CHAPTER 12

Negotiating positionality within institutional ethnography as a non-native researcher in Norway

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Abstract: This book chapter builds on my reflections as a non-Norwegian speaker and a non-native researcher studying the role of Education and Care (ECEC) centres as arenas for integrating refugee children and parents in Norway. Guided by institutional ethnography as an approach and a method of inquiry, I explore Dorothy Smith's concept of 'people's standpoint' in relation to the entry into the lived experiences of ECEC professionals and refugee parents. I elucidate the evolution of my research project from the motivation behind it, my arrival in Norway as a graduate student and my interest in political debates on refugees and immigrants, which has led to the development of my research study. I discuss how I entered the research site and the processes of recruiting participants, the interviews with ECEC professionals as the first point of entry into the research and later the interviews with refugee parents. From these activities, I reflect on my positionality and how I discovered that I occupied a hybrid position rather than fitting into a typical insider-outsider dichotomy. The chapter shows that from the 'outsider within' position, I interacted with the participants from a position of both relative familiarity and unfamiliarity. I will also show how this position influenced my analysis.

Keywords: positionality, institutional ethnography, outsider-within, ECEC centres, refugees, integration

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Introduction

'How can you – a black man from Africa – do research on Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres?'

This question was asked by a senior researcher when I introduced the plan for my research project in a meeting. In all its bluntness, the question may seem provocative. Yet, it is relevant. As a non-Norwegian speaker and non-native, how can I conduct research in an ECEC field that is so culturally distinctive, where neither children nor staff can be expected to be well-versed in English, and to which I probably appear as an outsider? One may deduce that the statement meant that one ought to be an 'insider'; otherwise, the question might not have sufficed. An insider refers to a researcher who shares similar experiences or identities, such as culture, language, ethnicity, nationality or religious heritage with the participants, while the outsider does research from the outside of the experiences or identities of the participants (Kusow, 2003; Carling et al., 2014; Nowicka & Ryan, 2015).

Many researchers within the social sciences grapple with notions of emic (insiderness) and etic (outsiderness), as they seek to discover their position vis-à-vis informants (Taylor, 2011). Debates still exist within the social sciences, especially in disciplines like sociology and anthropology, about who can research who and the advantages and drawbacks of being an insider or outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). However, these debates have been marred by complexities due to the fluidity of positionality whenever a researcher fits neither insider nor outsider status. This means that a nuanced approach to research positionality is needed when researching contested institutional processes, such as the integration of refugees, that involve a diverse set of participants (Carling et al., 2014; Tewolde, 2021). This book chapter does not go into the debates on how institutional ethnography differs from other ethnographies but rather aims at exploring the debates on research positionality for the non-native researcher using institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry.

In relation to my study on how ECEC centres work as arenas for integrating refugees in Norway, it has been my experience to be neither an insider nor an outsider. This book chapter builds on my reflections on fieldwork experiences as a Kenyan man researching the role of ECEC centres as arenas for integrating refugee children and parents in Norway. The project

is an institutional ethnography. As many of the chapters in this book give testimony to, researchers who apply institutional ethnography often start their inquiry from embodied experience, for instance as a professional (such as Stray in chapter 2) or parent (such as Jordal in chapter 13). As they discussed in their respective chapters, this researcher position involves challenges, but it also comes with advantages. The position and experiential knowledge of the researcher within the institutional complex (s)he studies cannot be neutralised. Implicitly so, neither can the power of language. The role of texts and speech as coordinators of actions in institutional ethnographies entails that the researcher should have some familiarity with the language used. For me, 'a black man from Africa' who does not speak much Norwegian, there are obvious challenges. But are there also some advantages? The intention of this chapter is to share both reflections and experiences when conducting institutional ethnography from this particular subject position. Note that the experiences I share are not unique to institutional ethnography. On the contrary, they may be recognisable by many researchers who do qualitative research.

In this chapter, I argue that I occupied a hybrid position that did not fit the archetypal insider-outsider categories during the fieldwork (Smith, 2012; Carling et al., 2014). Occupying a hybrid positionality means that I shared some of the experiences and knowledge of my informants, but not others, and could therefore be categorised as both insider and outsider (Smith, 2012; Adeagbo, 2021). During my field work, I realised that my positionality changed when I interviewed ECEC professionals and refugees respectively, because of experiential and embodied similarities and differences. These similarities and differences in the relations between different participants and myself meant that I had to find a concept that would reflect my experiences rather than seeking to fit myself into the insider-outsider dichotomy. The concept of the 'outsider within' appeared most fitting to my position. I, therefore, operationalise the concept of the 'outsider within' to refer to my position as a researcher caught up in social relations of unequal power and use it to explore my placement in the social relations between my two distinct sets of research participants (Collins, 2004).

