Transformational junctures during my fieldwork

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Introduction

For me, transformation is a necessary part of overcoming difficulties. It can have both positive and negative dimensions, on the one hand, it brings possibilities, on the other hand, there are many sufferings and struggles during the process. This past year has been characterised by uncertainty and fear. As a postgraduate researcher I feel that opportunities and challenges coexist in the transformation to an increasingly digital world, particularly for ethnographers for whom being in the field is central methodologically.

My research is about middle-class schooling anxiety in Shanghai, China and how it impacts discussions about motherhood in online communities. My fieldwork originally involved three months online participant observation via WeChat[1] (in Norwich, UK), two months in-person interviews (in Shanghai, China), and a month participatory research activity (in Shanghai, China). However, before I had finalised my research proposal and obtained ethical approval, the whole country (UK) went into lockdown and consequently I had to revise my ideas about fieldwork. This led to encountering two main challenges: first, the interviews would have to be conducted virtually and I was not sure if the participatory workshops would go ahead; second, my relationship with respondents might be impacted and limited in an internet-only environment. In the following reflection, I share some practical issues and personal feelings that accompanied these transformational junctures, especially the changes in my relationships with respondents in a purely digital world.

Transformation in the local fieldwork

After an online probationary review my PhD life switched to an internet-only version. I'm lucky enough to have chosen in the early stages of my research to identify my 'field' as both online and offline as the focus of my observation is online communities. Nonetheless, as an ethnographer, the realisation that I might not be able to meet my participants was sobering. I began to wonder about the extent to which my ideas about fieldwork would have to change as my plans no longer aligned themselves with traditional fieldwork. Shanghai is the context of my research and I was going to do the fieldwork there, so Shanghai was my 'field', wasn't it? But my research also involves online communities, and I would be spending three months (or more) engaged in online participant observation, so then weren't these online communities my 'field' too? This idea comforted me: at least I would still be going into the 'field', albeit virtually.

The following months were not as painful as I feared. The online participant observation in the WeChat groups went well (from June to September 2020) and I decided to conduct virtual interviews by WeChat message through a smartphone during October 2020 from the UK. The move to the online environment was straightforward in that observations had already been planned as virtual and interviewing online was not too difficult. It was more like experiencing,

[1] WeChat is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WeChat

feeling, and observing participants' daily life through a smartphone.

I was more anxious about the third stage of my fieldwork which was to involve three participatory workshops in Shanghai. I felt I should return to China as soon as possible. However, in October 2020 a no in-person fieldwork policy was still in place at my University. I applied for a concession due to exceptional circumstances, but my application was refused. At this point it seemed that I would have to either organise virtual workshops or give up the third stage of my fieldwork. After discussions with my supervisors, I decided I could not relinquish the in-person participatory activities. My research is intended to include practical support for mothers as they navigate the worries and concerns around their children's education. In this sense the face-to-face workshops are an essential element in my research's intended impact. I envisaged that the face-to-face participatory workshops would help mothers explore different ways to deal with or lessen anxieties and difficulties; I saw it as providing a space for my participants to find practical solutions.

It was taking so long to get permission to carry out fieldwork that I decided to take annual leave instead and seek fieldwork approval once I was home. Daily life in China by then had returned to normal. I completed the forms and resubmitted them to the postgraduate office whilst in quarantine in Guangzhou (my landing city). I then spent a miserable month filled with the anxiety that my research fieldwork would not be approved.

Finally, in March 2021 I conducted three participatory action workshops in Shanghai. Card sorting, problem trees, and solution circle methods were used to explore the mothers' perceptions on schooling, gender division, and self-development, to discuss the possibilities of lessening their pressures and anxieties. The process of inviting respondents to meet in person and join a group discussion was not easy, but I am pleased that I insisted on doing so. About a month after the workshops one participant reflected, 'I was relieved that we talked about fathers' participation…my husband began to take our child out alone. On one occasion, I just went out leaving my husband in charge while our child got on with homework'. It seems that the participatory action workshops had helped the mothers take actions and make changes in their lives.

Transformations in relationships with respondents

The primary aim of the online participant observation was to help me familiarise myself with the online community, to find potential respondents, and to formulate interview questions. The observation certainly fulfilled these aims: WeChat groups can only be joined by invitation, so the group managers are powerful gatekeepers. I had to secure their permissions before engaging in any research-related actions in the groups. With the group manager's permission, I posted information about me and my research and then was able to recruit several respondents by adding them as contacts on WeChat. My online observation therefore not only led to group chatting but also gave me access to individual posts. It was easy to start a conversation (via WeChat message) based on daily posts. Most mothers were willing to share their perceptions and personal stories on a specific topic. WeChat conversations consist of texts, pictures, and emojis that make conversations far more informal and 'intimate' compared to even the most unstructured interview. Also, online chatting is flexible enough

to suit mothers' schedules. These asynchronous conversations (Mann, 2016) were particularly convenient given that we were in different time zones (O'Connor et al, 2008). Participants could reply to messages at their convenience and had more time to think about their answers (Mann, 2016).

Most of the time, I did not contact my participants, focusing instead on what they posted about their daily lives. My 'likes' and 'comments' were usually ignored but I felt that it was important to use these functions as a way of showing my attention and care in this digital world. An exception was Sui a particularly friendly and talkative participant who, as well as being a mother, was a teacher in a private institution. I decided to ask her for a digital semi-structured interview. She agreed and a few days later, through WeChat audio call we talked about the marketing of education and her perceptions regarding the drivers of parental anxieties. After the interview, we kept in touch as before – interacting through informal posts. One day in January 2021, she sent a message asking for a conversation, 'nothing about your research but just talking'. I was on the phone with her for about 120 minutes. I heard a story full of frustration and helplessness and I had no idea how to respond. I suddenly felt out of my depth. The experience led me to reflect on what participants might need or come to expect from me and what I could offer.

I realised that some participants – like Sui – simply wanted a good listener. As a mother, she had no one to turn to who had the time to listen to her properly, someone who would pay attention to her worries and challenges and could provide emotional support. For many, online communities do provide this support to some extent, but that afternoon Sui clearly saw me as a familiar stranger who could listen without being emotionally involved.

What I later discovered was that this friendly openness and willingness to share was very much confined to the online environment. I came to realise that the anonymity it provides may be a key element to its popularity. When I started my participatory action research in Shanghai, I invited Sui to meet me in person, no recording, just an informal chat. I thought she would be happy to have tea with me but to my surprise she politely refused my invitation. On reflection I realised that she probably was uncomfortable about the idea of seeing me in 'real life' after having shared those personal stories and 'secrets'. I decided to back off and continue to simply be a 'net-friend'.

Now, Sui is still a participant rather than friend but this kind of relationship feels more natural and friendly than the traditional researcher-participant mode. The experience with Sui helped me to feel less worried about how far a researcher should/can go with participants, recognising that participants have their own agency and that the boundaries of these relationships are co-constructed in this sense.

Conclusion

The changes in my research space were unexpected, jumping from participant observation in the online community to face to face workshops with the participants in Shanghai, and then back to the online world. Also, my role as a researcher has changed several times, from a stranger to researcher, as a net-friend, then back to researcher. These changes have

transformed my relationship with participants and with my research and have highlighted the need to continue to be flexible in how I position myself and participants, online and offline.

References

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