

CONNECTING INTERSECTIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL POSITIONALITIES

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Summary: Intersectional approaches to social positionalities have stressed the interdependence between different kinds of social divisions as well as the relational nature of social categories. In empirical research practice, these complexities require a high level of methodological reflexivity. In this paper, I will show how different kinds of methodological reflexivity are connected to the concept of intersectionality. Reflexivity includes continuous attention and reflection upon the social practices of positioning and differentiation in the field (including the positioning of the researcher), as well as analytic reflection upon the importance of academic knowledge and processes for social and political struggles. Using empirical examples from fieldwork with West African migrants in Bremen, I will show how important insights into the processes of social category-making and the importance of locality and space for intersectional social positioning can be derived from reflexive analytic practices.

Zusammenfassung: Intersektionale Konzepte zu sozialer Positionierung betonen die Interdependenz verschiedener Differenzlinien (wie Geschlecht, Klasse und Ethnizität) sowie die Relationalität sozialer Kategorien. In der empirischen Forschungspraxis stellt diese Komplexität hohe Anforderungen an die Reflexion der Feldforschung. In diesem Beitrag zeige ich, wie verschiedene Arten der methodologischen Reflexivität mit dem Konzept der Intersektionalität in Verbindung gebracht werden können. Reflexivität bedeutet hier die Analyse sozialer Praktiken der Positionierung und Unterscheidung im Feld – unter Einschluss der eigenen Praktiken der Feldforscherin – sowie die analytische Reflexion der Verbindungen zwischen akademischer Wissensproduktion und sozialen und politischen Kämpfen. Mit empirischen Beispielen aus meiner Forschung mit westafrikanischen Migranten in Bremen zeige ich, wie die analytische Reflexion von alltäglichen Erfahrungen beim Feldzugang zu wichtigen inhaltlichen Ergebnissen führt: sowohl im Hinblick auf machtvolle Prozesse der sozialen Kategorisierung als auch im Hinblick auf die Bedeutung von Ort und Raum für Konzepte der Intersektionalität.

Keywords: Methodology, intersectionality, reflexivity, positionality, ethnography, translocality

1 Introduction

The concept of intersectionality has been met with a burgeoning interest in gender studies and in the context of interdisciplinary debates on issues of inequality and difference (BRAH and PHOENIX 2004; PHOENIX and PATTYNAMA 2006; LEWIS 2009; WINKER and DEGELE 2011). It has become an important heuristic concept used by geographers analyzing human experiences based on multiple intersecting power relations (VALENTINE 2007; SCHURR and SEGEBART 2012; HILLMANN and WASTL-WALTER 2011; BÜRKNER 2012; STRÜVER 2013; RODO-DE-ZARATE 2014). However, it remains a challenge to develop methods of empirical research and data analysis that do justice to the complex theoretical concept of intersectionality. In short, intersectionality frameworks are based on the assumption that social divisions and categories like race, gender, or class, are interrelated – on the levels

of individual experience and social representation as well as on the level of social structure (WINKER and DEGELE 2011, 51–52). The term intersectionality was coined by KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW (1991), highlighting the now-classical categorical triad of “race, class and gender” in the context of US-American anti-discrimination policies. But there has also been an extensive debate about the need for open-endedness within the concept of intersectionality, especially as the concept travels to different places across the world (DAVIS 2008, 69).

When using an intersectionality framework to empirically analyze social positionalities (ANTHIAS 2008, 15), researchers are confronted with different questions: How does one determine which categories of difference should be looked at? How does one ensure that an intersectionality approach does not re-essentialize pre-determined, fixed categories of belonging, but looks at their interaction and mutual

constitution instead? In this article, I will argue for a reflexive approach to research practice in an attempt to answer these questions. To support the argument, I will use examples from my research with migrants of West African descent in Bremen. Starting from the assumption that all social categories of difference are relational and socially constructed, I will first show how different ideas of relationality are connected to a methodological need for reflexivity. Furthermore, I will elaborate on different relations between concepts of intersectionality and reflexivity and show how these connect to fundamental ideas of ethnographic research. In the third part of the paper I will expand on how calls for reflexivity can be implemented when analyzing field notes from empirical research and how this can lead to important insights.

