Sensitive Populations and Self-reflexive Methods: Ethnographic Exploration of Race and Racism in Poland

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Poland has witnessed a rise in cross-border migration from both within the European Union and from regions around the world. A demographic consequence is biracial families in Poland. A social consequence is that in formerly racially homogenous Poland, racial inequality evolves from a nascent stage experienced by the few to a rapidly developing institution, with biracial families caught in the middle of past and future. In this article I discuss the methodology of a research project on identity strategies of Black African men, White Polish mothers, and biracial children, and the communities that they build. These groups are sensitive populations due to the racism, xenophobia, and discrimination that they face. I discuss (a) how the oral history method can be effective when working with sensitive populations, (b) the ethical and privacy concerns that come with social network snowball sampling and maintaining the anonymity of this population, and (c) how self-reflexive methods offers an honest, straightforward, and effective approach to examine the subjects and communities of my research.

Poland has witnessed a rise in cross-border migration from both within the European Union and from regions around the world. This is due to a number of different factors, including Poland's accession to the European Union, Poland's convenience and attractiveness as a transition country, and globalization's overall effect of creating selectively permeable economic, political and social borders (Górny et. al, 2010). The 2011 Polish census showed that 56.3 thousand individuals from other countries resided in Poland and out of these, 40,000 stayed for longer than 3 months. 27,000 of these individuals stayed in Poland for a minimum of 12 months, while 36,000 planned to stay in Poland for a year of more (Kostrzewa and Szałtys, 2013, p. 28). Poland saw a rise in immigrants coming from African

countries as compared to data collected in 2002 and 2011, with around 800 individuals temporarily staying in Poland in 2002, and 1,390 coming in 2011 (3.5% of all immigrants) (p. 32).

Statistically, we see that people of different races and cultures are increasingly in closer contact in Poland. A demographic consequence is a small number of biracial families in Poland. A social consequence is that in formerly racially homogenous Poland, racial inequality evolves from a nascent stage experienced by the few to a rapidly developing institution, with biracial families caught in the middle of past and future.

In this article I discuss the methodology of a research project on identity strategies of Black Africans, White Poles and biracial children and the communities that they build.[1] I conducted interviews using the oral history method. To supplement interview information and collect data on the community, I used informal conversations during the course of participant observation in the places where Black African fathers, White Polish mothers, and multiracial children congregate. To find potential interviewees, and the communities of which they are a part, I used a combination of traditional snowball sampling and social media. All told, I conducted 33 in-depth interviews, and countless informal conversations in numerous events across the three Polish-African communities between 2011 and 2015.

There are three purposes to this article. First, I discuss (i) how the oral history method can be effective when working with sensitive populations and (ii) the ethical and privacy concerns that come with social network snowball sampling and maintaining the anonymity of this population. As a part of these communities, I assumed that my presence had impacted it and the data collection. I followed the anthropological tradition and recent sociological trends of self-reflexivity (Prowse, 2010; Pezzala, et al., 2012; Gouldner, 1970). Thus, the third purpose is to discuss (iii) how self-reflexive methods offers an honest, straightforward, and effective approach to examine the subjects and communities of my research.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION: SENSITIVE AND HARD-TO-REACH

The population that I analyzed has two main characteristics that influence how to approach, analyze and write about them. First, they are sensitive, meaning that they are visible and vulnerable to extreme forms of physical and verbal discrimination. Second, owing to the fact that they are sensitive, they are also hard-to-reach, meaning that they are wary of and therefore not readily accessible to social researchers. Bias, ethics, privacy and anonymity of research subjects take on a special significance with sensitive and hard-to-reach populations.

The groups of my research are sensitive populations. Because Poland does not have an extensive modern history of relations with individuals from Africa, most of the notions of the "black other" are informed by a uniquely Polish African mythology (Kłoskowska 1962; Chodubski 2005; Fereira 2002; Mol 2004). For example, "Bambo," the still popular children's poem about a little African boy who is afraid to bathe because it will "bleach" his "black skin", reinforces stereotypes of Africa and those who are from African countries, "used AS fuel for insults aimed toward people with darker skin, specifically from African countries and mixed race backgrounds, in Poland (Mikulska 2011). Studies of African-Polish relations have focused on racial identities and divisions rather than national or ethnic, specifically citing problems between "whites" and "blacks". This is due to the understanding that Africans in Poland are perceived through the prism of race (Ząbek 2009).

The Helsinki Foundation 2011 study entitled "Racism in Poland" explores racism toward immigrants and children of mixed marriages.

