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Personal

Please introduce yourself – name, role, and affiliation

Please provide a brief introduction to your research interests/ the work that you do

KH:

My name is Kaiju Harinen, I am a postdoctoral researcher in a research project entitled *Intersectional Reading, Social Justice, and Literary Activism (INTERACT)*, based at the university of Turku, Finland. My post-doctoral research project combines intersectionality, feminist and decolonial storytelling, discourse analysis applied to literature, and anti-racist reading circles.

I received my PhD in French from the University of Turku in 2018, with a thesis on Francophone literature, intersectionality, and performativity in the semiautobiographical writings of the West African authors Calixthe Beyala and Ken Bugul. I have also been working for an anti-racist and cooperative NGO based in Dakar and in Helsinki.

Project

- Please Introduce the research project you will be discussing – how did you become interested in the project?

KH: I will be discussing my postdoctoral research in the INTERACT -project that I already briefly introduced. I will concentrate especially on the anti-racist reading circles that I mentioned and on the anti-racist and intersectional reading circle -method that I have started to develop in the project based on the empirical material that I have collected from the reading circle participants' reading diaries, questionnaires, creative writing exercises, feed-back, and my auto-ethnographical observations.

The initial idea for my postdoctoral project was born out of frustration and anger related to the rise of Islamophobic, racist, transphobic, xenophobic, etc. discrimination and hate crimes in Finland (and many other countries in Europe). The discrimination has become more and more common, even trivialized. I asked myself what I could do with all the theoretical knowledge that I acquired during my doctoral studies on intersectionality and Francophone West African literature in the context of Finland.

The context is of course different from that of France or West Africa (mainly Senegal and Cameroon) represented in the works that I studied in my thesis. However, I would say that the intersectional discriminations represented in some minority literatures often have a universal dimension which makes it possible to expose and analyze the complex discourses and power relations related to social injustice and intersectional discrimination.

The anti-racist and intersectional reading circles seemed to me a concrete way to make intersectional discrimination and privileges more visible and to reflect on concrete anti-racist and anti-discriminatory strategies and allyship with other people struggling with the same issues.

- Can you please tell us about the research method you have used, and why you have chosen this particular method for this project?

KH: My research method is based on a myriad of various theoretical epistemologies and perspectives, such as decolonial studies, intersectionality, feminist and anti-racist pedagogy and critical discourse analysis applied to literature but, in the end, they all have in common the engagement for social justice and that is the main reason why I have chosen them for my research project.

My main theoretical background is however intersectional inquiry and practice. I want to specify, at this point that, in our project, we consider intersectionality as a research tool that conceptualizes the multiple, relational, and complex power dynamics connected to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, able-bodiedness, age, species, or any such factor that is relevant to our socio-cultural experiences.

The objective of the reading circles is to move from the various theoretical perspectives that I mentioned to a critical and anti-racist pedagogical practice. The circles are based on the reading of minority literatures, semi-structured discussions in small groups and creative writing exercises. The aim of the reading circles is to allow participants to better understand the process of othering, racist and/or intersectional discrimination, privileges and, above all, to raise the participants' social and critical awareness. To sum up, I would say that I wanted to provide a concrete and material literature-based tool to transform the social consciousness of the participants.

In other words, I am combining research and activism. In this context, activism means a mode of activism committed to social justice. In our research project, we understand activism as slow activism, long-term analysis, and concentration on structural inequalities in order to "show the bigger picture". We highlight our mode of activism as intimate activism developed through reading and writing.

- Did you have to recruit participants for the project, and if so, how? Give details of any sampling methods/gatekeepers/incentives/accessing the field?

KH: Yes. I had some challenges in accessing the field as I had to find participants for the reading circles held in the library and at the university. I am used to organize events and teaching at the university, so it was not hard to find participants in there since the participation was connected to different courses organised at the university and I knew how to contact the students.

However, I was a little bit surprised by the difficulties that I faced when I was organizing the reading circles that were held in the local library and events outside the university. At first, I contacted the personnel of many different libraries but quite many of the librarians were somehow reluctant to organise a reading circle about anti-racism and intersectionality. They said that the topic was of course very important but, in their opinion, people simply would not participate in such reading circle tackling such difficult and politically sensitive issues. One person even said that they did not think that racism had anything to do with their everyday life and that the people in the town in question were not interested in discussing such topics.

