Everyday power dynamics and hierarchies in qualitative research: The role of humour in the field

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Abstract

Negotiating the relationships influenced by a combination of identity markers during fieldwork is an important aspect of qualitative data co-creation. Based on ethnographic research with the canal boating and enthusiast communities in the UK, this paper focuses on the mundane power dynamics and hierarchies in research situations. The paper discusses the role of humour in negotiating the interpersonal dynamics and argues for the consideration of power (im)balances in the field beyond assumptions of the researcher as definitely the advantaged side. Joking plays an important role and is used by both research participants and researchers to level the researcher–participant hierarchies as well as to reproduce and reaffirm them. This takes place on a conceptual continuum: first, in terms of their relative rigidity, whereby certain norms, opinions or value systems are reinforced; and secondly, flexibility, whereby the notions about norms and preconceived ideas might shift during the research encounter.

Introduction

In qualitative research, the theoretical and operational parts of the study are closely linked, and the co-creation of knowledge (Riese, 2019: 670) largely depends on the personal,

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social and convivial relationships that develop between the researchers and the research participants (Davies, 2012: 5). Many identity markers and personal characteristics, such as gender, age, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, spoken language, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, cultural capital, views, values and others, affect these relationships (Berger, 2015). They furthermore bring about various power dynamics in the field, complete with corresponding hierarchies and potential inequalities. Whether the relationship has developed over an extended period during a long-term participatory fieldwork, or in a more limited contact of arranging and conducting an interview, the identities and positionalities of all parties considerably affect the data co-creation process. The qualitative researcher therefore needs to constantly scrutinise both their own and the research participants' influence on the fieldwork process, choice of methods, particularities of the knowledge creation and data analysis (Berger, 2015; Davies, 2012; Etherington, 2007).

Epistemological studies on qualitative data as situated knowledge often stress the need to discuss power, a way how certain actions affect and influence others (Riese, 2019: 677). The power dynamics, their (im)balance on the field and the subsequent hierarchies and inequalities are influenced by the researchers' and research participants' various social, cultural and physical characteristics and their combinations (Etherington, 2007; Wolf, 1996). In this paper, I will discuss some aspects of the everyday power (im)balances in participation-based qualitative data co-creation, paying particular attention to the usage of humour (Giuffrè, 2015; Gouin, 2004; Watson, 2015) as tactics for negotiating the research situation. I will show that humour can be an important tool for overcoming or levelling various hierarchies and inequalities, yet it can simultaneously also reproduce and reaffirm them. It is therefore important that the researchers pay sufficient attention to this dual role of humour and joking while negotiating the heterogeneous and dynamic field of social relations that is qualitative fieldwork. I develop my arguments based on the analysis of data from my ethnographic research on leisure mobilities of the holiday boaters and canal enthusiasts in northern England. I will discuss the (mis)uses of humour in negotiating the different identity markers (particularly gender and migration status), showing how they contribute to both affirming of and challenging the stability of the subtle mundane hierarchies in the field.

Researcher's multiple positionalities in the field

A researcher is never a neutral, objective data collector, but a gendered, aged, raced, classed, nationed, etc. individual, all of which influences their access to and the relationship with the studied groups and individuals (Bell et al., 1993). This notion is well established and acknowledged in academia, yet the published research often still maintains the illusion of not only the 'ungendered scholar' (Babiracki, 2008: 170), but also one with no particular age, race, ethnicity, nationality, group membership or socio-economic status. The awareness about, and attention to, these characteristics and their interplays in qualitative fieldwork has nevertheless been steadily growing in the past decades; however, we still need to pay closer attention to the particularities of these complicated dynamics (Kostet, 2021; Riese, 2019). The reason why it is sometimes

difficult to apprehend this issue is that identities are very difficult to pin down as they are multi-layered and 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall, 1996: 4).

Much of the literature on researcher positionality focuses on gender, undoubtedly a major determinant in how the researcher is perceived on the field (e.g. Baxter, 2003; Pini, 2004, 2005; Warren and Hackney, 2000). However, it is also important to put gender into the context of other identity markers to understand how the relationships in the field can result in an active identity work (Kostet, 2021; Thomas et al., 2019). Pini (2004), for instance, stresses the need for reflexivity in navigating the set of identities a researcher might inhabit during their study. In her study of Australian rural sugar industry, these included her family ties (coming from a farmers' family), nationality and ethnicity (identifying as Italian-Australian), gender (being perceived as a 'nice country girl' by the research participants), occupation (an academic) and theoretical-political positions (a feminist).

