

4-12-2020

## Confronting Shifting Identities: Reflections on Subjectivity in Transnational Research

Jiyoung Kang

Indiana University - Bloomington, [jiyoungkang0323@gmail.com](mailto:jiyoungkang0323@gmail.com)

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### Recommended APA Citation

Kang, J. (2020). Confronting Shifting Identities: Reflections on Subjectivity in Transnational Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(4), 937-946. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss4/4>

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## Confronting Shifting Identities: Reflections on Subjectivity in Transnational Research

### Abstract

As researchers' identities impact the research process, researchers need to take a reflexive stance toward their positionality in the research. The issue of positionality is especially important for research focusing on multicultural issues, which necessarily involves dynamic power relations among different racial/ethnic groups. Drawing from reflections on my research focusing on South Korean adolescents' understandings of migrants, this paper illustrates when and how I confronted my positionality. My positionality as a racial/ethnic minority in the United States affected the process of selecting the research topic and the theoretical framework as well as analyzing interview data while my positionality as an ethnic Korean was salient when making interview questions, interviewing ethnic Korean adolescents, and reporting the findings. There was also a moment in which my identity as an international student from the United States outweighed my ethnic/racial identity during interviews. By sharing my experiences in conducting transnational research in my home country, this paper attempts to contribute to underrepresented discourse on the use of reflexivity in non-Western societies, especially when neither the researcher nor the researched is White.

### Keywords

Positionality, Subjectivity, Reflexivity, Multicultural Studies, Transnational Research

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## **Confronting Shifting Identities: Reflections on Subjectivity in Transnational Research**

Jiyoung Kang

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA

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*As researchers' identities impact the research process, researchers need to take a reflexive stance toward their positionality in the research. The issue of positionality is especially important for research focusing on multicultural issues, which necessarily involves dynamic power relations among different racial/ethnic groups. Drawing from reflections on my research focusing on South Korean adolescents' understandings of migrants, this paper illustrates when and how I confronted my positionality. My positionality as a racial/ethnic minority in the United States affected the process of selecting the research topic and the theoretical framework as well as analyzing interview data while my positionality as an ethnic Korean was salient when making interview questions, interviewing ethnic Korean adolescents, and reporting the findings. There was also a moment in which my identity as an international student from the United States outweighed my ethnic/racial identity during interviews. By sharing my experiences in conducting transnational research in my home country, this paper attempts to contribute to underrepresented discourse on the use of reflexivity in non-Western societies, especially when neither the researcher nor the researched is White. Keywords: Positionality, Subjectivity, Reflexivity, Multicultural Studies, Transnational Research*

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### **Introduction**

The self is always present throughout the whole research process (Brayboy, 2000; Subedi, 2006). Researchers' own identities impact the ways questions are developed and conceptualized, research data are collected and analyzed, and analysis is interpreted and written (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lew, 2011). Therefore, it is important for qualitative researchers to take a reflexive stance toward how their identities shape the research process. As "a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness" (Callaway, 1992, p. 33), reflexivity involves a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and the researched beyond "a simple story of subjects, subjectivity, and transcendence or self-indulgent tellings" (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). The issue of subjectivity and reflexivity is especially important in research focusing on multicultural issues, which necessarily involves dynamic power relations among different racial/ethnic groups, because research that emphasizes issues of difference might serve to further marginalize the participants of the study (Bourke, 2014; hooks, 1990).

Regarding this issue of subjectivity, there has been a long-standing argument in qualitative research between post-positivists and post-modernists. Although both admit the inescapable influence of subjectivity in the research process, their approach to addressing subjectivity clash with each other. Post-positivists understand subjectivity as biases that impinge on the clear-sightedness of the researcher and argue that this subjectivity needs to be "tamed" by a rational process of noticing and note-taking (Peshkin, 1988). The post-positivist methodology for taming subjectivity requires more attention to particular moments of attachment in the research process, and values as much emotional distance from the researched

as possible (Schweber, 2007). On the other hand, post-modernists describe subjectivity as fractured, unstable, and continuously in process (Chaudhry, 1997; St. Pierre, 1997), and thus critique the epistemological stance that positions subjectivity as “an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). The focus of post-modernists is, therefore, to reveal the complexity and instability of subjectivity instead of taming it.

Schweber (2007) attempts to bridge the two conflicting stances by emphasizing practice rather than theory. Even though the two perspectives seem almost impossible to reconcile, she demonstrates that the two positions coexisted in her study without clash.

