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Shifting power dynamics in interviews with children: a minority ethnic, working-class researcher's reflections

Qualitative Research

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Biographical note

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Shifting power dynamics in interviews with children: a minority ethnic, working-class researcher's reflections

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the literature on power dynamics and researchers' positionality in qualitative research, by shedding light on the experiences of a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background. Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts, it discusses how middle-class children confronted the researcher with language stigma and how they, while drawing boundaries vis-à-vis those who 'lack' cultural capital, (unintentionally) drew boundaries against the researcher herself. In turn, it illustrates how during interviews with working-class children, manners had to be adopted with which the researcher is no longer familiar. This article calls on ethics committees to more strongly consider how researchers might become 'vulnerable' themselves during fieldwork and to acknowledge intersectional experiences that potentially cause power dynamics to shift, even in research involving groups that are socially believed to have little power, such as children.

Keywords: class identity, habitus, insider-outsider status, positionality, reflexivity, researcher-researched relationship, research ethics, vulnerability

Introduction

Power dynamics and the researcher-interviewee relationship have been of major concern within qualitative research. Over the past years, these dynamics have especially been studied when there are socially unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched group, in terms of social class, gender, race and ethnicity (e.g., Arendell, 1997; Bain and Payne, 2015; Hamilton, 2020; Pincock and Jones, 2020; Swartz, 2011; Vanner, 2015). In childhood studies specifically, since 1989, scholars have drawn on the United Nations 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' to call for children's rights to be properly researched (Ennew et al., 2009), also raising the question of power dynamics in research with children (Christensen and James, 2000; David et al., 2001; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Farrell, 2005; Richards et al., 2015). Initially,

researchers across disciplines mainly emphasized the privileged position of the researcher vis-à-vis the interviewee and how this would result in an inherent power imbalance. However, scholars, and particularly feminist scholars, have challenged these hierarchical, asymmetric notions and conceptualized power relations as complex, reciprocal relationships, which reflect the dynamics of intersectional experiences (Conti and O’Neil, 2007; Hamilton, 2020; Råheim et al., 2016). Research encounters, indeed, can develop in such ways that the researchers may also become ‘vulnerable’¹ themselves (Bashir, 2019), especially when certain dimensions of their identity are socially less recognized than those of the interviewed groups (e.g., Arendell, 1997; Egharevba, 2001; Råheim et al., 2016). Despite the urge to consider these reversed experiences, however, methodological reflections generally focus on the challenges that white, middle-class scholars face (Sin, 2007). It is only recently that a growing but still scant body of methodological reflections have been written from a minority ethnic (Egharevba, 2001; Hamilton, 2020; Törngren and Ngeh, 2017) or working-class (Hurst, 2008) perspective.² Moreover, methodological reflections from the experiences of researchers whose minority ethnic descent intersects with a working-class background are even scarcer, just as shifting power dynamics in research with children are underexplored.

This paper, therefore, aims to contribute to current discussions on researchers’ positionality in two ways. First, it highlights the qualitative interview experiences of a female minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background in Flanders (Belgium), a region characterized by large ethnic and social class inequalities, both in education and in the labour market. Among the OECD countries, the educational gap between middle and lower-class children is almost nowhere as strong as in Flanders, which makes it structurally difficult for disadvantaged children to climb the social ladder (OECD, 2017). Unsurprisingly, as a result, working-class academics, let alone those with a minority ethnic background, are exceptionally underrepresented in Flemish academia.³ This paper, therefore, brings in a marginalized and unrecognized perspective, which can support a growing number of first-generation students with similar class-based experiences in their research work, to improve understanding of the diversity of experiences, and by doing so to provide a headwind—however insignificant—to the ubiquitous reflections from a middle-class perspective.

