

Research Note: The silenced assistant. Reflections of invisible interpreters and research assistants

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Abstract: *Given the increased attention in anthropology and human geography to the positionality and reflexivity of researchers completing fieldwork in foreign countries, it is surprising that we still know relatively little about how research assistants and interpreters are positioned in the field and their own concerns, constraints and coping mechanisms. This article, based on in-depth interviews with local interpreters/research assistants in Vietnam and China, working alongside Western doctoral students researching upland ethnic minority populations, provides space for the assistants' voices. While reflecting upon their own time in the field, we see how the positionalities of these individuals can have rather unexpected consequences. Furthermore, the assistants' analyses of particular events, as well as their take on the best way to proceed in specific circumstances can be at odds with that of their employers, and negotiated coping strategies have to be found. The article concludes with advice from these assistants regarding how future assistants can make the best of their position, and what foreign researchers need to consider in fostering constructive working relationships.*

Keywords: *China, fieldwork, interpreter, positionality, research assistant, Vietnam*

Introduction

Recently there has been much written in anthropology and human geography concerning subjectivity and reflexivity and in particular the impacts that a researcher's gender, class, ethnicity, age and politics can have on field data collection, field experiences, data analysis and interpretation (see, among others, Burgess, 1986; England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Dowling, 2000; Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000; Kobayashi, 2001; Valentine, 2002). Stemming from a social constructivist approach, this scholarship has resulted in many valuable texts concerning the need to account for one's positionality during field research, either in foreign locales or closer to home. At the same time, debates over bias and rigour in qualitative research have expanded and have further stressed the need for reflexive approaches, as well as carefully designed research procedures (see Baxter and Eyles, 1997, 1999; Bailey *et al.*, 1999a, b). Given the vast array of excellent literature now available on such topics, it is therefore

somewhat surprising that little has been written about the researcher–research assistant/interpreter relationship. What is more, from the limited work available – mainly regarding interpreters, and mostly within health science – I could find none centred on the voices and opinions of assistants themselves. For all our progress within the social sciences to include the voices of 'the other', especially under-represented research subjects and participants, and also our own voices as reflexive researchers, a key partner in the research process has been rendered invisible and effectively silenced. As a consequence, we know very little about the subjectivity and experiences of research assistants and interpreters from their own standpoints.

Much research involving qualitative methods undertaken in a cross-cultural setting involves the help of interpreters/research assistants, situating it far from the myth of 'lone ranger research' (Geertz, 1983; Davidson Wasser and Bresler, 1996). Given the vital role that these individuals frequently play, and the lack of

reflexive work to date regarding these assistants, the purpose of this piece is to give space to their opinions and reflections. I group interpreter/research assistant together as a term in this text because the two individuals at the heart of this piece ‘wore both hats’. In my experience, regardless of job description, interpreters are frequently called upon to fulfil ‘a cultural consultant role’, becoming both interpreter and assistant during fieldwork in cross-cultural situations (Freed, 1988: 315). Similarly, as Temple and Young (2004: 171) note, ‘the translator always makes her mark on the research, whether this is acknowledged or not, and in effect some kind of “hybrid” role emerges in that, at the very least, the translator makes assumptions about meaning equivalence that make her an analyst and cultural broker as much as a translator’.

In this article I bring together the reflections and suggestions of two research assistants/interpreters, one based in China, the other in Vietnam, employed by two graduate student authors in this special issue. This article is not so much about the right or wrong ways to work with interpreters, nor how to go about undertaking cross-cultural research with local assistants. The aim is to give voice to the reflections of the research assistants/interpreters themselves regarding their own field experiences and positionalities so that we might better understand their agency. Nevertheless, from these narratives emerge a number of valuable lessons and suggestions for future cross-cultural fieldwork.

But let me briefly situate my own experiences with research assistants/interpreters first. I have undertaken academic fieldwork with approximately 30 research assistants and/or interpreters in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, China and French/English-speaking Canada. I have worked in cross-cultural, cross-gender and cross-language settings, often at the same time, and my level of language competency has varied in locations where English was not spoken, from near fluent (Indonesia), to nil (China). All, except two of these research assistants/interpreters, have been younger than myself, and just over half were male. In Vietnam, the scene has changed remarkably since my first trip to the uplands in 1999. On my first research visits I was accompanied by different junior members of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sci-

ences (VASS). These assistants were sometimes in internship-like positions, hoping to prove their worth to senior VASS officials to be hired as full time *Biên chế* (permanent state employees), or they were recently promoted *Biên chế* (see Nguyen An Phuong, 2002). These assistants were trained in quantitative survey techniques, were ill-prepared for the qualitative methods I wished to employ, and appeared very uncomfortable undertaking interviews with ethnic minorities, especially when I asked male assistants to help me interview ethnic minority women (see Bonnin, this issue). Over time, the need to bring such assistants to the field has relaxed, which I can only presume is a reflection of Vietnam opening up further to outsiders, and perhaps because I have avoided ‘getting into trouble’. Nowadays, while still carrying a research visa and having completed the appropriate meetings in Hanoi, I tend to work in the uplands with privately employed research assistants, including ethnic minority women who have learned English from tourists. My field experiences with these women have been some of the most rewarding and enriching to date. Alternatively, when working with male state employees in both China and Vietnam who hold faculty or more senior research positions, these individuals (and friends) are willing to humour my ‘odd’ qualitative techniques to a certain extent, especially when collaborating on a research project that has financial benefits for themselves and their team. In China, these relationships have also been tinted by the hope on their behalf of visiting Canada for a higher degree; while I have tried to support such dreams financially and bureaucratically, they have yet to transpire. I am very aware that such working relationships are laden with power imbalances and ethical concerns (see Molony and Hammett, 2007). Before delving into such debates further, however, let us review the rather limited literature on research assistants and interpreters to date.

