Chapter 5
The Power of a Multi-layered Identity in Central Asian Research

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Abstract Conducting research in the Central Asian context is complex due to the competing historical, cultural, and linguistic narratives of the past(s) and present(s). In this essay, I, as a female Kazakh scholar, discuss how various aspects of my multi-layered positionality (e.g., gender, social status, motherhood, and institutional affiliation) shape my research in/on Central Asia. While critically reflecting on my insider versus outsider position, I also touch on my positionality as a single mother of three underaged children and how this influences the way I experience fieldwork.

Keywords Central Asia · Decoloniality · Local voice · Female scholar · Motherhood

Introduction

In recent decades, reflexivity as a methodological tool to acknowledge a researcher's positionality has become an important aspect of qualitative research, especially from critical, feminist, post-structural, and postmodern perspectives (Bilgen et al., 2021). Understanding one's positionality is crucial to recognize how it influences the research process, data collection, and interpretation of findings (Dall'Agnola, 2023). As noted by Chilisa (2012), failure to acknowledge and reflect on positionality can result in a biased or incomplete understanding of the research topic and its context.

Various publications have highlighted the difficulties associated with cultural differences when conducting research in non-western contexts, including Central Asia, especially when it comes to the dilemmas and challenges that are context specific (Jonbekova, 2020; Whitsel & Merrill, 2021). In communicating the challenges associated with doing fieldwork in the Central Asian context, much elaboration comes from international scholars. The issue of positionality is also distinct in the discourse of peers who come from outside.

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In this essay, I reflect on my positionality as a female Kazakh scholar living and doing research in the context of Central Asia. Along with reflecting on my background and research experience as an early-career female researcher in the Central Asian context, I will follow decolonial thinking to question issues of power within my own positionality and representation as a local scholar. As argued by Bilgen et al. (2021, 520), "reflexivity in research processes can serve as a tool to dismantle embedded power hierarchies." My positionality is significantly influenced by my recent endeavors of questioning my own positionality as a western-educated local researcher from a traditional Kazakh family who was raised in a post-Soviet rural area in Kazakhstan. These constructs within my being clash with each other at times. While within the inner family, traditional views prevail, in my research practice, I am cautious of which values I am rooting into the knowledge I am producing. My traditionalism in thinking is also influenced by religious beliefs and culture in the family and larger society.

For that purpose, I first start with reflections on my Ph.D. journey in a UK university as a governmental scholarship holder, before continuing to discuss my postdoctoral experience at an international institution in Kazakhstan. After contemplating the issue of insider and outsider positionality in doing research in Central Asia, the essay ends with a reflection on another critical aspect of my positionality, namely, my identity as a single mother.

A Multi-layered Identity

My positionality as a social science researcher in the Central Asian context is embedded in my age, gender, language, social role, institutional affiliation, and religion. I found being aware of and navigating these multiple identities is crucial in the field. This awareness of the multiple layers of my identity did not occur straightforwardly to me. My journey began when I started my Ph.D., overwhelmed with the technical concerns of writing a thesis and engaging in only limited reflexive activity, to now as a postdoctoral researcher, where every piece written and read is accompanied by self-reflecting questions and analysis. My orientation toward reflexivity and positionality has largely been influenced by the latest project I am involved in, one which looks into co-creating culturally relevant social science research ethics in Central Asia.

Within the country context, I found that one explicit aspect of power in fieldwork is connected to my institutional affiliation. Once as a Bolashak scholarship holder while doing my doctoral field research and later as a postdoc at Nazarbayev University, I observed how both gatekeepers and participants would show respect toward me, accept and trust in me as a representative of an advanced education system. When coming from London to collect interview data, my role as a young researcher would be emphasized by gatekeepers as "international," with specific credit given to my Bolashak awardee status. Affiliation with Bolashak and Nazarbayev University is strongly guided by the policy discourse of benchmarking Western standards, which

impacts the way representatives of these systems are perceived. This might be specific to the academic environment in Kazakhstan, where all my fieldwork happened.