> "Monkey," "black monkey," "asphalt," "Bambo," "gorilla" are the types of invectives that nearly all interviewees of African origin reported hearing. Individuals who stand out for their darker skin and/or are of Asian origin reported hearing insulting epithets such as "black", "nigger" or "yellow." Foreigners frequently hear comments that they are not welcome in Poland and should go back to their countries (Mikulska, 2011).

The increase of cross-national contacts and immigration to Poland has certainly had an influence on how race is culturally perceived. Physical difference is a marker that has not been a positive determinant of what it means to be "Polish" according to the Polish people.

To approach this population, I focused specifically on snowball sampling in hard to reach populations (Goodman, 2011) for the purpose of conducting oral history interviews. This type of snowball sampling, differs a great deal from Coleman's (1958–1959) definition of snowball sampling in not hard to reach populations as in the case of hard to reach populations, sample frames do not exist and therefore this methodology "relies on the people in the convenience sample to select other people from the hard-to-reach population" (Goodman, 2011, p. 350). In the age of internet-based social networking, classic snowball sampling for interviewing hard-to-reach populations is no longer the default. An innovative solution may be to use online social networking sites with virtual elements such as, mutual friends, niche groups, events, discussion boards and fan pages, which provide a virtual space for snowball sampling that occurs even before initial contact.

This method has two main challenges: selection bias and maintaining privacy. Selection bias occurs when some are excluded from physical social spaces where

classic networking occurs. The inclusive nature of internet social networking can account for this, with the risk of bias toward the more privileged side of the digital divide. Privacy issues for this sensitive population are more of a challenge: I explore the ethical implications of using social networking sites, along with how privacy and information can be maintained. When it comes to in-depth interviews, I also argue that some aspects of the oral history method are fundamental in obtaining responses that could otherwise be omitted by the interviewee. Below I will give an overview of the project itself in order to illustrate the importance of these two methods when researching "sensitive" and "hard to reach" populations.

METHODOLOGY IN THE POLISH-AFRICAN COMMUNITIES: SNOWBALL SAMPLING

Methodologically speaking, much of the research that has been done on biracial individuals and families is quantitative in nature, and as suggested by Telles and Sue (2009) it is necessary to explore the dynamics of interracial relationships and families through qualitative and ethnographic data in order to better understand these dynamics on a micro-level rather than focusing entirely on macro-level approaches that can limit our understandings of these dynamics (p. 140).

Researchers face many challenges when it comes to studying new phenomena, such as the emergence of biracial, specifically Black African and White Polish families in Poland. Because African migration to Poland has just begun to increase, with the average migration of Africans to Poland from 2004–2008 at about 125.4, as compared to the average migration from 1999–2003 of 105.2 (GUS archives, 1999–2008), the presence of African and biracial individuals has not yet reached a point where they are an "apparent" part of Polish society both in the sense of statistical data present, and in the sense sampling frames (Goodman, 2011). In this case, the most feasible method of acquiring interviewees is through snowball sampling for hard-to-reach populations. According to Browne (2005) "Snowball sampling is often used because the population under investigation is 'hidden' either due to low numbers of potential participants or the sensitivity of the topic..." (p. 47). Browne explores many of the advantages and limitations of using snowball sampling in her study of non-heterosexual women. She explains that one way to use snowball sampling in gaining initial contacts is to "use personal networks and ask friends and acquaintances to be involved. They in turn ask their friends and partners if they would be willing to participate. This method avoids the problems associated with methods that rely on the categorization of groups" (Browne, 2005, p. 49).

Many other researchers also argue that the "more sensitive or threatening the phenomenon under study the more difficult sampling will be" (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997, in Browne, p. 48). It should be noted that snowball sampling in hard-to-

Sarah Grunberg, Sensitive Populations and Self-reflexive Methods: Ethnographic Exploration of Race and Racism in Poland

51

reach populations differs a great deal from Coleman's (1958–1959) definition of snowball sampling in not hard to reach populations, as in the case of hard to reach populations, sample frames do not exist and therefore this methodology "relies on the people in the convenience sample to select other people from the hard-to-reach population" (Goodman, 2011, p. 350). In the age of social networking, classic snowball sampling for hard-to-reach populations is no longer the default method. Just as it has been said that "studies of sensitive subjects have employed individuals' social networks in order to access 'hard to reach' and 'sensitive' populations (e.g. Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Eland-Goossensen, Van de Goor, Vollemans, Hendricks, & Garretsen, 1997; Sarantakos, 1998; Valentine, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c in Browne p.48), following others, I chose an innovative solution to snowball sampling through the use of online social networking sites, which act in a similar way to traditional snowball sampling but allow for much more access.

Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Afrix.org, in the case of this specific Polish-African sample, provide a virtual space for snowball sampling through such elements as mutual friends, niche groups, events, discussion boards and fan pages, where snowball sampling occurs even before initial contact. These platforms establish a starting point, or potential convenience sample, which would then select the first wave of snowball sampling (Goodman, 2011, p. 350). Social networking sites also allow for a certain amount of accessibility for the interviewee which may make the interviewee more comfortable to take part in the research study. Browne suggests that in her own research, "Being rooted in social networks was significant because participants were able to 'check out' the research and me both as a researcher and a person" (cf. Duncan & Edwards, 1999 in Browne, p. 50). In this way, social networking can be used as an advantage and as a means to gain access into a particular community through the interviewees' accessibility to the researcher's profile, mutual friends, etc.

Browne, (2005) along with many others, suggests that snowball sampling "can be seen as a biased sampling technique because it is not random and it selects individuals on the basis of social networks" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Baxter & Eyles 1997; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997 in Browne, p. 51). Social network snowball sampling has two main challenges: selection bias and maintaining privacy and anonymity. Yet, while in classic snowball sampling, selection bias may occur as many are excluded from social spaces such as sports organizations, nightclubs, and other events, the inclusive nature of internet social networking can correct for biases inherent in snowball sampling. Still, of course not all selection bias can be eliminated, as it is clear that bias will still exist toward the more privileged side of the digital divide. Browne also makes the point that "Snowball sampling (as with most sampling techniques) relies on individuals' willingness to be involved in research and consequently some people will always be excluded" (p. 52). In the

end, selection bias will always be an issue when it comes to snowball sampling, however it is almost impossible to generate a random sample of a group of individuals who are often time "hidden" or extremely "hard to reach" for various reasons.

Privacy issues for this sensitive population are more of a challenge in using social networking sites where privacy controls are not in the researcher's direct control. An example of this may be if a researcher searches for their sample in a specific group formulated on a social networking site. This group may be open to the public, or open to all members, and therefore interviewees can be traced back upon publishing the article (if the author names the group, or characterizes the group where they found their sample). Still, there are reasons to argue that privacy can be guaranteed in that a researcher can create a private group on a social networking site that is only visible to its members. However, privacy in its entirety cannot be guaranteed until the owner of the site guarantees it, and recently this has become an issue of major debate—if privacy is truly guaranteed on the internet. The ethical implications here are obvious in that confidentiality becomes more and more difficult to maintain when individuals become a part of online communities.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS AND THE ORAL HISTORY METHOD

While snowball sampling helps to gain access to certain groups of people, the next step of the researching process is the means of data collection. In-depth interviews are a very common means of collecting qualitative data. In this study, data collection and analysis is based on in-depth interviews with elements of the oral history method. As a research assistant for Professor Lutz Niethammer, said to be "the leading practitioner of oral history in Germany" (Iggers, 1991, p. 822), I was able to master this particular method, which "is…often used to study the experience of oppression– the personal experience of being a member of an oppressed group" (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 157) and can also be defined as "in depth biography interviewing, typically of people who are excluded from or marginalized within conventional historical accounts" (Sarkar, 2012, p. 578). The oral history method is an intensive collaborative process of narrative building based on storytelling and listening of the interviewer and interviewee (Hesse-Biber, 2008, p.150) and allows for history to be written from "the bottom up" (Niethammer in Miller, 1981 p. 142, Luken and Vaughan, 1999, p. 404). It is a collection of personal stories and is a unique method as there can be "moments of realization, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the narrative process" (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p.150). Sarkar (2012) emphasizes the importance of the stories collected as they not only "provide new information about large-scale social processes or events... but also, more importantly, how they both bring alive and add texture to what we

think we know" (p. 595). Hesse-Biber (2006) discusses the contrast between the in-depth interview and the oral history method by stating,

> When using in-depth interviews an interviewer will typically have a focused topic for the interview and will follow an interview guide which, as we saw, may be semi-structured or relatively unstructured. Interviewees may or may not be asked identical questions, depending on the design and goals of the project. Oral history interviews differ in that, while the researcher is studying a specific topic, the organization of the topic is likely to be far less focused (p. 152).

The in-depth interview method, which typically focuses on a specific topic and follows either a semi-structured or unstructured interview guide, seems to be lacking when it is not combined with certain elements of the oral history method. I consider it necessary to use a semi-structured interview guide while at the same time using aspects of the oral history approach, as the oral history method can be seen as "a critical method for understanding life experiences in a more holistic way as compared with other methods of interview. This is congruent with the tenets of qualitative research and can yield not only rich descriptive data but also knowledge about social processes" (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 153).