An additional aim of the reflection in this chapter is to contribute to expanding the voices of non-Western researchers doing ethnographic sociological research on migration issues in the global North, where the majority of ethnographic studies on refugees and immigrants reflect the voices of Western scholars (Delucchi, 2018). Besides, exploring positionality

within my study is about preserving my standpoint as a researcher but also engaging in thoughtful, ongoing reflexivity about my subject position and the possible changing relations with the participants to ensure I preserve their voice, knowledge and embodied experiences (Walby, 2007). From an epistemological viewpoint, my PhD project takes a 'reflexive epistemological position, in which knowledge is co-created through interaction between me as a researcher and the participants whose experiences I explored' (Frampton et al., 2006, p. 30), which aligns well with institutional ethnography's principles of knowledge making. My study, therefore, decamps from the argument that the social world can be known through an etic lens in which the researcher explores human experiences from an objective outsider position and value-free methods espoused in the positivistic and realist methodologies (Matsau, 2013; Beals et al., 2020).

The argument for reflecting on my research positionality

Previous literature on positionality has largely focused on the dichotomy of insider/outsider perspectives (Merriam et al., 2001; Ochieng, 2010; Carling et al., 2014; Zhao, 2016; Tewolde, 2021; Adeagbo, 2021). This lens to understanding positionality has been criticised for being methodologically simplistic and philosophically essentialist, as well as carrying the risk of othering, as researchers tend to objectify the researched groups (Carling et al., 2014; Ryan, 2015; Nowicka & Ryan, 2015).

Departing from a feminist epistemology, I explore how being situated in a hybrid position of knowledge making has influenced knowledge development within my PhD research project. Situated knowledge as a concept underlines that research is always situated in a specific historical, social and embodied context, from which the research object is then constructed and studied (Haraway, 1999). My fieldwork was guided by institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry. While Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledge' focuses on the researcher's embodied location in the research context, Dorothy Smith's concepts of 'people's standpoint' and ruling relations focus on the researcher's entry point to the experiences of the participants as seen from where they are located within particular social relations (Smith, 2005). Both Smith and Haraway draw on the overarching notion within feminist standpoint epistemology that all knowledge production is ultimately value-laden and a result of historical processes

and socio-political epistemic struggles. Institutional ethnography, therefore, through the standpoint tradition, offers a useful point of entry into my inquiry in which I explore the ruling relations of integration work in Norwegian ECEC centres. Within institution ethnography, the notions of insider/outsider as categories recede, because the idea of ruling relations is not visible in linear form but involves a complex series of locations interlinked to each other (Grahame & Grahame, 2009).

Situational understandings of positionality allow qualitative researchers to engage with reflexivity as a process that goes beyond the researcher's identity and characteristics, and how they are similar/dissimilar to those of their participants (Folkes, 2022). Ethnographic research, especially within migration studies, has faced criticism due to a perceived tendency to centre ethnicity, race and other identities as fundamental to a researcher's positionality (Merton, 1972; Ryan, 2015). Some critical questions that have emerged during the research process, both before and after the fieldwork, are how my position as a non-Norwegian researcher informs the relations with the participants and what viewpoint I bring into the inquiry besides the participants' standpoint (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2021). From an institutional ethnographic perspective I think this is important, because the focus is not centred on what categories I belong to but rather on how my standpoint experiences relate to those of the ECEC professionals and refugee parents in my study. Smith's writing is therefore an inspiration for a reflective lens in my study that can make visible the ruling relations that organise and coordinate the experiences of integration of ECEC professionals and refugee parents (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2021).

My interest in the welfare of refugees grew when I spent a semester in autumn 2015 at the University of Malta during my graduate studies in Oslo. During that time, I took a course on global issues which covered the topic of refugees and migration. It was also at this time when the image of the drowned three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi captured global media headlines (Shocking images of drowned Syrian boy, *The Guardian*, 2015). The horrifying story awakened an interest in me to research what was happening to the refugees in the Mediterranean region. At the time, the situation of refugees had become a political issue, not only in Malta but also within the European Union, and attention to refugee issues was growing.

