DISCOVERING POSITIONALITIES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON DOING FIELDWORK IN SOUTH INDIA

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Summary: Critical reflection on our positionalities fosters a better understanding of our embodied research experiences. Positionalities undergo transformation throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In this paper, we seek to engage with the question of how our situated, fluid positionalities shape relations and the data collection process in the field. To this end we discuss 1) our positionalities as researchers in the research process; 2) field entry; 3) embodied field performances; 4) marital status; and 5) the relationship between research assistants and researcher. Discussion of these interrelated themes is prefaced by a brief introduction to contemporary work on Indian feminism and gendered geographies.

Zusammenfassung: Eine kritische Reflektion unserer Positionalität erlaubt ein besseres Verständnis unserer (ver) körperlich(t)en Forschungserfahrung. Diese transformiert sich während des ganzen Forschungsprozesses, inklusive Datensammlung und -analyse. Deshalb halten wir es für äußerst fruchtbar, uns mit der Frage zu beschäftigen, wie unsere situierte und dennoch flexible Positionalität Beziehungen im Feld und die Datenerhebung beeinflusst. Wir reflektieren über 1) unsere Situation als Forschende, 2) den Feldzugang, 3) den körperlichen Auftritt im Feld, 4) die Bedeutung unseres Familienstandes und 5) das Verhältnis zwischen Forschenden und Forschungsassistenten. Diese Themen beeinflussen sich gegenseitig und sind in eine Einführung in zeitgenössischen Indischen Feminismus und Gendered Geographien eingebettet.

Keywords: Positionality, reflexivity, gender, cross-cultural research, embodiment, India

1 Introduction

When conducting qualitative research we are challenged by our fluid and contested positionalities as researchers towards our subjects and the emerging relationship of power between us (Berg and Mansvelt 2000; Crang 2003; McDowell 1992; Rose 1997) The notion of objective and value-free research delivering universal truth cannot be held up in the face of situated encounters, where the researcher as a social being is similarly questioned and interrogated by the interacting interview partner, thus co-creating statements. The "crisis of representation" in the 1980s gave rise to an influential movement that questioned the possibility of truthful presentations and representations of the "other" and the capacity of the subaltern to be heard (Nagar and Geiger 2007). In response to this crisis, Western academics either abandoned fieldwork or adopted a reflexive approach that is usually incorporated into the post-fieldwork phase. Nagar and Geiger (2007, 267) describe a feminist understanding of reflexivity as a way of acknowledging that "ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the shifting contextual and

relational contours of the researcher's social identity and her social situatedness or positionality". Especially in feminist research, epistemologies demand reflexivity and introspection on positionality, that place the research and the researcher on a map of power relations (Jackson 2006). Building upon this idea, Smith (2003) claims that geographers need to critically reflect upon their positionality while doing research in countries not their own. She defines positionality as "[…]our 'race' and gender […] but also our class experiences, our levels of education, our sexuality, our age, our ableness [and] whether we are a parent or not. All of these have a bearing upon who we are, how our identities are formed and how we do our research. We are not neutral, scientific observers untouched by the emotional and political contexts of places where we do our research" (Smith 2003, 186).

Critical engagement with our positionalities, identities and emotions in the research process is crucial for doing fieldwork in an ethical and personal as well as academic and political sense (Wolf 1996). This paper addresses a number of methodological questions that arose while conducting fieldwork in

South India. In particular we explore issues related to our positionalities and revealed through a process of critical reflexivity. The two experiences of fieldwork discussed in this article were conducted early on in our careers as social scientists, in rural areas of the neighbouring states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in South India, and in both cases with an explicit focus on gender issues. Martina Padmanabhan (2003) studied the social interaction between NGOs and rural women in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu during the six months of research for her MSc thesis in 1995. This research was undertaken in association with the Gandhigram Rural Institute and supported by an individual grant from the Indian Council Cultural Exchange. Isabelle Kunze investigated the social organisation of agrobiodiversity related to land use change in Kalpetta district, Kerala during altogether eight months between 2010 and 2012 (Momsen et al. 2013). The research was undertaken towards her PhD, as a member of the "BioDIVA" research group, hosted by the Indian NGO, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). BioDIVA was an Indo-German transdisciplinary research project (Christinck and Padmanabhan 2013). The BioDIVA team included three interdisciplinary research "tandems", each consisting of a Germany-based and an Indian doctoral student, working in the field of economics, ecology or the social sciences. Two of the Indian researchers were former staff members of MSSRF, and their perspectives were informed by this experience.

In this paper, we argue that critical reflexivity on our positionalities fosters a better understanding of our embodied research experiences. These undergo transformation throughout the process of data collection and analysis. We particularly seek to engage with the question of how our situated, fluid positionalities shape relations and the data collection process in the field. We also examine how our emotions and emotional relationships affect our positionalities as researchers.