Ghost-workers

In the social science literature concerning research assistants and interpreters, we chiefly find reports of concerns regarding ethnographic translation, along with procedures of how to work with interpreters. For example, a body of

established anthropological texts has focused on precise translation details and/or the technicalities of the interview process (such as Malinowski, 1923; Casagrande, 1954a, b, 1955; Werner and Campbell, 1973; Venuti, 2005).¹ The concerns of many such authors are with rigour and process, and how to arrive at a 'correct' version of an interview transcription. The central worry is therefore how 'translation problems' can be solved. As Temple and Young (2004: 163) have observed, 'this is the predominant model in much cross language research, if only by default'.

Since the late 1980s, a series of articles in the health science and social work fields has focused on the different options available to health service providers hiring interpreters. Debates have included whether to hire trained interpreters versus friends or relatives of the interviewees, and the pros and cons of each approach (Freed, 1988; Phelan and Parkman, 1995). Discussions also centre around communication effectiveness with or without interpreters (Kline *et al.*, 1980), potential seating arrangements for effective interviews (Freed, 1988; Phelan and Parkman, 1995) and cross-cultural interviewing concerns in social work (Freed, 1988). Again the focus of such articles is practical and unreflexive, the objective being to solve 'problems' when one is aiming to obtain the closest interpretation as possible to the original source – such as undertaking 'back translation' to test interpreter skills – and to reach consensus on what constitutes best practice (Edwards, 1998).²

In one of the few early pieces to discuss the interpreter's role and positionality, Phillips (1960: 297) notes that 'it is clear that the interpreter's effect on the informant – on what the informant may or may not say – is theoretically no different from the anthropologist's effect'. Yet, taking a positivist approach, Phillips goes on to note that 'ideally, the interpreter should be nothing more than an agent for transferring messages between the informant and the field worker – a kind of passive instrument for the anthropologist' (Phillips, 1960: 298).

Partly in reaction to such statements, a small number of authors have begun to take a more reflexive stance to analysing working relationships with interpreters. Edwards (1998: 197), commenting upon her research on the concerns

of immigrants and refugees in England, argues that 'researchers need to acknowledge that they carry out interviews with, rather than through, interpreters, and that the latter's role should be made explicit and be the subject of critical reflection'. She adds that nearly all social science research raises ethical quandaries to some degree and is riddled with power disparities at a range of scales. There is no exemption when working with interpreters. Noting that most academics undertaking research with immigrants are not from those groups themselves, she reasons that a reliance on such interpreters will be vital, yet questions why the relationship between interviewer and researcher is seldom discussed (see also Temple, 2002; Temple and Edwards, 2002). Similarly, Temple and Young (2004: 164) suggest that 'the relationships between languages and researchers, translators and the people they seek to represent are as crucial as issues of which word is best in a sentence in a language'. These authors problematise the fact that the positionality of interpreters has been ignored in qualitative research and stress the impact this has on knowledge construction. They argue that there is no such thing as a neutral position from which translation can take place, and that we must acknowledge the power relationships inherent in such research (see also Spivak, 1992; Simon, 1996; Scott *et al.*, 2006). As such, Temple (2002) suggests that the 'intellectual auto/biographies' of researchers and translators be made part of methodological discussions.

Turning to research assistants specifically, there is a dearth of literature on the roles that these individuals play, albeit on occasion they are labelled 'field staff' and the problems in gaining well trained 'staff' are noted (Bulmer and Warwick, 1983). One exception, Sanjek (1993), provides an interesting overview of the different styles of relationship between informants/assistants and anthropologists that characterised anthropological fieldwork from the early 1900s until the 1950s. He notes:

While professional ethnographers – usually white, mostly male – have normally assumed full authorship for their ethnographic products, the remarkable contribution of these assistants – mainly persons of colour – is not widely enough appreciated or understood. In no major treatment of the discipline is it portrayed

as a fundamental part of the history of anthropology (Sanjek, 1993: 13).