I had an impression from unofficial conversations with respondents and gate-keepers in Kazakhstan that it is prestigious and a privilege to be affiliated with these systems. These "prestigious" systems are perceived as "difficult to access" and acquaintance with me was seen as an advantage. There were times when people would ask me how to get employed or access these entities. In these cases, being open and straightforward about my role and status as a researcher helped me to manage and navigate people's expectations of me. This can be tough at times, as research participants were expecting something back as a reward for their involvement in my research. Despite my prestigious affiliations, my access to people, who were predominantly "men in power," was not that straightforward.

Central Asian local researchers have extensively covered in their reflexive writings the challenges associated with accessing representatives in power. Janenova (2019) highlights raising concerns over various research problems such as gaining access to governmental officials, conducting interviews and focus groups, and important ethical and safety aspects of being in the position of a local researcher. My experience with governmental officials is related to gaining access to and being constrained or reluctant to speak up. In my experience as a Ph.D. student doing fieldwork in Kazakhstan, I was ignored and had interview requests rejected on many occasions by "people in power" as Thibault (2021, 4) puts it. I was sent away by the representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science who would agree to talk to me when I contacted them, and then at the agreed upon time would excuse themselves with a busy schedule or a "hectic day." After trying to gain access to the site for two months, I decided to send an official request as I knew that those sent via official channels could not be ignored and the Ministry would have to send me a reply, whether the reply they would send would be informative enough was another concern. But I hoped to at least get some response and planned to treat it as data, knowing that very often, you get a non-committal reply from officials.

In contrast, on another occasion, I observed how being affiliated with a Western institution helped ease access to participants, especially when participants were high-level officials. Once participants were given the credentials of the internationally recognized institution and foreign professor-level researcher whom I was assisting, they would talk to me and agree to spare their time for an interview.

On the same field trip for my doctoral research, I was concerned about the way official education policymakers whom I managed to meet would question the choice of the Kazakhstani education context and qualitative methodology for my doctoral research. According to them, as a Ph.D. student studying abroad on the Bolashak scholarship, I should have selected other contexts to learn "best practices" and then implemented them in Kazakhstan. Since quantitative methodology is a traditional research methodology established since the Soviet period, I appreciated that they were coming from their policymaker position and long-standing form of inquiry accepted in the local science system. But, as an enthusiastic young researcher who was motivated to explore local issues, I felt discouraged.

At the same time, as has been discussed by many local researchers (e.g., see Turlubekova, 2023), there were challenges that I faced in the field as a local researcher in contrast with foreign/international researchers, even those more junior. While age is another particular aspect of Central Asian culture, it is quite specifically experienced when intersected with gender. In some circumstances, my research abilities as a young female researcher were questioned or devalued. On one occasion, a male top manager, instead of answering my questions, challenged the validity of my questions: "Is this a question?" "What kind of question is this?" In that situation, I felt mistreated as a little, stupid girl who had no rights or enough competency to approach the person in power. Such experiences added more frustration and decreased my confidence as a Ph.D. student. For someone who is just paving her way in the competitive field of academia and for whom doing research was challenging at times, such an experience did not add any encouragement but affected my professional self-esteem. For some time, I had the uncomfortable feeling of hesitation to approach positional leaders. Now, I regret that I chose this group as my participants to the extent that, in my teaching, I tell my students to think carefully about who their participants are for their research.

Being an Insider and Outsider

Discussions on the insider/outsider stance have proven to be complex. Merriam et al. (2001, 1) state the fluidity of the boundaries of the two states, arguing for "the reconstruing of insider /outsider status in terms of one's positionality vis-à-vis race, class, gender, culture and other." Similarly, I often find myself feeling both an insider and an outsider, a so-called "in-betweener" (Milligan, 2016, 248) while conducting research in my country and the region.