Our critical and methodological reflections focus on five main areas of interest, which emerged while conducting fieldwork and also during the course of data analysis and retrospective interpretation of the experience: first, our positionalities as researchers in the research process; second, field entry; third, embodied field performances; fourth, marital status; and, finally, relationships with our research assistants. We focus on these themes because they are mutually related and were those that principally affected our positionalities during the fieldwork and afterwards. These methodological re-

flections are prefaced by a brief introduction to contemporary work on Indian feminism and gendered geographies that provides the theoretically context for our empirical work.

2 Indian perspectives on feminisms and gendered geographies

In order to understand the social and cultural context of the research described in this paper, it is important to refer to and reflect on contemporary debates on feminism and gendered geographies in India. The emphasis in these debates on fulfilling women's needs illustrates the intellectual discourse and climate in which the empirical work took place. In this paper, we argue that social relationships during data collection among the researchers, research assistants and interview respondents were shaped by power structures derived from hierarchies of gender, social status, class, age and ethnicity in the South Indian setting. Indian views on feminisms and feminist geographical research on India provide fruitful areas of theoretical discourse that can help to contextualise our empirical experiences in the field and inform reflection on our positionalities.

Indian ideas on feminism(s) are characterised by a number of ambivalences that highlight the multiple meanings of feminist thought (Chaudhuri 2004; Bhasin and Khan 2004; Bhagwat 2004; Rege 2004; Krishna 2007). Adopting a postcolonial viewpoint, Chaudhuri's (2004, xii) body of work focuses on women's activism in India but contains little on theoretical feminist approaches. Indian feminists are ambivalent towards the use of the term "feminism" itself because Indian gender studies have focused strongly on exploring the "history of the women's question in India". In discussing exclusion, power and gender equality, Chaudhuri (2004) underlines the differences between Indian and Western social values. She notes that the Western idea of equality is "alien" to Indian society with its strong hierarchical family and community structures. Thus, researchers doing fieldwork in India need to re-examine concepts such as equality and women's emancipation, informed by a critical analysis of our own embodied positionality and understanding.

Bhasin and Khan (2004) argue that there is no single understanding of Indian feminism as it is based on historical and cultural realities and derived from differing consciousnesses, perceptions and actions. Historical research in India has laid the ground for theorising feminism as being strongly

related to postcolonialism and the class and caste of feminist actors. Bhasin and Khan (2004, 4) suggest a broad definition in which Indian feminism can be understood as "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work or within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation'. This idea clearly addresses gender issues and the subordination of women, but without referring to the roots of subordination in patriarchy.

According to Bhagwat (2004, 298), research on gender (in)equality needs to develop theoretical and methodological frameworks to deconstruct Indian masculinist culture. While feminist work critically engages with differentiations and specificities related to class, caste, tribe or cultural and religious minorities "no one took note of the voices of women as women'. In examining the literature on Indian feminist thought, it becomes clear that the theorization of gender as an analytical category remains a gap in research (Krishna 2007). However, feminists involved in Dalit studies and indigenous feminisms focusing on marginalised people stress that "it is imperative for feminist politics that 'difference' is historically located in the real struggles for marginalised women" (Rege 2004).

Contemporary feminist geographical writings by Raju (2011) and Raju and Lahiri-Dutt (2011) draw attention to geographical differences among constitutions of gender, age, class and ethnicity. Current work highlights how Indian feminism is distinct from Western feminist thought. Rather than emphasising the multiple meanings and representations of gender, power relations and the body, emerging feminist geographical research in India focuses on women's access to the basic resources, in order for poor households to lead better lives. They do so by calling for analytical frameworks which encompass the social and conceptual formations of space and place. These frameworks enable a better understanding of the spatial embeddedness of social relations that are shaped and created by notions of femininity and masculinity. Crucial for examining Indian gender geographies is sensitivity to differences among women from different subaltern locations. Lahiri-Dutt (2011) claims that in India, intersections of space, power and knowledge are experienced on an everyday basis. Activity spaces such as home (private) and the market (public) are not simply sexually segregated geographical locations but mutually exclusive. This observation is related to a key element of contemporary work on gender and geography in India: the much con-

tested debate on the binary separation into public and private domains. Consequently, the "fluidity of binaries" (Raju 2011, 13) appears to be a defining characteristic element of everyday life in most Asian countries that merits reflection during the research process.