In the anthropological tradition, Sanjek suggests that the position of field or research assistant, or 'cultural guide' became more common from the 1930s. Malinowski is often credited with this shift from relying on one or two participants for information with preset questions, to a more active fieldwork approach in which people involved in everyday life and ceremonial activities became objects of observation and targets of interviews: the official birth of participant observation. To undertake such interviews, local assistants became increasingly necessary and 'it became common to enlist, and pay, one local cultural guide as a member of the ethnographic team. This person might translate, introduce, negotiate, gather facts, and even conduct interviews and write field notes to facilitate the work of the professional ethnographer' (Sanjek, 1993: 14). Karttunen (1994) also provides historical insight into the world of interpreters/research assistants working for missionaries, civil servants, anthropologists and linguists, drawing upon autobiographies and additional secondary sources of 16 such field workers from the 1500s to the current day.

In contemporary research, the multiple roles of research assistants are briefly mentioned in a piece on collaboration in qualitative research teams by Davidson Wasser and Bresler (1996). Robson (1994), in a reflexive piece on her time as a graduate research student in Nigeria, delves further into researcher-research assistant relationships, expressing anxiety about whether she could discern what was a 'just' rather than exploitative arrangement with her assistants, and noting the potential pitfalls of living arrangements in the field when assistants of both genders accompanied her. Also reflecting upon their time as graduate student researchers, this time in Vietnam, Scott *et al.* (2006) fittingly raise concerns regarding the ethnicity of the interpreters/assistants with whom they worked while attempting to interview ethnic minorities, as well as tensions along gender and class lines, concerns also mentioned by Yeh (2006) *vis-à-vis* her fieldwork with different assistants in Tibet. Finally, Molony and Hammett (2007) write of the ethical dilemmas surrounding power relations and wealth imbalances with assistants

in the field, and the complications regarding choosing an appropriate assistant. They provide one of most nuanced articles regarding research assistants to date.

In sum, while contributions on the roles, positionalities and reflexivity of the *researcher* have helped to add depth to our understandings of cross-cultural research, there still remains a gap in our understandings of the research process as a whole due to the lack of attention paid to the voices of our interpreters/research assistants. Indeed, as Temple and Edwards (2002) note, our research is subject to a 'triple subjectivity' involving interactions among researcher, research participant/interviewee and interviewer/research assistant. Yet in our task to put pen to paper and analyse our field data, reflections upon the process of working with a research assistant/interpreter have been frequently overlooked, and their voices too often ignored.

Another point of view: Research assistants and their field experiences

The two research assistants contributing their voices here have both worked for Western graduate students for a number of months. They have also worked alongside me in the field: Vi in Lào Cai province, Vietnam, for one month in 2007, and Chloe in Gùizhōu province, China, for two weeks in 2009. Given that I know both assistants and the Canadian graduate students for whom they worked, from the start I was cognisant that what Vi and Chloe said to me would very likely be biased, as they might want to portray their employers in the best light (especially as I supervise one of them). While I considered having someone more independent undertake these interviews, upon reflection, this probably would have yielded fewer insights. An independent person would have had little awareness of the tasks the assistants completed, the work circumstances in both uplands regions, the relationships they had forged with their researchers and the difficulties (at least some of them) that I already knew they had faced. I wanted to probe these more. Therefore, despite the biases introduced by me directing these interviews, it appeared to be a potential route to gain an in-depth understanding of Vi's and Chloe's experiences. In attempting to

reduce partiality I avoided questions about their researcher employers, focusing instead on a priori themes of job practicalities, emotions they felt during fieldwork, and their own comments and suggestions for future research assistants, and for overseas researchers working with local assistants.

We undertook Vi's interview in Hà Nội, Vietnam in early May 2009, while Chloe's interviews, at the end of May 2009, May 2009 were in Zhaoxing village, Gùizhōu province, China, where she had worked as an assistant. On both occasions, we discussed the purpose of the interview and the project as a whole before oral informed consent was granted. Each was given an opportunity to review or 'member check' a draft of the manuscript before publication (see Turner and Coen, 2008), and both replied with comments that I have incorporated. I asked both if they wanted to use their real names in the final article or a pseudonym. Vi, in Vietnam, preferred to use a pseudonym that she chose. She stated that this would let her be more open in her comments. Chloe, in China, decided upon using her 'Western' name, which could be thought of perhaps as a semi-pseudonym; only Western researchers and locals familiar with her work with Westerners know her by this name.

Vi worked in Vietnam with Christine Bonnin, a female graduate student from Canada, for eight months during 2006 and 2007. Their fieldwork took place in Lào Cai province, a northern mountainous province on the Chinese border, where a large number of ethnic minority people live (see Bonnin, this issue). Vi is of *Kinh* (majority Vietnamese) ethnicity and comes from the lowland province of Nam Định, 100 km from the capital, Hà Nội. Nowadays she lives and works in Hà Nội, and when interviewed in 2009 was 25 years old. Chloe worked as a research assistant/interpreter with Candice Cornet, also a female Canadian graduate student, for four months during 2006 and 2007, after they originally met in 2004. Their fieldwork took place in Gùizhōu province in southern China, home to a large Dong ethnic minority population (see Cornet, this issue). Chloe is a *Bai* (Báizú) ethnic minority. She lives in Guiyáng city, the provincial capital of Gùizhōu, and was 26 years old in 2009. Both Vi and Chloe have university degrees, Vi has a Bachelor of Arts in English for Technology

Purposes (a degree for interpretation and translation), and Chloe has a Masters of Arts in Religion.³