2 Relationality, reflexivity, and intersectionality

Relationality as a concept in the philosophy of language refers to the assumption that the meaning of linguistic signs is constituted through a continuous process of differentiation, not by the essential fullness of a sign. “The elements of signification function not by virtue of the compact force of their cores, but by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to each other” (DERRIDA 1982, 262). To give an example, the term *woman* as such only makes sense if we assume that there is a network of terms that *woman* can be compared to (*man, child, mother, etc.*). Furthermore, social order is continuously and implicitly (re-)produced through these processes of signification. However, people that are categorized by various academic disciplines (and also through popular media, in political discourse and everyday language use) are actors that also categorize themselves and others in relation to each other, as well as in relation to the categories and positions available in public discourse (BOURDIEU 1995 [1985], 53; ANTHIAS 2013, 7). These categorizations can be subversive, can transcend boundaries, and show how ambiguous, fuzzy, or irrelevant academic or other public categorizations as well as personal experience may be. Such projects of deconstruction and subversion still need to employ language, and the terms, categories, and differentiations used in academic discourse need to be seen as co-producers of practices, identities, and places (LOSSAU 2003, 104). I will later come back to the point that the conceptual elaboration of intersectionality is part of a counter-hegemonic project that at the same time produces

both relatively stable categories of identity and their subversion.

However, understanding relationality purely from a linguistic perspective is not enough for my argument here. The relationality of positions in social space is also based on material differences in resource endowments and in interdependent struggles for positions and for symbolic power¹⁾. The latter is constructed as the power to define how the social world is and should legitimately be ordered (BOURDIEU 1995 [1985], 38). From this understanding of relationality, BOURDIEU argues for a reflexive approach to social research. His argument is based on the understanding that the social sciences are part of everyday struggles about categorizations and access to symbolic power. To be reflexive, social researchers thus have to analyze political and social struggles around categorizations (BOURDIEU 1995 [1985], 54). Building upon BOURDIEU’s thoughts, LIPPUNER (2005, 145) calls us to question the very concepts and categories that we use in geographic theories. Especially if categories seem well set up and categorizations seem clear-cut, there is a danger of scientifically creating and thus being led to perceive “as real groups” the groups that have been created on paper (LIPPUNER 2005, 145, with reference to BOURDIEU 1998 [1994], 23; see also GOFFMAN 1990 [1963]). Understanding intersectionality as a critical concept embedded in a struggle for recognition and social justice thus also implies a non-essentialized understanding of the lines of difference that it creates.

In the following chapter, I will argue that intersectionality can, on the one hand, be employed to shed light upon social relations of dominance that are underexplored in the everyday experience of people in a research field. Like this, as a critical concept, it helps to shed light on “blind spots” of power and dominance. On the other hand, allowing personal experience to challenge and extend pre-determined understandings of power, inequality and difference is firmly supported by the epistemological foundations of intersectionality. In the following section, I will explain how both of these reflexive moves connect to intersectionality as a dynamic and critical theoretical concept.

¹⁾ Other conceptualizations of relationality focus on cultural difference. Coming from a tradition of philosophy and cultural studies, an article on relational hermeneutics by STRAUB and SHIMADA (1999) points to fundamental issues of intercultural interpretation. Also, concepts of translation in HUSSEINI DE ARAÚJO and KERSTING (2012) suggest further issues in politics and practices of academic knowledge production, that are closely connected to the ones presented here.

2.1 Lived experience as a counterpoint against pre-determined theoretical concepts

The first aspect of methodological reflexivity implies that researchers should distance themselves from pre-determined theoretical categorizations that influence their world views. This kind of reflexivity is firmly based in ethnographic research practice and stresses on being self-reflexive about how to bring theories and categories into conversation with empirical realities. Adhering to this kind of reflexivity, academic processes of creating knowledge about social or spatial categories have been treated as objects that can themselves become subject to academic scrutiny. Different researchers have called for such an “observation of observation” (LUHMANN 1990) or “objectivation of objectivation” (BOURDIEU 1993, 365) and a more ethnographic approach towards research practice (MATTHES 1985). In geography, POTT (2002; 2004) has shown how reflexivity in LUHMANN’s sense can be translated into qualitative empirical work. He looked at individual processes of social positioning with reference to ethnicity and space. In anthropology, from the early 1990s, FUCHS and BERG (1993, 14) observe that an anthropological take on the practice of anthropology itself has become common. This has led researchers from other fields to apply a similarly reflexive approach to their own scientific practices and thus to tap into an anthropological attitude towards the connection of theory and empirical findings as a model for reflexivity.