Overall, Indian perspectives to feminism adopt a postcolonial approach[1] that puts the historical context and historical injustices at the centre of analysis, while focusing on women's voices rather than the analytical concept of gender. Inspired by poststructuralist thought, contemporary work on gendered geographies in India highlights the complex organization and meaning of space, understood as a product of social transformation and experience (Raju 2011). In this paper, we uncover the ambivalences of doing fieldwork and respond to the call to critically reflect upon our positionality as researchers (Smith 2003) in a cross-cultural setting, from a feminist perspective. We further aim to contribute to the theorization of gender as an analytical category (Krishna 2007) that is socially constructed and, therefore, expressed differently in distinct cultural contexts and places. This builds upon current feminist geographical work on India that aims towards a better comprehension of the spatial embeddedness of social relations that are gendered. In addition, we address issues concerned with gender (in)equality and the ways in which Indian masculinist culture (Bhagwat 2004) affected our positionalities in the field.

3   Methodological reflections on positionalities

3.1 Situating ourselves in the research process

In this section we reflect on the experience of doing fieldwork in South India and living in a conservative, rural environment over a period of several months, and on our roles as researchers, as women and as German citizens before and after fieldwork. Martina Padmanabhan is daughter of a Tamil Brahmin and a German mother and, at the time of her MSc fieldwork, was single and 25 years old. Having been brought up and educated in Germany, her Tamil is rudimentary. Experiences of family visits and travelling in South India, studying rural sociology, and working for a year on a farm in Germany feed into her ideas and images of rural India.

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[1] A postcolonial engagement with the German-speaking development geography is offered by Lossau (2012).

Isabelle Kunze is a white, middle-class, married and university educated woman. She was raised in Germany and, at the time of writing, is 31 years old. She started her PhD research in South India without having any proficiency in the local language (Malayalam). During her twenties, her strong interest in development and cultural studies led her to travel to countries like Thailand, Laos, Australia, New Zealand and Egypt; however, she had not been to India before starting work on her PhD. Looking back, she considers that her lack of knowledge about Indian culture and its complex, heterogeneous traditions reinforced her "outsider" position and resulted in a feeling of being "out of place". During her first research visit to India, a photo[2] taken by a colleague records her first encounter with the divide that separates the researcher from her respondents. The picture taken in 2010 in Wayanad district, Kerala shows Isabelle's first field visit to a Kuruma village, standing next to village inhabitants and a social worker.

During the exploratory field study, Isabelle Kunze visually analysed the picture through the lens of critical reflexivity. These thoughts also underline her embodied positionality in the field.

"The two taller women in the middle of the five women were the ones who took part in the interview. The young women on the right of the photo accompanied us throughout the whole visit; she supports the self-help group in the village. The other two shorter women were curious about our visit and spontaneously joined us. (…). It can be seen that the tribal women did not want to come closer to me. This reveals the 'artificial' disconnection between the researcher and the research participants. Furthermore, the differences in clothing also demonstrate cultural differences. Based on my experience so far, a lesson learned is that wearing traditional Indian clothes (Shalva Kameez) makes me feel that I am on a similar level to the respondents and more socially accepted. Wearing western clothes makes me feel "different" (or "western" in terms of the "other"). I feel it is important for the research and interviewing process to be "among equals', even though I am aware that I am still a European, unmarried[3] "young lady'. I also hope that spending more time with tribal women in particular will help to establish some relationship between us" (Kunze, exploratory study field notes, 2010).

Similar considerations apply to embodied performances and to social and marital status; issues which will be further explored below.

On starting out the fieldwork for her MSc, Martina Padmanabhan (2003, 32) experienced a role reversal when women identified as respondents refused in a most charming way to follow the routines of a semi-structured interview. Instead they set out to interrogate the young lady from Germany, asking direct and detailed questions about her family background and set-up, as well as her educational aspirations. By interrogating her in this way according to their own criteria, the women situated the interviewer in their lifeworld. The exploration and comments on the obviously inter-religious marriage of her parents, her motivation to come to India to study and her pitiable lack of further sibling beyond one brother, had two ends. On the one hand, the information extracted served to place the lone girl in a social cosmos and revealed her embeddedness a wider network that offered her protection. On the other hand, these interrogations, that involved discussion of a wide range of topics from beauty patches to eating habits, taught the researched researcher about the criteria the women held to be important and applied to organise their social world and form judgments. While considering herself in the best western tradition as an independent woman with a great degree of self-determination, these cordial cross-examinations unveiled her own social blind spots. As Mosse (1993) notes, women in interviews do not clearly demarcate personal from private information, or subject from relationship. By locating the researcher within their own perspective, the women "interviewees" laid the groundwork for the subsequent process of data collection.

3.2 Entering the field: encountering life-worlds

An exploratory field study conducted by the Indian-German BioDIVA research team promised to be a useful way for Isabelle Kunze to gain a first impression of the research area, Wayanad district in Kerala, South India. This study took place in April–May 2010 and provided an opportunity to meet research colleagues and to visit a number of field sites and indigenous agricultural communities. The experience enabled her to reflect on her positionality as a researcher, and led her to question both her outsider role as a European researcher, and her partial knowledge

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[2] Due to ethical issues, the photo of Isabelle and the women taken in a South Indian village cannot be printed.