After returning to Norway in 2016 to conclude my graduate studies in Oslo, I kept abreast of the plight of refugees, especially the contested political debates. During the subsequent months, I began developing the ideas

for my PhD project and eventually began my research in summer 2018. The ideas arose from curiosity about the role ECEC plays in the integration of refugee children and parents. ECEC centres have attracted attention for being amongst the immediate institutions that establish contact between refugees and the host communities for refugees and other immigrants. In ECEC institutions, people meet and their interactions involve negotiating their values and identities, and also experiencing different forms of socialisation that shape them as social beings and acceptable citizens (Olwig, 2017; Lunneblad, 2017; Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020; Joppke, 2017; Goodman, 2019). The study questions what happens when refugees and teachers meet in ECEC centres. Moreover, I explore how teachers and refugees negotiate different cultural ideals relating to childhood and parenting and arrive at a shared understanding, if this happens at all. This curiosity is motivated and influenced by my academic and professional background in Early Childhood Studies and my previous work experience in institutions focusing on the welfare and education of children.

I chose to do ethnographic semi-structured interviews as part of the fieldwork due to its suitability in generating relevant data that would help explore the research questions in my study. Besides, my keen interest in the issue of refugees and their relations with ECEC centres made Norway a suitable location for this project. In the last few decades, Norway's refugee population has increased to 4.5 per cent of the national population, comprising predominantly people from the Balkan region, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea (Statistics Norway, 2022).

Increasing migration and ethnocultural diversification have continued to raise debates and instigate policy changes, and have even influenced changes in institutional practices in Norway, while questions of who is 'integrated' and who is not have featured in the media, academic circles and political platforms (Næss, 2020). In Norway, there is a universal acceptance that the welfare state is responsible for the integration of refugees and that publicly funded institutions, such as ECEC centres, play a significant role in facilitating the reception and resettlement, education and care, health care and family support for refugees (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011; Olwig, 2011; Øland, 2019). At the same time, there is a need to explore how this welfare model of integrating refugees shapes the integration of the experiences of refugees and ECEC professionals (Valenta, 2008). In this light, I decided to use institutional ethnography as a methodological approach to explore the connection between

integration experiences in ECEC centres and the extended social relations that shape these experiences.

Research methods and data collection

The fieldwork kicked off in spring 2019 in the south of Norway. The first phase of data collection started with interviews of ECEC professionals working at three different centres. When carrying out institutional ethnography, the participant's standpoint is an integral part of the research process, referred to as 'located knowers' (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 13) or 'the subjects, the knowers, or potential knowers' of the experiences or phenomena under exploration (Smith, 2005, p. 52). As I was interested in knowing how integration is carried out in practice in ECEC institutions, I began the inquiry from the standpoint of ECEC professionals. My ambition was to explore their work knowledge when 'doing' integration, such as what they do, how they reach decisions, what their thoughts are about the work and how the work is coordinated between them, including other people in different sites mediated by texts (Nilsen, 2021). The use of the concept of work as used in institutional ethnography acts as a pathway for exploring the mundane, everyday activities that ECEC professionals and refugee parents carry out or experience when they participate in and reproduce the social and the institutional complex in which the integration of refugees is organised (Smith, 2005, p. 229; Lund, 2015).

One of the challenges I encountered at the start of my project was getting access to participants. This can be attributed to the fact that I had relocated to the south of Norway from Oslo and I did not have prior contact persons. Besides, despite having lived in Norway for some time, my competency in the Norwegian language was relatively basic. I, therefore, needed to find participants who were confident to be interviewed in English and where this was not feasible, I had to recruit a research assistant whose main role was interpreting during the interviews as well as translation and transcribing of recorded interviews.

In Norway, especially in relatively smaller towns and rural areas, being black and not speaking Norwegian meant that I would certainly stand out as a foreigner. While I was aware of the salience of these attributes, I had not confronted or fully understood what role they would play in my research and how this would position me, both during and after the fieldwork. Besides, it was clear that there would be an explicit and implicit

influence of my positionality. I, therefore, occupied an ambiguous position during my fieldwork. On the one hand, I came to Norway to study, meaning that I had a student visa. This later changed to a work visa, after joining the University of Agder as a PhD Fellow. I am currently a permanent resident of Norway with an academic position at the University.

On the other hand, similar to the refugees, I am also an immigrant. This means that we share some common experiences, such as the ambition and expectation of learning the Norwegian language, adjusting to a new culture and country, and the general challenges of being part of a visible minority[1] group in the Western world. However, during the data collection, I realised that there were aspects of the refugee experience I did not relate to. The main difference was the process of immigrating to Norway. Whereas I migrated to Norway voluntarily, the refugees came to Norway through forced migration due to diverse challenges in their home countries. As such, our immigration experiences differ. Moreover, my occupation as an employed researcher at a university meant that I couldn't relate to the refugees' everyday realities. This is an experience many refugees reflected upon, pointing out that it is difficult to find many immigrants in such a position. In that sense, my occupation became a point of difference in positionality between the refugee participants and myself.

