Su-Ann Oh, S. P. Ong, and Prashant Somosundram

SPINNING TALES: THE ACTIVIST-INTERVIEWER AND MIGRANT WORKER ORAL HISTORIES IN SINGAPORE

ABSTRACT. From 2009 to 2012, Migrant Voices, an NGO in Singapore, conducted oral history interviews with migrant workers from China, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The project aimed to give voice to foreign labourers working in Singapore. Involving almost a hundred activist-volunteers and migrant workers, it resulted in a public exhibition, a film documentary, and a public archive. It remains arguably the most wide-ranging and ambitious project of its kind ever attempted in Singapore. In this article, the project organizers examine both the processes underlying the project and the kinds of knowledge and narratives that were produced. In particular, they argue that the oral histories should not be viewed as self-evident and unmediated documents of migrant worker consciousness, and ask us to consider an alternative approach to these narratives.

Migrant workers are an invisible feature of modern capitalist society. Seen in construction sites, their presence is imperceptible; heard in the streets, their voices are unqualified to participate in public discourse. Singapore, the most developed country in Southeast Asia, depends on the interchangeability and invisibility of semi-skilled and unskilled labour of men and women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, China, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, to support its pursuit of economic growth.

In an attempt to qualify, empower and render visible migrant presence in the public sphere, Migrant Voices, a nongovernmental organisation in Singapore, initiated the Oral History Archive Project (2009-2012) to document the life stories of migrant workers in contemporary Singapore using in-depth interviews.

The impetus for this lay in the desire to empower low-wage migrant workers by providing a platform for expression and an opportunity to share their stories with interested parties. The other reason was to create a public archive of valuable knowledge of the rich experience of migrant workers in Singapore that would otherwise remain unrecorded and relegated to the margins of Singapore's social consciousness.

The very act of interviewing, recording, analysing and (re)presenting oral life narratives in a public archive is a process by which a body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established as 'reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This is the precise intention of the project. However, therein lie methodological and ethical dilemmas. First, the life stories have to be understood in the wider context of NGO activism in Singapore as it structures the discourse, activities and affiliations underlying the Oral History Archive Project. Second, the role and positionality of volunteer activist-interviewers have to be considered. Finally, it is necessary to reflect on the point of view of the interviewees: what were their motivations for being involved in interviews? What points of reference did their narratives spring from? The interplay of these elements is illustrated through two case studies of interviews conducted with Indonesian and Indian migrant workers.

The paper first describes the process by which the life stories and the way they

were collected were systematically analysed. The research conducted was ethnographic, not in the sense of the micro-observations of daily life, but in the anthropological sense. The narratives given by the migrants can only be fully understood and appreciated if they are situated within the broader political and structural context of institutional relationships (public, NGO, state) and the characterisation of migrant workers in Singapore. Drawing upon the symbolic interactionist tradition, the narratives and the process by which they were collected were analysed in relation to contextual and subjective positionality. Migrants and their interviewers act towards objects, systems and other people based on the meaning those things have for them; these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Mead, 1934; Becker et al., 1961). Symbolic interactionist methods lend themselves to generating analyses of storytelling: the loosely structured format of intensive biography interview encourages the narrator to recount the past and to elucidate the meanings that she creates from these experiences. In addition, the way that she interacts with the interviewer speaks volumes about the how she interprets her position in relation to her environment (Blumer, 1969).

The paper ends with a discussion of how the analysis generated a better understanding of the advantages and limitations of the methods used and a set of

recommendations for improving the collection of migrant life stories in Singapore.

Positionality: Role and Identity in Activist Interviewing

The positivist paradigm for research informs the standards of validity, reliability and generalisability in research in the social sciences. The belief is that scientific enquiry into phenomena must remain detached; the findings are invalidated if the inquiry influences the outcome. Many argue that this is not possible even in the scientific disciplines, and others have created a substantial body of work that carefully counters this claim in the social sciences. Reflexivity has been conceptualised as an awareness of the way in which researchers affect and influence the social settings that they research. The emphasis in such work is to consider the role and identity of the researcher in her interactions with the researched and how that has an impact on the community and on the findings of the research. This has focused on how individual identities and roles – gender, ethnicity, class and so on – colour the lens through which researchers conduct and analyse their fieldwork (Rose, 1997; McLafferty, 1995; Nagar, 2003). This perspective recognises that research is a social activity, that all social interactions are inter-subjectively negotiated and, by extension, will influence the very social phenomenon that is being investigated. In addition, knowledge is contextual and

circumscribed by space, time and social structures. As Rose (1997) points out, 'all knowledge is produced in specific circumstances and […] those circumstances shape it in some way' (p. 305).

In assessing and analysing the methods used in collecting oral life narratives from migrant workers in Singapore, we wondered if the 'activist' inclinations and motivations of the interviewers had had a significant influence on the stories recounted by the migrant interviewees – this highlights the role and identity of the interviewers in the process of narration creation. For the purpose of this paper, we define the activist-interviewer as someone with some knowledge of Migrant Voices as an arts advocacy group raising awareness on migrant worker issues and who volunteered with the intent of raising social awareness of migrant workers and to effect social change, directly or indirectly. This definition led us to reflect on the positionality of the interviewers. We considered the interrelatedness of interviewer identities with the political, ideological and institutional frameworks in which the researcher and the researched reside and interact (Nagar, 2003). Positionality takes the notion of 'role' further, to encompass the wider social networks and institutional affiliations of those involved in the research.