Recently, VERNE (2012b, 192–193) has called geographers to take up the challenge that a more genuinely anthropological epistemology entails: To try to seriously, holistically and intensely understand social and cultural life in the field on its own terms, rather than subsuming it under an already established social theory or concept. VERNE calls for a creative interplay of theoretical concepts, close participation in the lived experience of people and for a genuinely hermeneutical approach to interpretative research. An anthropological attitude towards research means taking serious both the lived experience and self-descriptions of the research participants (as far as the researcher can understand them) as well as the subjectivity and bodily experience of the researcher’s own self, whose cognitive, emotional, bodily and spiritual reactions and positionings are a central research instrument (BREIDENSTEIN et al 2013, 103). Epistemologically, this concept of

reflexivity connects with the movement of Black Feminist Theory and hence with the development of the concept of intersectionality. The latter developed with a strong emphasis on the shared tacit and practical knowledge and experience of black women in the United States. An integral part of “coming to voice” for Black Feminist Theorists consisted of making personal experiences public, relating them to each other and therefore challenging hegemonic social theories, policies and categorizations used for them (HILL COLLINS 2000 [1990], vii; HOOKS 1981; HULL et al. 1982; CRENSHAW 1989, 1991). The development of intersectionality as a concept can be seen as a reflexive move. It used the lived experiences and empirical realities of Black Women in the United States as a counterpoint towards existing social theories, policies and movements.

The criticism against hegemonic and powerful social theories that was developed by Black Feminist Theorists was part of a more general criticism of the implicit generalisation of white-masculinist, seemingly “neutral” social sciences and the “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (HARAWAY 1991, 189) and the authority anthropologists performed when “writing culture” (CLIFFORD and MARCUS 1986). It was embedded in a larger movement towards a more reflexive scientific practice and a step towards marking knowledge as situated and partial (HARDING 1991). Thus, reflexivity in this sense is not necessarily seen as an instrument to “neutralize” the effects of the social positioning of the researcher (BOURDIEU 1993, 372), but as an attempt to constructively mark scientific knowledge as situated and positional. It constructively uses “subaltern knowledges” to further push critical social theories. A reflexive approach to scientific practice must therefore include a continuous effort to read the lived experiences of the researcher and the researched against theoretically pre-determined categories and concepts.

For example, OYĒWŪMÍ (2002, 1) challenges gender studies with a focus on Africa, saying that any “serious scholarship on the place of ‘gender’ in African realities must of necessity raise questions about prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches”. This is due to the fact that theoretical concepts of gender in the social sciences have usually been developed with reference to gender arrangements and gender regimes in white middle-class Euro-American social contexts (with nuclear families and a male-breadwinner model).

Thus, the construction of “African women” as a group and the construction of “gender oppression” as a relevant form of oppression is first of all a theoretical assumption that has to be questioned: “To what extent does a gender analysis reveal or occlude other forms of oppression?” (OYĒWŪMÍ 2002, 2). For example, OYĒWŪMÍ analyses “seniority” as a more fundamental, but situational and fluid concept of hierarchical and non-hierarchical differentiation in Yoruba societies (see also OYĒWŪMÍ 1997). OYĒWŪMÍ’s criticism shows that it is necessary to question all three categories among the classical “race-class-gender” triad as to how much they matter or what they actually mean in a certain place. Looking at the methods used for the development of intersectionality concepts, this reflection can be seen as an intersectional move in itself: Black Feminist Theorists like Patricia HILL COLLINS (2000 [1990], vii) encourage researchers to actually use their own subjectivity, their bodies, their tacit and implicit knowledge, their positioning and their specific perspectives in interpretative research. This encourages the development of empirically grounded, “messy” concepts that can be used to nuance and further develop social theories as such. This is exactly what anthropological epistemology calls researchers to do. Any fixed notion of intersectionality wanting to pin it down to such-and-such three or four categories and historically and spatially universalize it, does not capture the methodological and epistemological foundations of its development.