Research assistant/interpreter positionality

Research assistants/interpreters come to the field with their own preconceptions, values and belief systems just like any researcher, if one believes, as I do, that 'one's position within the social world influences the way in which you see it' (Temple and Young, 2004: 164). While the position of the researcher is sometimes made visible by authors willing enough to discuss their positionality and reflexivity, such as Morton (1995) in her account of fieldwork in Tonga, and Mandel (2003) in Benin, these elements are just as likely to affect the research assistant/interpreter but are consistently ignored. For the assistants/interpreters at the core of this story, their positionality is strongly influenced by ethnicity. As is obvious from the other articles in this special issue, in socialist China, Vietnam and Laos, the state deals with ethnic minorities for the most part to ensure that the country as a whole moves steadily forward in its economic progress. As such, minority outlooks on concerns such as livelihoods, environmental sustainability and resource use are frequently overlooked. In the case of the research and researchers/assistants involved here, these state directives play directly into relationships forged in the field and into local majority/minority understandings of the 'other'. In Vietnam, where ethnic minorities are not generally well understood among the lowland Vietnamese majority, the former are commonly depicted as 'backwards' or 'lazy' (Hickey, 1993; van de Walle and Gunewardena, 2001; Sowerwine, 2004; World Bank, 2007; Nguyen Van Chinh, 2008). These perceptions are shaped by the fact that 'in a country that invests great measure in recollecting and commemorating the past, few minority cultures have indigenous archives, and are thus categorised as "peoples without history"' (Turner and Michaud, 2008: 160; Scott, 2009). In China, the situation is fairly similar, although with far higher absolute numbers of ethnic minority populations. In the provinces where they are the most numerous they tend to be granted more tolerance by the state and migrant Han Chinese; however,

obvious exceptions in politically sensitive areas remain, as in Xīnjiāng during 2009 (Chiao and Tapp, 1989; Gladney, 1994; Baranovitch, 2001; Harrell, 2002).

Given this context, Vi, as a lowland Vietnamese, grew up with cultural television programmes that displayed the material culture aspects of ethnic minorities, but not much else. She had travelled to Sa Pa town in the uplands once before starting employment as an assistant/interpreter there, and remembered from that trip: 'I didn't talk to them [the ethnic minorities]. I just looked at them, that's all . . . I could not recognise who was Hmong, Yao, like that . . . Maybe only the Hmong people I could recognise because they are on the television many times'. When asked what she thought of the different ethnic minority groups she encountered during that first visit, she added, 'at that time I had no idea about those people. I had no intent to talk with them, or to find out if they are interesting or not . . . Of course I still feel that they are dirty, even after I meet them and know them very well, I still think that they are dirty [laughs]'.

For Chloe, an ethnic minority herself, the situation is clearly different. In our conversations she emphasised carefully that she believes it is wrong that some cultures are considered more backwards than others in China; rather 'many cultures are just different'. She recounted how, as a school pupil, her Han (majority ethnic Chinese) teachers would tell her class that the *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minorities) are '“backwards in production” and very different; they would stress the difference'. She continued to explain, 'I never really believed the teacher but you were never allowed to say anything. Only at university could you ever speak in class'. Later she added that perhaps other teachers were not so strict and she thought that the situation might have changed in more recent years. Chloe had not been to the Dong ethnic minority village where she worked with Candice before they travelled there together in 2006. Her first impressions were of 'a very big village, and beautiful. It hadn't been destroyed so much by modernisation. Local people seemed simple – pure hearted and friendly'.

Such introductory comments already illustrate divergent inter-ethnic power relations at play. While Vi's knowledge of and interactions

with ethnic minorities increased significantly over the course of the time she spent in the field with Christine, she retained very specific understandings of how these groups are different from lowland Vietnamese. Chloe, on the other hand, appeared more attuned to how state discourse on ethnic minorities is reiterated through daily practices at the local level. While these interpretations are part and parcel of the assistants' daily lives and positionalities, they can become even more accentuated during fieldwork processes and interactions. If researchers do not reflect upon such elements of their assistant's situatedness, the consequences will remain masked and the rigour of our fieldwork potentially compromised.

Alongside ethnicity, a broad spectrum of other positioning factors are at play in the field for the research assistant/interpreter. For example, it is not necessarily easy for a young woman in Vietnam or China (nor in many other parts of the world) to face up to a government official and try to elicit information, or perhaps even more stressful, obtain research permissions for their employer, an overseas researcher. Research assistants have their own approaches to dealing with such negotiations that they usually have to devise themselves, on-the-spot, because, at least at the outset of the fieldwork, it is unlikely that the overseas researcher comprehends a number of the intricacies involved in these negotiations and relationships. Or, as Robson (1994: 47) puts it, 'it is common for the researcher on entering the research environment to find him/herself in the role of naïve idiot'.