There are times/places/moments when, as a researcher, one’s subjectivity feels as though it may be tamed, rationalized, contained, and domesticated ... there are also times/places/ moments when the fracturing of subjectivity, its blossoming fury and ludicrous unravelings, its hybridity and multiplicity are unarguably uncontainable ... When there is no clear winner (professional researcher over complicated Jew) but rather multiple players (granddaughter, daughter, mother, complicated Jew, researcher), postmodern paradigms of subjectivity necessarily prevail. (pp. 78-79)

For her, therefore, “the real questions are not whether subjectivity is unitary or multiple, but when, and not whether the research itself is affected by the single-seeding or cross-pollination of theory metaphors, but how” (pp. 79-80). Rather than focusing on identifying the nature of subjectivity, she asserted that researchers need to investigate when and how their subjectivity affects the research process and discuss how to better address those issues.

From this pragmatic standpoint, this paper illustrates when and how I confronted and addressed my subjectivity in the process of researching South Korean adolescents’ understandings of migrants. By sharing my experience in conducting transnational research in South Korea, where I was born and completed P-16 education, this paper attempts to contribute to underrepresented discourse on the use of reflexivity in non-Western societies, especially when neither the researcher nor the researched is White. This study builds on the works that have explored the issue of negotiating race and ethnic identities in transnational spaces, especially in non-Western context (Choi, 2006; Subedi, 2006; Yang, 1972).

### **Positionality**

At the time of this research, I was an international student who came from South Korea to pursue a Ph.D. in the United States. While staying in the United States, I often felt marginalized as a racial/ethnic minority, which led me to be interested in education for racial/ethnic minorities not only in the United States but also in South Korea. As a first step toward pursuing my interest, I wanted to examine how ethnic/racial majority students marginalize minority students by understanding students’ perception of migrants. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews with South Korean adolescents because little research has been conducted about majority students’ understandings of migrants in non-Western contexts. However, during the whole process of my research, I had to confront different identities in different contexts. Therefore, as an effort of “doing reflexivity” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), I decided to trace how my identities shifted in differing contexts and how my shifting identities affected the research process.

## Methods

This paper draws from reflections on my research experience of investigating Korean students' understandings of migrants. From May to July 2016, I conducted open-ended, task-based interviews with twenty-one ethnic Korean students, aged 13-18. To select participants, I used "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 1990) to diversify participants according residential areas. I recruited ethnic Korean students who live in urban, manufacturing, or rural areas because each area has the different demographic composition of migrants: manufacturing areas have high populations of migrant workers; rural areas have relatively high populations of marriage migrants; and urban areas have high populations of varying types of migrants, including North Korean refugees. I interviewed seven in an urban area (Seoul), seven in a manufacturing area (Ansan and Peongnae), and seven in a rural area (Iksan).

Interviews were conducted in groups, consisting of 2-3 students who knew each other not only because interviewing with friends can make students feel more comfortable to talk, but also because the data drawn from peer interaction itself can be a good source to see how images of migrants are collectively constructed by peers. During the interviews, I used elicitation techniques that "use visual, verbal, or written stimuli to encourage people to share their ideas" (Barton, 2015, p. 180). Elicitation techniques were especially useful for this study because adolescents, having internalized socially desirable attitudes toward minorities, tend to express their prejudice in more implicit ways (Hirschfeld, 2005).

Each interview consists of two tasks and four open-ended questions. Two tasks were designed to unpack implicit assumptions that students have about migrants. In the first task, I showed students four pictures one by one, each of which included varying types of interaction among ethnic Korean students, migrant students, and foreign teachers. I asked students to (1) describe what is happening in the picture, (2) speculate what the students or teachers in the picture say or think, and (3) speculate why the migrants in the picture are in Korea. These questions aimed to investigate how students categorize migrants in their own terms before going through the next task consisting of four predetermined categories. In the second task, I asked students to rank four migrant groups (migrant workers, marriage migrants, and North Korean refugees, and international students) in order from the most to the least difficulty they think they have living in Korea, and then explain why they think so. After that, I asked students to describe anything that come to their minds when they think of each type of migrants. After finishing two tasks, I asked students to talk about their experiences with migrant peers and their ideas on racism in South Korea as well as on the recent debate on enhancing the rights of migrant children. Each interview was conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English with all participants' names changed to pseudonyms.