Second, this paper takes an uncommon approach as it underlines how power dynamics shift, whether in fact or in the mind, in research with children aged 11 to 12. That is to say that despite the strong focus within childhood studies on children’s agency (James, 2009; Stoecklin and Fattore, 2018), both methodological literature (Ennew et al., 2009) and ethics committees usually have very strict guidelines regarding working with children, as this group (and rightly

so) needs ‘to be protected’. This article does not claim that such a focus is unjustified – on the contrary – but it does aim to approach children as social actors who are also able to impact adults’ everyday lives. As Corsaro’s (1992) seminal work on ‘interpretive reproduction’ shows, children are not passive actors in social life. Rather, they creatively draw on adults’ repertoires to make sense of their own world and actively contribute to social production and change (see also Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012). Calarco (2018), for instance, analyses how middle-class children are actively involved in securing school advantages themselves, rather than ‘passively’ enjoying a biased education system which privileges them (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2003). In a similar fashion, Thorne (1993) clarifyingly demonstrates how children resist, rework and create gendered expectations through boundary-making processes. The ways in which children draw on symbolic resources to challenge, but also to create and maintain inequality has also been studied in research on ethnicity/race (e.g., Connolly, 2002; Devine et al., 2008; Sedano, 2012) and social class (e.g., Kostet et al., 2021a; Kustatscher, 2017; Vandebroek, 2020). Indeed, if we aim to consider children as active social actors, we should also recognize their ability to produce and reproduce inequalities, to affect and harm the other – not only in interaction with their peers and parents or teachers, but while interacting with other adults, such as researchers, as well. Yet, as both professors in childhood studies and the ethics committees involved urged me to think twice as hard about my methodological steps as I would do when working with adults, as a novice researcher within this field, I did not even consider that the researcher-interviewee interaction might affect *me* negatively. Obviously, as an adult researcher, I continue to bear an enormous responsibility when conducting research among children (see also Bashir, 2019) and my power relation towards them is structural, which is evidently not the case from the opposite angle. However, children can (unintentionally) nevertheless affect the ways in which I understand my overall position as a researcher whose experiences are already underrepresented in academia. As a result, I often have felt as if I was standing on unstable ground when conducting interviews.

This article is not so much about how to overcome obstacles when interviewing children, nor does it provide clear-cut answers to the ethical dilemmas described. Rather, it aims to foster a discussion on how researchers are emotionally affected by interview experiences and how difficult it is for underrepresented academics to discuss these encounters with others. It is about problems which I have not resolved, but which have just remained as problems. This paper is about recognizing that social inequalities can be reflected in interview interactions and how this affects one’s personal and professional identity.

My position as a researcher

My social position differs strongly from that of the vast majority of my academic colleagues because of both my social background and educational trajectory. My parents migrated as newly-wed young people in the 1970s from a remote rural commune in the Rif, Northern Morocco, to Belgium, where their children would be born. My father, who is illiterate, worked in a recycling factory for about 30 years, until the workers were collectively fired in 2010, due to the financial crisis. My mother, who did not attend primary school either but learned basic Arabic reading and writing in the local mosque, took care of the six children. Unsurprisingly, my father's income was not sufficient to live comfortably with a household of eight, which caused financial problems throughout our childhood. My oldest brother did not finish secondary education, my other four siblings have a vocational secondary qualification. I am, hence, the only one among my siblings with a tertiary education degree, and the first among our huge extended family to pursue a PhD. However, my school career was a 'bumpy ride', which left me far behind my peers.

Flemish education is well-known for the inequality it reproduces, and studies have shown that lower-class and minority ethnic children are more likely to be referred to the vocational track (which prepares the student to enter the manual labour market) in secondary education because of teachers' biases, among other things. Teachers appear to expect less from these vulnerable groups, irrespective of their grades, whereby they discourage or even prevent them from joining the academic track (which prepares for tertiary education), leading to a large underrepresentation of minority ethnic and lower-class children in academic programmes (Boone et al., 2018; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013). This is what happened to me, when a teacher had said that I should consider 'doing something with my hands' as, according to her, 'Moroccan girls do not pursue higher education anyway'. However, as I immediately felt out of place in the vocational track with my two left hands-I was embarrassingly bad at cooking and sewing, which were my two main classes-I lost motivation, started skipping school frequently, and thus had to repeat many years of schooling. I dropped out of school unqualified at the age of 18, started working as a salesperson in a large clothing company, but since that did not work out either, I enrolled in adult education to obtain my secondary diploma anyway. I acquired my vocational qualification at the age of 22, whereafter I successfully and passionately pursued higher education while working part-time. I achieved my MSc in Sociology at the age of 27. Currently, I am in my early thirties, a third year PhD student, and at the time of writing this article, I have almost five years research experience.