The combinations of these various roles and identities are therefore further complicated by the researcher's status as either insider or outsider in the researched social group or community. The insider researcher can be defined as someone who shares cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic and religious heritage with their research participants (Ganga and Scott, 2006). It could also mean (special interest) group membership, such as for instance the community of boaters on the UK canals and rivers. Some researchers can become 'opportunistic' complete member researchers (Adler and Adler, 1987), being born to or having become a group member prior to the start of the research (e.g. Roberts, 2019) or 'convert' complete member researchers (Adler and Adler, 1987), starting out as an outsider and becoming a member during the research. These relationships can be complicated: Scovazzi (2016), for instance, an Italian migrant to the UK who lives on a canal boat and studied the majority white British boating communities in London, conceptualises her experience in terms of Abu-Lughod's (1991) 'halfie', someone inhabiting a liminal space between insider and outsider.

The multiplicity of identities is therefore not only a research reality, but also something the researcher should actively and explicitly reflect on and foreground in their analysis (Pini, 2004). This means not just acknowledging switching back and forth between different categories of identity markers, but also accepting that 'multiple (and potentially conflicting) positions may, necessarily, be performed simultaneously' (Thomas et al., 2019: 375). What is more, these intersecting positionalities, properties and attributes result in varying power relations, which I will discuss next.

Power and hierarchies in the research situation

The differing intersectional positionalities influence the power dynamics and the subsequent hierarchies in the field, which in turn affect the research encounter and inform the subsequent analysis (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In the field, just as in any other social setting, social relationships are organised into categories and levels according to various official or unofficial normative criteria which legitimise explicit or implicit value systems and norms, that result in control, influence and power (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). On the

UK canals, for example, boaters perceive themselves as having a priority over other canal users, such as walkers or cyclists; furthermore, there are distinct hierarchical factions amongst boaters themselves, based on their types of boats (traditional or contemporary) or purpose (working, dwelling or holidaying) (Kaaristo et al., 2020: 855).

Traditionally, the researcher has tended to possess more symbolic, cultural as well as economic capital within fieldwork settings (Chen, 2011). This includes power over finances and knowledge production (from deciding the research focus to what questions are asked and from who), while often also possessing a socially as well as economically higher status (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Justifiably, this has gained most attention in academic accounts on hierarchies and inequalities in the field. On the other hand, some theoretical and methodological attention has also been paid to 'studying up' (Nader, 1969; Priyadharshini, 2003; Ruan, 2020): research situations where power balance clearly favours the research participant. These can include the researcher experiencing the 'glass ceiling' when trying to gain access (Gusterson, 1997; Johnson, 2014) or the participants withholding information and attempting to dictate the research process, for instance, interview as well as research questions (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016; Natow, 2019).

Consideration of power (im)balance(s) in the field, however, remains incomplete if we only think about it in terms of 'up' or 'down', based on the researcher's presumed symbolic or cultural capital, often lent to them by belonging to an academic institution. In an actual, lived research situation, multiple various identity markers and their combinations should be considered, and the power dynamics are often complicated. Studies that discuss this kind of instability and volatility of power relations specifically in terms of methodology, however, are rare. Exceptions include Ganga and Scott (2006) who show how shared citizenship and nationality, instead of leading to easier access, can serve as a highlighter of the differences in socio-economic status between the researcher and the research participants; this was the case with a Northern English doctoral student from a working-class background conducting fieldwork with high-salaried Southern Britons residing in Paris. Lund et al. (2016: 284) report how in their study with indigenous female leaders, 'financial and knowledge power rested with the researchers, while the grassroots insights and information to be shared was controlled by the gatekeeper and the women leaders hence exclusion and inclusion to knowledge and resources co-existed within the project.' Similarly, Kostet (2021) shows how the power dynamics can shift significantly during the research encounter, even when studying children, who are habitually regarded as having much less power than the researcher. This highlights the importance of understanding the role of each stakeholder and their subsequent access to power in a research process to successfully create spaces of inclusion.