What is particularly important to consider in this analysis is the interplay of power structures embedded within an activist interviewer/project/NGO in its work

with migrant workers. This intersects with notions of role, identity and positionality in complex and nuanced ways. As Rose (1997) writes, 'facets of the self – institutional privilege, for example, as well as aspects of social identity – are articulated as 'positions' in a multidimensional geography of power relations' (p. 5). Consequently, how do we situate an activist-interviewer within the context of narration creation, knowing full well that they will have an impact on the narrative produced? The conventional argument is that activist-interviewers come with a set of characteristics and political leanings, and that is what makes them 'activist'. It can be argued from the other way around. In reflecting on the interviews, making sense of the issues to explore and acting upon this condition, the Oral History interviewer *becomes* an activist-interviewer, similar to Maxey's conception of the activist-academic (Maxey, 1999, p. 201). In fact, Benmayor and Skotnes (1994) argue that the activist-interviewer plays an important 'role for the processes of personal testimony: that not only reports on, but actively participates in the process of identity construction' (p. 15 as quoted in Thomson, 1999; Rose, pp. 315-317).

In a further development to our analysis, we began to consider the agency and activism, and by extension, the roles, identities and positionality of the *interviewees* in setting the content, scope and limits of the narrative. This revealed remarkable insights into our own thinking about interviewees' motivations and perceptions

about the purpose and context of the interview.

The academic literature on reflexivity has invariably focused on the identity and positionality of the researcher. Since the mid 1990s, anthropologists have considered how researchers analyse their own positions—in terms of gender, race, class, and other categories—and how these affect their individual relationships with their subjects in the field (Appadurai, 1996; Marcus and Fisher, 1996; Behar, 1997; Salzman, 2002; Bourdieu, 2004). However, as Gershon (2006a) rightly points out 'scholars have largely remained silent about the role of non-anthropological reflexivity in local understanding' (p. 445). While it is necessarily the case that we can only account for our own positions, we attempt to piece together the indicators, fragments and clues of the role, identity and positionality of the workers involved in the project so as to situate the oral life narratives within a micro and macro understanding of NGO activism vis-à-vis migrant workers in Singapore. The objective is to examine 'the ways in which people view themselves as social strategists engaged with a social order that both limits and enables their efficacy' (Gershon, 2006b, p. 540). As Gershon suggests,

> An interrelated form of reflexivity, a second-order reflexivity, also comes
> into play here, involving how one construes others as social strategists. In
> the moments when system-carriers and culture-bearers interact, not only
> are people explicit about their relationships to a social order, be it culture
> or system, they also openly acknowledge that the other person is engaged

with a different social order'. (2006b, p. 540)

Genuine understanding of the interviews requires us to view the worker-narrator as a self-reflexive actor in and of herself; it requires us to understand the concrete constellation of power and interests within which the workers and their narratives are embedded. With this frame in mind, we foreground our analysis by describing the reasons for using oral history to collect life narratives. This is followed by a discussion on methods used, where questions on reflexivity emerge, and are used to conceptualise issues of role, identity and positionality as a means of guiding our analysis. Our findings present and describe the wider context of NGO activism in Singapore, an important element to understanding positionality, as it structures the discourse, activities and affiliations underlying the Oral History Archive Project. Next, we consider the role and positionality of volunteer activist-interviewers: do their own assumptions about migrant experiences, interrogation styles and foci, and their assumed role as symbolic representatives of an advocacy group influence the life narratives collected from migrant workers? Our analysis led us to contemplate these issues from the point of view of the interviewees: what were their motivations for being involved in interviews? What points of reference did their narratives spring from? How were they recruited? The interplay of all these elements is illustrated through two case studies of interviews conducted with

Indonesian and Indian migrant workers.

Before we present the findings of our exercise in reflexivity, it is necessary to describe the way in which we conducted our analysis. We analysed the 16 transcripts of interviews conducted with the interviewees, email interviews with interviewers and a face-to-face interview with two interviewees using questions such as:

What trajectories of personal experience are privileged in the narratives? What were the more prominent narratives and what were the kind of common references that interviewees fell back on?

What were the power dynamics in the interview? How were they discerned? How were they negotiated?

How were the framing of the interviews influenced by the identities and role of activist-interviewers and interviewees?

How were the narratives shaped by affiliations, networks, knowledge and motivations on the choice and access to sample groups, the effectiveness of interview methods?

How, and to what extent, does the nationality, class, and gender status of the interviewer and translator find their way into the narrator's expressions of consciousness and social identity?

In addition, we examined the recruitment methods and profile of the

interviewers, the sample and selection of interviewees, the way in which interviewers were matched to interviewees and the location of interviews. This, in turn, led us to reflect on the positionality of both the interviewers and the interviewees within the broader institutional and ideological framework of activism and NGO positioning in Singapore. The questions that emerged were: what is the shape of Singaporean NGO activism concerned with migrant workers? How does it legitimise or delegitimise certain types of migrant workers and certain life experiences? How did this influence the content, scope and purpose of the oral life narratives produced?

The Research Context

Migrant Workers and the Wider Context of Activist NGO Work in Singapore

In examining the content of the narratives produced, it is necessary to situate the Oral History Archive Project in the landscape of migrant worker NGO organisations in Singapore as well as in the political and social environment that produces the discourse, policy and action surrounding migrant worker issues. We must recognise that it is not just about the individual roles and identities of the interviewers and the interviewees that influence the life narratives, but also how they perceive and operate within the context of their institutional relationships and

wider social milieu vis-à-vis migrant worker issues. The narrative that is produced in the interviews is bound within this broader context. Importantly, the limits of activism in Singapore need to be highlighted – what actors say is conditioned by their understanding of the boundaries within which they may manoeuvre. Their inclination to speak rubs up against the question of what they can actually gain from doing so. It must be acknowledged that the scope of activism finds expression within the interviews.

The Oral History Archive Project fell under the aegis of Migrant Voices which was a registered arts charity that engaged with low-wage migrant workers in Singapore through the arts and provided them with a platform for expression, using community theatre, and the visual and performing arts. MV sought to promote interaction and integration between migrant workers and Singaporeans. When MV formed in 2006, there was considerable discussion by its leadership on its role and place in the landscape of migrant worker organisations in Singapore. The decision then was to position itself purely as an arts society rather than an activist/advocacy group for migrant worker issues. MV's desired separation of arts and activism became more tenuous and in 2009, the society embraced its role as an arts advocacy group. This was marked by the creation of Solidarity for Migrant Workers, a formalised resource-sharing and support network comprising TWC2,

HOME and MV.