Chloe was adamant that the most difficult people to try to interview were government officials in the provincial capital city of Guiyáng, and indeed she had never managed to interview any. She noted that 'government officials seemed indifferent to the [research] project. We would call them for information but they would say “no, we're busy, and you can see all the information on the internet” and then they would hang up'. She added that, in comparison, 'scholars and academics in Guiyáng were more easy going, they are people who can relate to what we are doing and they are doing similar research projects'. Similarly, Vi in Vietnam observed that the most difficult interviewees were 'the men who work for the People's

Committee.⁴ It's very difficult to get exact information from them', adding that this was the case regardless of the level of government administration, from the provincial to the commune level.

In China, Chloe observed that it was always easier for Candice and herself to talk with people in Zhaoxing village rather than in Lípíng (the county level administrative city) or Guìyáng, the provincial capital. She noted that people in the village 'like talking with others'. When I asked whether gender made a difference to the ease with which they could undertake interviews, she replied, referring to Dong ethnic minority interviewees,

men here [in Zhaoxing village] are usually educated so they know the Chinese language, so that makes it easier . . . Men will talk a lot, while women will also talk, but less. Women will say, "you should talk to my husband" . . . The older women don't speak Chinese so that makes it difficult. This is also about traditional rules . . . it's normal that men are the spokesperson for things 'outside', while women are 'about the house'.

She remarked that, in contrast, interviewing men and women of younger generations involved the same levels of difficulty.

In Vietnam, Vi also found that men were easier to interview, although intriguingly the reasoning was quite different, and she relied on her charm to help get the job done. She explained,

it was easiest for me as a female to interview the [Vietnamese] male. They are very interested in talking. If I'm a female, if I'm interviewing a man, even if he works for the market management, or People's Committee they are very interested in me, except for the ones already married. The free men . . . Because they think I am from Hà Nội, so I must have interesting information and a lovely way to talk . . . Being female is a plus . . . You must be interesting, you must have a lot of information about the world outside, so if you are a girl it is a plus for them to talk.

I explored whether this had led the men to flirt with her or ask her out on a date, to which Vi replied:

No, never. Because if I make the signal, then they think 'ok this girl is very easy I can go out with her'. But I do not, I just come here, and I try to be friendly but not too close to them . . . But if we are friendly with them, then they will give us priority and good information.

Interestingly then, for quite different reasons, both research assistants found cross-gender interviewing easier. This is not always intuitive for researchers from the West entering a new research field, and a common assumption is that female assistants will be more comfortable interviewing females; likewise male assistants interviewing men. Research tactics differed regarding how the assistants tried to draw information from participants, based in part on gender dynamics. As such, their agency influenced how the production of data was a social process, shaped by a multitude of identity factors (see Pratt, 2010). Such findings signal the importance of discussing interview dynamics with assistants/interpreters before, during and after the fieldwork process. This can shed light on erroneous assumptions and lead to new, potentially more rewarding approaches in the field. It can also result in far more nuanced understanding of local gender dynamics.

The task at hand

'Speech is like the wind, and if you don't record something straight away then you'll forget' (Vi, 14/5/09).

I asked both Vi and Chloe to define the job that they had held in their own words. Chloe replied, 'before Candice arrived she already sent me a plan of her research so I knew what it was about, and what she wanted to do. Then we do interviews, observations, "free talking" and we discuss a little bit. I helped Candice to interview people and talk with them, ask them questions, translate answers to Candice'. She continued to describe the tasks in more detail:

I would also contact people in the village, book the hotels for her, book airline tickets for her, call bureau directors that Candice wants to interview. I would explain Candice's research topic to the people that I rang, such as: "I am co-operating with a foreigner who is a PhD

student, her main topic is related to minority culture and tourism, can you help us?" Normally people will co-operate with us, but contacting people wasn't so easy . . . people don't know what it is we do, I have to explain a lot. It was easier in the village because if someone was busy then we could come back the next day.

Chloe then continued to note the difficulties involved in her position,

my job as RA was very difficult. I had to interview, then we [Chloe and Candice] would go over the tape together, and translate to English as we listen. I then would also transcribe the tape later in the evening to Chinese. . . . Often I would work from 9am to 9pm . . . And if Candice didn't understand something during the interview, I would have to translate during it, and then often the person being interviewed wanted to also know what Candice was saying . . .

Vi likewise described both interpreter and research assistant aspects of her employment, and the multi-tasking this involved,

the job is mainly interpreter, and sometimes I work as, like, co-ordinator . . . I mean I have to arrange the interview between the other people and Christine . . . in advance . . . I have to ask them, maybe with the ones in Si Ma Cai for example [market management people, hotel owner, people in market], we tell them when we will arrive next time. So I have to keep in touch with them, to make sure that next time they will receive us. I try to text them to say 'how are you' and 'thank you' . . . blah, blah, blah . . . it's like keeping in touch.

Vi continued to clarify the parts of her role she felt were important: 'I try to remember about their [interviewees] history, about their life, so next time I remember and ask, so that they think "oh this girl she's considerate about our lives, she remembers what we talked about before" so it's easier to talk with them'.

Vi also illustrated the difficulties of her job when interviewing,

in the interview, I have to 'break the ice'. And I have to make the questions in my way. Because sometimes you [the researcher] ask this, but I do not directly ask that question

because based on my knowledge it's too straight to that person or it's too difficult for them to answer . . . Too straight into their life . . . It's that saying 'if you go to Rome, act like in Rome'.