Because each member of this community has a very specific way of forming identity, this particular sample consists of interviews within biracial families and the Polish-African community. While maintaining a certain focus during the interview at distinct moments of realization, taking a holistic, life story approach allows for yielding many more explanatory statements and ideas. As Hesse-Biber (2006) explains, "Oral history allows for the merging of individual biography and historical processes. An individual's story is narrated through memory. This means that their recollection of their experiences, and how they give meaning to those experiences, is about more than "accuracy;" it is also a process of remembering – as they remember, they filter and interpret" (p. 156). This becomes all the more important when studying identity strategies of marginalized groups of people.

SELF-REFLEXIVE METHODS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

As Becker (1958) notes in his paper on the "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation", "the participant observer gathers data by participating in the daily life of the group or organization he studies" and can be used to both locate hypotheses as well as to test them (p. 652–653). My research began in 2010 and formally ended in 2013, though in the last two years I have followed-up on some of my contacts and continued to participate in the community. I have been both a participant observer at many different cultural events, community meetings, and informal gatherings, and as such I was also an active member of this community. I became known for my research goals as well as my involvement within different

groups and organizations. Because I am a part of these communities, I assume that my presence had impacted it and the data collection. Each of the groups of this study are sensitive populations and, as a social scientist, my first priority to maintain their anonymity and privacy. There are specifics of the public and private aspects of these communities that, if revealed in full, could negatively impact the prospects for the anonymity of my subjects. In order to guarantee anonymity, I sketch but do not fully render this community, and I am selective in the descriptions. Some aspects of these communities are willingly public, such as formal Polish-African conferences that the organizers and speakers hope would attract a wide audience and media attention. In all situations, however, I weigh heavily on the side of anonymity.

The Methodology of Self-Reflexive Sociology

In Goulnder's (1970) work, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, he highlights the importance of Reflexive Sociology outside of the walls of academic discourse and instead within the understanding of sociologists' own beliefs, lives and experiences:

> What sociologists now most require from a Reflexive Sociology, however, is not just one more specialization, not just another topic for panel meetings at professional conventions, and not just another burbling little stream of technical reports...The historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology as I conceive it, however, would be to transform the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level .... In deepening our understanding of our own sociological selves and of our position in the world, we can, I believe, simultaneously help to produce a new breed of sociologists who can also better understand other men and their social worlds. A Reflexive Sociology means that we sociologists must-at the very least-acquire the ingrained habit of viewing our own beliefs as we now view those held by others (Gouldner, 1970, 489–90).

Reflecting and contemplating one's own position in the world cannot, in my opinion, be separated from many of the fundamental principles of Sociology, such as understanding one's individual experience as connected to the larger historical and social context. My own journey through this research process stemmed from a decision I made after completing my undergraduate studies in Ithaca, NY to explore what was my unfamiliar, yet familiar, "motherland". As a child of Polish immigrants, I had felt the dual-culturality of my experience, yet I had never visited the place where this culture found its roots. I found this strange and intriguing-- how could it be that I had barely looked beneath the surface of the very source that I felt was such a vital part of my identity? Perhaps I felt less social pressure to

pursue it in context because this particular facet of my identity was not immediately recognizable, and frankly, no one questioned it.

When I arrived to Poland, I also immediately became aware that there was a part of my identity, one which I had never fully explored or felt to be integral, being immediately highlighted and used as a reference point for others to make sense of me. Ethnically my Jewish roots presented as a source of identity that was more familiar and known to those around me than it was to myself. I began to wonder about the identity of individuals who experience dual-culturality in Poland, and even more so, those who presented as physically different from the majority of the population, or were easily identifiable as "others". On a certain level, I felt that I could relate to the feelings entwined with dual cultural identity, as I had felt most of my life that I was able to experience and see a bit of both worlds. However, while I had received some comments in Poland about "looking Jewish" in a purely stereotypical sense, I was able to pass, for the most part, as Polish. Even my American accent had faded to a point where I rarely had to answer questions related to "where I was from" by the end of my stay in Poland. I understood that others living in the country did not have this privilege to "pass". This led me to begin asking questions about the experiences of ethnic and racial minorities in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on two intertwined factors: community and identity. As much as I passed as Polish most of the time, Poles were quick to let me know that I was different, perhaps even in a positive sense. I had never recalled someone in the United States questioning my ethnic identity. From this point I began to understand how the racial and ethnic homogeneity of Poland influenced how individuals were categorized in terms of your identity – you were either Polish, or you were most definitely not. Reflexivity in this sense helped me understand my own experience in the context of others who could have been experiencing either something very similar or very different. This was what I was interested in exploring and has since shifted my own perspective and understanding of my place within this social and historical context. I came into the research understanding very little, and have left with a breadth of knowledge that has shaped my own identity in the process.