In the end, I used my personal networks and contacted a friend who works at the library, and she had the courage to tell me that I would need to introduce my idea without the academic terms of research. In practice, it meant that I had to take terms of "racialisation" and "intersectionality" away from the description of the reading circle. I did that, and my

friend introduced the idea to the chief librarian and, slowly, we managed to organize a reading circle that lasted for two terms, we had meetings once a month. I also had to change the name of the circle into a human rights-reading circle instead of an antiracist reading circle. The library used their own platforms to recruit participants and I used my personal network and platforms and, in the end, about 7 people attended the reading circle.

- How did you collect your data? (Please walk us through the steps you took)

KH: That was a long process. I have collected the data by myself and with my colleague Marta-Laura Cenedese who also works in the same research project. At first, our research project had to request an ethical review statement on the ethicality of the research plan and on other risks related to the research from The Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku. It meant an awful lot of official documents such as data protection statement, assessment of the ethical nature of the research, and information sheets for the library participants and another one for the university students.

The ethical review of the Ethics Committee to the research took about three months and we needed to provide more information and documents to the committee especially about the handling of the personal data of the participants since the reactions to racism and intersectionality were considered as a politically sensitive topic. The collected data consist mainly of reading diaries, questionnaires related to intersectional and critical reading and participants' affects and reflections on their own positionings in different social encounters. That is why we had to provide a lot of detailed information for instance on how the personal data would be protected and processed according to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (EU:n Act 679/2016) and current national regulation.

In my opinion, the instructions of the committee were not well applied to Human Sciences, and it was also difficult to find any concrete information. The ethical committee and the regulations of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity also used a specific language that was not easy to understand or adapt on the analysis of the impacts of critical reading and writing. But it was an important learning process and I learnt for example that that personal data can also mean political opinions or sexual orientation and that it had to be protected from recognition of the person stating these opinions. Finally, according to the Ethics Committee, our research could be ethically approved, and we could start the data collection from the participants of the reading circles.

However, the process made me think of how much all this bureaucracy must impact on the research that will be done in the end. I don't mean that the protection of the data and other ethical issues are not important but, at the same time, the critical reading and argumentation is the point of departure of the literary scholars.

After the approval of the ethical committee, I introduced our research project for the participants of the reading circles. I also provided them with the detailed information sheet (5 pages) about the research, the data collection process, and data protection. Then, I distributed the consent forms to the participants and reminded them that they could participate in the reading circle without participating in the study and that they could also withdraw their participation from the study at any point of the reading circle. The participants returned the reading diaries, questionnaires, and creative writing exercises at the end of the circle. Then the diaries and other collected data were anonymised and pseudonymised with gender neutral pronouns and stored in the database protected by University's secure server that can be accessed only by project members.

- What challenges have you faced throughout the project/research and what steps have you taken to overcome them/ Did anything surprise you. If so, did you make any changes to accommodate?

KH: Talking about discrimination and decolonisation seems to be a highly reactive topic especially when it comes near to your own personal encounters and everyday life. I was surprised by the aggressive and defensive reactions of some people with whom I have discussed about organising the anti-racist reading circles. The Scholar Robin DiAngelo calls this by the term of “White Fragility” and some typical reactions of this type of fragility can be detected from the collected data as well.

For instance, one person would say that they had nothing to say about racism and it does not concern them as white-skinned middle-class person. They agreed that racism exists in Finland, however, they considered that no one would like to participate in such a difficult reading circle. The topic was considered almost as a taboo or at least a very difficult matter to discuss. I didn’t even mention any basic principles of decolonial or anti-racist pedagogy to this person. It maybe goes without saying that this reading circle never happened. After all these long discussions, I felt really puzzled and didn’t have many occasions to give full vent to my feelings. So, I started to write a research journal and decided to use that as part of my auto-ethnographical data collection. This decision helped me to move onwards but I still felt quite lonely and frustrated.