One might ask whether, with my university degree and comfortable doctoral scholarship⁴, I still can call myself ‘working-class’. Needless to say, I would never identify as a ‘worker’ and do not necessarily identify as ‘working-class’ as such either, but I do strongly identify *with* my working-class background. I am fully aware that with my socio-economic status, that is my level of education, income, and current position as a doctoral researcher, I occupy a privileged position in this society. However, although I have a high socio-economic status, I definitely do not identify as *middle-class*. When I use the term social class, I refer to a multitude of processes that go beyond socio-economic position alone. I follow a Weberian definition of social class, which conceptualizes class as an aggregate of individuals who share similar life chances. In this sense, class refers to the accumulation of different forms of ‘capital’ – in Bourdieu’s terms, economic, social and cultural capital – which, in combination with other important factors such as race, ethnicity and gender, result in a socially advantaged or disadvantaged position and related life chances (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage, 2015). My working-class background, hence, affects my current social position and further life chances in several respects more strongly than my current socio-economic position does, or at least leads to more restricted life chances compared to my middle-class, white colleagues, which evidently also has an impact on my sense of belonging and overall well-being.

The study

These reflections concern an almost completed four-year qualitative doctoral study on children’s boundary making and repertoires on ethnic and social class diversity. More specifically, this research examines how a diverse group of children perceive the diversity around them (see Kostet et al., 2021b), how they navigate social class differences in their everyday lives (see Kostet et al., 2021a), which aspirations they hold for their futures and how they assess their own life chances to achieve what they aspire to (see Kostet et al., 2020). All this is studied through cultural sociological approaches closely related to the sociology of valuation and evaluation as applied by Michèle Lamont (2012). It thoroughly examines how collective identities are differentially valued and how individuals negotiate the negative meanings associated with their social groups.

The project, of which the data collection phase has been completed, consisted of three rounds of in-depth interviews with children. The first round took place in the sixth and last grade of six different primary schools, in which 47 children (then 11-12y) were interviewed. 24 of these children were selected to further participate in the following rounds, based on their

willingness, their parents' consent, their ethnic and social background and their individual narratives (on diversity, their future dreams and life chances, among other things). The second round took place approximately 8 months after the first round, and hence after the children had made the transition to secondary education (1st grade), and the last research round took place 20 months after the first (2nd grade). The objective of the repeated interviews is to examine whether children's repertoires and boundary making processes are challenged once they leave their primary school and move to a secondary school, where they interact with new classmates and hence new reference groups. Based upon their ethnic descent, 10 children are governmentally considered 'native' – which means that both their parents and grandparents were born in Belgium – and the others have at least one (grand)parent of foreign descent and hence are considered 'non-native'. These children have parents/grandparents from, among other countries, Morocco (the largest minority group in the region), Turkey, Georgia, Sweden, Poland, Congo, Ghana, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Kurdistan. 12 of these children self-identify as Christian, 25 as Muslim and 10 as non-religious or atheist. Children's narratives reveal a strong ethnic gap in terms of their social background. Based on the information they and their parents or teachers provided about, among other things, their home and living conditions, parents' occupation and stories about, for example, unpaid bills, it becomes clear that most of the children of Belgian descent belong to a middle-class family while most (yet, not all) minority ethnic children have a working-class background.

Shifting power dynamics in interviews with children

Language stigma and shame

It is not new to argue that many social upwardly academics with a working-class background struggle with language, speech and accents in the ivory tower. Among the most prominent sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu, for example, explains in the documentary film *La sociologie est un sport de combat* (Sociology is a Martial Art) how he felt cultural shame because of his lower-class background, and that he was particularly ashamed of his accent, which he corrected when he entered the elitist *École normale supérieure* in Paris (Carles, 2001). In a similar line, in his memoirs *Returning to Reims*, Didier Eribon illustrates the identity work that must be done when navigating the academic world with a working-class heritage and the constant alertness that comes with it:

It was also necessary to relearn how to talk, to eliminate incorrect pronunciations and turns of phrase along with regional usages (...), to correct both my northeastern accent and my working-class accent, to learn more sophisticated vocabulary, to make use of more suitable grammatical constructions, in short, to keep both my language and my delivery of it under constant surveillance (Eribon, 2013 p. 107).