Power relations therefore can and do change during the research process (Anyan, 2013; Sepp, 2012). This is especially the case with interactions between relatively equal individuals – defined as 'studying sideways' by Nader (2011: 217) – where it is difficult to pinpoint the power balance due to the multiplicity of interconnected roles and positionalities. These situations, which account for a lot of contemporary data co-creation situations, are not unproblematic. In terms of gender, for instance, both Vähäsantanen and Saarinen (2013) and Pini (2005) report that male research participants sometimes attempt

to use flirting for establishing power. Female researchers on the other hand can use it for securing and conducting a successful interview, as argued by Sepp (2012: 341) who reflects on the boundaries of 'seduction' in her fieldwork. Regardless of whether the researcher studies 'up', 'down' or 'sideways', the power dynamics depend on an array of identity markers at work at the same time – and sometimes pulling in different directions. When these mundane, yet complex situations occur, an oft-used tactics to deal with them is humour.

Humour in ethnographic encounters

In social situations, humour is used for both enhancing the self as well as enhancing relationships and solidarity with other people, and these usages can be benign and tolerant but also detrimental or damaging (Billig, 2005; Martin et al., 2003). Social control and power are often exerted through teasing and joking, and conversational humour is 'a double-edged sword that both diffuses and controls conflict' in any social interaction (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997: 275). Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 195), for instance, famously defined a joking relationship as 'a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence.' He differentiates between symmetrical and asymmetrical joking relationships as depending on whether both or only one of the parties is expected or allowed to joke, determined mostly by generational seniority. Radcliffe-Brown also points out that joking relationships in Western societies are more dynamic and informal compared to the more standardised and formal ones in many traditional societies.

In situations where some are perceived as outsiders (be they foreigners, researchers, or both), humour can become a means of indirectly describing the particular social relationship (Rasmussen, 1993: 211) and of expressing and highlighting differences, while simultaneously downplaying and de-dramatising them (Giuffrè, 2015: 218, 236). Humour is therefore inextricably connected to power as it can reduce inequalities but also underline or strengthen them (Holmes, 2000: 160):

> A joke is thus a sort of mock-ostracism in which I bring up some deviation on your part and invite those who care to listen to take pleasure in your embarrassment, but then, having shown that I have the authority to at least chastise you, I pass on further and full exercise of that entitlement and welcome you back into the fold (Wolf, 2002: 336).

Therefore, researchers often use humour as tactics in order to manage or diffuse potentially problematic situations. For instance, Sampson and Thomas's (2003) fieldwork on-board of cargo ships with their masculinist strict hierarchies included frequent sexist remarks from the research participants. They describe how to 'pass the test [they] had to both register the comment, perhaps with a sardonic glance or a raised eyebrow, whilst resisting the temptation to "rise to the bait"' (Sampson and Thomas, 2003: 179). Vähäsantanen and Saarinen (2013: 501) write about an interview situation where a 25-year-old female doctoral student did not respond to a male 53-year-old research participant's proposition to go on a date (a combination of 'testing, or making an innocent

comment, or posing a humorous question – or perhaps in some way expressing real thoughts') with 'unlaughter', a non-reaction to the joke or with a display of disapproval (Billig, 2005). Instead, she engaged in 'critical accommodation' (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017: 386) by going along with this and jokingly suggested going to a café right after the interview. In this context, the researcher's response to the research participant's attempt to establish power served the purpose of making a point that personal topics belong outside of the research situation – and established her power as an interviewer (cf. Sepp, 2012). After a moment of silence, the interviewee returned to answering the interview question, completely ignoring the suggestion. This shows that an interview situation is replete with continual control and power negotiations, actively shaped by all participants (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013), often managed and negotiated by using humour (Gouin, 2004).

There is a need to pay more attention to these mundane hierarchies and power performances that are played out through humour in research situations. As follows, I will explore the usage of humour as everyday tactics, calculated actions that both the researchers and research participants employ for moving between the different roles imposed by them by the social systems (De Certeau 2005: 213). When the multiple, sometimes contradictory or conflicting roles become evident, the different parties often use humour, which can simultaneously downplay and highlight the mundane hierarchies and power relations in the flow of the research realities.

Research background and methodology: ethnography of leisure boaters on the UK canals and rivers

There is a network of over 7000 miles of inland waterways – rivers and canals – in England and Wales (Inland Waterways Association, 2021). Canals have undergone a significant transformation in their usage, from being essential transport links when they were constructed during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and early 19th centuries, to gradually becoming derelict and disused following the introduction of the railways in the 1840s. Since the 1950s, the importance of canals as a leisure and tourism resource has been increasingly recognised, with diverse uses including boating, walking, angling, running, hiking and cycling promoted as leisure activities (Kaaristo et al., 2020).