Other differences between myself and the refugee participants included culture, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, professional status and language. Regarding religion, for instance, some Muslim participants expressed concern about the involvement of their children in religious arrangements connected to, for example, Easter and Christmas. This was not an issue I could relate to. Some Muslim male parents also expressed concern about having male kindergarten workers change their female children's nappies. Besides, due to diverse cultural differences in raising children, the refugee parents' ideas of independence during childhood and the role of the parent in the child's decision-making varied. For instance, some parents were uncomfortable with how much risk children were allowed to take during play and being outside in winter conditions in ECEC centres in Norway. Even if I could understand the parents' concerns, I did not share them, at least not fully.

1 By 'visible minority' I refer to people who are visible as brown or black refugees, since Norway currently has Ukrainian refugees who may be more invisible in relation to their physical features.

The actual fieldwork was based on individual semi-structured interviews with 13 ECEC staff (pedagogical leaders, teacher assistants and language support teachers), 12 individual refugee parents and a focus group consisting of three refugee parents. The sampled ECEC centres included one ECEC reception centre that is exclusively for refugees and two general ECEC centres (one public and the other private), all of which rely on public funding and are required to adhere to the Framework Plan for Kindergartens.

The common characteristic amongst the refugees was that they had children enrolled in an ECEC centre. While for the ECEC staff, the common feature was that they were employed in an ECEC centre which included children with a refugee background at the time of interviewing. I used snowball and purposive sampling to recruit the participants. Most interviews were conducted in English, while a few were carried out in Norwegian accompanied by a Norwegian interpreter. All of the research participants who were professionals were women. Except for two, they were ethnic Norwegians. More than half of the interviews were conducted in the Norwegian language with the support of a research assistant who helped with translating and transcribing them into English. The involvement of a research assistant enabled participants to choose between Norwegian and English. Of the 13 ECEC staff interviewed, only two identified themselves as immigrants, with one having come to Norway as a refugee child with her parents. Both participants spoke Norwegian and Arabic, which they mentioned was crucial for them in engaging with other refugees, especially those coming from Arabic-speaking countries.

Towards identifying my positionality

As explained in the introduction, I occupied a hybrid position in relation to the participants' standpoint during the fieldwork and did not fit either insider or outsider status. I had to switch back and forth between insider and outsider status depending on individual and group experiences between the refugee parents and kindergarten teachers. For instance, when I interviewed a woman from East Africa who spoke Swahili, I felt like an insider because we shared a similar linguistic and cultural identity. To the ECEC professionals, I felt like an outsider since I did not have any prior work experience in ECEC settings, although I have academic qualifications and research experience in Norway. Their standpoint felt distinct from mine.

Based on my prior education and practical academic visits to kindergartens in Norway, I realised that I had underestimated the knowledge I had of the kindergartens in Norway. While I did not feel totally like an 'outsider' in the ECEC centre, the interviews showed that I did not relate to the professionals' experiences of working in the integration of refugees. However, I had certain assumptions about how integration work is done in ECEC centres. For instance, I knew that kindergarten teachers would emphasise their work of promoting the acquisition of the Norwegian language among refugee children and, to an extent, among the parents. This is because it is encapsulated in the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) which is an authoritative document outlining the values, responsibilities, objectives, working methods and learning areas with which all kindergartens in Norway are expected to comply. Besides, I had lived in Norway for a considerable time and had an idea of the issues to which the welfare state funded institutions accord priority.

To the refugee parents, I felt relatively like an insider due to being an immigrant myself. However, I did not relate to their experiences as refugees, nor could I automatically identify with their cultures, religions, parent status, gender, and immigration backgrounds. Moreover, refugees are not a homogenous category but a conglomeration of people of different nationalities who have different cultures, religions, gender, educational status, sexual orientations and political ideologies, among other forms of diversity, which made it hard for me to claim an insider positionality in their realities.

The interviews with the non-native ECEC staff differed somewhat from those conducted with the native ECEC staff. For instance, the immigrant teachers highlighted how being immigrants themselves informed their conversation with refugee parents on navigating the cultural differences both in the kindergartens and the community at large, as the quote below from the teacher Joana highlights:

> I think that it makes it easier to understand where they're coming from, how they might think. I see myself as a mediator between the Norwegians and the foreigners. I often assist in explaining what they (refugee parents) are saying so they gain a better understanding, but I'm not able to understand every culture, but still, it seems like it has some value.