Transient Workers Count 2 (TWC2) and Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics (HOME) are two prominent organisations in Singapore. TWC2, formed in 2003, is focused on promoting the rights and welfare of workers and good relations between migrant workers and employers through research, advocacy and direct services such as running helplines and providing free meals to distressed migrant workers. Similarly, HOME, formed in 2004 conducts research, advocacy and runs helplines, skills upgrading courses and shelters for homeless migrant workers. This network of NGOs forms the core of organisations working on migrant worker issues. The background to this NGO activity is the state of migrant worker living and working conditions, political discourse and government policy in Singapore. Singapore is heavily reliant on foreigners in its labour force. As of 2014, 1.4 million foreigners were legally working in Singapore (MFA, 2011, p. 2). This accounts for slightly more than one third of the total labour force. The Singapore government has long pursued an open policy towards immigration. Despite this, there are tensions in relation to the social and economic position of low-wage migrant workers, and their place in a capitalist economy that relies on them as cheap, replaceable labour. In the words of the current Prime Minister of Singapore:

> They are not here to steal our jobs but to enlarge our economic pie…Because they are hard-working and willing to work long hours, coffeeshops can stay open late or even round the clock. The airport, seaport, factories, offices, hotels, restaurants and retail outlets here can offer better service and business hours. Even smaller businesses, such as neighbourhood shops, can reduce business costs and stay afloat if they hire some foreign workers on top of locals (PM Lee Hsien Loong, ST, 2/5/2008).

While the Singapore government has pursued an open policy towards foreign labour, it also tightly manages them through administrative regulation. There are four different types of permits that regulate the quantity and quality of foreign workers in Singapore. Permits are issued based on the nature of industry, skills required, country of origin and allowable length of stay in Singapore Skilled foreigners earning more than $2500 are eligible for the Employment Pass while mid-level skilled foreigners earning more than $1800 in professional, specialist and technical fields are eligible for the S Pass. A large proportion of foreign labour in Singapore is semi-skilled or unskilled labour (Piper, 2005/6, p. 4). Work Permit (Foreign Worker) applies to the semi- or unskilled foreign labour that are specific to each sector, from construction, manufacturing, services, marine and Work Permit (Foreign Domestic Worker) applies to females working in domestic households. Driven by socio-economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment and limited job opportunities, men and women leave their homes in sending

countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, China, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to pursue unskilled employment as Work Permit holders in Singapore. However, due to their poor education, financial indebtedness, unfamiliarity with the local environment and fear of authority, unskilled, low-wage migrant workers tend to be easy victims of abuse and manipulation. Such instances include withholding payment of wages, unauthorised deductions from wages, poor living conditions, overcrowding and physical and sexual abuse (Piper, 2005/6, p. 8; HOME, 2015).

Oral History, Life Stories, and Migrant Worker Narratives

Oral history is conventionally used to provide rich and textured personal narratives to supplement and/or enhance documentary evidence and understanding(s) of the past. In the Oral History Archive Project, the purpose is to understand the past only in so much as it informs the understanding of the life stories of existing individuals. This form of data is often referred to as 'life history'. It is the 'account of a life, completed or ongoing' (Mandelbaum, 1982, p. 146) and often combines written and oral evidence.

In this project, it may be most appropriate to call the method used oral life narratives as it is based solely on the audio recording and transcription of the

accounts related by migrant workers. The reason for employing methods used in recording oral history was to fully exploit the nature of storytelling. There are moments of realisation, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the narrative process. The loosely structured format of intensive biography interview leads the narrator to look back and give voice, not only to what she is currently experiencing and her perspective on that, but more crucially to the process that led her there. Having to narrate her own past requires her to make implicit decisions and judgements about it — where she creates meaning, what she deems important, her feelings and attitudes, the relationship between different life experiences or different times in her life. This positions the use of oral narrative in this project as both a method for collecting meaningful information about people's lives as well as a means for assisting narrators to make better sense of their own experiences.

While this was unique in the context of Singapore at the time, it is not unique to this type of project. In a review on the use of oral history in migration studies, Thomson (1999) observed that oral history can facilitate the historical understanding of the migrant experience (de Roche, 1996), foster personal empowerment by generating public recognition of collective experiences which have been ignored or silenced (Thomson, 1999), provide therapeutic benefits of

public affirmation through the sharing and validation of personal stories (Serikaku, 1989), and collect content for advocacy and effecting social change (Perks and Thomson, 1998).

The other reason for using oral history methods in this project was to produce an archive of valuable knowledge and rich life experiences of persons and groups in Singapore that would otherwise remain untapped. Oral history provides material on individuals from whom or for whom very little written documentary evidence is available, supplies accounts of everyday life and work (Thompson, 1978 in Burgess, 1982), supplements documentary evidence, acts as a check against other sources of data, and exposes the 'silences and deficiency of the written record' (Samuel, 1982, p. 144). These reasons are particularly salient in the context of Singapore, where migrant workers form a significant but invisible part of the labour and capital equation which underpins the infrastructural and economic development of Singapore. Statistical data on the numbers of migrant workers entering and leaving the country are available. However, there is little in the way of publicly available narratives articulated by migrants themselves. As Morrison writes,

> The history of the colonized, of the powerless, of labour, of women, of ethnic minorities, and of children had rarely appeared in documents. With the growth of oral research and its use by historians, the inarticulate have been given a voice and therefore a say in their past (Morrison, 1998, p. 1).

Oral narratives have been invaluable in migration studies in demonstrating the complexity of the migration process, in illuminating the way in which policies and migration patterns are played out and in assisting scholars to generate theory out of intricate personal histories and experiences. In Singapore, migrant workers are perceived by the general populace as a singular commodified entity, without regard to individual experience, thought or opinion. Oral narratives offer 'unique glimpses into the lived-in interior of migration processes' (Thomson, 1999, p. 26).