My study focused on leisure and holiday boating on the canals of Northern England. I carried out the research using ethnography, a holistic approach to data co-creation where the operational, methodological and theoretical parts of the study are interconnected and the researcher's involvement in the lives of the research participants is vital (Davies, 2012: 5; Mannay and Morgan, 2015). I collected data via participant observation combined with interviews. Between 2015 and 2018, I regularly attended the public events and open meetings of canal enthusiasts, volunteered twice a month at canal clean-up events, and boated with different boaters I met on the waterways, learning how to steer, manoeuvre and moor the narrowboats (the most common type of boat on the narrow British canals) as well as how to operate the locks. Altogether, I took 15 boat trips on different canals and on various boats (privately owned and hired), lasting from 4 hours to 4 days. I recorded information in a field diary I kept during the boating trips (as well as during other meetings

and encounters on the canal) as well as taking photos and some video recordings of the events, primarily for use as memory aids for writing the field diary.

This was accompanied by ethnographic interviews, conducted both in the immediate 'field' (on boats and near canals) as well as in other settings, chosen by the interviewees (homes, cafes or offices). These interviews did not 'involve entering the field, collecting the data, then immediately leaving' but were 'engaged, committed, involved and time-consuming' (O'Reilly, 2012: 127). The semi-structured interview schedule covered the topics of everyday routines, social life and convivialities of boating, the technical and material aspects, tempo and sensory experiences, as well as emotions related to boating and canals. I recorded interviews with 20 British boaters, 12 men and 8 women, referred to in this paper by sex (M or F), followed by a cardinal number and their approximate age. All the interviewees received a participant information sheet covering the purpose of the research and details on data usage and storage, and signed the interviewee consent forms.

Analysis: Negotiating researcher positionalities between fixity and flexibility

The researcher inhabits various roles in the field, as their 'performed approachability' (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017: 384) helps to achieve and sustain the necessary rapport. The key strategies include taking on the role of 'socially acceptable incompetent' (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 38), which means becoming a learner taught by the research participants and engaging in 'critical accommodation [which is] a strategy of silence, or going along in order to get along' (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017: 386). These are often used interchangeably for gaining access as well as maintaining it. As follows, I will discuss how these strategies, complicated by the actors' identity markers, result in particular power dynamics and how the subsequent relationships are either challenged or solidified through humour (Giuffrè, 2015).

Fixed identity performances and hierarchies

Canal boaters in the UK are a rather homogeneous group: the activity is most popular among white British males over 55 years of age (Canal and River Trust, 2018: 32–34). When commencing fieldwork, my outsider position was evident but not necessarily a disadvantage: in the research context, it is sometimes easier for women to gain access to male dominated groups than vice versa (Musante, 2015: 273). Possessing no prior knowledge about canals and no boating skills whatsoever meant entering the lower rungs of the community's relatively fixed hierarchies and power relations. This made taking the role of a learner, constantly asking questions a very natural position in the first stages of my fieldwork. As my experience grew, I learned to recognise the moments when downplaying certain factual or practical competences would be beneficial for the quality of the data.

However, boating hierarchies do not only depend on skills or knowledge: various other attributes, beyond categorising social life, order people hierarchically and sometimes

reproduce mundane, small-scale inequalities. Among the first fixed identity performances I encountered were those surrounding gender. One morning, with an intention to go through a manned lock from a canal to river, a male boater and I went to look for the lock keeper to agree on our passage. After knocking on the door of the lock keeper's cottage several times, we had almost given up, when the door was finally opened. I did not participate in the following interaction – the exchange of the information of details for our passage through the lock – any more than greeting and saying thank you. After we returned to the boat, we recounted the story of the grumpy lock keeper, who had obviously been sleeping, to our fellow boaters. One of the male boaters said, 'Certainly, Maarja had to bat her eyelashes at him' for us to be allowed through, and that this might prove useful in the future: should we need anything else I can be sent to do just that (field notes).