[3] At that time (April 2010)

about the issues raised in the research proposal[4]. Even though Isabelle had conducted an in-depth review of literature on gender and agrobiodiversity, the feminization of agriculture and the use of participatory methods in the field, she felt inadequately prepared theoretically. In her exploratory field study report, she explained that

"[…] leaving for India without having a clear picture of what we are going to find out and how (and also given the fact that this was my first time in India), I actually felt a bit under-prepared. However, the positive side of not being fully theoretically prepared was that it allowed for a great level of flexibility, which I believe was an essential asset for my first experience of field work in India" (Kunze, exploratory field study report, 2010).

This commentary reveals a difficulty that many researchers probably find themselves in before entering the field. On the one hand, she felt the need to be familiar with the knowledge derived from the literature on the field of interest. On the other hand, she also wished to attain a "neutral" position as a researcher, being aware that knowledge entails a certain bias and, therefore, her own acquired knowledge represents only one amongst many modes of thought.

Isabelle's experience of undertaking an exploratory study underlines that knowledge is never value-free but situated and partial. England (1994) explains that reflexivity is central to fieldwork because it encourages self-discovery and may lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions. Billo and Hiemstra (2013) stress the importance of concepts such as reflexivity and embodiment within the context for doing fieldwork. Reflecting on field experiences in Ecuador, they highlight the incompatibility between writing a clear, precise and confident research proposal on the one hand, and dealing with the methodological "messiness" in the field on the other.

A literature review on the nexus between agrobiodiversity and gender identified two major themes relevant to Isabelle's research: the feminization of agriculture and the declining social status of women due to a loss of (agro)biodiversity caused by a conversion from rice paddy to banana and plantain cultivation[5]. It is considered that the better status of women in South India compared to the North has "something to do with the historical dominance […] of wet-rice cultivation, which makes significant demands for female labour" (Corbridge et al. 2013, 264). However, the exploratory study in 2010 challenged these assertions in the literature, because mainly men rather than women are involved in agriculture in Wayanad. Preliminary results of our research showed that women, particularly more educated women, often prefer to leave the agricultural sector because of its low financial returns. In addition, a crucial observation made during the exploratory study was that the loss of agrobiodiversity might not be as strongly related to a declining social status of women as is often portrayed in the literature on agrobiodiversity and gender (Howard 2003). These findings forced Isabelle to question her initial assumptions after returning from the field, and led her to revise her research questions and identify new topics for investigation. The findings of the exploratory study lend support to Raju's (2011) notion of spatial embeddedness of social relations, as being not only gendered but also shaped by other intersecting categories including age and social status. For example, Isabelle became aware that changes in the social organisation among land-owning indigenous communities in Wayanad affect women and men differently according to age. In addition, social changes, in particular related to improved education and increased mobility of women, contribute to changing agrarian relations. Consequently, the current focus of her research is to explore how agrarian and social changes are interrelated and how these changes are gendered. Overall, the exploratory study was a fruitful opportunity to question her positionality with regard to the overall research objective and the "problem situation" described in the initial research proposal. Discussions among the team with researchers from other disciplines on these matters also stimulated critical reflexivity on the research focus.

Isabelle's experiences were a consequence of the institutionalised structure of research projects and the need for research funding. Applications for grants require proposal writing and the production of outline research designs. Often, when the time comes to apply the theoretical research question on the ground

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[4] Isabelle Kunze considers herself as lucky to have had this opportunity to undertake an exploratory study, which in her case was incorporated in the research project design and thus the funding proposal. Such a study is useful in international research projects, helping to build cross-cultural capacities among team members and enabling contextualization of theoretical research proposals which are often written "out of place".

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[5] The differentiation between rice paddy and banana/plantain has a gender dimension because paddy is often considered a "female crop" whereas banana/plantain is a "male crop". Although in both cases men hold the decision making power, paddy cultivation involves mainly women's labour.

in the fieldwork stage, carefully thought-out ideas go to pieces and prove inappropriate. Confrontation with the idiosyncrasies and strangeness of the field induces a slow, but persistent erosion of theoretical assumptions and concepts. Hypotheses based on literature review have to be altered to account for facts observed in the field, and discovered in encounters with respondents, colleagues and research assistants (Padmanabhan 2003, 25). In this situation, the researcher can feel overwhelmed by new impressions and confused by the loss of perceived stable positionality, making it hard to stay focused on the research aims. Participant observation can help overcome the feeling of disorientation in the field and provide inputs for productive reformulation of research methods. Thus the initial confusion can stimulate the development of more adequate research questions and perspectives, and further the identification of relevant key-categories, revealed through a process of discovery. This is not a pain-free process for the researcher. Reflection, reformulation and slow development of a more relevant research question go hand in hand with intellectual and emotional friction, as unreasonable expectations of completeness and unlimited resources give way to a growing awareness of capacity constraints and the vastness of the field. But this painful encounter between an idealised research setting and the messiness of the life-world opens up the research process, making room for new and surprising findings from which new hypotheses can emerge. Thus, questioning of our positionalities is a fundamental stage of the research process: a source of irritation that becomes productive.