Methods Used in Eliciting Oral Life Narratives

The most common technique used to elicit oral life narrative is the narrative interview (Bauer, 1996; Purushotam, 1998). Essentially, the aim is to encourage the interviewee to tell the story of her life, in her own words. Different researchers propose distinct ways of eliciting an account but there is some disagreement over whether there needs to be an explicit framework for selecting a narrative. Consequently, the type of questioning and the questions used flow from the position taken on this.

The initial method considered for eliciting oral life narratives from migrant workers in the Oral History Archive Project was that devised by Nirmala Purushotam, following her fieldwork with Sharon Siddique on Indians in Singapore (Purushotam, 1998). This involved no explicit selection criteria and was based on

the frame of reference provided by the interviewees' implicit understanding of their and interviewers' roles, position in society, gender etc. The person is approached for a life story, with no reference to any particular interests on our part. The underlying theory is of how knowledge constructs social order, and how that knowledge is embedded in the taken for granted but not noticed stock of common sense we all use in our everyday life. Our aim in the interviews was to minimize our structures of relevance that would otherwise constrain the story; and in doing so expand the space for the accessing of a narration that is more her/his than ours. Its value, as Nirmala put it, 'lies in the a-ha moment of people who told their stories. In this way the individual-as-member actually can come to grasp his or her situation more profoundly and the knowledge is potentially more useable and power giving.'

Four practical features were central to the interview technique:

The interviewer starts the interview with the general request to narrate one's life story;

The interviewer refrains from actually asking any questions;

Pauses are dealth with by repeating the narrator's last sentence (repeating it if necessary; compelling the narrator to choose his/her own trajectory);

The interviewer had to learn to let pauses grow and become uncomfortable

(Purushotam, 1998).

To prepare our interviewers and to assess the feasibility of these techniqes in the field, we drew up a series of training workshops. The first was a workshop aimed at eliciting awareness and self-reflexivity about shared meanings and perceptions. She asked participants to write down on a piece of paper five separate words describing the thoughts that came to our head when she named an object— for instance, 'man', 'woman', 'father', 'mother', 'foreign worker'. She then retrieved the sheets of paper and read aloud our responses to each category. That normative assumptions were implicit and embedded in our shared construction of social reality was quickly grasped by all who were present.

The second were two test interviews conducted by Nirmala using her narrational method; we videotaped the interviews to use as training material for interviewers. The subjects in this instance were two women: a volunteer interviewer in the Oral History Project; and a member of Migrant Voices. Unfortunately, what emerged from the test interviews were not life 'stories', but life 'problems'. Without prompting, and even after having taken part in the earlier workshop, both interviewees remained firmly rooted to the assumption that we were interested in only their problems. It became apparent that the framework of interviewing—practised in the context of migrant workers and life stories—needed

more decisive strategies of loosing it from the moorings of problem-solving.

As a result, a different method was devised. Interviewers were asked to bring objects from three different categories to elicit narrations about different aspects of their lives. The categories were: i. objects brought from homeland; ii. objects imported from their homeland which they often purchased and used in Singapore; and iii. objects that made them feel part of or marginalised in Singapore. The first phase involved a series of 'interaction' sessions where interviewers and interviewees were introduced to one another and given the opportunity to get to know one another informally. The second phase took place in a more formal interview setting where interviewees were asked specific questions and the interview was recorded on audio devices.

Recruitment Methods and Profile of Volunteer Interviewers

Volunteer interviewers were sourced through Migrant Voices' online networks and through an open call on the Arts Community Listserve.

With the focus on the role of the interviewer in shaping the narrative, it is necessary to scrutinise the recruitment outreach as it could lead to a specific and dominant demographic of volunteer interviewers with a particular predisposition to migrant issues, which would then influence and shape the narrative.

We had 14 interviewers: four of whom were students, one artist, three

academics, two lawyers, three from the corporate sector and one from the military. They were all from middle-class backgrounds, and all but one were below the age of 40. It seemed that the interviewers viewed this as a learning opportunity, to find out more about the lives of migrant workers, and in some cases, they stated explicitly that they wanted to know more about the difficult circumstances that migrant workers find themselves in Singapore. Several of the interviewers were more skilled in interviewing and this made their motivations for being involved less explicit. For others, the type of question and the line of questioning revealed their more 'activist' reasons for conducting the interview.

Choice of Interviewees

The project recruited interviewees through the familiar networks of partner NGOs involved in local work on migrant workers' welfare. Undoubtedly, this skewed the sample of interviewees to exclude migrant workers who were not involved in or part of this network.

All the interviewees were members of various migrant worker NGOs. The four Tamil men interviewed came from the shelter run by HOME at Desker Road; the three male Chinese interviewees came from the Healthserve, which runs a clinic, pro bono legal consultation and other welfare services in Geylang; the four female Indonesians joined us from the Indonesian Family Network (IFN); the two

Filipina interviewees were already volunteers at Migrant Voices; the three male Thai interviewees were recruited from the Friends of Thai Workers (FTOW) which runs free English classes every Sunday.

As the above shows, we relied heavily on MV's existing migrant worker networks and NGOs, such as the residents of the HOME shelters, HealthServe and IFN. In particular, the residents of the shelters had negative working or living experiences in Singapore and their primary concerns were about their rehabilitation and compensation. These dominated their narrative. There was a second level of selection which was outside the control of the project: the way in which the message about the purpose of the interviews was mediated by the several organisations and their gatekeepers who had privileged access to the interviewees. For instance, the managers of the partner NGOs chose interviewees based on their own understanding of what an interesting and relevant migrant life story would be.

Matching interviewers and interviewees

The interviewers were assigned to potential interviewees based on their language ability. We arranged for the interviewers to take part in NGO activities and to develop rapport with members of NGO groups and potential interviewees. Even though there were regular meetings with the project leader to assess their progress in establishing relationships, the matching of interviewer to interviewee

was a relatively fluid affair.