Resisting a fixed notion of relevant lines of difference and domination, scholars have often added an “etc.” in enumerations of intersectional concepts. BUTLER (1991, 210) has noted that this “etc.” signals exhaustion and a potentially illimitable process of signification. As I have shown above, the “etc.” is an important hint towards the methodological foundations and epistemological approach with which intersectionality was developed: It calls for an open-ended reflexivity and creates perspectives for an engagement with theory based on personal experiences and empirical findings (SCHURR and SEGBART 2012, 153).

However, as I argue in the next section, this effort towards open-endedness does not mean that concepts that critically theorize structural systems of domination have become obsolete. Such deductive attempts can usefully point at “blind spots” of difference and domination and thus be useful for reflexive research practice.

2.2 Intersectionality as a counterpoint against implicit systems of dominance in the field

Critical concepts and social theories like intersectionality attempt to shed light on hidden mechanisms of power and oppression. Thus, critical social theories can help researchers to actually perceive the frictions and workings of powerful social differentiations and hierarchies in the field, to see what they would otherwise have overlooked. As I have argued above, academic categorizations are embedded in social and political struggles. The development of the concept of intersectionality was embedded in Black Feminist political struggles to politically delegitimize and criticize different, interlocking systems of oppression while refusing to privilege a single dimension of experience (BRAH and PHOENIX 2004, 78). A conscious inclusion of social theories and perspectives that spell out previously ignored structures of oppression is thus the second part of an intersectional reflexive approach to research practice. The main theoretical insight that the concept of intersectionality has brought forward is the entanglement of multiple axes of differentiation – economic, cultural, political, etc. – that are produced by and productive of specific social, historical and geographic contexts (BRAH and PHOENIX 2004, 76). This means that group-making processes or group-based emancipatory policies are entangled in a web of relations with each other. An intersectional analysis would show how groups draw on these relations for their most important characteristics (cf. also BOURDIEU and WACQUANT 2006 [1992], 262).

I am coming back to my previous example to illustrate this here. The way OYĒWŪMÍ analysed “seniority” as a fundamental principle of differentiation among the “Oyo-Yoruba” and presented it as an “African perspective” cannot be simply taken for granted as an essential or authentic “Africanness”. Her concept can be seen as embedded into struggles for self-definition and of recognition of specifically “African” ideas of social hierarchies in post-colonial Africa. In her argument, she creates links to pre-colonial concepts that are mainly used to criticize western assumptions about Third World cultures as inherently misogynic and Third World women as victims (see also SPIVAK 1988; MOHANTY 1988, 80–81; KERNER 2010, 250). As BAKARE-YUSUF notes: “I suggest that OYEWUMI’s fixation with an untainted linguistic and social indigeneity is ultimately motivated by a desire to assert the radical Otherness of African culture in relation to Europe. This desire to proclaim Africa’s own unique culture, mode of be-

ing and hermeneutic tradition has a long tradition in African political and intellectual history, embedded as it is in the quest to contest European denial of African humanity and European global dominance” (BAKARE-YUSUF 2003, 133).

BAKARE-YUSUF criticizes that in the process of unsettling one category (gender), OYEWUMI reinscribes another differentiation (Africanness vs. Westernness). At this point, intersectionality as a theoretical concept suggests that the seemingly monolithic category of “Africanness” should rather be analyzed as created by and entangled in social struggles for emancipation and intimately connected to gender-differentiations. Furthermore, BAKARE-YUSUF (2003, 130) criticizes that an analysis of Yoruba culture that neglects gender differentiations might also serve to support unquestioned, hegemonic patriarchal structures. In her view, a gender perspective is valid and productive in its effort to illuminate the “blind spots” of cultural norms and otherwise unquestioned hierarchies. A critical gender perspective could thus be productive in looking at Oyo-Yoruba societies exactly because it is a theoretical concept that comes from the outside and can spark reflexivity. However, the risk of being rejected as an “outsider’s theoretical perspective” is embedded in the intersectional complexities of cultural and identity politics in a post-colonial age.

With this, intersectionality as a critical social theory also offers a theoretically grounded perspective on reflexivity. Its theoretical advances suggest which categories of difference, systems of dominations and struggles for emancipation should be considered to avoid “blind spots” of overlooking materialized social structures and hierarchies (WINKER and DEGELE 2009, 141). Secondly, an intersectional perspective suggests that the complex, contingent and ambivalent processes of negotiating world-orders and discursive structuration (RECKWITZ 2008, 207) always involve interdependent struggles along several lines of differentiation.