3.3 Embodied performances in the field

Field work literally implies stepping into field, villages and houses of people, where researchers and research subjects interact visually even before interview takes place. Jackson's work on feminist epistemologies and development research offers useful insights into reflexivity and its meaning in the context of doing fieldwork in an unfamiliar country. She argues that reflexivity "refers to the fact that, in describing something, we do not stand apart from it, separate from the order already existing around us" (Jackson 2006, 533). This idea fits into the notion of embodied performance, understood as the ways in which performances of gendered bodies define masculinities and femininities, which are shaped by power structures (Datta 2008), i.e. social hierarchy. The following commentary is the product of

Isabelle's post-fieldwork reflection on the experience of the fieldwork process, and illustrates how the production of embodied performances in the field reinforces hierarchical structures within a cross-cultural research team.

Hierarchy in an Indian context is defined through social status, religion, marital status, caste and the level of education, all of which are gendered. In this case, data collection was planned and implemented by six doctoral researchers, three women and three men, with similar levels of education and assigned roles within the overall research project. However there were major differences among us in terms of social and marital status, as well as ethnicity. Two men were NGO staff members as well as researchers, and thus had a double role within the research team. Drawing on their Keralan origin, status as senior staff members, strong links with the partner NGO, extensive field experience and long-standing interactions with Adivasi communities in Wayanad, these two men designated themselves as being at a higher level in the hierarchy, over other members of the project team. The men perceived themselves as being responsible for the "protection" of the women colleagues at a lower level in the institutional hierarchy, adopting the Indian behavioural pattern of the elder brother. This embodied performance entailed the reconstruction of Indian masculinist culture (Bhagwat 2004) within the context of the research team and the reproduction of patterns of gender (in)equality which are linked to social hierarchy. There was considerable unease on both sides in the Indian and German team members regarding what forms of professional behaviour were appropriate in this bicultural setting. Indian project partners saw their role as hosts and interpreted this role in a traditional, conservative way. For Indian colleagues, it was a challenge to understand the idiosyncratic behaviour of German, female independent-minded but novice PhD students, and more so to operationalise this behaviour in a form appropriate for conducting research among socially orthodox and rather strict rural populations. Looking back, it is clear that the Indian male team-members were struggling to find the right words to express their concerns without hurting their colleagues' feelings, but at the same time determined not to risk their good working relations with communities by allowing their new German colleagues to commit (unintended) offences. At the same time, their behaviour towards us was partly unconscious and rooted in their cultural upbringing as members of Indian society.

The Indian administrative system categorises untouchables and tribal communities as "scheduled castes" and "scheduled tribes" for the sake of affirmative action. Often these terms are linked to the label underdevelopment, providing evidence of how the treatment of castes and tribal communities in India has become part of a wider societal debate on ideas and goals of development. The attitudes behind this discourse reveal themselves in bodily performance. The general preference shown to tribal groups with "pure" ritual practices, or for the pleasant and worldly communication patterns of male elders over the uneasy reticence of poverty-ridden former bonded labourers, is not just a matter of convenience and the ease of establishing a working relationship. On a deeper level, disgust provoked by the embodied personification of ritual impurity is embedded in the ritualised Hindu value system, and as such can paralyze even the smartest Indian partner. Such embodied feelings are linked to the tradition of untouchability (CORBRIDGE et al. 2013, 255), avoiding social contact, joint meals and sharing water sources. BOURDIEU (2001, 216) has coined the term "habitus" for this "embodied system of dispositions durably inscribed in people's reflexes, movements and desires".

Another strong hierarchical difference was spatial locality. HARCOURT and ESCOBAR (2005, 7) stress the interrelations between embodiment and emplacement in which "bodies are constituted through power". One young women researcher had a north Indian background, was unmarried and unable to speak the local language. At the same time, she was a gender activist with a Master's degree in Gender Studies. Her north Indian ethnic background, her young body and her active political attitude put the male colleagues outside their comfort zones, which reinforced hierarchical gendered relations in the project team. These hierarchies are constantly reproduced through embodied performances (e.g. appropriate dress codes for men and women) that in turn reproduce gender norms and body language. This raised concerns related to gender (in)equality among the German women researchers. The way that appropriate versus inappropriate embodied performance were distinguished differently for women and men team members made them feel uncomfortable. This example highlights how intersecting aspects of identity such as ethnicity, gender and social status define the spatial embeddedness of social relations.