Internationally, associations between social class and accents have a long history in which working-class accents have often been perceived as ‘vulgar’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Crew, 2020). In addition, in many Western European regions such as Flanders, language also forms an important symbolic boundary against minority groups (Bail, 2008). That is to say that even if they fully master the dominant language (which is Dutch in Flanders), minorities speaking with thick accents are strongly stigmatized and these accents are generally hardly tolerated in the labour market (Wimmer, 2013). In Flanders, thick ‘minority accents’ have become stereotyped to such an extent that they are often used for caricature. A comic television show ‘*Wat als?*’ (What if?), for instance, even broadcasted a short sketch titled ‘What if everyone spoke like a Moroccan?’, in which a white group of people discuss a classical music concert, while imitating the so-called thick accent of Flemish Moroccans, which caused both laughter and commotion among the many viewers. Although this accent is also seen as a form of popular street language amongst youngsters, research has shown that youth of Moroccan descent are highly aware of these stereotypes and some indeed feel ashamed of or aim to conceal their accents while talking to the ‘native’ group (Jaspers, 2008, 2011).

I have also been correcting my accent since I entered academia, although I like to make myself believe that I am not ashamed of my working-class background, which I indeed have never kept secret. However, I was especially concerned, not about a so-called working-class accent, but about my highly stigmatized ‘Moroccan accent’ while speaking Dutch, which cannot be fully corrected. A difficulty in the Dutch language is the use of several definite articles, such as the article ‘*de*’ for masculine and feminine words, and ‘*het*’ for neuter words. Knowing whether to use ‘*de*’ or ‘*het*’ comes largely through language sensitivity that mother tongue speakers develop naturally. For those who do not have Dutch as their mother tongue, the use of the correct articles is a major challenge as there are few rules for this and language sensitivity cannot be developed easily – certainly not in my case, as I mainly communicated with those whose native language is not Dutch during my childhood. I went, for example, to kindergarten and primary schools with a majority of minority children. So, I, too, sometimes use these articles incorrectly. Symbolic boundaries based on these grammatical mistakes would also be drawn during the conversations with children.

When interviewing Jordy,⁵ an 11-year-old pupil of Belgian descent, who stated that he does not like his peers of Moroccan descent very much, he explained:

Jordy: I do hate it a little bit that they [Moroccans] do not speak Dutch normally, they use their articles wrong. (...)

Researcher: Why does that bother you?

Jordy: Because you, you, you should pay attention, but they don't pay attention. You have to do your best if you're not good in something. (...) My brother now also has Moroccan friends and now he speaks differently than before. (...) He speaks a little bit Moroccan, and he doesn't use his articles correctly anymore. And he also uses Moroccan words sometimes. (...) My parents say something about it, but he keeps doing it.

Researcher: What do they say?

Jordy: Like 'speak normal!' or something. And, and... 'speak decently!' We don't like that very much...