To analyze data, I used initial, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I first read interview transcripts with a set of broad coding categories reflecting my research questions including areas such as the reasons of migration, images of migrants, sources of information, and thinking about racism in Korea. Then, I began axial coding to break these categories down into more detailed subcategories, which enabled elaboration of the initial broad codes. After the axial coding, I found polarized patterns of students' understandings of migrants in addition to one shared pattern: While all students recognized migrants as deficit "Others," half of the students perceived migrants as passive victims, fellow humans, and contributors; another half of the students recognized migrants as beneficiaries, competitors, and troublemakers. These conflicting perceptions of students add more complexities to previous research that has focused on revealing students' hostile attitudes towards migrants (Bryan, 2012; Devine, Kenny, & Macneela, 2008; Spyrou, 2002). Therefore, I re-grouped subcategories into three major patterns according to the students' reasoning. Since this paper

focuses on the methodological issues, in the following section, I focus on tracing my role in the research process instead of reviewing the findings of the study in detail.

## **Results**

### **Being a racial minority in the United States**

Even before research actually takes place, subjectivity is deeply embedded in one's reason for choosing a research topic and entering the specific field in the first place (Roberts & Sanders, 2005). At the very beginning of my research, my identity as a racial minority in the United States made me interested in racial marginalization. Born and raised in South Korea, I was unaware of my racial/ethnic identity in my country. However, after I moved to the United States for study, I have been constantly positioned as a racial minority. Whenever I heard racial jokes and harassment on the street, I was forced to confront my racial identity, although I had never thought of being Asian as an important identity to define myself before. In addition, whenever I spoke in English with a distinctive accent, I had to confront the fact that I am "different" from other majority students. This feeling of being marginalized led me to have strong empathy with racial/ethnic minorities not only in the United States but also in South Korea. For this reason, I became interested in critical multiculturalism, which unravels the marginalization process of minorities. According to critical multiculturalism, it is important to interrogate structural constraints that perpetuate the racial disparity (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Guided by this approach, I planned my research to reveal the ways in which ethnic majorities marginalize migrants in South Korea. In this way, my racial identity affected me to choose the research topic and rely on critical multiculturalism for my theoretical framework.

During the analysis and writing process, critical multiculturalism helped me connect discrete pieces of data in a way compelling to academia. However, my strong commitment to critical multiculturalism also made me too focused on one side of my data, that is, ethnic Korean students' exclusive attitudes toward migrants at the expense of neglecting counter-examples. Although I could not recognize my bias in analysis, I came to notice my lopsided commitment to critical multiculturalism when I received feedback from my colleagues, who pointed out that I dismissed important counter-examples of supporters. When my participants talked about their opinions on enhancing education and health care benefits to migrants, almost half of them opposed it by articulating the images of migrants as beneficiaries, competitors, and troublemakers. Yet, the other half of the students supported migrants by advocating migrants' human rights and emphasizing their contributions to Korea. These students also supported expanding socioeconomic benefits to migrants because migrants are fellow humans and contributors to Korean society. Despite the presence of advocates for migrants, I failed to recognize these supporters at first because I paid too much attention to documenting the ways in which ethnic majorities marginalize minorities. While spotlighting students' marginalizing thinking about migrants, I inadvertently left out the advocates' stories.

Potter and Hepburn (2012) pointed out that if researchers fail to consider "the orientations to stake and interest on the part of the interviewer and interviewee" (p. 556), interview conclusions may be "based more on researchers' prior expectations than on analysis of actual interview conduct" (p. 566). Therefore, it is important for qualitative researchers to be constantly aware and assess how their own theoretical orientations affect their interpretation of research findings (Scholte, 1972) and endeavor to keep "a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured" (Lather, 1986, p. 267). After receiving feedback, I reread all of my transcriptions, and finally found that significant numbers of my participants suggested contrasting ideas to my initial findings. To correct my analysis, I changed my argument by including counter-examples. In the process, I learned not only the

importance of reflexivity during the analysis but also the significance of peer-reviews to complement my liminal perspective.

### **Being an ethnic majority in Korea**

Researchers often find their identities shifting in changing contexts (Choi, 2006; Lew, 2011) because positionality is “determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’” (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Although my status as a racial minority in the United States initiated research, once I arrived in South Korea to interview ethnic Korean students, I found my ethnic position changed from minority to majority. During interviews, my Korean ethnicity made the students feel more comfortable talking about migrants from their own perspective.