Such comments point to the vital cultural broker role played by research assistants and their central part in allowing the researcher's work to proceed smoothly. Again, because much of this occurs in the language of the people being interviewed, it is not always immediately obvious to Western researchers that careful negotiations and social positioning are being undertaken by research assistants, as well as the potential stress and anxiety that this can cause. More reflection by researchers upon these dynamics could potentially lead to reduced *faux pas* in the field, and a more positive work relationship between researcher and research assistant. Yet, at the same time, it is naïve to think that one's research assistant is likely to voice concerns or anxieties over interviewing style or their role openly, especially if they are dependent on the researcher for immediate employment, advancement in their (state) career or a letter of recommendation. Researchers must ascertain discreetly and diplomatically how the research assistant is viewing fieldwork and any concerns he or she might have.

Eliciting emotions

I ran through a series of emotions with both Vi and Chloe to elicit spontaneous reflections of specific events in the field that had left lasting impressions on them. These included when they had felt happy, sad, angry, anxious and frustrated. The time when Vi, in Vietnam, had felt the happiest (*hạnh phúc*) was not directly linked to her employment as a research assistant/interpreter but was an event that had occurred while she was 'off duty' in the field. She had been able to assist a young, illiterate Hmong woman in obtaining a passport, by helping her complete the paperwork. Vi stated this was her happiest field moment 'because after a while I understand their life and I think that I cannot give them money, so I can do something else for them'. She continued to note that 'their life is not as good as our life, and also, some girls are still very small, and they deserve

to know more about the world, not just Sa Pa'. In contrast, Chloe, in a comment that was more focused on the research task at hand, noted that she felt the happiest (*kuài lè*) 'if we interviewed someone and he or she told us something interesting, that was very helpful to Candice's research, and if it was a new thing for me too'.

When I asked if she had felt sad (*buôn*) while working as a research assistant/interpreter, Vi replied with a smile that she thought she had been bored more often than sad, observing that 'sometimes I felt it was very boring to be an interpreter there. No friends to talk with, and of course because I have to speak English all day, so it's like I live in a foreign country'. However, elements of both sadness and anxiety entered the conversation as she then remarked, 'I missed home. And I think maybe this job is not for women . . . it's like a temporary job, so I think about when I come back [to Hà Nội], what will I do', clarifying that she had been worried about her future after this position. Chloe was less inclined to discuss this emotion, only noting that she felt sad (*sháng xin*) 'if I work a lot . . . (laughing) . . . if I'm too tired'.

Vi described the time when she had been the most angry (*tức giận*) in what appeared to be very restrained terms (compared with what I had already heard from her companion researcher, Christine). Vi remembered that 'I never feel very angry, except for one time, I think it was so crazy. In Sĩ Mã Cai market, a man there tried to force me to drink and he touched me [on my side] and I was very angry. And I think "I cannot do this any more!" . . . he was a Kinh person, he was not polite'. In contrast, Christine's version of the event, detailed to me with a great deal of concern, was that the man had slapped Vi on the face. Vi's toned down comment might have been for my benefit, or a move to try to put the experience behind her. Regardless of motive, of her own accord, she had a very different interpretation of the event a year later from her researcher-employer, a point that I return to later.

Vi noted that meeting new people did not make her anxious (*lo âu*), and because she felt fairly confident in such situations, that did not concern her. She commented instead that it was the long distances that they had had to travel on mountainous roads that had made her very nervous (and car sick), clearly adding another

layer of fatigue to the process. Talking through such anxieties also reminded me of previous Vietnamese research assistants who were nervous working in the uplands because of the malevolent spirits and ghosts they believed resided there (see Scott *et al.*, 2006). This begs the question, how many Western academics who are going to work in a foreign context think to ask their research assistants if there are bad spirits and ghosts where they will be working, and whether the assistant will be comfortable with the situation?

When asked if she had become frustrated while on the job, Vi replied:

I'm not sure about that, but sometimes it's more like I get confused [*không biết làm thế nào*]. Like sometimes I cannot understand Christine with her questions! She repeats the questions! Why? She doesn't understand me? Sometimes she asks the question and I ask the other [person], and maybe it's not clear and she ask another question on it. But I think it's already clear enough to answer all her questions.

Vi continued to explain that after a while she came to understand Christine's motives – trying to gain clarification on a specific point, or make certain that the question had been fully understood by the interviewee – yet Vi considered such repetition unhelpful. 'To Vietnamese if we ask the same question but in a different way, they will think we are very silly. Then they are not very interested in answering the questions'. Vi raises important points here regarding first, the importance for Western researchers to make sure their interpreter/research assistant understands the specific types of information being searched for, and that second, research assistants themselves are often better placed to identify the most appropriate way to conduct an interview.

