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Representing 'Others': avoiding the reproduction of unequal social relations in research

In this paper, the final one in a series of four articles on post-colonial research, Tam Truong Donnelly argues that some researchers have represented 'Others' in ways that tend to reproduce unequal social relations. Researchers undertaking cross-cultural studies must recognise how meanings are constructed in and through systems of representation, the article concludes

Introduction

Post-colonialists are critical of research which represents 'Others' in ways that naturalise and reproduce unequal social relations (Hall 1997, Mohanty 1991, Quayson 2000, Said 1994, Spivak 1988, Trinh 1989). Researchers undertaking cross-cultural studies often find themselves speaking with, for and about their participants' lived experiences. It is vital, therefore, that they recognise that meanings are constructed in and through systems of representation, and that they are mediated through dominant hegemonic discourses which can reproduce unequal social relations.

In this paper, I draw on Hall's work on representation (for example, Hall 1997). I discuss why representation is an important methodological issue, how researchers might participate (albeit unintentionally) in representational discourses that reproduce the subordinate position of immigrants and feelings of 'otherness'. I will also examine ways in which such participation might be avoided. Finally, my paper focuses on how Vietnamese women have been represented in texts.

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Representation

What is representation? According to Hall (1997), representation means using language, signs and images to communicate or represent one's understanding of the world to other people. Representation enables us to understand the world of objects, people or events by linking concepts. We develop these concepts in our mind through language or sign systems. Representation is an important part of a process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It also produces cultural values and constructs identity. As Hall (1997) states: 'Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the "real" world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events... The relation between "things", concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call "representation".'

How does representation produce meaning, value and identity?

Representation, Hall (1997) asserts, produces and circulates cultural meanings, values and identities through the use of language. Language, viewed in a broad perspective, is a system of signs consisting of written and spoken words, of visual images and of other means of expression, such as music. It also incorporates facial and bodily expressions and gestures. As Hall states: 'Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organised with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is... "a language".'

According to Hall (1997), representation also produces meanings through signifying practices – 'practice[s] that [produce] meaning, that [make] things mean'. He notes that people sharing a culture construct meanings of the world around them by using their interpretive frameworks. They also do so by integrating objects, people and events into their everyday practices (Hall 1997). For

example, when Vietnamese women take care of their children, spouses and members of their extended family, this is not only reflected as an element of discourse in the Vietnamese tradition. It also accords high status to these women, reinforcing the gendered division of labour and, crucially, is communicated as part of a definition of what a 'good women' means.

Meaning is not static. '[It] is *not* [pre-existing] in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word. It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable' (Hall 1997). Thus, meaning is socially and culturally constructed and can change depending on the context and the ways in which people of a particular culture or society construct it. We construct the meaning through the ways in which we represent 'things', which in turn, establishes or creates cultural codes, values and identity – and it is our ability to link these with our language or sign system that enables us to make meaning of what we perceive.

As Hall (1997) explains: 'Meanings also regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. They are also, therefore, what those who wish to govern and regulate the conduct and ideas of others seek to structure and shape.'

Why representation is an important methodological issue
Researchers produce meaning through the representation of their research

Researchers are constantly producing meanings through representing participants' lived experiences in particular ways. They do this by using certain words to describe them, telling stories and producing images through the emotions they associate with them, the ways in which they classify and conceptualise the research data, and the values they place on them.

As researchers, we should concern ourselves not only with 'the *how* of representation, with *how* language produces meanings, [but also] with the *effects* and *consequences* of representation' (Hall 1997). We should focus our attention not only on the ways in which

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representation through language produces and circulates meaning, but also on the ways in which meaning is produced and reproduced as the result of a particular discourse (Hall 1997).

Because discourses are sets of experiences that are displayed and arranged through language, they are 'ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice'(Hall 1997). Thus, representation is a form of discourse. If this is so, and a Foucaultian analysis affirms that it is, power relations are inscribed within discourses. As researchers, we should recognise that representation involves social conventions and unequal power relationships. We ought to be aware that multiple discourses on social issues, often involving conflicting perspectives, influence our interpretations and thus our presentation of data. But, of course, as Hall identifies, some people have more power to speak than others.

Representation involves unequal power relations
Representation involves unequal power relationships between researchers and their participants: that is researchers usually hold more power than the participants. As such, an analysis of the power relations between researchers and the participants in their research is essential in representations of research results. As Wolf (1996) points out, although researchers have attempted to minimise this power differential by engaging participants in more reciprocal dialectical relationships, 'the "equality" is [often] short-lived and illusory'. Cotterill (1992) reinforces this notion by stating: 'When the researcher leaves the field and begins to work on the final account the responsibility for how the data are analysed, interpreted [and represented] is entirely her own. From now on the [participants] are vulnerable. Their active role in the research process is over and whatever way it is produced is beyond their control.' In actuality, then, defining and presenting the participants' realities resides in the power that uncritical and unreflexive researchers hold.

