

Bias And Being an Outsider: A Reflexive Notes of Research on Indonesian Female Migrant Workers in Taipei, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Micro sociological research is always problematic. Often, these problems refer to the researcher who is studying an individual. Researchers often feel that the joy or sadness experienced by the individual they are researching also has an impact on the researcher when the researcher transcribes the data or rewrites it into an academic paper. This is how I felt when writing about the deep joy and sadness of Indonesian female migrant workers in Taipei, Taiwan. The sense of bias is always there in my mind so that the writing I produce is not neutral. Therefore, sociological micro-researchers need to be outsiders even if they know the individuals to be studied well. This paper is my reflexive notes as I conduct research on them.

Keywords: Bias, Outsider, Informal chatting, Indonesian female migrant workers, Taiwan



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INTRODUCTION

With the trend of globalization and the improvement in transportation and communication technology, the number of people who can afford and are willing to migrate to other countries has substantially increased (Tsai, 2015). The size of international migrants in the world increased by 37 percent and reached 214 million from 1990 to 2010. As a result, the relationship between migration and national development has been regarded as highly correlated (Athukoraola, 2008). This goes hand in hand with the commercialization of the migration process, where an “immigration industry” is established; thus, Indonesian migrant workers who are integrated into this process continuously become the property of others without self-determination. This means that they have almost no power to control themselves (Adihartono, 2023). They have nearly no autonomy to report to the authorities if they have been exploited, so many remain silent (Adihartono, 2023).

This article will discuss a reflexive note as a researcher who examines the issue of emotional politics in everyday life among Indonesian female domestic migrant workers in Taipei, Taiwan. As we know, the 2000s was a time when many Indonesian female migrant workers travelled to Taiwan to work due to the uncertain situation in Indonesia. This gave rise to many stories about the joys and sorrows they experienced while in Taiwan.

RESEARCH METHODS

Ngobrol (Informal Chatting) and Gathering Points for Indonesian Female Domestic Migrant Workers in Taipei

This research is based on qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods are more flexible as they allow for greater spontaneity and adaptability in the interaction between researchers and informants. Qualitative research aims to answer questions such as how, what, and why (Robson, 2011). According to Bryman (2008) qualitative methods usually focus on the use and meaning of words rather than counting the data collected. Qualitative research generally results in a narrative, report, or textual description of the phenomenon under study (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2008). In short, qualitative research focuses on obtaining detailed and in-depth information about a small group of people to learn how and why actors behave and think.

From *ngobrol* with Indonesian female domestic migrant workers, I utilize the naturalism paradigm but in this case, belongs to the social sciences discipline that explores social meaning (Brewer,

2003). From their standpoint, truth emerges from the “mouth of the individual” (Brewer, 2003). Naturalists use the concept of dialectical hermeneutics or interpretive dialectics to evaluate a social reality. This process is defined as a dialogue between the informants and the researcher.

I have interviewed eight Indonesian female domestic migrant workers in Taipei, Taiwan and two in Jakarta, Indonesia. They are aged between 22 and 30 years old and are all women. I did not interview men because I found that there are hardly any men who work in the domestic sector. They mostly do non-domestic work such as working in factories. My interviews were always conducted when the Indonesian female domestic migrant workers were off work and were usually conducted on Saturdays or Sundays. I was observing that on Sunday the workers appreciate dressing in modern clothes, meeting with friends, buying consumer goods, and exchanging opinions about the experiences of the week. On this account, Lan describes the Sunday activities and dress of the foreign workers as a day of “carnivalization” (Lan, 2006).

The central meeting point of them is in the Taipei Railway Main Station and in Daan (大安) Park, which is located in front of Taipei Grand Mosque (台北清真寺). Other places also used for gathering is in Ximending (西門町). Ximending (西門町) was created in the Japanese era and formed like an entertainment zone in Shinjuku or Shibuya in Tokyo, Japan. The Sunday outfits of the workers in Ximending (西門町) seem to outbalance the need for attractiveness to conform to a self-image that cannot be fulfilled in the employer’s house but according to one of the female domestic migrant workers who did not want to be identified said that in almost all cities in Taiwan, Indonesian female and male domestic migrant workers like to gather at the main railway station.

In the first stage, I tried to see what the atmosphere was like without making contact with them. On a sunny Saturday, I went to Taipei Railway Station and I saw with my own eyes that there were many Indonesian domestic migrant workers, both male and female, gathered there. In addition, many female and male domestic migrant workers from the Philippines were also gathered there. I could tell the difference between Indonesians and Filipinos by their language; many Indonesians used Javanese and Indonesian while Filipinos used Tagalog. It is very difficult to differentiate between Indonesians and Filipinos because they almost have the same face and body shape. Indonesians usually sit in small or large groups on the floor of the main hall and on the staircases on the different levels of this huge building. Dressed not like they were working, they joked around, made phone calls, and secretly sold goods or food and drinks from Indonesia. They were together for quite a while.