The fluidity or at times, complexity, of my insider/outsider stance has been very distinctly expressed and shaped within the Central Asian Research Ethics (CARE)[1] project I have been part of for the two years since 2021. As part of this large research project, we, the research team, are being challenged by our established worldviews as researchers. While I came into the project with strong Eurocentric values on how to do research due to my educational background, over the course of the project I started questioning my own stance and axiology. Keeping in mind that Central Asian research is influenced by multi-layered colonialism, meaning Western academic colonialism and Russian imperialism (Chankseliani, 2017), I draw a lot from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021, xiii) decolonization framework to "decolonize our minds, our discourses, our understandings, our practices, and our institutions" and to challenge myself as a researcher from Central Asia educated and working in a West-affiliated higher education institution. I also found Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that "decolonization… is about centering our concerns and world views and then

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[1] For more details about the project, please consult the following website: https://m.facebook.com/CentralAsianResearchEthics/?wtsid=rdr_0bsJ9gCibA05kjGVG.

coming to know theory and research from our own perspective and for our own purposes" (2021, 43) was helpful in reflecting on the research practices that I learned from the Western education system but apply in the local context.

Within this project, where I interact with participants from the three Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, my insider/outsider stances are questioned and reflexed upon very often. This is transforming my thinking and the way I see my own research practice. In a sense, I observe and acknowledge that these dynamics and the complexity of insider/outsider positionality are powerful every time we, as a team, collectively make sense of the data. On the one hand, I am a Central Asian and I am an insider in comparison with my non-Central Asian colleagues. On the other hand, I am an outsider to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as I am not from there. For example, while initially, I would perceive the Central Asian region as homogeneous owing to the shared regional cultural background, over the course of qualitative interviews, I realized that all three countries are different despite their shared Soviet legacy.

The advantage of being an insider is that it is reported to provide relatively easy access to the field sites and people due to knowledge of how the system works on the ground and/or local networks and connections the researcher has. A common Kazakh language and cultural aspects are additional benefits that I found helpful in gaining access to research sites and people in Kazakhstan. I was surprised by the openness and trust of the university administration and faculty members who I interviewed for my research. Due to the overwhelming political context and support for the phenomenon I studied, I expected that respondents might choose to be rather constrained in talking openly. But to my surprise, while cautious at the beginning, during the course of the interviews, more and more open and critical comments were explicitly shared with me. I believe one very decisive factor of such experience is grounded in the importance of acknowledging and respecting the "insider" relationship between myself and my research participants.

As a novice researcher engaged in my very first fieldwork, I was convinced of the privilege of my "insiderness." I found that this stance is amplified when intersected by language and ethnicity. For example, in the regions where people are predominantly Kazakh speakers, I was accepted as "one of us," who can understand by default the reality that underlies their responses. However, such ease comes with its own pressures as this insiderness subjugates objectivity and creates bias and needless assumptions instead of further probing to clarify what meaning the respondents place on their responses. For example, as a local researcher, oftentimes, I find myself not noticing or perhaps undermining some practices that are embedded within the culture that I grew up in and which feel "normal." However, my Western education background and interaction with international scholars in my academic career influence my thinking and I see how my positionality changes, and I question such issues as unethical. As a local, I understand the practices that are common, but from a Western perspective, they might be considered an issue creating a conflict inside.

For instance, writings of international female scholars who do fieldwork in Central Asia often highlight ethical dilemmas specific to the region that they found challenging to deal with due to the lack of cultural and contextual experience. Being an

insider, in contrast, is helpful in navigating such ethical issues in the field. On the other side of the coin, as a local to the culture, you may overlook or ignore these issues. For example, Thibault (2021), as an outsider female researcher, discusses the tension of unwanted attention from Central Asian males while doing fieldwork in Tajikistan. In her fieldwork notes, she talks about frequent questioning of her marital status. Indeed, as discussed by foreign female scholars in the Central Asian context, being married and having kids is often welcomed by the wider Central Asian society (Peshkova, 2014; Skriptaite, 2023). Once Central Asians know your marital status, you are kind of "approved." From my own local experience, such questioning seems to be directed particularly at females, though male researchers might also get questions about their relationship status.