Over the course of the trip and to my mild discomfort, the story was re-told several times and, regardless of my initial denial, came to be presented as a funny but factual story. The field diary reflects my unease, but also my conscious choice not to contest the narrative and instead react with critical accommodation and 'humour support' (Hay, 2001): laughing and playing along with the joke to mask my slight embarrassment in order to be perceived as likeable by the group. The decision not to respond with 'un-laughter' (Billig, 2005) indicates my simultaneous agency and lack of it (Seljamaa and Siim, 2016: 6) as I chose to position myself into an asymmetrical joking relationship (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940) with the boating crew. My field notes read: 'The whole deal was a bit sexist, but it was a joke, the purpose of which was to bring attention to the fact that I am a woman and younger than the rest (perhaps this is their way of addressing this difference).'

Canal boats can be regarded as a somewhat gendered space, where gender shapes the roles, statuses, interpersonal communication dynamics, expectations and subsequent practices (Ronai et al., 2013: 6) related to specific tasks. I learned on my first day of boating that when the crew is mixed, men tend to steer the boats while women work the mostly self-operated locks. This division of labour, when talked about, is mostly done in a humorous way. 'Working the locks' includes sometimes physically quite demanding tasks of winding the lock paddles up and down and pushing the heavy lock gates open and closed all the while the man often stands in the stern (back of the boat), and the situation creates certain subversions of the traditional gender roles of men taking on the more physically demanding tasks. The reason for this is that it is preferred to have a more experienced or confident steerer in the lock in case something goes wrong, and this often tends to be the man.

Reaffirming the gender-based division of domestic labour, both sexes also use chores to both (re)create and display gender (Kroska, 2003) on the boats. Women tended to do household tasks, such as preparing meals and drinks and washing up and I often participated in these activities, as they allowed for long conversations, which are good for rapport-building. Meanwhile, men were more likely to be responsible for the technical and mechanical side of the boat, taking care of the engine, but also steering, mooring, filling the water tank, etc. Indeed, there exists a certain juxtaposition in the canal boating community in terms of boating skills and knowledge: as the female research participants of Roberts' (2019) study on canal boat dwellers report, they found that they are expected

to have less technical knowledge about their boats than men do, whereas males talked about being expected to know more than they actually did.

For the purposes of researcher approachability, that is, being perceived as safe and nonthreatening by the research participants (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017: 381), female researchers often find themselves going along with the male displays of power and dominance establishment to secure data (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013). When I started hiring boats, I discovered that all the instructions concerning steering and manoeuvring the boat during the induction were directed exclusively towards any males accompanying me (also confirmed by my female research participants). Despite having booked the boat, signed the agreement, and paid for it, I was automatically assigned the lower, unskilled role in the boaters' hierarchy, based exclusively on my gender. Yet, I also challenged it sometimes, and the implicit gender-based assumptions became explicit when I displayed my awareness of them via joking:

> [The owner of the boatyard] showed us how the boat works, how to start and switch off the engine, etc. All this was also written down on a laminated sheet of paper on the cabin table. The owner said that all necessary information was there, but we all know that men do not read the instructions because they're too proud; he said that therefore [my friend] would probably not read them which is why he would go through the induction verbally. I went along with this type of sexist joking and said that I suppose the written instructions must be meant for me then. It was very clear from the start that all of the instructions about handling the boat, the engine and everything else were directed towards [my friend] only. When he [the owner] explained those things, he only looked at [my friend] as if I was invisible. (Field notes).

When I directly asked about gender-based division of labour on the boat, the research participants would often draw parallels with driving. As such, boating mirrors the practice of males tending to drive the cars in heterosexual relationships, reinstating the 'long-standing association between masculinity and driving' (Cresswell and Uteng, 2008: 3). These somewhat rigid roles appeared to remain in place even if the lived reality seemed to suggest otherwise. A boater told me, in a serious discussion, that although there were exceptions, the gender-based labour division was the case because 'men are better at spatial awareness' (M1, 60s), which makes them better at steering. It so happened that at that exact time during the interview, our boat, steered by an inexperienced male boater, crashed into a bridge, until another boater, a woman, took the helm from him; all the while this irony went unnoticed and uncommented upon by the interviewee. When I paid attention to, or directly challenged, similar notions, the research participants often used humour to address this topic:

> Author: Someone mentioned to me that it's quite often that the women work the locks.
>
> M2, 60s: Quite right! Quite right!
>
> Author: Why is that?