Chloe's frustration (*bú nài fán*) was, one might say, the other side of the coin, as she commented that she felt the most frustrated when 'we are interviewing someone and they don't really understand what we're getting at; they answer but it's not what we want [to get at]'. She continued to note that it was also frustrating when some people in the village did not want to cooperate with them. She gave an example of a local hotel owner whom Candice and Chloe

had known for over three years; when they returned in 2009 to ask him a few questions, he stated (while hung over), 'I have nothing to tell you'. Chloe explained 'such a time makes us feel awkward and embarrassed'.

The different emotions revealed here arose from a diverse range of circumstances to which the assistants brought their own locally appropriate coping mechanisms. The complexity of the multiple tasks they undertook is revealed in the nuanced reflections upon their positionality. Giving voice to these assistants allows us to delve more deeply into the 'triple subjectivity' that is ongoing in the fieldwork process. It is clear that their responses are not those that outside researchers would automatically assume, again highlighting the importance of keeping communication channels open between researcher and assistant. Cross-cultural empathy is as important with research assistants as it is with interviewees.

Practical advice from the professionals

Undoubtedly, Vi and Chloe are well placed to provide us with sound advice as to how one might best cope as a research assistant/interpreter working with an overseas researcher, and how researchers can help make the working relationship succeed. The following are a few of their key suggestions.

Skill requirements for research assistants/interpreters

I asked both research assistants which qualities or skills they thought were required to help them complete their role. In China, Chloe replied that the research assistant's relationship with the researcher was of utmost importance. She explained, 'you have to get on really well with the person you're going to be working with. And if you can't get on really well with them as a friend, at least you have to try to work very well together'.

Additionally, Chloe observed that the relationships that the assistant develops in the field with local people were essential to the fieldwork proceeding smoothly, explaining that 'you have to learn about the local people and be willing to interact with them. You have to learn about their way of life and be willing to sit and

chat with them'. In Vietnam, Vi also remarked upon the importance of being able to empathise with interviewees and adapt the interview process to meet interviewees' abilities and expectations. She clarified,

if you go to talk to a simple, poor person, you have to act like you are simple too. You shouldn't be 'high thinking'. But with the people that work for the People's Committee you have to be very strong, very educated, like very professional. . . . But the other before, if you act like you are powerful, then they will be afraid of you, and think "oh, is that right, or is that wrong?" For them you have to use soft voice and ask short questions. But for the People's Committee, or with a leader of something, you have to be very confident.

Vi's first priority regarding the skills a research assistant needed, however, was that one has to be strong and healthy. She explained that this was so that 'they would not be exhausted when making interviews. Because if you are exhausted you cannot do it properly. For example, if I am exhausted, I know the questions, but I do not care much about the question or answer. So that's not good enough'. Vi also noted, in a comment that links back to the frustrations that she had felt during her field period, that the assistant and researcher have to be on the same page with regard to the questions being asked, and what sort of information the researcher is trying to elicit:

If you [the interpreter] do not understand the question of the researcher, you have to ask Because sometimes maybe you think that you know, but the actual content, the information that they want to get is not similar, so I think it's better that you know the question well. For example, if you ask me "do you like it?" – but I do not understand – "do you like it in what way"?

Don't be arrogant: Advice for new researchers to the field

Vi and Chloe both thought carefully about their advice for new graduate students or researchers arriving from overseas to work in their respective countries. Chloe remarked,

you have to get on with the research assistant. You [the researcher] can't be arrogant and you have to be natural. Try to be friendly with the assistant. But when you are working you must also be serious, so that the research assistant understands that there's an important job to be done. If you always joke around then the research assistant will too – but there's time for that after the work is done each day.

She continued to add, 'Try to learn about the local culture and be friendly with the local people and also try to learn a little Chinese in advance, to make it easier for the research assistant'.

In Vietnam, Vi also stressed the importance of researchers being friendly with their assistant/interpreter, while adding a cultural nuance to her reply:

To be honest, if you want to work with Vietnamese it's kind of difficult . . . Because we do not work because we have to work, sometimes we work based on our feeling. So if you act like the boss of the interpreter you will not get a good result. So if you are friendly with the interpreter, you say that you need their help, and you have to discuss before the work. Because the interpreter, like me for the first time with Christine, I was so nervous, because this is my first time, and "oh this is a PhD research this is very big, and I haven't even finished my BA degree so how can I help her?" So you have to encourage the interpreter . . .

Vi continued that a researcher has to be 'half boss, half friend. I think it's very difficult. Because if the interpreter likes you, she or he doesn't mind to do anything, anything. But if I don't like you, even if you pay me the money, then I do it, but it's not as good as you expect it'.

In comparison, in one of the few previous articles to mention researcher–research assistant relationships, Robson (1994: 47) notes that as a graduate researcher she worked hard not to become too friendly with her assistants. She explained, 'keeping some distance was necessary for the maintenance of our good working relationships'. Similarly, Chloe and Vi point to the very careful balancing act required between friendship, professionalism and avoiding the appearance of arrogance.

Conclusion: Researchers and assistants together make for successful fieldwork

Research assistants/interpreters are individuals who are part and parcel of the knowledge production process, and as such we should be obliged to write them into our understandings of our field experiences and the results that we produce. We need to stop ignoring the positionality and subjectivity of research assistants/interpreters in social science qualitative fieldwork, as these factors influence numerous relationships, negotiations and differential access to interviewees and resources.