The Interview Process

The interviews were shaped first and foremost by the character of transnational gendered division of labour in Southeast Asia. The male interviewees—the Thais, PRCs, and South Asians—worked in construction and ship-building; and both sets of female interviewees—Filipino and Indonesian—were domestic helpers.

In querying the interview narratives, we found that certain trajectories of personal experience were privileged over others. In the case of the male interviews, both interviewees and interviewers pursued avenues of inquiry on work-related injuries and contractual disputes—these were dominant themes in the narratives. Because of the nature of our recruitment channels (the NGO-run aid and shelter centres; HOME and Healthserve), the majority of male interviewees were mired in contractual disputes and struggling with work injuries. Many had been jobless for quite a while and a minority even homeless. The Thai interviewees were comparatively well-off, but even so there were tremendous restrictions of time and freedom of movement where it was not possible for the interviewers to get to know the men better—a prerequisite for more meaningful conversations. Indeed, the fact that these men went for English lessons on their only day off in the week suggested

that they were perhaps the exception rather than the norm.

The interviews left several kinds of impressions. The Chinese interviewees were more politicised than the other male interviewers, and they eagerly discussed mainland Chinese and Singaporean politics and social affairs. Indeed, they were less formal with their interviewers, and at the risk of over-statement or over-generalisation, we must observe that there was a rather less rigid adherence to the life trajectory of 'studying, saving up, and living disciplined lives', which was more keenly felt in the Tamil and Thai interviews. The women we interviewed were all domestic helpers and enjoyed relative privileges in comparison with their peers – mobility (day off); and able to take part in NGO community activities. In comparison, the female narratives were more diverse. It is perhaps reflective of their situation and position within their respective NGO groups and community support networks. Theirs was the more confident outlook of someone involved as an activist—as opposed to someone being helped by an activist.

Findings: Talking freely vs Talking without an agenda

Case Study I: Interviews with Indonesian domestic workers

In the previous sections, we present the findings of our investigation, starting with a description of the wider context of NGO activism in Singapore and how this

grounds, pervades and frames the networks, institutions, and actors in a particular context and background that is unique to Singapore. Next, we consider the more micro aspects of role, identity and positionality in relation to the recruitment of interviewers, the sample of interviewees and the matching of the two for interview sessions. Finally, the interplay of all these elements is illustrated through two case studies of interviews conducted with Indonesian and Indian migrant workers.

The Interviewees: The Indonesian Family Network (IFN)

It is no exaggeration to say that the Indonesian interviews would not have taken place without the involvement of the IFN. The IFN is the only NGO-connected network in Singapore run by Indonesian women for Indonesian women; it is an informal group operating an emergency helpline and counselling aid for housekeepers, run on a volunteer basis. The IFN has been one of MV's closest partners since MV's inception in 2006, and its members constitute a critical base of volunteers for most of MV's artistic and cultural projects. The project leader was introduced to about 10 of their members after his project proposal was accepted. Many of these IFN members were at the time already working with MV on an exhibition of photography by migrant workers called InsideOut II, held at the LaSalle College of the Arts. The process of explaining the project to them and listening to their views about it was the first step he had to take in establishing

relevance, interest and trust.

Four things stood out at the meeting. First, that these women could take part in IFN activities on Sundays meant that they enjoyed a weekly day off: a relative privilege for domestic helpers. Second, because the project leader was new to MV, the credibility of the project for these Indonesian women hinged upon its endorsement by MV's President, and a handful of veteran IFN members who saw an intrinsic value in it. Third, there was an almost immediate agreement amongst the women that their life stories were to educate Singaporeans (though what exactly people needed to learn about them was not openly discussed). Fourth, the women were keenly aware of and keen to assert their own position as collaborators, and not just interview subjects; as one of them put it to him at the meeting, 'If you help us, we will help you.' That we would advance the concerns of the community, and the very limited (and self-selective) profile of potential interviewees, was readily apparent and assumed. In short, what enabled the involvement of the women from IFN was a combination of their relative privileges (e.g. of mobility and resources), the personal involvement and enthusiasm of leaders within the group, and the prior history of sustained and intimate collaboration between the two organizations.

We must point out that while we did not intend the IFN to be the sole source of interviewees, it was the only viable one at that juncture. There were problems

with other sources which we were unable to address. In the case of a partner NGO which operated a shelter for instance, there were concerns about the emotional and psychological frailties of the women in their care and how they would respond to being interviewed. There was also the question, which was repeatedly posed to us by groups and gatekeepers who did not share IFN's close working relationship with MV, of how these interviews could benefit participants materially and further the welfare of foreign domestic helpers in concrete and tangible ways. These doubts could not be easily assuaged with rhetorical assurances and abstract theories of social change and self-empowerment. Indeed, the pressures of material constraint and physical isolation meant that many domestic helpers could not commit to a long-term project; and that they would remain indifferent as long as it had little immediate bearing on their personal lives. There were certainly profound anxieties from the outset about these limitations: how they would shape and constrain the narratives we would get; and what they meant for the feasibility in the longer term of a more comprehensive archive project.

The Interviewers

The interview team comprised of three female third-year mass-communication students from the National Technological University of Singapore. All three are very good friends. They are Singaporean citizens and are of Malay ethnicity.

Rasyida initiated an email correspondence after seeing a call for volunteers placed by Migrant Voices on http://www.we-are-aware.sg (this is a website and forum page formed in 2009 in response to the perceived appropriation of the NGO AWARE by a Protestant group; it mobilised a large groundswell of interest in local civil society during the height of the intense media scrutiny). In response to the project leader's request, Rasyida recruited her friends who formed the rest of the interview team. Two in the group have had prior experience in voluntary welfare and social work. However, none of them had any experience in NGO work involving domestic helpers and migrant workers.