Although I knew that learning the correct articles is not simply a question of paying attention or making an effort, I felt very small when Jordy was talking about the Dutch spoken by 'Moroccans'. I must admit that I even felt intimidated. Not only did Jordy confront me with existing language stigma, but I also immediately felt an enormous pressure not to make any of these grammatical mistakes myself during the interview or during the follow-up studies. As a result, I made every effort to only use words whose article I was sure about, which was laborious work. After all, if I were to say '*de*' where it should have been '*het*', I would not only run the risk of bothering Jordy, but I might also lose his valuable openness as a child-respondent. Since he was the only pupil in the study who explicitly stated that he dislikes certain ethnic groups and does not always enjoy diversity, it was important to me that he could openly express his concerns-or his irritations-which are both relevant for my study on children's boundary making. Afterwards, I did wonder whether it was not my 'responsibility' to make him reflect about his statements, not by 'correcting' him but by asking thoughtful questions, but that possibility did not occur to me during the interview. At the moment itself, I felt mostly minoritized. This encounter stayed with me for days after the interview, for I was confronted with how I felt as if I had to 'prove myself' towards my young interviewee-not so much that I had to prove myself as a trustworthy researcher, as all qualitative researchers have to do, but rather that I had to prove that I am a 'legitimate' or 'good immigrant'. At that moment, Jordy seemingly had power over me, as if he represented the societal 'judgmental gaze' through which minorities are perceived. When Jordy made the above comment, despite his age, he as a majority ethnic pupil in fact was the one who had the power to decide which kind of language was valid, which made me effectively insecure about my speech and caused me to adjust my language use at the time. The self-regulation into which I quasi-automatically relapsed, felt like a cruel form of symbolic

violence; this interaction imposed and reinforced the norms of those who possess greater social power.

The Looking-Glass Self and 'lack' of cultural capital

Language is one of the most pronounced features, but only one aspect of how children confronted me with my childhood habitus. Before I started my interviews, I had not realized how little experience I had in working with middle-class children. Indeed, although I have had much practice in working with various groups, such as vulnerable minority youth, lower-class ethnic majority youth, youngsters with disabilities and adults in poverty, encounters with middle-class children had been rare in my life. As I already mentioned, I went to schools with a concentration of lower-class minority children, and I grew up in a then disadvantaged neighbourhood as well. The first middle-class persons I intensively interacted with, except for my teachers, hence, were the friends I made in higher education.

We quite often hear of experiences of middle-class adults-be they researchers, teachers or social workers-who, when they are first confronted with vulnerable groups, come to realize that they were hardly aware of the hardship in some families' lives. For me, it was somehow the other way around. Although, as a sociologist, I was fully aware of how children's everyday experiences are powerfully impacted by social class (Lareau, 2003), I had never encountered these unequal childhoods by personally talking to middle-class children, whose life stories are not only very different to those of my lower-class interviewees, but also to that of my own childhood. It was illuminating but also quite unsettling to see major sociological theories materialized, such as the differential acquisition of linguistic skills (Bernstein, 1964) and how middle-class children used the kind of vocabulary I only learned at a much later age. It was also striking to hear the ways in which they, throughout their 'concerned cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), talked about their various leisure activities, their latest intercontinental travels, or how some show awareness of the importance of social capital as they explain how knowing the right people can help you in life. However, what struck me most, was how some of the middle-class children drew 'cultural boundaries' (Lamont, 1992) towards others, i.e. they distanced themselves from their socio-economically more vulnerable peers based on their so-called less accumulated cultural capital, not knowing they were unconsciously drawing boundaries vis-à-vis me as well:

Olivia: I can have whole discussions about stuff like musicals, Hamilton, and my [minority ethnic] friends are not familiar with it. Then I feel a little bit... yes... I feel different than them. (...) Uhm, I know more stuff. I mean, I don't want to be rude, but I know more stuff than they do, and I already speak English very well. (...) So yeah... It just feels like they are only aware of Belgium and their country of descent, but I want more...

As Jordy reflected the ways in which minoritized groups are socially judged based on their accents, Olivia confronted me with how lower-class groups are perceived to lack cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Of course, I was already very much aware of the importance of cultural capital inside and outside the academic world, but now I also started to anxiously wonder: is this what my former colleagues would have said about me when I did not engage in a conversation about the architecture and interior of the Duomo di Milano-not so much because of a lack of aesthetic sensitivity but because of the paucity of vocabulary to describe my impressions? Did my teachers at school, among other things, believe that my world was restricted to Belgium and my country of descent? Indeed, when researching the ways in which people evaluate others' worth, through the sociology of valuation and evaluation, it is extremely difficult not to dwell on how your family's and your own value is evaluated by others. Yet, I felt less hurt by Olivia's value judgement than by being reminded that, for most of my life, I had no access to cultural resources that actually nourish me intellectually and emotionally-I can now say. A form of exclusion that was not only due to my family background itself, but also because I was believed to 'not pursue tertiary education anyway'. In her brilliant memoir and study, Lynsey Hanley describes this inequality in much more striking terms concerning her own social mobility:

[A] door opens into a room filled with stimuli you never knew existed: not only new things to see, but new ways of seeing (...), making the one to which you'd previously been confined feel at once claustrophobic and sparsely furnished. You start to look again, with fresh eyes, at aspects of the culture that you're used to (...). In doing so, you become attuned to the broader idea of what all but the finest examples of them are suggesting collectively about the level of your comprehension and by extension your intelligence. Over a period of time a single, strong message begins to emerge: that, as someone from a working-class family (...), you are expected to reach a certain level of understanding and no higher (...) [F]or the likes of you, entertainment is meant to be about forgetting, not remembering; for escape, not for transcendence (Hanley, 2017: 52–53).

Moreover, and more importantly, the interviews with the children made me realize once again that it is difficult to 'catch up' in cultural capital, as this is passed from generation to generation. It is only through interviewing children in the academic track of secondary education, a world

which was unfamiliar to me, that I have gained insight into what I have been missing during my educational trajectory-both in terms of subject matter and in terms of speaking and presentation skills. Tomasz, for example talked about his history classes in a very confident way that is unknown to me. It was not necessarily what he said, but how he could present himself as historically aware that struck me. He referred, for example, to Minoan civilization or communism in a more fluent way than I even feel empowered to be fluent when presenting my own doctoral research. Acquiring cultural knowledge is one thing, being able and feeling entitled to exchange your knowledge with confidence is another. The children indeed confronted me with how they not only have more access to cultural knowledge than my family or I have ever had, but also with how they develop a ‘sense of entitlement’ (Lareau, 2003) to speak about a particular topic and how they learn to confidently share their knowledge. It is not only cultural capital as such, but also the self-confidence with which one talks about culture, which forms an important symbolic boundary between classes (Savage, 2015)-and this competence is obviously very important when building an academic career. It should not be surprising that these kinds of encounters have reinforced the feeling of being an imposter.

Further, as several children, like Olivia, drew boundaries against children whom they perceived to lack cultural capital, I needed to be very careful not to come across as lacking capital either. After all, my university degree and cultural interests-which I only started to develop at a much later age-are not enough to effortlessly discuss their theatre and museum visits at home and abroad. When a teacher asked pupils in my presence for the name of the well-known architect who created many of the mosaics in Barcelona’s *Park Güell*, I broke out in a cold sweat as I expected that he would look at me if the children did not know the answer. However, no sooner had he asked his question than an 11-year-old girl enthusiastically responded: ‘*Gaudíiii*’. I had to be vigilant about both how I talked and what I talked about. The interviews with my middle-class child-respondents were in this sense not so different from my everyday interactions at the university. Although not intentionally, they set the standard that I had to meet, because we were all socialized into a world in which both ethnic inequalities and social class matter, and even matter in interaction with children; a world in which the standards of the middle class are valued more than those of the working-class, and indeed, where these evaluation processes even occur when talking to children.

Split habitus and alienation

Where habitus generally operates at an unconscious level, those who find themselves in unfamiliar fields become very aware of it. The above examples should make it clear that there is a mismatch between the structures I find myself in and my embodied habitus, which Bourdieu has called ‘split habitus’. This split habitus is characteristic of people who have found themselves in a radical new context, for example through social mobility, which often creates a fragmented self: *‘a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities’* (Bourdieu, 1999: 511). To grasp the lived experience of this split habitus, Eribon beautifully writes:

And so, when you return to the environment from which you came – which you left behind – you are somehow turning back upon yourself, returning to yourself, rediscovering an earlier self that has been both preserved and denied. Suddenly, in circumstances like these, there rises to the surface of your consciousness everything from which you imagined you had freed yourself and yet which you cannot not recognize as part of the structure of your personality – specifically the discomfort that results from belonging to two different worlds, worlds so far separated from each other that they seem irreconcilable, and yet which coexist in everything that you are (Eribon, 2013: 18).