I respect Spivak's (1988) recommendation that representation of the research findings should include the voices of the 'Other' or members

of the lay public. Spivak (1988) refers to 'the general non-specialist, non-academic population across the class spectrum, for whom the episteme operates its silent programming function', and not just the voices of the elite 'Other'. We ought to pay attention to what is spoken, what is implied and to what is not spoken – what is unspoken is not necessarily unimportant. As such, our analysis should include recognition of those who can and cannot speak and why certain issues are not spoken about. As Foucault (1978) points out, often it is not 'a plain and simple imposition of silence'. Rather, it ['is] a new regime of discourse. Not any less [is] said about it ... But things [are] said in a different way; it [is] different people who say them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results'.

The position of the researcher

Alcoff (1991) argues that the social position or the location of the researcher affects not only the meaning of spoken words and meanings assigned to an event, but also the value and the significance of any claim made. Alcoff (1991) states: 'The rituals of speaking that involve the location of speaker and listeners affect whether a claim is taken as a true, well-reasoned, compelling argument or a significant idea. Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will, in turn, affect its perceived significance.'

Towards this end, the ways in which researchers construct meanings are influenced by their theoretical frameworks, their epistemological approaches and their disciplinary discursive practices. In these practices, cultural meanings, interpretations and representations are considered to be fundamental, all being shaped by the researcher's position in a 'social space'. In the area of knowledge production, what is taken as truth, what claims can be upheld as knowledge, and what knowledge is considered legitimate is influenced by the social position of the researchers who speak for and about 'Others'.

This conception of the speaker's social 'positionality' holds researchers both accountable and responsible for the ways in which they interpret and present their data. Thus, as Wolf (1996) suggests,

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sensitivity and reflexivity to the social location of oneself and others must be critically and consciously exercised in the representation of the research data. Therefore, it is important that we researchers recognise that our experiences, cultural background, social position, theoretical framework and disciplinary ideologies and discourses will have an influence over the questions we pose. As such, we need to take care over the ways in which we interpret the meanings of data, as well as what we consider to be relevant information to represent. It is also equally important for us to acknowledge what Wolf (1996) has insightfully noticed: 'Our positionality is not fixed, but relational, a constantly moving context that constitutes our reality and the place from which values are interpreted and constructed.'

I concur with Cheek and Porter (1997) who state that what we choose to represent or not represent, and how we represent certain views and social phenomenon, reflects our own beliefs, values and assumptions about reality, and how that reality is to be understood. Because there are a number of ways to represent reality and writing can only 'reflect a partial view of any particular [social] phenomenon or aspect of reality at any particular time' (Cheek and Porter 1997), we should realise that what we represent, we affect as well.

While some researchers are sensitive to and reflexive about their social location and the unequal power relations that influence the way in which they represent 'Others', they can unintentionally participate in representational discourses that reproduce, for example, the subordinate position of immigrants. By looking at some of the ways that Third World women, in particular the ways in which Vietnamese women have been represented in texts, I attempt to illustrate how homogenisation and racial stereotyping can create feelings of otherness which in turn shape immigrants' healthcare experiences by placing them in a certain socially disadvantaged position.

Third World women
As Trinh Thi Minh Ha (1989), states: 'Difference... is that which undermines the very idea of identity... It subverts the foundations of

any affirmation or vindication of value and cannot, thereby, ever bear in itself an absolute value.'

Yet, representation of the differences of so-called Third World women in a negative light is pervasive in Western dominant discourse. Many Western political and discursive representations of Third World women are problematic because they present these women as a homogenised group, very different from the women of the West – the 'first world women' (Mohanty 1991, Quayson 2000, Spivak 1988, Trinh 1989). As Quayson (2000) observes, this homogenisation tendency is part of the larger Western conception and portrayal of the oppressed position of the 'Other' woman in both media presentations and discursive practices. Mohanty (1991) discusses some Western feminists writings (and some Third World scholarly writings as well). These, she says, have 'discursively colonized the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world thereby producing/representing a composite singular "third-world woman"... Some feminist writings have displayed Third World women as an oppressed group 'that can be the presumed Other of the Western female culturally, materially and discursively' (Quayson 2000).

Said (1994) observes that the contemporary Western view of the Orient as an outsider and an inferior partner of the West is manifested even in the academic sphere. In many academic discussions about the Orient, some Western scholars use Oriental voices, images and ideologies to reinforce the conception of the culture and intellectual awkwardness of the 'Others' – the Orient. Such representations are also used to show the Western scholar's status as 'superior judge' and 'intellectual man'(Said 1994).

In addition, Spivak (1988) argues that in many Western writings, both feminists and post-colonialists tend to exclude the voices and/or knowledge of the colonial 'Other'. Symbolically speaking, Spivak's conclusion that the colonised subaltern (women included) cannot speak, tells us that many Western writings have not adequately presented the reality of the colonised 'Other' and society. The exclusion of the voices and knowledge of the subaltern 'Other?' produces and reproduces unequal social relations.