So began my exploration of the Polish-African community. I believe the first time I spoke to my grandmother about people of color in Poland was on the night that Barack Obama was elected into presidential office for his first term. My grandmother's neighbor burst through the door and burst through the door and exclaimed in disdain, "First Jews ruled the world and now the negroes will rule". My initial reaction was one of shock as her words so overtly expressed a type of racism that felt all too familiar. Later on, I attempted to put her words into context. My grandmother explained to me that being "different" in Poland was not easy and that many people in Poland still feared anything that was not innately Polish,

that this had to do with a long history of occupations and so on. I also came to understand that the experience of people of color in Poland was different from the experiences that I understood of people of color in the United States as Poland did not experience such a deep historical racial divide.

From this point on, I started carrying out informal conversations with ethnic Poles about Africans in Poland. Often times before and throughout my research I would hear generalizing statements and jokes such as "we are 100 years behind the negroes" (in terms of how civilized or uncivilized Poles are) or the word "murzyn" used loosely to refer to all people of color in Poland, and usually had negative connotations. I noticed that in all of my social circles, the lack of diversity that existed allowed for a comfortable space to speak about people of color in a degrading fashion. I observed what I eventually came to understand as dialogue and actions rooted in xenophobia, ignorance (perhaps due to a lack of education as well as a lack of contact with African people), curiosity, along with examples of overt racism. I began to discover early in 2010 that the history of Africans immigrating to Poland was fairly new, beginning somewhere in the late 1970s/ early 1980s, and that there were not many individuals from African countries (as compared to other minority groups) living in Poland, ranging anywhere from 2,000 to just over 5,000 Africans total living in Poland. The data on these individuals was also problematic at times, The Central Statistical office not including those individuals who live in Poland on a temporary basis (those without permanent residency), which leads to the discrepancy in knowing how many individuals from African countries actually reside in Poland at a given time. However, with this said, it was apparent that the population was growing.

My research began as an informal search for stories that could help me better understand the experiences of the members of the African community in Poland. As I mentioned to some friends that this was a topic that interested me, I was introduced to a few individuals who openly shared some of their experiences. My first encounter with someone with Polish and Nigerian parents shed light on the difficulties that bi-racial Poles encounter in their everyday lives in Poland. This particular individual expressed that they encountered racism on a daily basis on a number of different levels and in various spaces. This included comments while walking down the street, problems in the workplace, as well as the constant assumption that they were a foreigner in Poland. After our conversation, I informed this individual that I may continue to research this topic, to which they agreed be interviewed in the future.

At this point I began to attend African events in order to formalize my academic interests and continue to discover the larger community in order to see how it functioned. I met many individuals with both similar and different stories, from Polish-African backgrounds as well as individuals from many African countries and

announced the topic of my dissertation during these meetings. I became involved in two organizations that advocated for migrant rights in Poland as well as a stop to racism in Poland. Soon my reputation was known among this community as both a researcher and member of the community.

CONCLUSION

In this research I specifically focus on interviews done with members of the Polish-African community in the racially homogenous Poland. Individual interviews were conducted in the language that the speaker was most competent in (either English or Polish). In conducting this research, I used a mixed method approach, snowball sampling with the use of social networking platforms, incorporating data collection and analysis is based on in-depth interviews with elements of the oral history method, informal and formal conversations, along with participant observation in the places where this community congregates. This combination is ideal for this sensitive population, specifically the in-depth interviews with elements of the oral history method which allowed for interviewees to answer difficult questions in an open and natural way. Moreover, oral history provides for detailed analysis of micro-macro processes as I can place deep personal histories in a broad historical context (Hesse-Biber 2008; Riemann 2006) and when combined with participant observation, tells a story that is vivid and multidimensional. As a part of these communities, I assumed that my presence had impacted it and the data collection. Following the anthropological tradition and new sociological trends of self-reflexivity (Prowse, 2010; Day, 2012; Gouldner, 1970), I integrated my description of the community with myself as a subject.

NOTES

1   A note on terminology: some prefer the term "multiracial", "multiethnic" or "mixed race" to biracial, however here I focus specifically on two socially constructed racial categories – Black and White – that have strong meaning in contemporary Poland.

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