Accepted as an insider: tensions and dilemmas in gaining access in ethnography

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This paper explores the tensions and dilemmas in fieldwork arising from social allegiances, along with ethical questions, in gaining access to research participants in multilingual and institutional settings. I draw on an ethnographic study of language policy in Timor-Leste that I conducted in 2012 in which policymakers, head teachers and teachers’ understandings of recent language policy changes were investigated. The paper describes how longstanding social and historical networks based on nationality, ethnicity, family and friendship allowed me to gain access to people and sites which would not otherwise have been available. However, with this social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) came expectations predicated on conventions of reciprocity which extended between me and the mediators and also between me and the participants to whom I had been introduced. Of particular significance was the relationship between myself as researcher and local mediators who were often family members, acquaintances and friends. Mediators were local people with local expertise who possessed important social capital for introducing me to other participants. In this paper, I explore the ethical and social obligations created by my insider role as an East Timorese with family connections to particular East-Timorese histories. I investigate the tension created by my social obligations and the ethical issues they raised.

Drawing on the assumption that ethnographic fieldwork is a social process and on the notion of social capital, I aim to illustrate the dynamic and fluid nature of researchers’ positionings and identities, focusing on the ways in which social roles and expectations shape the construction of relationships and knowledge-in-the-field.

Reference


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