Matching Interviewer and Interviewee: The Process

Part of the methodology entailed getting the interviewers and interviewees to interact. Two sessions were conducted on different Sunday afternoons in MV's shophouse, which was a familiar and sympathetic space for the IFN women. The meetings aimed to be as informal and fluid as possible: they took place in a living room layout and drinks were provided; there was no facilitation and the women formed their own groups and chatted amongst themselves. The project leader discreetly observed the meeting from a table in a separate section of the room.

The first hurdle encountered at the meeting was language. It soon became obvious that despite the avowals of ethnolinguistic affinity from both parties in

advance of the meeting, an elaborate performance of cultural differentiation and prestige was being enacted. The interviewees were called upon during the conversation to come up with a litany of Bahasa Malay equivalents of Bahasa Indonesian words. The Indonesian women amused themselves with the contrast, occasionally voicing the longer and more intricate units of their own language in unison with the truncated Malay equivalents. The interviewers had to apologise for their lack of fluency in the language. There was an implicit assertion of cultural prestige, a position as poorer cultural cousins, that the Indonesian women were keen to emphasise to their Malay interlocutors; a point unwittingly underscored by one of the interviewers who told the project leader after the first meeting that 'our language is a *diluted* version of Bahasa.'

It should be said, however, that one of the striking features of this intercultural positioning was its double aspect: the Malay interviewers were marked simultaneously as both insiders and outsiders. As one of the IFN women put it in a recent interview with the authors of the paper,

> if the interviewer can speak Bahasa Indonesia, it would have been a much better interview… the two languages are like different dialects. It would be more comfortable to have someone who could speak Bahasa Indonesia (notes from interview with Lily and Maznah, 2 March 2010).

Nevertheless, she could claim in the same interview that

She felt comfortable with Rasyida because she was Malay and so the race is almost the same (notes from interview with Lily and Maznah, 2 March 2010).

The second and more intractable difference was in age and life experience. It was hard to miss the homogeneity of the interviewers who belong to a singular demographic: they were all young female varsity students from local middle-class backgrounds. The disparity in age and life experience between the two groups was compounded by the fact that, for all their experience with local community welfare organizations, the interviewers had no prior experience with domestic helpers and migrant worker NGOs. This absence of prior knowledge about the specificities of the migrant condition was not an issue in the meetings, but would create crucial asymmetries and faultlines in the subsequent interviews.

Bahasa Positionality. Talking without an Agenda: Power Relations and the Politics of Representation

As we observed earlier, the central aim in our pre-planned interview technique was to ensure that the structures of relevance were not ours but of those whose voices we sought. To achieve this, we hoped to reduce the 'contaminating' influence of the interviewer and to cut through to the different slices of migrant worker life by focussing the interviews on three object categories (i. objects brought from homeland; ii. objects imported from their homeland which they often

purchased and used in Singapore; and iii. objects that made them feel part of or marginalised in Singapore). However, within the activist framework of the Indonesian interviews, this device was now a problem. The notion of talking about life vaguely without an agenda collided starkly with their notion of what the interview was for. Two issues rendered the interview technique particularly ineffective with two interviewees,

  i.   The power relations between interviewers and interviewees.

  i.   The narrators' acute awareness of the interview as a struggle over how foreign domestic helpers are understood and portrayed to the public.

In the first instance, precisely where we sought to minimise the interviewers' presence, Lily and Maznah demanded evidence of their commitment to their cause—which they constantly assessed in the interviews by observing the questions asked and the kind of responses elicited. They had situated power and authority specifically in knowledge about migrant worker problems. They had sophisticated ways of gauging the level of knowledge and calibrating the parameters of their relationships with interviewers. Questions to which answers were self-evident, insufficient responses, or a constant stream of mute assent, were quickly perceived as gaps in knowledge. Maznah suggested in a recent interview with the authors of the paper that Rasyida's interview did not make for a good interviewing experience

because she did not have a lot of experience about migrant workers. She felt that Rasyida asked many questions that required herself and Lily to provide basic information about Indonesian domestic workers and that this was quite tedious. In her view, age was not an issue; what was more important was having someone who understands the situation that migrant workers find themselves in in Singapore. In her view, the value of the dialogue was inextricable from the larger agenda of advocacy and counselling for the migrant worker cause. She wanted to share different cases presented by domestic workers, and to get advice on how to deal with these cases, and Rasyida was not able to provide that dialogue.

Beyond these acute positionings of knowledge and power lay another trickier engagement: the test of solidarity. In the interview Lily and Maznah tried on several attempts to sound Rasyida out on the issue of Malay employers and their behaviour toward Indonesian domestic helpers. (A note on this subject: Lily and Maznah claimed in the interviews with the authors that Malays are the worst employers out of all ethnic groups; common complaints range from customary arrears in salary payment, mistreatment, and mistrust; these observations were attributed to experience on the IFN helpline). Unfortunately all Rasyida did was to agree. It is not clear to the authors whether she felt uncomfortable, or if she did not know enough to hold an opinion. What concerned us more was why Lily and

Maznah felt they had to draw Rasyida out on the subject of Malay employers by virtue of the fact that she was Malay. If it was already evident from the start that she had no experience with migrant problems, what was to be gained by making her answer for other people? Could that be fairly expected of her? What was at stake? In our interviews with them Lily and Maznah suggested that they wanted to have a conversation with her to see if Rasyida could illuminate, explain or add to the topic—and they were disappointed that all she did was to agree. But this response seems to us to elide a more salient prerogative: that getting Rasyida to speak dispassionately about the 'Malay-Indonesian Problem' was a way of testing her solidarity with the Indonesian foreign domestic workers' cause —'knowledge', in this instance, was merely perceived as a function of a critical attitude and reflexivity.

On hindsight, the contest over the types of narration and knowledge to be produced by the interviews and the methods used to elicit them was already enjoined from the outset by Maznah—who refused to bring an object to the interview. When the authors of the paper asked her recently if she thought the interview technique of bringing objects was necessary to the interview, she declared it impractical and ridiculous. Lily, on the other hand, said that it was useful to have the object because some people, even Indonesians themselves,would

not know about her city. Her reason for talking about her city was to show that her city has a 'good side'.

