



When Methods Meet: Gender sensitive methods

Katarzyna Kosmala and Anna Sznajder (both University of the West of Scotland), in conversation, August 2016.

In this seventeen-minute video Katarzyna Kosmala and Anna Sznajder discuss different aspects of gender sensitive methods. They refer to research that they have done with professional artists, cultural producers and with rural artisans – lacemakers to make the point that researchers need to be mindful of how some aspects of people’s lives and their places are more readily spoken and written about than others (such as discrimination and exploitation). As a result, it is important that the research methods used are capable of capturing phenomena that are missed by more conventional approaches, including silences and elements that are left invisible, made opaque or even erased using ordinary observation or that are difficult to access, such as bodily experiences and power dynamics within the field. These challenges can be met through researchers working in partnership with research participants to get a fuller sense of the latter’s perspective and engage through the stories ‘behind’ their situations. Sensitivity to things that are unspoken or left invisible reveal phenomena such as the gendered nature of space, and this highlights the importance of considering the researcher’s positionality and power of discourse in the research process and the academic fields from the outset.

Transcript of conversation:

KK: I thought it would be really nice if we just first maybe introduced our own paradigms.

So in terms of the visual analysis which I have developed, which has really taken a deconstructive turn, with particular sensitivity to gender, has a kind of long gestation period. And the tiers of which are actually discussed and articulated in the volume which I have edited and contributed to which is called *Sexing the Border: Gender, Art, and New Media in Central and Eastern Europe*.

So what the book really does is looking at the encounters between the arts, media and technologies, - the digital and pre-digital technologies. And looking at how they have implicated on the articulation and representation of gender, in particular in post-Socialist spaces of Central and Eastern Europe which the book focuses on. And in addition, it is really looking at taking into consideration the current debates on gender, you know in European research as it is of today.

So that is the kind of frame of visual analysis with deconstructive term comes from my point of view. The kind of typical traditional tropes which I will be using, I will be using notes, I will be using the recording of the voices, of the interviews, of the formal chat and the informal chat. I will be obviously spending hours analysing in silence the artworks, and I will be looking at what has been written about the artist. I will be looking at what has not been written about the artist. I will be obviously looking at the exhibition space and the spaces of disseminations. I will be talking to the public, I will be talking to other critics. In terms of their approach and ethnographies it is quite a traditional way of looking at it. But in addition there will be hours of silent work in which it is myself and the artworks in a silent space of which I will have to have that time and immersion which perhaps is a bit different from the typical ethnographic approach as I see it.

AS: My ethnographic approach is underpinned by feminist epistemology which means for my research that I am giving a space for my participants to elaborate more on their views and also I allow them to select that which can be used by me. So I was trying to build positive relationships which can be also long lasting and in the future lead towards some projects together.

KK: This kind of idea of co-producing the results and co-producing the research, I mean what the key challenges would you say?

AS: Well as an ethnographer we need to always also keep the balance, because we at the end of the day don't want to go out from the field with lots of data, without any meaning. So we are supporting our participants which is of course part of this gender methodology, we are trying to be sensitive about. But we need to be aware that we are there for collecting data, the challenges also that we can at some point merge with our participants.

KK: How do you then allow yourself to critically distance but at the same time, sensitively approach the subject and analyse the data?

AS: Well a sensitive approach in my case is to become lace-maker myself, and participating in lace-making activities in events which lace-makers organised. So basically it was taking their role, to understand their practices and also to have the same subject to talk about. Do not forget my participants; some of them were very 'advanced' in age, so we didn't have much in common. However this practice makes us work together and we could exchange our views. I could take their perspective and understand what they are doing more.

KK: And can you elaborate more about the bodily experiences, I mean the idea of frustration if something doesn't work and how did you deal with it, and how did it for instance help you to understand the monotony of making laces and the hours of this type of labour? And how it is underpaid and the issues you have written about?

AS: The first day of my lace-making practice was a day of tears because I didn't realise it was so hard. It was literally very hard. And I have seen a woman working long hours, so when I felt this, the pain in my back then I understood you know how it is exhausting work. It can be. They were also describing how it was in the past, where there was no light, no

electricity, no heating and they were making laces so I could even more feel that, especially in their houses, which in the rural areas they can sometimes be cold.

So a very interesting experience, whole experience, I would say total experience of making laces.