M2, 60s: I have no idea. I think ... As you say: why? Come, get about there, get your back and shoulder into it! I really don't know. Whether because in that particular group maybe the woman is used to the man driving, perhaps that could be it. Maybe she just wants to get away from him and have five minutes peace and quiet. [Both laughing.]

Just as gender, my foreignness was negotiated through highlighting my obvious difference from other boaters and canal enthusiasts (that manifests itself in my spoken English) through joking about it. A couple of boaters told me once that it is probably not politically correct to call me a foreigner and suggested 'alien' (field notes) instead, followed by some space-themed jokes. When going through a tunnel with a group of boaters, the navigation authority representative asked how many people were on the boat as crew, the captain of the boat replied, 'four crew plus one Estonian immigrant hidden away' (field notes). One boater painstakingly searched for errors in my spoken English, and, albeit in a friendly and humorous manner, corrected me whenever I made a mistake. The purpose of this was to help me learn, which I appreciated, yet the constant highlighting of my foreignness made me feel slightly self-conscious at times. One evening, when putting leftover food to fridge, a boater turned to me, showed me a roll of tin foil, and asked – without joking – 'Do you have this in Estonia?' (field notes). The light conversational question, asked with no intent to insult, nonetheless served as a reminder that regardless of my academic credentials, because of my origin I was perceived as someone potentially not familiar with a simple kitchen item and functioned as a mundane reminder of my position as a 'new migrant' from a post-socialist country who tend to occupy more marginal positions in British society (Fletcher, 2014: 246). Nevertheless, I too would sometimes jokingly bring up my being foreign as an excuse for my initial lack of boating skills, by pointing out that there are very few canals in Estonia.

The boaters, mostly White British males over the age of 60, could also have been using humour to address my obvious difference (female Eastern European in her 30s when conducting this research) from the rest of the group, which might have seemed odd to some onlookers. Bringing my Otherness to momentary attention via joking was one of the key tactics to stabilise the situation but sometimes also reinforce the existing hierarchies in the face of possible inversions. It would also allow to better navigate the unfamiliar social situation and to see whether I went along with a particular joke: in the rare cases when I responded with unlaughter (Billig, 2005), anything said could quickly be taken back, labelled as 'just a joke'.

I would sometimes also challenge the preconceived notions, for instance those related to boat handling, by offering to steer the boats through the locks or for longer stretches on the canal. I wanted to be of help, but also demonstrate that after some time on the canals I, too, had become a boater with some of the necessary skills. My taking the initiative, however, was especially in the beginning of the fieldwork mostly related to conducting research: in similar circumstances in my everyday life, I most likely would have unreflexively slipped into the roles offered to me in these new situations, instead of being proactive. For instance, being a non-driver and, according to my own self-image, not technically minded, I would not have taken an active role in learning to operate the boat beyond occasional supervised steering if not for the research. Therefore, some of the

hierarchies I encountered in the field had as much to do with my own preconceived ideas about my capabilities, and less so with the research participants' perceptions of me based on my gender or any other attributes.

The lived experience of the fieldwork situation can enable, even force, the researcher to take on the roles that diverge from the established norms and hierarchies and extend the limits of their performances (cf. Lumsden, 2009). The personal journey of a researcher can therefore include not just one from the margins of a community to an acceptance and (partial) membership, but also one of self-discovery and self-realisation (Coffey, 1999: 116–117). It is in fluid situations like this that the more flexible identity performances take place in the field, sometimes destabilising the established hierarchies and power relations; I will turn to these next.

Flexible identity performances and hierarchies

Hierarchical power relations are not necessarily created by individual differences as such, but by their specific interplays in particular research situations. For instance, while the boaters seemed to agree with an existence of certain gender-based division of labour on the canal as discussed above, they also displayed 'flexibility of gender role cognition' (Cobb et al., 2009: 84). This was expressed in assertions that there is either no need for a gendered division of labour on the boat; that it is not always the case; or in pointing out that women working the locks does not necessarily mean that it is simpler task than driving the boat through them:

> I know what you mean by lots of men on the back end and women sitting and looking as if they don't do any actions on the boat. I suppose they do, when it comes to it, but I think, to be truthful, some of the locks can be more challenging than steering (F1, 60s).