Researchers taking part in field visits during the exploratory study were given clear guidance on culturally appropriate versus culturally inadequate field practices. Overall, these practices reveal the ways in which masculinist culture in this particular context is reinforced by embodied performances in the countryside. A key concern was the "right" embodied performance of women and men, with respect to clothing, body language and observance of purity customs. In particular, German female team members were asked by the Indian men colleagues to wear culturally suitable clothes for "young ladies" (the North Indian dress called Shalwar Kameez), that covers the signifying feminine body parts including breast and cleavage, accompanied by a shawl (duppata) which can even be worn as a veil. Men were supposed to wear long trousers. All team members were asked to remove shoes before entering a community household, and advised that tea and food should be respectfully accepted. It was noticeable that the rules were defined by the men colleagues, who saw themselves as experts based on their long-standing experience in the field. Significantly the team did not contain any local women.

Based on her field experiences in Dehli, DATTA's (2008, 189) work explores how male and female bodies, in different locations in the field, are perceived both by researchers and participants as "markers of gender identity". Her work offers interesting incentives for a post-fieldwork engagement with positionality and reflection on the ways in which embodied performance affects the research process. Reflecting on her experience of fieldwork, ISABELLE perceived the female dress code as a spatialised embodied performance, i.e. the representation in a particular space of social identities of class, gender and religion through the body (DATTA 2008). Wearing Shalwar Kameez made her feel comfortable and culturally acceptable to the project partner, Indian colleagues, participants in the research and the local community as a whole.

Moving in rural India as a young woman challenges common assumptions about appropriate behaviour for unmarried ladies. Mobility endangers a good reputation and indeed puts the women in danger of sexual harassment and violence. Patriarchal double standards operate under the pretext of providing protection to women, providing they define themselves via their relationship to men as fathers, brothers or husbands (PADMANABHAN 2003, 34). Once without obvious male chaperonage and defence, women appear as threatening as they undermine the tacit acceptance of a patriarchal gender regime by defying male control and standards. Even successful women scientists have to guard their reputation by not going to the field on their own, in order to maintain marriage prospects.

3.4 The power of marital status

Given the cultural and religious diversity in India, intersectionality plays an important role in the construction of gender identities that are shaped by multiple layers of postcoloniality (SCHURR and SEGEBART 2012), including class, caste, social status (married or single, being a parent or childless), ethnicity, religion and level of education. Marriage, as an institutional arrangement between gendered bodies, is one of the factors shaping gender identity and can therefore be expected to have an important influence on the research process, though there is relatively little discussion of it in the literature (NAGAR and GEIGER 2007). In her post-fieldwork reflection on her social status during the research process, ISABELLE recognised that marriage was one aspect that strongly transformed her role as a female researcher during fieldwork.

Married women in India are privileged over those who are unmarried. In social life, all women need to be closely guarded by their families, brothers and husbands. This practice is based on misogynistic ideas that construct women's sexuality as powerful and dangerous; therefore, women's bodies have to be controlled by men. Still today, a "good" woman is married, a caring wife and a mother who safeguards and protects the family order in its daily material and spiritual life (HELLMANN-RAJANAYAGAM and FLESCHENBERG 2008). Or as expressed by CORBRIDGE et al. (2013, 262) in their working definition of patriarchy: "the disadvantaged female body is produced at the end of a long set of decisions which seek the domestication of girls and women and which have worked to ensure their relative powerlessness."

Traditionally assigned gender roles of married women are constantly reproduced in rural environments. During her first visit to India, ISABELLE learned that marriage defines the social status of men and women. Furthermore, the social process of getting married involves significant changes in men's and women's lives that influence their embodied performances in public spaces. When ISABELLE visited a farm community the first time, the first question asked by a women farmer was "are you married?" At first, she felt uncomfortable answering this question because in her view, the respondents were crossing a private boundary into an area which, she assumed, was not relevant to her research endeavour. However the respondents needed this information in order to know how to relate to her. This incident illustrates the importance of learning by researchers about the relevant categories of social relationships and their spatial embeddedness through informal conversations in the field.

ISABELLE got married between the exploratory study and the start of field work in 2011 and this change in relationship status markedly changed her positionality in the field. Initially, she did not see the need to share this change in her personal life because, based on her understanding, marriage and partnerships are private matters (although in Germany marriage is also an institutional act involving a number of publicly sponsored privileges). At the start of her second stay in Kerala, ISABELLE was asked about her family's wellbeing. She then shared the change in her private life with some male colleagues. One commented on the change in relationship status and said, "congratulations, now you have reached a higher level in society" (Field notes February 2011). Her social status had changed from "young lady" in 2010 to a "married woman" in 2011, which her male Indian colleagues viewed as something "better" than being unmarried. In addition, this transformation in social status affected the ways in which her embodied performance was perceived by Indian colleagues and research participants. Without her wishing it, the change in marital status also separated her from other unmarried women team members, which required reconsideration of her positionality. Overall, ISABELLE totally underestimated the importance of this change in social status and the ways in which marriage would affect her role as a female researcher and cross-cultural team member.