[Interview 1]

I: What do you think the [ethnic Korean-looking] students in this photo are thinking?

Minji: They are curious about who the man [non-ethnic Korean teacher] is.

Yoomi: I feel like, honestly, students are thinking that why this kind of man is teaching me (laugh). I am like such a prejudiced person (laugh).

[Interview 2]

I: Have you ever met peers with immigrant backgrounds?

Sion: When I was younger, there was a boy from China.

Youngmin: (interrupting) Sion took his Jordans [sneakers].

I: Why?

Sion: I don't know. He just gave me. Youngmin also knows him.

Youngmin: I didn't like him, so I teased him because he often bragged that his Chinese friends have their own cars.

Laughter of participants during interviews tells more than what the participants actually said (Seidman, 2013). In the conversation with Yoomi and Minji, if I were not an ethnic Korean, Yoomi would not laugh at all when she expressed her “prejudiced” perception of migrants. If the interviewer were a non-Korean, she might refrain herself from laughing and instead described migrants in more socially appropriate ways to care about interviewer's reactions. Similarly, in the interview with Sion and Youngmin, both students confessed to teasing a Chinese boy. This revelation might not happen if the students were not talking with a person whom they thought able to understand their situations well. Because my participants tended to perceive migrants via an “us and them binary” (ethnic Koreans vs. non-ethnic Koreans), my Korean ethnicity provided me with access to more frank opinions of ethnic Korean students. Dunbar Jr, Rodriguez, & Parker (2003) emphasized that “race mediates both the meanings of questions that are asked and how the questions are answered” (p. 280). Similarly, my Korean ethnicity allowed participants to interpret and answer my questions from the dominant ethnic group perspective, rather than in a politically correct and socially appropriate way.

However, when researchers had similar backgrounds with the participants, this commonality is both a source of strength and limitation (Lew, 2011, p. 166). While my ethnicity allowed easier access to the straightforward opinions of my participants, my ethnic identity also limited my understanding of migrants, which affected to shape my interview questions. During interviews, I asked students to rank four types of migrants (migrant workers, marriage migrants, and North Korean refugees, international students) in order of the extent of difficulties that each type of migrant would experience in Korea. Because this classification based on migrants' visa status has been widely used by Korean scholarship on multicultural education (Hong, 2010; Seo, 2013), I had no doubt that the typology well represented migrants.

Yet, while reflecting, I realized that relying on the four categories without a doubt reflects my limited perspective as an ethnic Korean. Lowe (1996) pointed out that “grouping is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific position assumed for political reasons” (p. 82). Even though the visa status significantly impacts migrants, assuming it is the only factor to explain migrants’ lives reflects my ethnic Korean-centered perspective, while neglecting migrants’ agency to define their own lives. Before using ethnic Korean centered categories without reflections, I should have considered more which categories migrants think are the most relevant to define themselves.

In addition, by asking students to rank in order the extent of difficulties that each type of migrant would experience, my interview question already constrained students’ answers to some extent, by stereotyping migrants as strugglers. Along with this question, in the background section, I focused on describing legal and structural constraints on migrants, reinforcing the popular representation of migrants as victims. Later, while reflecting on my questions and descriptions, I found that overemphasis on structural oppression can victimize and disempower migrants. Even though majority migrants are likely to experience hardships in Korea, there also exist other examples that challenge the perceived victim status of migrants. Some migrants come to Korea to work as teachers, researchers, or executives; some might enjoy their life in Korea without experiencing discrimination or exploitation. Furthermore, even if most migrants suffer from structural oppression, it does not necessarily mean that they have no agency because the act of compliance itself results from the reasoning of agents with awareness of structural limitations. Structural constraints always operate via agents’ motives and reasons, establishing conditions and consequences affecting options open to others, and what they want from whatever options they have (Giddens, 1984).

One might think that, because my focus was on interrogating ethnic Korean students’ understandings on migrants, the missing voice and agency of migrants in my interview questions and background section is not necessarily an important issue. However, describing is never neutral but inherently a matter of choosing to describe certain thing over others (Choi, 2006, p. 449). Therefore, the way that my interview questions and the background section represented migrants ultimately influenced how my findings were organized and interpreted. In this regard, by describing migrants’ lives only from an ethnic Korean perspective, not only the participants’ response but also my interpretation of participants’ understanding was limited. As Bourke (2014) highlights, each aspect of my research was “mediated by who I am, and the lens through which I view the world” (p. 5).