Similar sentiments from the teacher Caro, who is a native Norwegian, highlight the different roles immigrant teachers fulfil in ECEC centres. In the interview, Caro says:

> But we also have teachers and assistants who speak the mother language, i.e., the children's ethnic language. (…) I have to ask the woman (teacher) who can speak Arabic to come and help me because I cannot speak Arabic, and the children cannot speak Norwegian. So, the children need people who can speak their language, and then they can slowly start to speak Norwegian. But first, we focus on how to make them feel safe.

According to Caro, the immigrant teacher (whom I call Sara) plays a key role in relation to some refugee children by using her Arabic skills. Sara herself told me during the interview that she was an immigrant. That we were both migrants made it easier for me to ask her about how being a migrant affected her everyday integration work with refugee children.

The privilege of the outsider

In Norway, English is rarely used, whether institutionally or socially, and Norwegian is the official working language in ECEC centres. In this light, many participants amongst ECEC professionals initially spoke to me in Norwegian, probably on the assumption that I had a good command of the language as some immigrants in Norway do, but would promptly switch to English once they established that I wasn't that 'good' in Norwegian. Then we would negotiate which language to conduct the interview in. While most ECEC professionals appeared to have a very high level of spoken English, some did not feel quite confident being interviewed in English and therefore I conducted the interviews with the support of an ethnic Norwegian research assistant intepreted during the interviews, and transcribed the recordings.

In addition to interpreting during the interviews, the research assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim. I discovered that the research assistant was very important to the research, not only for interpreting research questions to the participants, but also in providing the context of my questions to the participants. This was crucial to ensure that the participants understood what I was exploring through the questions I posed and by providing the context, it explained the why. By using an interpreter who happened to be ethnically Norwegian and had her own children in Norwegian ECEC centres, enabled her to explain untranslatable cultural meanings and expressions that only insiders, i.e. Norwegian speakers, could understand (Lund, 2015).

Besides, during the research process, I had a slight advantage, because I have basic competence in Norwegian and I have lived in Norway for a

considerable time. Therefore, I picked up some things directly from the participants and wrote down notes to supplement the transcribed interviews by the research assistant. Carrying out the interviews with a interpreter made me acknowledge the challenge of conducting interviews alone in a language that I am not fully conversant with. However, this also comes with other unforeseen advantages, such as using the 'ignorant' tag, through which you can question the usually taken-for-granted knowledge.

For instance, during the interviews, I explored the participants' understanding and the expressions they used to describe their work. During various conversations with ECEC staff, the Norwegian term *trygghet* was frequently uttered by the participants as they spoke about their everyday work with refugee children. In English, *trygghet* is usually translated as 'safety'. The concept usually connotes being protected from harm or danger. The frequent references to *trygghet*, which particularly emerged in expressions such as 'making the child feel safe', puzzled me.

Norway is arguably one of the safest places on earth to raise a child, given its high ranking on different scales of human development, well-being, happiness, etc. So why were the ECEC staff so preoccupied with safety? As the interviews progressed, I noticed that *trygghet* had a different connotation. I discovered that in the context of Norwegian ECEC centres, *trygghet* refers to an emotional state of mind, indicating a sense of belonging, comfort and predictability.

Arguably, *trygghet* is focused on emotional stability and other kinds of protection but does not necessarily overlap with English notions of safety. *Trygghet* is rather linked with the Norwegian kindergarten's long tradition of creating a home-like environment, emphasising intimacy, warmth and safety (Korsvold, 1998; Gullestad, 1997; Seland, 2009). This is set out in the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* which outlines that ECEC staff shall 'ensure that all children find safety, belongingness and well-being in kindergarten' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 20).

Trygghet, thus, emerges as an important ideal in the routine integration of refugee children. The continued use of the concept of safety was a part of professional discourse. As my exploration moved on to trace trans-local relations, I discovered that the safety discourse seemed to originate from professional parenting courses and training taken by the ECEC staff, which were based on particular programmes. One of these was the International Child Development Programme, where the ECEC teachers accessed knowledge and training on parenting and trauma care for children. The use of the

safety discourse showed that ECEC staff were reverting to the professional language they were trained and embedded in when they talked about their everyday work in integration. This language influenced how they understood and viewed their work and refugee children.