The next day I went to the Ximending (西門町) area. There I also met Indonesian female and male migrant workers. They were sitting on the floor with food and drinks. They were joking and gossiping with each other. I did not make contact with them yet as I was waiting for my gatekeeper who was trying to contact them for an interview. On Wednesday, I was contacted by my gatekeeper that there were eight people I could interview. I was so nervous because I did not know them from each other yet. What were their thoughts and what did they see in me as a researcher, those two things made me even more nervous.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Outsider and Bias

As an outsider, I also have to avoid feeling excessive emotions as this could make me an insider or someone who is also involved as a migrant worker. When I was writing this article, I felt compassion for my respondents who were worried and afraid to continue their work in Taipei, so writing about how they felt also affected me even though I am a man. This should not have happened. I always think of them and I want to help them. But as a researcher, I should not have done that. After all, a researcher has to be objective in looking at each case. As an outsider, I should respect and appreciate what they are doing. From an insider's point of view, a researcher should understand what they have done or whether they entered Taipei legally or illegally.

As I have explained before, qualitative researchers are (very) afraid of being affected by bias when interviewing informants or when writing, and this also happened to me when I started writing. Because I interviewed female domestic migrant workers from very different backgrounds, I was somewhat affected by bias, especially when I listened to them talk about the conditions they were living in, such as Atun who was very unhappy and wanted to return to Indonesia as soon as possible.

Atun complained that her employer seemed to be unfamiliar with her personal life, so she felt uncomfortable and wanted to end her one-year contract as soon as possible, so there is a non-negotiable feeling when I asked if she would come back to Taipei. For this reason, she said,

Just imagine, I have to do extra work after my work time is over. Indeed, the working time is arguably very short, only from 8am to 12pm. When I first signed the contract, I imagined that after my work time, I could meet my friends to gossip, but that never happened. One month into my employment, my employer allowed me to be free after 12pm. I was delighted. But after 3 months, my employer forbade me to go anywhere for no reason. I was asked to do extra work at home. I did not feel at home. Furthermore, I want to go back to Tulungagung (East Java) as soon as possible. But if I go home now, I won't get my full salary for one year because of my one-year contract. I get angry if I have to do extra work. If the contract said there would be extra work after my time was up, I would have no problem. However there isn't. Many of my friends said, "you have to wait one year". I can't stand it, but I have to endure it. I really like living in Taipei actually.

With a sense of bias, I immediately asked Atun why she did not immediately report it to the authorities. I should not have asked her that question right away because she had not told me how and by what means she arrived to Taipei. There would have been a significant difference if I, as a researcher, had known how Atun arrived. If Atun says that she arrived to Taipei with official or legal documents then as a researcher I can ask whether it is possible for Atun to leave Taipei without completing her contract. The word "possible" is one word that can make a slightly rude question a little weaker and can be a little polite. If Atun says that she arrived to Taipei illegally, I, as a researcher, should not have asked the question directly. For Indonesian female migrant workers in particular, the word illegal has a very inappropriate meaning when it is said directly in front of them because the word illegal implies that they do not have any access to what they can enjoy as female migrant workers who legally enter Taipei.

The story from Narti also made me feel biased. She was traumatized and depressed. Narti has returned to Malang (East Java) after working only six months in Taipei. Her rather cold demeanor made it difficult for me to interview her. Because I am a man, she was so afraid to accept me, and it turns out that after I asked her older sister, Narti was mentally and physically abused while in Taipei. It took approximately one week to meet her. It was very hard for her to tell me that she was abused.

One week before I met Narti, I was so nervous. Narti's sister said that Narti likes to just leave when there are men around. Narti also suddenly breaks any object when she sees a man. Narti's family has taken her to the hospital to find out what's wrong with her because when Narti returned to Indonesia, Narti did not say anything about what happened in Taipei. Narti's sister said that Narti was very good at keeping things from childhood so the family did not know what Narti was complaining about.