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In many nationalist debates in the so-called Third World, women's concerns and voices have not only been subordinated to patriarchal concerns in nationalist discourses, but also, notes Alto Quayson (2000), '[their] experiences [are] taken as needing defence from the implications of Western feminine models'. Women of Third World countries then 'became more the sites than the subjects of the debates about them, and these "sites" were eventually construed in ways that rendered women completely alienated and absent from the experiences that were being declaimed on their behalf' (Quayson 2000). The alienation and absence of the women's voices will, in turn, reproduce unequal social relations.

Trinh Thi Minh Ha (1989) criticises the term 'Third World' as often referring to an underdeveloped, underprivileged, socio-politically submissive and subversive society. It has conveniently lumped together a group of 'poor' nations and ignores their individualities. Toward this end, the term 'Third World women' denotes a category that lags behind 'First and the Second World women'. It reflects 'the subtle power of linguistic exclusion. The generic term 'Third World women' Trinh contends, provokes annoyance, irritation, hostility or even feelings of pity among Westerners. Furthermore, 'Third World women' denotes a special sense of difference.

'Third World' women are different and this makes them 'special'. Representation of 'Third World' women's differences takes many forms in the West: from being 'hot' sexual objects to being hard-working, sacrificing, tolerating and submissive individuals. Edward Said (1994) reveals that Oriental (or Third World) women are often seen as 'creatures of male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid and, above all, they are willing'.

The popular television series *Tour of Duty* on the Vietnam war produced by Zev Braun Productions and New World Television is only one of many visual texts that so readily shows how 'good looking' Vietnamese girls serve American GIs as sexual objects. Vietnamese women are only made visible in bars where they work as prostitutes in the laps of American GIs, performing sexual acts for

money. Vietnamese women in this media portrayal are either sexual objects or fanatic nationalists who would willingly kill or be killed for their communist ideology. Nowhere in these episodes are these women portrayed as loving daughters, mothers and wives who single-handedly manage their own businesses in busy markets or family eating establishments. The voices of Vietnamese women are completely absent. This popular discourse and stereotyping ideology of Third World women as 'hot' and 'barbaric' has not only taken on an active role in establishing and reinforcing a hierarchy between the sexes, but it also puts these women in the unequal power relation of a subordinate, even 'inferior' social position (Quayson 2000).

In a similar vein, Beiser (1999) makes the critique that the term 'refugee' denotes an assumption that refugees are often 'survivors of oppression, plunged into poverty, purified by their sufferings, and boundlessly grateful for safe haven'. Thus, there is a growing public ambivalence towards refugees and immigrants when there is evidence to show that they are not as 'pure' or not as 'grateful' to the host society as wanted (Beiser 1999). Despite the fact that many Vietnamese immigrants have successfully integrated into Canadian society and are good citizens, public misinformation about Vietnamese gang-related problems by the media casts shadows on these immigrants' image (Beiser 1999). Sympathy has turned to negativity and doubt. Not only that, but the Vietnamese are now viewed as troublemakers and burdens by some Canadians.

Raymond Williams (1981) suggests that in a society, media organisations, such as the press, publishing companies, television and the film industry, are important dimensions of the social, political and economic organisation. These organisations represent and reflect a society's dominant relations and ideologies, which then become a standard against which other forms of social relations, behaviour, and productions are interpreted and judged. Emotional manipulation is often their first priority. As such, the media portrait of Vietnamese that focuses on the bad rather than the good has initiated a growing negative attitude towards Vietnamese Canadians. It has done much damage to their reputation as hard workers and loyal citizens and, thus,

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has made the adaptation process into Canadian society even more difficult for these refugees and immigrants. This, in turn, affects the ways in which they are able to manage and access health care.

Conclusion

This paper begins to explore representation as an important methodological issue which needs to be considered by researchers. My chief aim has been to emphasise that, as researchers, we produce meanings and values, and create social identities through the ways in which we represent our participants' lived experiences. Homogenising and racial stereotyping representational discourse can reproduce unequal social relations and feelings of 'otherness' which in turn, hinders immigrants' adaptation processes to the host society by placing them in a disadvantaged social position.

In representing the 'Others', echoing Hall (1997), I emphasise the need for researchers to focus their attention not only on the ways in which representation through language and signifying practices produces and circulates meaning, but also on how knowledge is produced as the result of a particular discourse. Researchers also need to be aware of:

(a) the connection between power, language and knowledge, all of which are influenced by the historical specificity of a particular discourse or regime of representation at a particular time in a particular place; and

(b) how the researcher's positionality and power influence discourse, regulate conduct, construct identities, shape social relations and practices, and define the certain ways things (or knowledge) are represented (Hall 1997).

Last, but not least, women research participants should not be restricted to a role of passive victims of representation. Rather, they have human agency. They can construct their own identity and re-present themselves through active participation in representational discourse that disrupts and challenges taken-for-granted dominant hegemonic discourse.

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