From its epistemological origin, intersectionality thus has a twofold connection towards reflexivity and suggests a dynamic relationship between theory and empirical data: It developed as a challenge to hegemonic imaginations and social theories deeply grounded in personal social experiences of Black Feminists. Seen from this view, it motivates researchers to use their embodied feelings and experiences for academic knowledge production. As a critical social theoretical concept, it also helps to reflect upon hegemonic imaginations in the field (and in our own thinking). It is because of this dynamic

and twofold connection to reflexivity that intersectionality is a particularly useful concept in research on identity, difference, and inequality.

3 Reflexivity and intersectionality: examples from the field

Reflecting upon my intersectional position in the field, it is much too simple to define myself in a static position according to fixed lines of difference like this: “I am speaking from the position of a white German, middle-class, female, academic, married to a Nigerian-German with two kids”. Such an exercise in self-positioning is sometimes seen as a way of marking knowledge as situated (NAGAR and GEIGER 2007, 269). However, it simply “labels” the researcher, emphasizes a “condition of detached alterity” (KOBAYASHI 2003, 348) and power (MOHAMMAD 2001, 112) and risks essentializing social categories yet again (NAGAR and GEIGER 2007, 269). BOURDIEU (1993, 368) calls such accounts narcissistic and claims that they can be used for shrugging off any kind of deeper scrutiny into the relational social position of the speaker. From a theoretical perspective, such accounts take social space as absolute and not as relational (BOURDIEU and WACQUANT 2006 [1992], 229). A relational analysis should shed light on the continued complex and often ambiguous relationships between different people that evolve through face-to-face social interaction and that are embedded in larger social processes.

This means that an awareness of a (possibly privileged) position before entering the field may be helpful, but a reflection upon experiences during fieldwork can show how such a position is negotiated, questioned, or challenged. Such reflections can also be seen in recent work on methodology and fieldwork practice that show how embodied performances of gender, race, class, religion or other aspects of the researcher’s identity are shaped by and in turn shape fieldwork experience (DATTA 2008; HENKEL 2011; SCHURR and SEGEBART 2012; FARIA and MOLLETT 2014; FISHER 2014; KOHL and MCCUTCHEON 2014). Using specific fieldwork interactions for the attempt to reflect upon the relevance of different lines of division, their enactment in practice, and their relationship to power has been shown to be very productive. These field interactions can be used for interpretative advances and theoretical work to criticize previous academic concepts or pitfalls (SHINOZAKI 2012). Field diaries that entail the description of how field-relationships were established and maintained can

show how “the field” was accessed, addressed, and hereby co-produced. As I will show, initial attempts to establish relationships in the field can be revealing as to how and which social divisions are relevant in specific social situations and in a specific political context. However, even intensive, well-written and detailed accounts of these processes of building social relationships in the field and of private, personal feelings in the field have been called “narcissistic” (BOURDIEU 1993, 366) or “confessional narratives” (MAGOLDA 2000, 209, as quoted by VERNE 2012a) and have sparked criticism as to how much they take away from the actual treatment of the research subject. As KOBAYASHI has written: “On my worst days, I ask why the heck I should care about how a privileged, white graduate student felt when she went out into the world to discover oppression and marginalization. But, whoa, hold on. On my better days, I must acknowledge that she probably can’t get to first base without at least some self-reflexive positioning, that at the very least we need to be reassured that her/our assumptions about the world are not unquestioning” (KOBAYASHI 2003, 348).

The question remains, if this introspective work needs to be shared with readers in academia. My argument is that sharing such work is necessary. I believe that a critical reflection upon experiences, positionalities and emotions in the field helps researchers to develop important insights into their research interests, especially in social and cultural geography. Furthermore, if more of such “confessional” data is published, it can have a revealing effect. It can help to bring about a new recognition to the value and resourcefulness of subjective, personal thoughts and emotions in research. If such thoughts and emotions remain hidden from academic readership, how can anyone be encouraged to actually dare to consciously use their own (life) experiences and feelings for their empirical research? Thus, another important reason for the publishing of such materials on fieldwork is transparency (VERNE 2012a, 43) and a more open and honest research practice (as for example shown by ROSE 1997). SUNDBERG (2003, 181) also stresses the importance of “breaking the silence about fieldwork”.