These notions, when translated into gender performances through practices, can be flexibly adjusted according to the situation. I was once steering a boat and a young male boater offered to make me a cup of tea. This somewhat flexible approach to the gender-based roles concerning the chores was immediately met with the reinforcement of a more fixed hierarchy: another, middle-aged male boater noted that being a woman, it should be I making the tea; however, since I had been steering the boat for the past hour, I deserved having my tea made for me. The exchange was humorous and taken as such by all the parties including the younger boater, who proceeded to make the hot beverage. Indeed, playful banter is one of the key tactics used as a means of addressing topics such as social differences, gender, and power disparities as it can function as a means of 'almost flattening social and gender differences while at the same time reiterating them' (Giuffrè, 2015: 221). The older boater's comment highlighted the expected gender roles for a moment but was simultaneously diffused by being presented as a joke, after which everything proceeded according to the specific situation at hand (cf. Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013: 508). When the two power vectors met, the hierarchies stemming from boating practice took precedence over the gender-based ones. I had taken on a 'male' task

by having been responsible for the boat and established my authority in terms of my steering skills and I therefore deserved to have the tea prepared and brought to me.

The understandings about masculine and feminine roles on the canal, coupled with my own preconceived ideas about my skills and abilities, were the reason I hesitated before building up the courage to take part in the power tools training held by a volunteer group for installing new mooring rings along the canals. I and another female volunteer (who had followed my lead after admitting to similar hesitations) subsequently navigated the heavily gendered space of operating the power tools, which was filled with gendered discourse. My flexible approach to, and performance of the gender roles, was met by certain re-rigidisation performed via joking. After I had successfully completed drilling a hole in concrete and was filling it with a sealant gun so that the ring could be installed, one of the instructors quipped, encouragingly, 'See, it's just like decorating a cake!' (field notes).

Similarly, my nationality would not go unnoticed before and after Britain's vote on leaving the European Union in 2016 and the subsequent discussions on Brexit. Right after the vote, several boaters came to hug me and some even apologised for the result, wanting to make sure that I was aware of their position on the issue. When I mentioned I was going to see *Twelfth Night* at a theatre that night, one of them told me, 'Shakespeare wrote all those plays set in Italy and Denmark and Greece and other places in Europe. Is it not ironic how in the same year we commemorated 400 years from his death this country voted for Brexit. I wonder what he would have thought about this Brexit and Trump nonsense and what plays he would have written about it' (field notes). By pointing out many continental European settings of the famous playwright's plays to me as an EU citizen, he highlighted the flexibility of the national identities and played down our perceived differences, which had been brought to a spotlight by the vote, using humour as 'an exercise in affirming the bonds of community between us' (Wolf, 2002: 331).

I – incorrectly – assumed that most would share a similar position and had a long and heated discussion with one canal enthusiast, which, even though we remained civil, was on the verge of becoming a full-blown argument, bringing the complexity of my own position clearly to the foreground. On the one hand, I felt that as a group member (boater and a volunteer) I was entitled to sharing my positions, opinions and feelings on the issue that so clearly affects my life. On the other hand, however, as a researcher I wanted to maintain a good working relationship with the research participant. I drew the conversation to end by some light-hearted joking about us wasting time discussing politics, time we could have used for talking about canals instead.

When similar issues came up again, I made a choice to self-regulate my verbal and non-verbal responses, regardless of my actual feelings (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017) which sometimes required considerable emotional labour (Lumsden, 2009: 501–502). Joking remained one of the go-to tactics for both the research participants and I to deal with discussing the subject. The viability of longer-term plans were sometimes questioned since I could be 'deported', and a topic raised whether I would be 'allowed back to the country' (field notes) when I went on holidays – and I would play along with and sometimes also initiate these light exchanges. My presence in the group as an EU citizen who had recently moved to the UK was a potential reminder of the issue both for

those who had voted for Brexit (perhaps also reasoning in terms of immigration as many did (Clarke et al., 2017)) as well as for those who had voted against it. When Brexit would come up in conversations, I mostly chose not to engage in direct confrontations between the research participants that would now and then take place in my presence – just as the British society in a whole, the boaters too had become increasingly polarised on the issue. Instead, as a form of self-care as well as tactics for maintaining good relations with all the group members, I discussed Brexit only with those boaters who I knew shared my views. In other situations, I mostly took on a role of an amused observer when the conflicting political views played out in front of me and would only share my personal opinions when asked directly (in which case I was honest about them.)