On Single Motherhood and Academia

As a single mother scholar, the boundaries between my roles as a parent and academic are often blurred (CohenMiller & Izekenova, 2022). The challenges of being an involved and present mother while also trying to catch up professionally as an emerging scholar in a competitive academic field can be daunting. These challenges can sometimes be further complicated by the cultural context in Central Asia encountered while conducting fieldwork. As a single mother, this can be especially challenging, as I must balance the demands of my research with the needs of my children. In the Central Asian context, with its strong emphasis on family values, being a single mother can be seen as a departure from traditional family structures and may be met with scepticism or disapproval by some members of the community. This scepticism can make it even more challenging to balance the demands of family and research, as there may be additional expectations and obligations placed on me as a mother. This can be particularly demanding while doing fieldwork which requires me to be away from home and my children for long periods of time.

When conducting one of my projects during COVID-19, and later when Zoom became part of our lives, like other mothers before me (Skriptaite, 2023), one of the challenges I experienced was from my underage children who, from time-to-time, would interrupt me with their different needs while conducting online recorded interviews. On several occasions, my children broke into the room with screams and cries to ask for water or for me to change their nappies. It was often funny to find out during the data analysis of the official interview transcripts, which were done by a third-party text, which read "The kid screams and asks to change her nappy." Though the majority of respondents were understanding, male participants, in particular, would be bothered by these occasional disruptions. Female respondents, in contrast, would be supportive and comment that they were also in the same boat. At times, as a researcher, I would be concerned about being perceived as unprofessional by my participants as deep in my mind, I find myself influenced by gendered stereotypes and mother role prejudices. As Skriptaite (2023, 139) writes, "these moments of 'exposure' and the inability to control" and separate my private and professional

spaces "would make me feel like an imposter—a woman not fully in control of the domain traditionally assigned to her, who is miserably failing at posing as a professional—in a domain which by tradition is normally gifted to males."

Despite these challenges, I have learned to be resilient, creative, and reflective in my work. The strong family values traditionally emphasized in Kazakh culture have proven to be an invaluable resource for me as a researcher since I received immense support from my parents and relatives who have always been ready to take care of my kids whenever I needed to either travel to the field or conduct interviews in person. I am especially thankful for the tremendous and encouraging support and help that I, as a widowed single parent, received from my extended Kazakh family, friends, colleagues, and community. Such support is rewarding and keeps me committed to my academic journey.

Concluding Thoughts

The multi-layered nature of positionality, as discussed in this essay, is a complicated matter. Its complexity is underlined by various factors and is often context-bound. It is often more difficult to navigate when you are an emerging scholar from a region where research is seen as "under-developed," which puts extra pressure and tension on paving your way through to your research career. Being aware of your role and position in building knowledge in your own context with its nuances is an important part of the whole research process.

Being reflective has helped me to appreciate my position as a local researcher, which in turn can be helpful in developing a deep understanding of the nuances of the problem and its context, in building strong relationships with community members and stakeholders, in providing access to valuable insights and perspectives, and in opening opportunities for collaboration and co-creation. At the same time, I also acknowledge the potential for bias or a lack of objectivity, as researchers may be personally invested in the issues they are studying. It is important for local researchers to remain vigilant and transparent about their biases, and to ensure that their research is rigorous and methodologically sound.

Reflecting on my experiences as a single mother and scholar conducting fieldwork, I have come to appreciate the resilience and adaptability that this work requires. By being creative, strategic, and reflective in my approach, I have been able to navigate the competing demands of family and research, while also building a fulfilling and meaningful career, albeit one which requires careful planning and prioritization. By setting boundaries, delegating tasks when possible, and being intentional about how I use my time, I am able to be both an involved mother and a successful academic. While it is not always easy, I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that come with balancing these two roles, and I hope to continue to grow and learn in both my personal and professional life.

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