### **Being an international student from the United States**

Although it has commonly been assumed that having racial/ethnic/cultural commonalities with the participants automatically positions researchers as insiders, Villenas (1996) emphasize that “as researchers, we can be insiders and outsiders to a particular community of research participants at many different levels and at different times” (p. 722). Problematizing early discussions of insider/outsider status that assumed the binary status of researcher either as an insider or an outsider, Merriam et al. (2001) asserted that the boundaries between the two are not clearly delineated but rather slippery and fluid depending on researcher’s changing positionality. Therefore, even in conducting “home” research, researchers come to experience moments of being both insider and outsider at different times because there are times when factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, or class outweigh the racial/ethnic/cultural identity (Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Narayan, 1993; Subedi, 2006).

Similarly, in my research, although I had an ethnic commonality with the participants, my position as an international student from the United States sometimes created a subtle boundary between the participants and me. In non-Western societies, researchers’ Western



affiliations are viewed as a symbol of economic and political wealth (Louie, 2000; Subedi, 2006). Western hegemony, U.S. hegemony in particular, also has prevailed in South Korea because the United States played an important role in establishing the South Korean government and adopting Western political, economic, and educational systems in South Korea. As a strongest ally and a liberator from Imperial Japan and communist rule, the United States has wielded political and cultural power in South Korean society (Hong & Halvorsen, 2014; Shin, 2010). Therefore, South Korean people strive to learn English (Park, 2009), and having a U.S. higher education degree is crucial to be successful in the Korean job market (Kim, 2012). In this context, during interviews, especially at the beginning or at the end of the interview, some participants asked me to show my English speaking and tell me about my life in the United States.

In addition, regardless of my actual financial situation, my status as a returning student from the U.S. graduate school was automatically interpreted by the participants as being rich. This assumed richness of international students made the atmosphere of the interviews more complex when the participants ranked international students as the least struggling group among migrants and differentiated themselves from international students.

[Interview 1]

I: Why do you think international students are having least difficulty?

Yoomi: Because they would go back to their countries.

Minji: Most of all, study abroad is...

Yoomi: (interrupting) possible only when they have some money.

Minji: Yeah, that's true. I am really jealous of them. They are those whom I am jealous of most. I really want to study abroad but I can't afford it.

[Interview 2]

Sikyung: International students are the number one.

Daeyoung: International students are fucking comfortable.

I: Why do you think so? We are also having difficulties (laugh).

Sikyung: They are not struggling.

Daeyoung: Because study abroad is only possible for those who have money.

As illustrated, the students assumed that living as an international student in South Korea is "comfortable" because "they have some money." By contrasting themselves who "can't afford it" to those who can do it, the students felt "jealous of" international students. This differentiation positioned me in-between the ethnic Korean students and migrants. As an international student in other country, I unwittingly became empathized with international students, saying that "we are also having difficulties." In the moment, even though I shared the same ethnic background with the participants, my identity as an international student from the United States outweighed my ethnic identity and thus the difference between the students and me was more salient than similarities.

### Concluding Thoughts

My identities affected the whole research process including my research questions, interviews, analysis, and writing process. The influence of my identities on the research was both a source of strength and limitation. On the one hand, my identities motivated the research, bolstered my relationship with participants, and fueled my analysis. On the other hand, they limited my questions and my perspective. Some limitations were complemented by self-reflection and peer-reviews while other limitations could not be resolved but only acknowledged due to practical constraints. This paper shows that subjectivity is not

insurmountable, nor does it need to be overcome; rather, subjectivity is an issue that needs to be recognized, explored, and well addressed to keep researchers from unwittingly marginalizing minorities even in their benevolent agenda for minorities. Becoming reflexive at every moment of research is the only way to maximize the strengths and minimize the limitations of our positionality affecting the research process.

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#### Author Note

Jiyoung Kang is a doctoral candidate at Indiana University. Her research interest is in multicultural education, qualitative research, students' understandings, and curriculum studies. Please direct correspondence to [kangjiy@iu.edu](mailto:kangjiy@iu.edu).

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#### Article Citation

Kang, J. (2020). Confronting shifting identities: Reflections on subjectivity in transnational research. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(4), 937-946. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss4/4>

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