These considerations relate to current approaches to gender and geography in India (RAJU and LAHIRI-DUTT 2011) which address the fuzzy boundaries between private and public spaces. The social meaning of "being married" in Wayanad was negotiated with colleagues and participants – both actors who belong to a public space.

For researchers, coming-of-age in the field is asynchronous to our maturation and changing social status as citizens of our country of origin. CLARK (1994) describes how she gained field-credibility in her vivid account of ethnographic work at the Kumasi market in Ghana. She started off as a relatively passive, but safe, trustworthy or at least harmless visitor, owing to her limited language and social skills. Learning in leisure periods about etiquette and proper behaviour was as important for her research as the acquisition of work-based skills. CLARK describes her growing biological age as less important (and often crudely misjudged) for her reputation in the field than her increasing social age.

First treated as a toddler, she gradually progressed into adolescence as she proved fit to oversee the business and learned how to keep quiet when necessary. Her husband's visit later established her as a functional young women and the label of "student" – a well-respected status in India too – accounted for her privileged family background, currently limited resources, social immaturity, use of contraception and predictable middle-class future in the eyes of the women traders she related to in the field. This is a light-hearted reconstruction of coming-of-age as a scientific fieldworker that nevertheless takes seriously the research subjects' need to embed the intruding researcher into the social setting under observation. Moreover, this recollection turns the author's sometimes frustrating encounters into sources of learning about value categories perceived as valid among the research subjects and adaptation strategies towards them. Thus, understanding of relevant social constructions can only be acquired to a limited extend by studying relevant literature. Rather, just as Isabelle describes, it is the bodily and emotional experience of being subjugated to these rules that demonstrates the functioning of categories other than those of our own socialisation.

The unintended, unconscious and mostly naïve trespassing of lines around issues treated as sensitive in German was also experienced by Martina. When the unmarried student arrived in Tamil Nadu to conduct field research for the very first time, she found that people everywhere classified her socially as the daughter of a Brahmin and this put her evolving pride in finally entering the professional world on hold. While education, especially higher education is the means to financial and thus higher individual freedom in the West, for women in India this freedom is constrained by other social categorisations that are perceived to be more important. The incidents described above underline the different connotations of public and private in India and Germany. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the differentiation between public and private in Germany owes a lot to the patriarchal history of capitalist accumulation and industrialisation, which created the dependent housewife. The lack of this historical experience partly explains why this strict dualistic value system of private and public matters is not as valid in India. Rather, the focus is on the individual embedded in wider social relations and social obligations, underlining the importance of kin as a safety net in the face of limited state support and other fall-back social positions in the case of breakdown of the former.

3.5 The relationship between researcher and assistant

Without language skills in the local language, doing fieldwork alone in India would be an impossible task. Therefore, the most important and crucial relationship during fieldwork and for the data collection is the one between the researcher and the field assistant. Pasquini´s and Olaniyan's (2004, 24) work on cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural viewing of positionality stresses that the "outcome of the research process is directly affected by the social makeup of both [the] research [team] and respondents". In this section, we respond to the lack of work that critically reflects the relationship between the researcher and the research assistant (Pasquini and Olaniyan 2004). We maintain that the success or failure of the data collection process strongly depends on the relationship between the researcher and the field assistant, and also on their respective positionalities and how their performances relate to each other in the field. Isabelle noticed that the positionality of the field assistants and herself were influential in the data collection process, due to distinct subjectivities. She worked with two different women field assistants in 2011 and 2012. Crucial intersecting aspects of identity were age, level of education, work experience, social status and family background. Her field experiences taught her that, for a researcher, working with an experienced field assistant of a similar age was challenging, because the assistant's role and responsibility were constantly being redefined by the assistant herself. The assistant's previous involvement in an international research project and her partial knowledge of indigenous people in Kerala encouraged her to reverse the roles in the data collection process. This resulted in a continuous redefinition of responsibilities as a team while doing the fieldwork, and arguments about the manner, style and timing of interviews and group discussions, which hindered the data collection process. The "reversed" power and hierarchical relations led to a constant questioning of Isabelle's role and skills as a foreign female researcher. Overall, the first phase of field work in 2011 was characterised by a feeling of being "out of place and culture". This reinforced Isabelle's partial self-conception and role as an outsider in the research process. However, reflection on these field experiences was a fruitful post-fieldwork exercise which allowed Isabelle to gain a clearer understanding of her role and positionality as a researcher.