KK: And I think this type of experience, you come across and the critical analysis of the how gender spaces there are in terms of the idea of exploitation to labour. And obviously the kind of under value of the skill and the craftsmanship, can you tell us a bit more about what are the benefits you know, coming out on the other side of your kind of research findings?

And what else is happening in terms of impact of your research?

AS: Well we can see really how gender inequalities are constructed through this approach. If we are really in the field then it is really helpful analysis. We see multiple relations they are involved in with the local shops, with the local organisations, then with the clients, then with the customers, among each other, with me as a researcher as well. So it is really beneficial to be inside this environment. Make laces together and then understand really what is this all about.

KK: What organisations you can think about - different players taking part in the whole kind of creative economy of the place? Can you tell us a bit more about the kind of dynamics of how gendered spaces they were in terms of organisational structures?

AS: Well if I would be just observing my lace-makers and lace-making environment, I would just probably see the cultural institutions, some cooperatives and some people who are making laces and selling in a local lace-making shop. But because I participated, I have discovered also some stories behind this old simple structure and relationships between men and women, between each other. Some hierarchies which are constructed by organisations, some hierarchies which are constructed by the shop but also by women because they are neighbours with each other so they are also competing if they see anyone who wants to buy laces.

So this is very interesting, and I think it was possible because I was within this community for a longer period of time really working with them. So I collected data from a rural field.

But you work with professional artists, so what are the challenges in case of this kind of work?

KK: I don't see the challenges being any different from working with the artisans as in your case. I think the experience of creating exhibitions and working with artists on a day to day basis, you know, from getting frustrated together with setting up an exhibition, to perhaps having a drink in the café afterwards. So all of that it breaks certain boundaries about perhaps the relationships and the relationality between myself and the subject of the research. And I need to arrive and create that space which will allow me to create a safe distance but enough proximity and familiarity with an artist to be comfortable, to write about their work and about them.

There will be time, maybe not immediately after the text is written and assimilated, but at some point when I go back to the artist, I want to sit down with them and say look let's have a look at that together, what do you think?

In terms of the kind of analysis of those data, like if I for instance think about much more aesthetic engagement with the artwork and the analysis of the representation in that frame, I also need to engage the intention so in a way just by looking at the piece of analysing it from

a distance, is not sufficient, you know I need to engage my whole body in analysis, I have to really use the very multi-sensual analysis of approaching this particular subject they have investigated and the way they have presented it.

AS: About their creative autonomy, in your research you wrote a lot about this, how you see gender sensitive methods in this kind of subject?

KK: First of all gender is theorised as a construction, so it's a construction, it's a result of various technological structures, a result of values, discourses. And discourses are multiple, epistemological discourses, organisational discourses, media discourses, the kind of the whole visual culture discourse. Epistemological frame as well as institutional discourse. And gender is also linked to the performance of gender in every day, so that is kind of the way I frame the gender in my research.

So coming back to the idea of autonomy, especially the kind of creative autonomy, we could perhaps the best illustrate it through the example of cultural producers, what type of work they try to commission and distribute and engage with the public. In my view - what does it really create? It creates a particular type of epistemology of working. What I see through interviewing them and through perhaps seeing the project they realise and looking at the autobiographies through the European diaspora, is really that they have distanced themselves from the place of origin if you like, I mean the construction of the place of origin. But at the same time they haven't completely assimilated with the new place of origin where they relocate. But what really happens is this kind of idea of a third value, when you create some kind of hybrid way of working when you actually draw on both but not merging either. And I think it gives a particularly rich critical way of dealing with issues like gender, and especially gender sensitive way of working which in my view cannot be really reached by any other means, by this idea of cultural clash which a person has to experience in order to kind of put yourself into the process of commissioning the research if you like.

So we kind of touched base quite deeply on the theme of creative autonomy which is a very difficult area of research, but you also talk about other cultural entrepreneurs, who actually use their creative autonomy in a different way. Can you tell us about that?

AS: Well there are some women who are trying to be entrepreneurs; it is difficult but not impossible in the local community. First they need to find their own space, usually it is their house, and some ideas for example are tourism on farms with lace-making workshops, so they are inviting outsiders, they are hosting them, they are giving training. So this is also another type of gendered space because mostly participants of these workshops are women and this is a really nice atmosphere. I was lucky to participate in this kind of workshop as well as a participant observer. So you can say that they are breaking somehow gender stereotypes, how the rural women should be perceived, how she should work, where is her place and they are showing that there are possibilities of actually being visible and earning on that as well.