The purpose of the interview was clear to both interviewees—to talk about the circumstances that Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore find themselves in so that the interviewers and Singaporeans in general would become aware of the pressures and hardships they face. In addition, the interview was seen as a way of redressing attitudes that Singaporeans have towards Indonesian domestic workers. However, they were also conscious of the representativeness (or lack thereof) of their own stories, the way in which the stories of other domestic workers they recounted are portrayed to Singaporeans by these interviews, and what should be portrayed.

The role and identity of both Lily and Maznah, as represented by them, are firmly rooted within the context of the Indonesian domestic worker community in Singapore, where they are perceived as leaders and role models. They approached the interview in this vein, using it as an opportunity to advocate for others, not as an opportunity to speak about their own personal experiences. Moreover, both Maznah and Lily were aware of portrayals that could potentially affirm the cliché of the 'good migrant'. They appreciated the complexities of the lives of other Indonesian women here and did not see themselves as being representative. In that

light, they felt that there was no point in telling their story as it was not representative.

> Maznah: 'My story is funny', 'successful'. There are other stories that are sad. (notes from an interview with Lily and Maznah, 2 March 2010).

Case Study II: Interviews with Indian construction workers

Choice of Interviewees

The Tamil interviewees were residents of the HOME Men's shelter. The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) is a registered society formed in 2004 to provide direct services and assistance for the special needs of the low-wage migrant worker community. In addition to running advisory helpdesks, telephone helplines and skills upgrading courses for migrant workers, HOME also operates a men and womens' shelter for homeless migrant workers embroiled in contract disputes with their employers or are awaiting insurance settlements for work-related injuries. HOME, along with TWC2 and Migrant Voices, is a co-signatory of the 'Solidarity for Migrant Workers' MOU, facilitating the sharing of resources and collaboration between the three organisations. Leveraging on this framework, the Migrant Voices project leader approached the welfare executive of HOME, to source for volunteers for the Oral History Archive project.

The welfare executive, familiar with MV's role as an arts advocacy group, chose the interviewees for the novelty of their contractual disputes, often resulting from work-related injuries. She felt that these unprecedented cases needed public airing in order to sway policy and effect public education on the complexities and vagaries of migrant worker vulnerability in Singapore. Once she chose the interviewees, she briefed them about MV and she described the Oral History Archive Project as a 'research project' that sought to increase public awareness about migrant workers. She also told them explicitly why she had chosen them for the interviews: that it was because she felt that theirs were unusual cases of contractual disputes arising from work-related injuries; and that she wanted their stories to serve as examples and case studies for future reference.

Choosing the Interviewers

The Tamil interviewer team comprised of Shubhashree, Varun and Prashant. Shubhashree, in her thirties, was born in India, speaks Tamil and lives in Singapore. She worked in the IT sector. She responded to the call for volunteers on the Arts Community listserve as she found the project interesting and felt that she could contribute with her Tamil language skills. Varun was also born in India and speaks Tamil. He responded to a call for volunteers on the Arts Community listserve as he was aware of negative public perception of migrant workers and

wanted to discover more of the real migrant experience and help change public perception. Prashant is a Singapore-born Tamil speaking male in his thirties working in the arts and catering industry. He was a committee member of Migrant Voices and was familiar with the issues that some migrant workers had to contend with. He participated in the project as it was a novel way of reaching out to more migrant workers to understand their emotions and experience.

In terms of dynamics within the team, although Prashant had most experience in engaging migrant workers, he initially took a back seat during the interview. This was due to the fact that he joined the team late and wanted to observe the methodology prior to taking an active role in the interview process. During the interviews, Varun would take the lead in asking the questions, with Shubhashree and Prashant interjecting with clarifying questions.

*Interviewer–Interviewee Interaction: Knowledge, Power and Identiti*es

There were no clear negotiation of identities between the interviewers and interviewees. This could be attributed to the prepping of the interviewees by the welfare executive which positioned the interviewers within the institutional framework of Migrant Voices. The recognition that the interviewers were from an NGO that aimed to better the migrant condition in Singapore elided the gap that existed between the middle class interviewers and the low-wage migrant worker. In

a sense, the recognition that the interviewees possessed valuable knowledge that was of interest to the activist-interviewer could have levelled the power relations and empowered the migrant worker. One can surmise that in such a context the identity of the interviewers had limited bearing on the course of the interview, as the interviewees already had a pre-fixed notion on what they wanted said and recorded.

Varun: The Empathetic Activist

Varun stuck to the prescribed methodology of asking open-ended questions relating to the objects that the interviewees had brought or were talking about. However, in his email correspondence with the writers, he shared:

> I felt that (migrant workers) are often misunderstood and mistreated. I wanted to help in the process of voicing out their stories and enabling society to read about their lives. I guess, in some ways, I was wishful that it would contribute towards changing public attitude towards migrant workers.

Varun clearly made attempts to draw out the more complete humanistic portrayal of the migrant worker by positioning him not as an individual but rather as a member of a larger family unit. In the exchange below, Varun's question chooses not to dwell on the causes of injury but on post-injury familial relations and interaction.

> Question: Do people at home know about your injury?

> Ravi: I normally don't go to work on Sunday's but I went on that day. Hmm, after I got hurt, I couldn't talk much. When I went to the hospital, the nurse asked me if I wanted to call someone. I couldn't talk much then. They took stuff out of my stomach and asked me if I wanted to tell anyone at home. I said that I have a brother here and he can be told. So they tried to tell my brother, but I think they were unclear about my name. So they went back and forth with my brother. He finally knew only after 3 days.