Yet perhaps this article has raised more questions than answers regarding the nuances of research assistant positionalities and the triple subjectivity among local research assistants/interpreters, foreign researchers and interviewees. For example, what are the levels of complexity added when working with interviewees for whom the language of the interview is the interviewee's second language, such as ethnic minorities? In both the Dong village in China and in Hmong communities in Vietnam, Chloe and Vi were using the language of the dominant ethnic group in the country (Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese) to converse with interviewees who had an ethnic minority language as their mother tongue. Numerous differential power relations and politics are at play in these circumstances that should be investigated more fully (see Alcoff, 1991). While the obvious solution is for the overseas researcher to spend a very long time in the field learning ethnic minority language(s) and local dialects, often the practicalities of fieldwork and researchers' access to these locales means that this solution is untenable. This is frequently the case in socialist China, Vietnam and Laos.

Furthermore, the comments that Vi made when she was 'touched' (her words) or 'slapped' (the researcher's words) by a Vietnamese man during an interview in a rural market raise the question as to whether both research assistant/interpreter *and* researcher should be interviewed concerning specific fieldwork events to compare situated knowledges. When I sent a draft of this article back to Vi for member checking, she reflected further on my comments here, adding, 'for me, it is because of the culture, and

the place we were in' (11/9/09). Consequently, if details of such events are going to be written into a researcher's work, whose report is the most accurate? The person to whom the event occurred with the greater awareness and understanding of her own culture and its norms, or the culturally out-of-place researcher writing up the account? How should this knowledge be constructed? And who should decide?

Such telling comments by research assistants also demonstrate that we must be doubly sensitive to the emotions and concerns of those whom we work alongside, even if we believe we are already. While undertaking fieldwork – and for graduate students this can be their first time undertaking long-term fieldwork away from family and friends – how often do we carefully reflect upon the feelings of our employees? While research assistants/interpreters may be in their own country, do we make assumptions that the task is easier for them than it actually is? Evidently, they too might be in a very foreign, unfamiliar situation and physical location for the first time, away from family and friends, and coping with a number of uncertainties, anxieties and mixed emotions. Keeping the communication channels open is therefore vital for the emotional well-being of one's assistant, a positive relationship between researcher and assistant, and for problems to be resolved more quickly.

More broadly, to what degree should research assistants be part of the data interpretation process? Time and cost are unmistakable factors in this regard. Such an inclusive approach is dependent on the length of time one has to work with a specific research assistant/interpreter, on funding, and for graduate students, on other degree requirements. This also depends on the interpreter/research assistant's willingness to be further engaged with the research project at hand.

Perhaps one of the most revealing take-home points I learnt from these interviews came when I asked Vi, at the end of our interview, if she had any other comments that she wanted to add or, given her skills at asking interview questions, if there was a question I should have asked her. She replied:

If you ask me a question about the future of the research assistant, if they want to work like this

for their whole life . . . to me it's no. Because at first we have to go far away from the family, and if we get married we cannot do it. And also the ones who want to get promoted they would never do it. So mostly the research assistants who assist the students like yours, they would never do it again, like when we get the job like me now [assistant manager in a Western operated firm].

Vi continued to note that now she would prefer to work in Hà Nội rather than travelling far away, such as to upland areas, and that 'even if you paid me a lot, [the answer is] no. So usually you get the ones who have just graduated who are very young and are willing to move far away'. This, in itself, undoubtedly raises a number of concerns for researchers who may want to continue to work with a specific interpreter or translator over a long period, especially if they feel that they have invested a lot of time, energy and funds into the training of an assistant. All told, we have to remember that these assistants are not just here to assist; they are individuals with their own socio-cultural positioning and their own life goals and dreams. Continuing to assist us might not be part of that dream.

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Notes

- 1 There is of course a whole linguistic sub-branch of anthropology, as well as literary criticism, regarding the construction and discourses of texts, but that moves away from my central concern here about the actual people who undertake these roles.
- 2 Back translation, also called double translation, is a process whereby one interpreter translates either spoken or written English into a second language, that version is then translated back by a second interpreter, and the two versions are compared (Werner and Campbell, 1973; Edwards, 1998). The process can be used either in determining the skills of potential interpreter or to add rigour

- to the actual research process (see also Marin and Marin, 1991). In my experience, it would be rare to have the opportunity to hire interpreters/research assistants in such a manner when undertaking fieldwork in China, Vietnam or Laos, given the relative lack of available, keen, skilled applicants.
- 3 On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being fluent, at the time when they were working together, in Vietnam I would rank Vi's spoken English as about 6, improving over the research period to 8, and the graduate student for whom she worked having Vietnamese fluency ranked 2–3 at that time. In China, Chloe's spoken English was 5, while the graduate student's Chinese was 6–7; hence there were different variations in language skills between each researcher–assistant team, adding further nuances to their relationships.
 - 4 The People's Committee is the executive branch of the Vietnamese Government. It operates at each bureaucratic level, namely national, provincial, district and commune.

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