- Can you please tell us about any research ethics considerations you had to account for? What steps or preparatory work did you do to ensure participants safety and comfort

KH: As I already mentioned the collection of personal data was a concern that was raised up mainly by the ethical committee but, for me, the safer space principles were the main concern. I was quite concerned about the racist and sexist slurs and insults that might occur during the reading circle’s discussions and that is why I wanted to go through the safer space principles in detail at the beginning of the circle. In the participants information sheet, we also provided a lot of information for the participants on mental health institutions or support that the participants could contact if needed.

- Were there any existing frameworks you had to adhere to, in addition to any official bodies you had to consult whilst undergoing your research.

I already replied to that question, I think.

- How do you perceive the power dynamics that have historically influenced research, and how can these be addressed through decolonization

KH: All comes back to the history of colonisation connected to Europatriarchal worldview that for instance Minna Salami has deconstructed beautifully in her book *Sensuous Knowledge*. The transformation is a long process, and I am not sure how one can influence on that with only one study or reading circle, but I guess it is better than not doing anything.

- Could you provide examples of concrete steps or methodologies that researchers can adopt to decolonize their research practices?

KH: In my opinion, the first thing to do is to try to decolonize the curriculum of research methodology and knowledge production which means in practice that the material that we

study and use as well as sources in our methodological research and teaching should represent a spatiotemporal and cultural background that includes also non-Western countries. Or, that the research we are referring to represents more marginalised epistemic practices, like many feminists, and decolonial researchers who challenge the “official” history” of colonial domination, sexism and sexual violence, and racial dehumanisation and many other forms of discrimination.

For instance, Françoise Vergès has been doing important decolonial feminist research in France. Her work considers the untold history of colonialism especially on the island of Réunion that is not well known in France (or elsewhere in Europe) even if this island on the Indian Ocean is still an overseas department and region of France. So, in other words, it is important to educate yourself and give space for researchers that are not often canonised in Western countries. It often requires travelling and connections in other geopolitical spheres that the Western countries.

I also think that the use of Intersectionality seen as a critical practice and a way to do knowledge activism, that Patricia Hill Collins (2012) calls *intellectual activism*, can indeed be a useful tool to decolonize one’s research and teaching. One should also remember that “Decolonization is not a metaphor” as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang state in their article (2012). On the contrary, the issues related to colonialism and intersectional discrimination should be tackled at all educational levels and in all subjects, not only in anti-racist reading circles or a specific day a year against racism.

- In what ways can decolonizing research contribute to more inclusive and accurate narratives in academia and beyond?

KH: Well, it is an initiative to tell “other stories” instead of the “single stories” criticized by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for instance in her famous TED talk in 2009. That is how the world becomes a little bit wider in a sense and gives more space for marginalised people and knowledge-making.

- How can researchers and institutions work together to sustain and amplify the impact of decolonizing research practices over the long term? -

KH: It is a massive work that the researchers and the institutions should do together to fundamentally change the structures that westerns power dynamics, institutions, and researchers reproduce, even if the intentions of the scholars or institutions are, in principle, or in theory, against the colonial and Europatriarchal systems and ways of doing research. It’s not a “tick the box” issue but one must work in a long-term perspective to be able to slowly change the structures of different institutions and power dynamics.

- How has engaging with decolonizing research transformed your perspective as a researcher?

KH: It has changed everything. I don’t see the world in the same way I used to. It has helped me to be more critical towards western and patriarchal knowledge-making and it has also provided me the keys to look for the information elsewhere, also to do simple changes in my own personal life and research, like watching the local news from Senegal, for example, or listening RFI Afrique that broadcast the news from Western African perspective.

Reflection

What do you wish people better understood about (METHOD/ TOPIC OF RESEARCH)

KH: I wish that people would understand that racism and intersectionality are both connected to colonialism and that they are both structural challenges, not a personal disoriented behaviour, such as a racist or sexist slurs, for example.

What advice would you give students looking to use anti-racist reading circle-method in their research? What tools and resources would you recommend?

KH: If I had to choose one book, I would recommend to start from the genealogy of the decolonisation by reading *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) written by Franz Fanon. The auto-ethnographical essay was published already in 1952 for the first time.

FREE TIME- anything else you wish to say

Conclusion- Thanks for watching. Please contact me if you have any questions.