When different power vectors with their accompanying hierarchies align and intersect on the field, they create a space for negotiating the research relationships. In addition to being a foreigner, I negotiated the roles of an academic, a member of the group of boaters or volunteers, a woman, and a younger person. All this created unstable hierarchies where the dynamics of power would shift from one person to another, depending on a particular situation, and therefore contributed towards rebalancing the power dynamics, which in research situations so often favours the researcher (Chen, 2011).

Conclusion: The role of humour in negotiating the (in)stability of hierarchies in the field

Identities of both the researcher and research participants in the field are inexorably intertwined and can be 'constructed, reproduced, established, mediated, changed or challenged over the fieldwork process' (Coffey, 1999: 4). Qualitative data co-creation is a continuous process where various roles are in a constant interplay of fixity and flexibility, stability and instability. One of the important tactics of interpersonal communication, used as a means to facilitate and negotiate these relationships, is humour. I concur with Giuffrè (2015: 215) who considers it 'extremely important that laughter, humour and irony be included as key elements in sharing the emotions that are part of ethnographic practice.' Paying attention to how humour is used as tactics to negotiate various power relations, hierarchies and mundane inequalities on the field facilitates better relationships and easier access, allows for diffusing some potential conflicts, and therefore results in co-production of richer qualitative data.

The researcher negotiates various hierarchies and power dynamics that emerge or become visible during the fieldwork, and the roles (taken or assigned) in this process can be placed within a continuum of certain flexibility and rigidity. As in many social situations, humour helps to facilitate dialogue, reduce tensions, bind people together and sometimes places them into joking relationships where parties tease each other without anyone taking offence (Lund, 2015; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). However, joking can also reinforce certain roles, behaviours, stereotypes (Giuffrè, 2015) or power relationships (Holmes, 2000). It therefore plays a dual role as it introduces both stability and instability to the hierarchies in the field: it simultaneously strengthens various hierarchies and power relations but also helps to mitigate, lessen and sometimes challenge them.

In some instances, the usage of humour in both relatively fixed and flexible identity performances contributes towards strengthening and stabilising hierarchies in the research situation. Gender roles can be sometimes brought to the centre of attention when someone engages in practices that are non-conforming. Indeed, gender emerges as one of the key factors of the development of mundane power dynamics (Babiracki, 2008; Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016). Similarly, both fixed and flexible identity performances related to my migration status and country of origin could be downplayed or, on the contrary, made prominent, but they would often be negotiated through humour, which helps to 'manage the liminality of the Other' (Giuffrè, 2015: 236).

Apprehending both the fixed as well as flexible identities through humour can also result in destabilising hierarchies – for both shorter and longer periods. Sometimes the research participants would assume and assign to me certain roles, yet (often mediated by humour on both sides) would happily adjust to any changes in these preconfigured roles, depending upon the situation. These roles would also change during the study as my position in the boaters' hierarchy shifted based on certain attributes, such as boating skills. Changes in the power dynamics can be fleeting too – the identities are flexed momentarily as the situation requires, after which they can revert to how they were before. On the other hand, however, they can also have a more lasting effect on both the researcher as well as the research participant, influencing each other in a constant interplay. For instance, over time, I became a co-participant in some running jokes. Whilst always good-natured, some of these were nevertheless made at the expense of other group members. As a novice, I had mostly been on the receiving end of these jokes (asymmetrical joking); however, as time passed and my position in the group's hierarchy changed, several of these joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940) also became symmetrical.

The fieldworker is a co-producer of research situations which they then study, all the while striving to successfully practice being an active, interested, engaged and empathic researcher. Using joking and humour for critical accommodation can facilitate better rapport-building and access to both formal and informal social spaces, which facilitates data co-creation. Some identity performances I discussed in this paper partially came about due to my presence in the field, constantly asking to perform certain activities and practices or to have them explained to me. This research, therefore, has encouraged me to push, question, and destabilise my own personal boundaries and preconceived ideas about my skills, gender, or migration status, and as such has facilitated the self-understanding and personal development of myself, both as a researcher and as an individual (cf. Anderson and Austin, 2012). The research situation is a fluid and dynamic one, and so are the hierarchies and power relations, which are re-stabilised and destabilised, depending on how the different actors respond in each given moment. As I have shown in this paper, humour is one of the key tools that is used by both the researchers and research participants to address, challenge but also maintain these (in)stabilities.

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