What I refer to as the 'safety discourse' was hardly problematised in Norwegian/Nordic research literature. It occurred to me that the notion of *trygghet* appeared to be so much taken for granted among Norwegians that it did not attract much attention. My unfamiliarity with this discourse suddenly opened an opportunity for me to see it from an 'outsider within' position.

In institutional ethnography, being unfamiliar with the context and realities of research participants aligns with the ambition to avoid institutional capture (Smith, 2005). Institutional capture refers to the attribute of treating institutional concepts and language as if they were descriptive rather than constitutive (Lund & Nilsen, 2020; Nilsen, 2021). The implication is that institutional ethnography researchers ought to deliberately take notice of and question such concepts to avoid reproducing dominant discourses (Magnussen, 2020).

Negotiating language when conducting interviews with refugee parents was more complex compared to the ECEC professionals. This is because some refugee parents did not feel very competent in English or Norwegian. The refugees came from diverse national backgrounds and therefore had a wide spectrum of ethnic and national languages, although the majority were fluent in Arabic, Tigrinya and Swahili. When I conducted a focus group with three parents who spoke three different languages, i.e. Arabic, Tigrinya and Turkish, I had to recruit three different interpreters who translated the interview into Norwegian and the research assistant further translated into English. Despite being an immigrant just like the three refugee parents, I was an outsider in their embodied experience. However, two parents who participated in the one-to-one interviews spoke Kiswahili, which is a common language in some parts of Africa. Once they established that I spoke Swahili, they were very enthusiastic about the interviews, and I conducted one of the interviews in Swahili. The difficulties experienced with the focus group or other interviews which involved a research assistant did not feature in this interview at all. The communication between us was direct and there was less likelihood of our misinterpreting each other. For instance, at one point she discussed how to raise children and reflected on the difference between Norway and Congo when it comes to managing children's behaviour. She highlighted that she had to learn new methods

of correcting and disciplining children in Norway, in contrast to the use of physical discipline which is most common in many African communities. Assuming that we shared some experience and worldviews, the interviewee shared reflections with me that she would probably be less likely to share with a Norwegian-speaking researcher, given the controversial and culturally taboo character of the topic.

Final reflections

In this chapter, through engaging with debates on reflexivity, situatedness and positionality, I have shown how my research experiences as a non-native researcher who has a minimal grasp of the dominant language in Norway contributed to the realisation of my hybrid positionality as an 'outsider within'. I have used Collins' (2004) conceptualisation of the 'outsider within' as a point of departure, adapting the concept to fit my position as a non-native researcher, albeit one who shared some experiences with those of the participants.

I have highlighted how my unfamiliarity with the research site involved challenges, but also offered opportunities for my experience in research. Being 'ignorant' enabled me to question taken-for-granted notions, which offered the opportunity for kindergarten teachers to explain things more explicitly and go beyond the assumptions about what is understood as common knowledge in their work experience. Occupying the 'outsider within' position can arguably be a favourable knowledge position for a researcher to occupy. The researcher then has prior knowledge that is relevant to the research, while also being enough of an outsider to question things that may be taken for granted by people who are more on the inside. Arguably, concepts such as *trygghet* may go unnoticed by people who are more on the inside of the context I was studying.

Scholars within feminist standpoint theory claim that it privileges knowledge produced from the perspective of subordinated or marginalised groups based on gender, race and religion (Smith, 1987). A non-native researcher carrying the minority tag can be conceptualised as a disempowered positionality that can add a new dimension from below, relative to the standpoints of the dominant group (Zhao, 2016). Being a non-native black researcher in Norway means I can be categorised as belonging to a minority group, which puts me in a position to see things from a different perspective in contrast to the majority population.

My research project was an opportunity to understand the complexities that come with conducting research from a shifting positionality. I am aware that having direct connections with the realities of some participants does not make me an insider. Reflecting on it now, I realise that my ambition was to remain true to my cultural positioning and not seek to fit either on the inside or the outside as that would not reflect who I am, and it would be intellectually and personally problematic.

The question of how a black man from Africa can do research in Norwegian ECEC centres may have come from an ethnonationalistic perspective. On the flip side, it also evoked reflections on my positionality vis-à-vis my informants, connecting me with wider debates within social science research. Moreover, it evoked the question of existing symbolic boundaries within research regarding who can develop knowledge about what. There is a need for a sociology that is no longer founded on Euro-American hegemony (Go, 2023), but which values knowledge development by scholars that represent diverse backgrounds, histories and everyday experiences.

Author biography

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