I met Narti at her house. She was accompanied by her sister. The tense faces of Narti and her sister were very visible. I was asked to sit down first. Narti ran away when she saw me but her sister calmed me down and said that Narti always does that when she sees a man. Her trauma and depression were very high. For about an hour Narti did not want to leave the room until her sister asked my permission to seduce Narti to meet me. I told her that the interview would not last long. It was very hard for her to tell me that she was abused,

...[a lot of silence and then a little crying] I'm sorry I remembered all the events there...[sobbing heavily] ...[silence] ...[crying and leaving me for about 30 minutes]. I'm sorry I left you...[silent again] ...[while rubbing her nose, she was ready to tell the story]. I'm sorry, I would rather not tell you too much. Furthermore, I left last year, I forget which month. I went there through unofficial channels. I was actually happy there, my employer seemed nice. For 1.5 months everything was fine, but in the following months I wanted to die. I was beaten with a pot when I didn't want to work. I was accused of having affairs with my employer's husband. Fortunately, I was not di sundut rokok [burned with a cigarette]. I was only hit. One day, I was kicked. I didn't know whom to complain to because I knew I was an illegal immigrant. Finally, I asked my friend to buy me a plane ticket. Thank God, I still had enough money to transfer it to my friend. The day I left, I just ran away. I didn't care about them. Luckily, it was early in the morning so they hadn't woken up yet. Fortunately, they didn't hold my passport. I bowed in gratitude when I arrived in Malang. To this day, I am still very traumatized and severely depressed.

When I listened to Narti complain about her life in Taipei, I emotionally felt very unfair. When she was telling her story, there were a few seconds when I did not listen to her because I was angry. I could not bear to hear Narti's story. Just before she finished her story, I told her to stop. Narti said why. I immediately told her that I wanted to go out for a while but what I did was I lit a cigarette and outside I asked myself why Narti's employer in Taipei was so cruel that she had to run away from Taipei and caused her trauma and depression.

The interview with Narti was very short. We only talked for about ten minutes. Narti was accompanied by her sister during the interview. I saw Narti's hands were a bit clenched because when I asked her sister, she felt so much resentment towards her employer and not Taipei city. When I asked Narti idly if she would go on holiday to Taipei sometime, she replied that she would not go back. She is afraid to meet her employer if she is in Taipei.

Biases Towards Trauma and Depression

Generally, trauma can be described as an injury that leaves permanent consequences, latent traces, that can be activated in periods of crisis. According to Neil cited in Eyerman (2001) a trauma can have permanent consequences, that cannot easily be dismissed, and events connected to it will replay again and again in individual consciousness thus becoming rooted in collective memory.

Trauma may lead to depression. Brown and Harris (1978) explain that depression can be explained in terms of the external social environment, rather than in terms of individual pathology. In a general social science approach, the social environment has been conceptualized in terms of social variables external to the individual. For example, the concept of social support has been used to explore the relationship between one's social relationships and the experience of depression. Brown and Harris (1978) identified a lack of confiding relationships as a vulnerability factor to depression. Social support can be considered a reflection of a particular set of circumstances and transactions between a person and their environment (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986).

So what made me write about trauma and depression that could expose qualitative researchers like me to bias? As a qualitative researcher who "has to" see an event spontaneously and hear the testimony from the mouth of each informant, I can feel how the informants suffer from an event that can make them traumatised and depressed. The absence of social support from the informants' friends could also make me biased but I rethought and asked myself if the concept of bias could be incorporated "a little" into the writing of my research. I asked my supervising professor about it and the answer was that it was no problem to include my bias but only a percentage of one hundred per cent. It means that the bias I included in my research should not be too extensive.

CONCLUSION

Being both biased and an outsider in qualitative research is (very) difficult. A qualitative researcher is usually presented with the lived realities and testimonies of an informant. A qualitative researcher goes to where they work or school and goes to where they gather. We see with our own eyes what they do and what they say. This is where the problem lies because a qualitative researcher also feels what they feel. Sensitivity is the main keyword for qualitative researchers. Without high sensitivity, of course, a qualitative researcher is unable to feel what the informant feels. However, the sensitivity of a qualitative researcher will be tested in writing a research or report. Because of the long time in researching informants in their place, qualitative researchers usually also enter as insiders which a qualitative researcher should not be able to do because the "sensitivity" of insiders is more penetrating to cognition than the "sensitivity" of outsiders. Bias will often occur when researchers enter as insiders either in behaviour or in writing. As a researcher conducting research on Indonesian female domestic migrant workers in Taipei, I experienced bias and being an insider rather than an outsider. This was especially true when I interviewed two Indonesian female domestic migrant workers who were victims of an accident. At the time I was furious that they were victims of their employers. However, what I did was not entirely right because as a qualitative researcher, I should not be excessively angry in front of informants. Bias also occurred when I tried to write. I poured out all the informants' disappointments in one piece of writing, which is not allowed because it can damage the informants' good name.

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