KK: That is really interesting by this example you are also actually very well demonstrated this idea of gender as a collective - as powerful construction through generation and how it kind of suppresses certain kind of individual initiatives of going beyond that kind of traditional way of understanding construction of what is womanhood in Bobowa. And that is very powerful this idea of the collective and individual, and the tensions within them and how they can kind of manifest themselves through the labour.

AS: There are definitely identities suppressed, you can observe them when you are doing participant observation, all the struggles which appears through the words, through the

behaviour, of how they are really struggling to be with a collective because they are part of the group, part of their own community but also to do something else and become visible and also from the economic issue.

KK: And I would say that really touches very much on this idea of invisible, visible/invisible, which if we talk about gender sensitive methods and the benefits of applying those types of methods, obviously they are attending to the invisible and making invisible visible is very, very powerful, it's the outcome of that type of research.

AS: Yes, it was very nicely analysed by some Australian researchers, Barbara Pini who was doing her research on rural farmers, women farmers and she investigated hierarchies, inequalities created by organisation and how these identities were resistant or suppressed by structures. But what is more important to say is that if we take gender perspective, we put our subject in the centre, we are not able to ignore their voices. We are not able to just think about it like data, another data which we are using to write a thesis or a paper about. But we are exchanging our experience with the subject and subject with us, our respondent, our artist or artisan. It is a lot of benefits because you can understand multiple levels of how the community works, but also relations, organisation, and dependencies between our research participants, what is visible or invisible, so this is why it is useful. In particular because it let us to be really in-depth into the community, in-depth with our participants rather than just be outsiders, still outsiders.

KK: I think also if I really come back to myself and this is where you talk very interestingly about this positionality in research and the importance of reflexivity in being able to understand your position as a researcher in the field and in relation to the subject of the study, and participants with which you build relationships over time, and how important it is to allow for this space of co-production. I would also add if we really are to kind of apply and give a bit more attention to visual analysis, it's a deconstruction, it would give us much more critical power, explanatory power in looking at how the gender spaces really are and how discrimination really operates, not only in the field in which we are studying and not only in the relationship to ourselves and the subject of the study, but also in research itself. The language of research, the academic fields within which we subscribe ourselves: How gendered they are and how limited in a way and how established they are and what sort of power they channel?

So the limitation and awareness of limitation of that language, is very enriching for researchers, especially embarking on the project to being able to say hang on, okay, this is where I come from, this is where I am situated in: What am I, and how it makes me as a subject of that research? And how will that determine the way I am going to go to that field and talk to those people and then write about it? I think this is the most powerful awareness which one can have, and not in the final year, or just about submitting the thesis and preparing for viva, but in the very first day, with the meetings with the supervisory team. The first days of going to the library, this idea of what type of disciplinary power, where do I sit, where do I situate myself, my research? Who are the people I work with, what type of language they speak, and how gendered, how discriminatory, where are the power relations? I think that would be my golden thread in terms of the particular benefits of using this type of approach.

AS: So we recommend them, gender sensitive methods!

KK: Yes definitely, yes,

Contributors

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Anna Sznajder has recently graduated with PhD from the School of Media, Culture and Society, University of the West of Scotland. She is lecturer in Bexley Learning Centre in England.

References and further reading: The following are recent contributions to the discussion of the methods, and they all contain bibliographies that provide suggestions for further reading.

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A. Sznajder, *Women, bobbin lace histories and the formation of lacemaking heritage in Bobowa, Southern Poland. An ethnographic case study*, (2014) unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of the West of Scotland

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Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

1. Think of three ways in which representations of gender contain 'silences', or things that do not get spoken about in everyday conversation. Why is it that these are not spoken about?
2. What does a researcher need to do in order to break these silences and get people to talk about them?

3. How difficult do you think it would be to find out what it is like to be an artisan – lace-maker?
4. How do we get to know an artist and their art?
5. What sorts of responses are called for from a researcher experiencing a ‘cultural clash’?
6. Why is the issue of the power dynamics operating in the research process so important? In what senses is a researcher privileged?
7. How does co-production of research affect the researcher’s voice? How do you feel about research participants ‘selecting’ the material to be analysed and written up in a study?
8. How can visibility and invisibility in the research be defined from the perspective of the researcher and the research subject?