Field assistants commonly also assume the role of translators, and as such their function as interpreters of data cannot be overestimated (Padmanabhan 2003). Unlike foreign researchers, whose positionality in the field can only be fully established via "reverse questioning" by the respondents (as described above), the research assistants enter the field with social status and biographical history attached. Like Isabelle, Martina worked with two research assistants. Their common trait was a slight standing apart from mainstream convictions and conventions. As Guttandin (1993) observes, it is often those not content with their circumstances, dissidents, and seekers of alternatives, who offer their service as translators. One of Martina's research assistants had entered an inter-caste love marriage, which was a source of constant remarks and comments. With the support of her husband she was able to arrange for transport and childcare to join Martina in the countryside and capitalize on her education and previous experiences of working as an enumerator (i.e. census worker), when she had depended on translators herself. The second research assistant was married to an older man and embedded in a larger extended family. She also was encouraged by her husband to engage in activities that took her outside the family environment. Using her earnings from work as a research assistance, she planned to open an independent bank account, separate from that of her mother-in-law. Her secular perspective on the women's empowerment in the setting of a temple town was a most enlightening influence on the research process. She had an unusual awareness of the role of religion as a force for social control – thus displaying analytical positionality – and, together with Martina, interpreted and critically discussed the statements obtained right after the interviews. Positionality is a social fact and cannot be avoided. Recognising positionality and acknowledging its influence on the data, implies recognition of how the mutually dependent relationship of researcher and research assistant gives rise to a process of data creation, and of its importance as a source of knowledge generation. Similar ideas are expressed by Husseini de Araújo and Kersting (2012) who reflect on the contradictions inherent in the concept of translation, from a postcolonial critical perspective. In their view, contradictions not only result in failure but also in the creation of new knowledge and, therefore, are fruitful for generating open avenues of critical thought.

4 Conclusion: positionalities lost and found

Methodological reflections on doing fieldwork in South India served to uncover changing positionalities in the countryside of our minds. Five interrelated key issues emerged during data collection and the subsequent process of analysis and retrospective interpretation: first, our situatedness in the research process; second, the experience of encountering lifeworlds on entering the field; third, our embodied performances in the field; fourth, the power of marital status; and finally, the importance of the relationship between researcher and research assistant.

When analysing our positionalities as researchers, we do not only encounter friction with Indian value systems, but also realise that our social identity, that we had presumed to be stable, in fact undergoes changes in accordance with changing private and professional relations. Reflecting on our social situatedness and positionality under conditions of cultural difference threatens the validity of received value systems. Emotional and intellectual engagement is required to come to terms with this new uncertainty. While this process is often ignored by published accounts of research methods and design, we highlight how reflection on mismatches and conflicts in the field is an indispensable source of new knowledge.

The large and small surprises encountered on entering the field provide ample opportunity to critically reflect on subjectivity and on constitutions of gender, age, social status and ethnicity (Raju and Lahiri-Dutt 2011), revealing how knowledge is socially produced and bound to cultural contexts. Awareness of the disparities between the research proposal and the problem situation in the field can help to revise and improve the relevance of the research questions. When unreasonable expectations of completeness give way to an awareness of capacity constraints in comparison with the vastness of the field, this can be a painful experience, both intellectually and emotionally; but at the same time one that leads to the fruitful advancement of hypotheses. Confronting idealised research settings with the messiness of the life-world enables us to reflect on the research process and to become more open to new and surprising findings.

Considerations of embodied performances highlight the close interaction between embodiment and emplacement (Harcourt and Escobar 2005), in which gendered bodies are constantly reproduced through embodied performances – such as, in particular, the culturally appropriate dress code for fe-

males – that simultaneously reproduce gender norms and body language. This also applies to social identities such as marital status. Researchers unfamiliar with these norms may undergo unwelcome, unexpected and disturbing experiences; however upon reflection during and after the fieldwork and during data analysis these can give rise to new knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, reflexive identification with our positionalities can stimulate awareness of the importance of the relationship between the researcher and the assistant and thereby enrich the data collection process.

In our view, a reflexive identification with positionality is useful as it helps researchers to critically engage with differentiations and specificities related to gender, including social and marital status, that affect our roles as researchers and thus the production of data and its analysis. However, on an inter-cultural level, reflections of this kind can be challenging as they require engagement with different value systems, power relations and hierarchies, all of which are gendered. Specifically, doing feminist fieldwork and incorporating a reflexive approach in a country like India is challenging for researchers because the feminist idea of equality conflicts with the strongly hierarchical structure and traditions of Indian society (CHITNIS 2004), as defined and negotiated by cultural values.

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