As I show in the following, practices of positioning myself in interaction with people in the field are an important interpretative asset. Reflections upon how I am seen and positioned by others help to enlighten how they see themselves and about which kinds of positions they struggle, and how these struggles are embedded in social relations. Everyday experiences in the field, whether they be grounded in difficulties of access or exceptionally positive or funny episodes

(SCHURR and KASPAR 2013, 41), can potentially be important for data analysis and deserve close attention. In two examples from my field notes, I demonstrate how the kinds of reflexivity described above can be useful for discovering interpretative starting points. I have chosen two different types of encounters in the field. The following sections are quoted from my field diary (without real names). To use my field diary for continuous reflection on my experience, I produced different forms of entries: Firstly, I wrote down notes on actual events and background observations to events, e.g. writing down how I contacted individuals, what I observed and how I felt in a field situation. This includes notes that were taken before and after (formal or informal) interview or group discussion situations. Secondly, I wrote down changes or processes that I felt had gone on for a while and which I noticed and wrote down at a particular point in time. Thirdly, I sketched possible links of my field experiences to theoretical approaches and geographical literature, so that I would not forget them later on. These notes included pondering on insecurities and possible “blind spots” that I had previously not thought about, but that seemed to be relevant when I kept on reading about theoretical approaches. Field notes thus do not simply mirror an experience, but are the results of complex processes of sense-making. In these processes, (silent) emotional, bodily and practical processes are translated into linguistic terms (BREIDENSTEIN et al. 2013, 95). Reflection at this point is based on the already-interpreted text that is produced in diary-writing.

The first example is from field notes that were produced as I tried to get a grip of the general situation for Nigerians in Bremen and set up one of my first interviews. A representative of an organization that I found on the internet was very cooperative about my approach to speak to him.

“I called G. G. some days ago on the phone and the first thing he told me was: ‘Oh yes, that is why we are here, to give information about Africa and to improve the knowledge about the situation of Africans in the city’ and then he invited me to come to his home. I was very happy with this easy and fast access, felt welcome in his home, as he showed me videotapes from previous events he organized, as well as awards from public institutions for his commitment to the social integration of Africans in Bremen. I offered to speak English with him at the beginning of the conversation, but he insisted on speaking German to me the entire time, although he experienced some difficulties expressing himself” (Field Notes, April 18th 2011, Bremen).

The focus of this interaction is the attempt to get in touch with experts and gate-keepers that will efficiently provide insights and access – and hereby co-constitute a research field. The note was written down after the first face-to-face conversation with G. G. and summarizes the way I contacted him, his reactions to my approach, where the interview took place as well as my feelings during the interview. The conversation itself was recorded with a digital recording device and can thus be further analyzed as well.

In the following section, I will turn to the analysis of this excerpt from my field notes and show how a reflexive analysis can lead to insights about intersectional social positionalities as well as the relational construction of knowledge and social groups. In this example, I reflect upon categories of symbolic power that have been deducted by WINKER and DEGELE's (2009, 37–53) intersectionality approach as highly relevant in modern capitalist societies: race, class, gender, and body. I show how the critical attention to categories of difference that seem absent or irrelevant in the interaction can provide an avenue to grasp symbolic power structures and the interactive reproduction of power that might otherwise be overlooked (DIDERO 2014, 133; FARIA and MOLLETT 2014, 2). Locating G. G., myself, and the interactive production of knowledge that we perform in an “objectified space of social difference” (DIDERO 2014, 133) and reflecting upon my emotions during the conversation thus works to distance myself from a “too easy and feel good” interpretation of expert knowledge. In the second section of this chapter, I introduce another excerpt from my field diary and show how, on the other hand, lived experience can open up insights into more complex spaces of social differentiation and lead beyond well established categories of difference deducted from intersectionality concepts.