The interactions with the minority ethnic children, who generally are from working-class families, also triggered strong reactions. It soon became clear that the children – because of an assumed shared background – were entrusting me with things they might not have said if I did not have a migration background myself. This was especially noticeable in interviews with children who elaborated on how they feel uncomfortable amid ‘Belgians’. However, the finding that the children assumed a shared background made me feel uncomfortable myself as I felt that I had to adopt manners with which I was no longer familiar. After the interview with Doha, for example, she gave me the kind of informal kiss and hug I had not received or given in many years.

Some of the other children, on the other hand, drew symbolic boundaries towards what they call ‘Belgians’, who, according to them, ‘talk neatly’, ‘study a lot’ and ‘do not dare to misbehave’. They also drew boundaries vis-à-vis minority ethnic groups they perceive to be ‘*Belgianized*’, i.e. those who are ‘whitewashed’ in their eyes because they aim to ‘talk neatly’ and ‘study hard’ as well. Where previously I had to ensure that Jordy would not place me in the category ‘Moroccans with a thick accent’, contradictorily I now had to ensure that I would not

be placed outside this category. Against my own expectations, taking up this role did not come easily. It took a lot of effort to ‘activate’ my repressed childhood habitus. In doing so, I sometimes used the wrong words, switched on the wrong accent and caught myself losing affinity with the children’s lived experiences. At those moments, I felt more than ever that the academic world-and the new middle-class friendships I have made there-have changed me to such an extent that, although I am not completely at home in my new environment, I no longer fit in my old one either. This is particularly interesting as it is generally claimed that researchers from minority backgrounds are more likely to build a rapport when interviewing minority groups. Minority researchers’ personal experiences are indeed often used to negotiate fieldwork access. However, little attention is paid to the ways in which the relationship with one’s background is often disrupted by the symbolic violence of academia itself. One is supposed to draw on the ‘cultural codes’ of a specific social group, whereas those codes had to be suppressed to navigate a middle-class institution in the first place. Because of my social mobility, I often find common ground with both lower- and middle-class groups because I have one foot as an ‘insider’ in both worlds. However, intellectual honesty compels me to admit that I am just as much an ‘outsider’ in both worlds. How to deal with this halfway position without causing harm to myself is, at least for now, an unanswered question.

Concluding reflections

In this article, I discussed how power dynamics can shift when interviewing children. Focusing on my experiences as a minority ethnic researcher from a working-class background, I highlighted how children whom I interviewed on their perceptions of diversity and social inequality, confronted me with my own minoritized subjectivity. While drawing boundaries vis-à-vis the lower-class and minority ethnic pupils, the children unintentionally drew bright boundaries against me as well. By way of conclusion, I would like to ask myself the ‘why-question’. Why did those boundaries expressed by children hurt? As a matter of fact, I was not so much hurt by the *boundary making* of the children as such, but because of the confrontation with the ever-present but often obscured cultural *boundaries* and the symbolic violence they engender. Arguably, I would have been much less ‘vulnerable’ had it not been that the children reminded me of those aspects of my identity that remain stigmatized within the broader society, and mainly within academia itself. This leaves me reflecting on at least two important things.

First, although I had to apply for ethical approval before I could start my interviews, the potential vulnerability of the researcher was never an issue. If the positionality of the researcher

had to be discussed at all, it was mainly concerning how that position could impact the researched individuals rather than the other way around. A discussion on how researchers should be supported if needed, seemingly has little place in these applications, let alone if a project concerns research with children. This reinforces the illusion that the researcher is in a position of power at all times, which arguably has performative effects; as I hardly had to think about my own potential vulnerability, I did not the least expect that the interviews could ‘harm’ me. Should I, as a novice researcher, not have been better prepared? As Butler and colleagues (2016) argue, there is a widespread narrow assumption that vulnerability is no more than a state of ‘victimhood’ and ‘dependence’, in which individuals need care and protection. If vulnerability, however, were to be understood as a relational concept (see e.g., Bashir, 2019; Hamilton, 2020) that also takes into account socio-political dynamics (Mackenzie et al., 2014), should the ethics committee not rather urge researchers (and themselves) to strongly reflect on ‘which power dynamics can arise/exist in interviews’, ‘how all actors potentially could be harmed’? Is it not because of a lack of this reflection on vulnerability, that some ethics committees seemingly hardly take into account that the university has ‘people like me’ in its workforce? What about other researchers who are not in a position of power in all-perhaps not even in most-circumstances? A critical reflection on what ‘vulnerability’ entails would benefit both the ethics committees and individual researchers; as to recognize the disadvantage within the own institution and to recognize the agency of vulnerable participants, who are often still seen as passive actors who need to be ‘taken care of’.