3.1 Feelings, field relationships and symbolic power

The first line of interpretation of the experience of “easy entry” is based on the direct reply to my request for getting in touch with the representative of the “African” organization. With his reply (“Oh, that is why we are here...”), he firmly sets himself in a local context of production of knowledge about different immigrant groups and their countries or here rather continents of origin. In the recorded conversation, he later refers to a general lack of

knowledge and to highly stereotypical knowledge of African immigrants among native Germans. In this way he positions himself as an expert who can produce “true” and reliable knowledge and who is the perfect partner for a researcher. With such a mode of talk, I feel very welcome with my curiosity and positioning as a researcher: Our interests match each other well and we make each other happy because we co-produce each other as “co-experts”. A belief in the power and significance of academic knowledge production for “correcting” some wrong images of “Africans” in Germany is implicitly shared. Furthermore, my position as a researcher becomes a “morally good” one, just as his position as a legitimate representative of an African association. This process also produces the category of “Africans” which G. G. then claims to represent – and I as a researcher co-produce as my category of interest.

The pride that G. G. takes in the various awards from public organizations for his commitment towards the “integration of Africans” hints towards a larger public discourse of “integration”. Thus, the group-making does not start with the short meeting between G. G. and me. Rather, it is part of larger institutionalized programs and social policies. In the context of the conversation, the awards strengthen G. G.'s role as an expert and as a publicly recognized figure. Furthermore, he spoke German to me the whole time, even after I suggested speaking English instead. The reason he gave for that was that he would like to integrate (“Weil, ich möchte gerne (...) integrieren”, from the recorded conversation, Minute 0:17). Language proficiency and the willingness to learn the language has become one of the most marked signifiers of “integration” in the German immigration discourse. Taken together, the awards and his linguistic choice thus serve to communicate the public legitimacy of G. G.'s and his association's activities and firmly position them inside a hegemonic German policy aim of “integration”. The fact that he insisted on using German with me also communicated to me that he saw me as a representative of a native German collectivity in our conversation.

How does this positioning in the policy discourse connect to the creation of the category “African”? Germany has long been a “reluctant” country of immigration (EHRKAMP and LEITNER 2006, 1591) where different groups of immigrants have only recently managed to gain some institutionalized voice in the public debate on integration and immigration. In national, state, and local processes of creating “integration plans” or “integra-

tion” projects and activities, the formation of larger groups is a strategy for recognition. The claim to represent a significant number of people is the precondition for being heard in such a setting. In such a context, academic work using the category of “Africans” can make a point for recognition of “African” activities and support the voice of their representatives.

From a critical intersectional perspective, this connection of integration politics and academia leads to the question: Whose voices remain unheard if G. G. and I form a “happy alliance” of experts co-producing academic knowledge and acting under a common hegemonic aim of “integration”? Whose interests are strengthened, and whose are marginalized? Apart from the production of the category of “Africans”, it is necessary to look (at least) also at gender, class, and body issues and detect their interactions. These issues have remained suspiciously silent in my field notes. I superficially describe that G. G. invited me to his (family) home, which is a two storey terraced house in a middle class neighbourhood and shows his relatively secure economic status. When he invited me, he also told me to come at a particular time, when he would have come home from paid work – and I did not write this down at that time. The categorization of G. G. as a man is only seen by the use of the pronoun “he”. How can the tendency to produce “happy” expert knowledge, to define and to produce “groups” be connected to this reflection upon G. G.’s and my positioning? Those aspects of G. G.’s position that can be marked as privileged remain silent in my field notes. Seen through the lens of producing knowledge and ensuring the legitimacy of knowledge as symbolic power, it seems that I co-operated with his aim to produce his own position as “objective” and “neutral” in writing down my field notes.

A critical reflection based upon intersectionality concepts and a critique of masculinist epistemologies (SUNDBERG 2003; BOURDIEU 2005 [1998]) that looks at field experiences as well as actual field notes can thus open up important insights. The gaps in my field notes hint at the interdependence of knowledge production and social positioning. As I have shown, academic knowledge production can support privileged “ethnic elites” that co-produce the groups that they claim to represent. My feelings of happiness and the silences that I have detected in my field notes can thus be seen as part of such a co-production and hint at the attraction of gaining symbolic power through the production of “objective” knowledge.

3.2 Reflections on entering the field: extending concepts of intersectionality

The second example is taken from a perspective of a more unstructured method of “hanging out” at a Kiosk owned by a Nigerian. The note presented here is part of the second type of field notes: I give an interpretation of several incidents taken together and summarize my own feelings and interpretations about the process of getting to know people and being seen by the people in the Kiosk.

“My husband is not yet working; he is still finishing his degree at a university in Saxony and going there for an extra job at times. Some of the men in one kiosk that he spends some time in seem not to believe that he goes ‘only’ for a 400 Euro job. We are met with some suspicions that sound like: ‘Ah, you are just pretending to be poor! We know your kind of person. Why are you always going to Saxony? You have a house there? Or maybe in Nigeria you have a house or a big car. Who knows what these two people are hiding from us!’” (Field Notes, May 15th 2011, Bremen)

These instances of suspicions that I sensed among people (mostly Nigerians) that used to visit the Kiosk and stay for a while to chat have some important consequences for the analysis of intersectional social positioning. When reflecting on this field note and my experience, two different aspects can be highlighted: First of all, the field note as such shows how much I connect my position in the field with that of my husband: I saw the way people were suspicious of me as a reflection of “our” way of life as a family. I summarized my husband and myself as “these two people” in the words that I sensed behind jokes and uncomfortable silences or hesitation to come in contact with me. I thus portray my husband as an important aspect of the way people see me: The connections to other places that I have through my husband are evaluated and commented upon. The position that is made salient here is not only that of a researcher, but it is also connected to my social life and my most intimate relationships. Thus my personal and professional identities were closely intertwined, as other researchers stress for accompanied fieldwork (CUPPLES and KINDON 2003). This opens up avenues to think about and to theorize intimate relationships when looking at intersectional social positioning.

Secondly, I seem to be perceived as part of a social field that extends far beyond Bremen (in part through the connection to my husband). The way my husband and I were met with suspicion shows how some people felt that they could not judge our personalities on the basis of our appearance in that

kiosk only. My performance of a relatively modest social position in Bremen, by living in a small flat close to the kiosk, wearing no-name clothes, and not deliberately paying for “rounds” when drinking in the evening, was not taken as a necessarily complete, holistic, or “essential” marker of my social status. My husband and I were suspected to possibly have a higher social status elsewhere (e.g. in Saxony or Nigeria). We were thus assumed to be hiding aspects of your social identity (GOFFMAN 1990 [1963]). In the context of gaining trust in the field, this suspicion of e.g. “pretending to be poor” seemed to imply that we were of a morally questionable character. On the other hand, the suspicions that were often voiced in a joking manner can also be seen as an attempt to show respect, as a move to make sure that we were not estimated below our status elsewhere. When I analyze practices of intersectional social positioning, I should thus take into account the complexities of (potentially) multilocal life-worlds. The kiosk in which I did fieldwork can be seen as a nodal point in transnational social relations (BÜCHLER and RICHTER 2010, 114). The future task to bring concepts of intersectionality into conversation with notions of translocality, transnationality, or mobility (e.g. WEISS 2005; MASSEY 1994) is an issue that follows from this reflection of my field experience.

4 Conclusion

This paper has argued for methodological reflexivity in geographical research because such reflexivity can provide important insights into questions of identity, difference, power and inequality. Methodological reflexivity includes continuous attention and reflection upon the social practices of positioning and differentiation in the field as well as analytical reflection upon the importance of academic knowledge and processes for social and political struggles. Understood in such a way, reflexivity connects with intersectionality in different ways.

First of all, reflexive practice in social and cultural geography requires critical theoretical concepts like intersectionality to shed light on “blind spots” concerning the politics of fieldwork and the way academic knowledge production is embedded in struggles for symbolic power. Using an intersectional approach to reflect upon the creation of specific social categories during fieldwork can provide important cues and stepping stones for further interpretative work. Intersectionality highlights

particularly relevant dimensions of social power and domination that situate research partners and researchers in social space. Aspects of privilege and power are often silenced and not recognized by those in hegemonic positions. Furthermore, intersectionality stresses the simultaneity and interdependence of social categories and lines of differentiation. These theoretical insights provide a framework with which to critically reflect upon fieldwork practice and the production of knowledge as embedded in larger socio-political processes of organizing, representation, and recognition.

Secondly, a reflexive approach helps to strive for an open-endedness of intersectionality as a theoretical concept when brought into conversation with empirical data. As I have shown, such open-endedness and sensitivity towards lived experience is firmly based in the epistemological foundations of intersectionality. Furthermore, it connects with basic assumptions of a genuinely ethnographic approach to empirical research. The analysis of concrete processes of interaction, feelings, thoughts and personal experiences in the field can highlight important issues that expand and enrich intersectionality as a theoretical concept.

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