There is indeed a gap between what ethics committees ask of researchers and what effectively takes place in the field. As receiving ethical approval does not necessarily mean that one has fully prepared for fieldwork, Hamilton (2020: 529) proposes that: *‘reflexivity must be adopted as an ethical principle, in a way that is rooted in intersectionality, thus acknowledging and enabling attention to the situated, shifting nature of power’*. Reflexivity is highly important, yet at times also a lonely task, which brings me to my second point. Methodological reflections written from a minority ethnic or working-class background are relatively scarce, and these groups are generally, moreover, strongly underrepresented at universities. In that sense, it is a challenge for novice researchers to collectively reflect and to be inspired while responding to methodological issues related to these very personal identity dimensions. This observation itself illustrates the prevailing symbolic violence; the ‘loneliness’ reminds you that you do not belong to the ‘norm’, and joint reflection, at least that which is free from symbolic violence, is for those who do. This is not to claim that minority ethnic researchers with a working-class background can only engage in reflections with those sharing a similar background. On the contrary, sharing

experiences across ethnic and class boundaries can undoubtedly provide fruitful answers to various ethical questions. However, a power imbalance may also be present in these interactions, especially when vulnerability is indeed perceived as a state of passivity and lacking agency (Butler et al., 2016). Not infrequently, sharing personal experiences has resulted in me being underestimated and feeling rather patronized by some fellow students and professors who felt like-and sometimes explicitly said- they have to ‘take care of me’, that they aim to ‘open doors’ for me. In a society where cultural capital is largely related to being educated, it indeed seems that as soon as I talk openly about my *subjectively experienced*-and this emphasis is highly important-lack of socially valued cultural capital, some can no longer imagine that I am nevertheless a capable researcher not lacking in intelligence or critical consciousness. And even in cases where these kinds of patronizing interactions do not occur, it should be acknowledged that it is not easy to expose one’s vulnerabilities within institutions that not only largely causes these, but also may misrecognize the extent to which social and ethnic inequalities matter in its own field. Even the most open and socially aware research groups have to operate in this rather hostile social environment. Expecting that underrepresented researchers will nevertheless put their hearts on the table, not even sure whether they will be patronized or not, is another form of symbolic violence. Let us rather simply start with collectively reflecting on how we aim to position ourselves towards different forms of vulnerability, while recognizing intersectional experiences causing power dynamics to shift.

¹ The concept of ‘vulnerability’ is defined in various ways (see e.g., Butler, 2004; Butler et al., 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Vulnerability may refer, for instance, to an ontological condition of human life as all human beings have bodily and material needs, which makes them depend on the care of others. People may also become situationally ‘vulnerable’ when they are confronted with feelings such as uncertainty and risk. Although these different forms of vulnerability are generally intertwined, I am here mainly concerned with ‘socio-political vulnerability’ (Mackenzie et al., 2014), e.g., vulnerability caused by disadvantage.

² There are, however, a number of essays on working-class academics’ general experiences (see e.g., Binns, 2019; Brook and Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020; Mazurek, 2009 for an overview).

³ In most European Union countries, collecting data based on race and ethnicity is prohibited, so data on the numbers of academics with a migration background are not available. The only available statistics concern gender, which show that Belgium belongs to the EU-countries with the lowest share of female early career scholars. Moreover, of the Full Professors, only 18.3% are female (European Commission, 2019).

⁴ Compared to many other countries, PhD scholarships in Belgium are equivalent to the salary of people with a master’s degree in some other sectors and are therefore sufficient to comfortably afford housing and living expenses.

⁵ All names are fictional.

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