Shubhashree: Activist-Convert

While Varun took the lead in the interviews, Shubhashree seemed more comfortable intervening to clarify on details and draw out specificities. This could be attributed to her lack of familiarity with migrant workers and her perception that the main objective of the project was to 'draw them out, get them talking about their lives here, and their lives back in India – and gain a better understanding (and present it to the public) about the lives they lead' (email interview). She confessed that there was no particular reason for choosing to work with migrant workers and hence adopts a neutral approach during the interviews.

However, it is also important to note that her positionality shifts after her involvement in the project. In response to the writers' query on why she volunteered for the project, she shares that was 'no particular reason at that point of time – although, now I would readily jump at a chance to work with the workers, since the project has given me lots of insight into their lives, and I'm keen to help

in any way I can'. While there is no clear indication within the transcripts of her shift in positionality, we could postulate that Shubhashree would have adopted a more activist approach in future interviews.

Prashant: Inexperienced Activist-Interviewer

While Prashant went into the interviews with knowledge of the experience of migrant workers, he was involved in the project at a late stage and thus initially adopted an observer's approach, before adopting a similar approach as Shubhashree in asking questions that would draw out personalised reflections on specific incidents. In asking direct questions like 'When was the last time you went home?' and 'What did you buy then?', Prashant aimed to avoid generalisations in the narratives. On two occasions where he had prior knowledge of the migrant experience, Prashant tried to engage broader issues such as integration in public spaces ('Do you visit other places in Singapore?'). However, the responses from the workers remained circumscribed within the framework of the set of objectives, conceptions, and values which they assumed were shared between the interviewers and themselves.

Tamil Positionality 1. Talking with an Agenda: Manipulation, Motivations and Motions

Manipulation & Motivations

As previously mentioned, the interviewees were deliberately selected by the welfare executive. She had briefed them on MV as an activist NGO and selected them to showcase their stories and plights with the specific objective of increasing public awareness. This pre-interviewing briefing pre-emptively shaped the mental frame of the interviewees, resulting them in focusing on their struggles, frustrations and post-injury experience, centred particularly around their experiences with the NGO. An example of an exchange during Selvaraj's interview:

> Shubhashree: What else would you like to say?
> Selvaraj: What else can I say? It's been about 10 months since my injury, and I just go operated upon. Still my vision is not very clear. They're good here, but they're taking time here – back home they would've finished treatment in a month.

Following Selvaraj's recounting of his brother's accident in India, there was a considerable pause in the interview. Shubhashree then prompted Selvaraj with an open-ended question if he had anything to say. Selvaraj took this as a cue to talk about his injury and the inefficient healthcare he received in Singapore.

A similar question to Selvaraj and Mahesh reveal a particular framing in their mental time frame.

> Prashant: Do you go to other places in Singapore?
> Mahesh: After this incident (injury), I have not been able to go to other places.
> Prashant: Before that?

Mahesh: Before that, I would go to work at 8 in the morning. It is 7-8 PM by the time I am done and get back home. After that, I need to cook and eat. I need to sleep so that I can wake up at 5 AM and get ready for work. On Sunday's alone, I go to Tekka (a place in Little India). I am let out from work by 5 PM, and go there and hang out till 10-10.30 PM. I don't go anywhere else.

Prashant: Do you visit other places in Singapore?
Selvaraj: Other places? The other day they took us out, like tourists. The previous week we went to Botanic Gardens. HOME (shelter) celebrated 5 year of being. They took us to East Coast Park this week. We played and cycled. We had competitions, cycling, football. Cycling we won. Chinese didn't win in anything. The Bangla guys won the football match. One tamil guy coached us. We won prize for cycling. They gave us one meal, cold drinks, a phone card. We went at 8.30 in the morning, and returned only by 6. Haven't gone anywhere else. I want to visit Sentosa, I haven't been able to visit only that, because of the treatment, else I would've gone.

The interviewer's aim in asking this particular question was to explore the integration of migrant workers in public spaces in Singapore and to understand why migrant workers tended to gather at particular public spaces along racial and national lines. However, based on the immediate responses of the two migrant workers, it appears that the assumption was that the interviewer was interested in the worker's post-injury experience. The pre-injury experience would have been considered too banal for the public.

It is understandable that the interviewees would keep returning to their post-injury experiences. However, we must also recognise that the pre-briefing by the welfare executive, the workers' assumptions of MV's interest areas, and the location of the interviews at the HOME shelter influenced the positionality of the interviewees. The motivations behind their responses may have gone beyond a simple life history narrative to encompass a wider activist discourse centred on their life experience after the work-related injuries. This is evident in the exchange with Selvaraj below, where he starts by talking about his experience in hospital, and then moves into a sharing of the collective experience of migrant workers at the HOME shelter.

> Prashant: Which hospital do you go to?
> Selvaraj: It used to be Changi Hospital, but now it's Outram Park, but it's the same doctor. 10 months is too long, but it's difficult – what do we do about food… we struggle a lot. Morning breakfast is at Sutha's, lunch we cook here at HOME (shelter for men), dinner – we either eat or go to bed early without dinner. Sometimes we eat late lunch around 3, so we just drink some coffee and sleep early. We eat if there's money, otherwise we don't. If there's no place at the HOME shelter then it's very difficult. Some companies are good, some cheat us. Many people come here from India thinking it's really nice here…but it's a struggle.

Hence it is evident that even though interviewers deliberately used open-ended questions, the interviewees tended to speak to a preconceived notion of the

'common agenda'.

Motions

Following this, Ravi went one step further to propose national policy solutions to improve the migrant condition.

> ... the Spore government should have an office in India and they should have officers as agents who should create awareness through newspapers and stick posters. And let everyone know where people are coming from. No company is given manpower without the MOM's permission. So the MOM will know where the workers are coming from. They should stick posters in cities where most people come from and tell them how their reputation is also getting spoilt, and tell them not to pay and get cheated by agents. They should tell them that someone wants to work in Singapore, they should approach the office, and they themselves will conduct tests and hire them directly. They should advertise such things, then such problems won't happen. If there's an office like that under the MoM/Singapore government, they won't lie. And things like agents cheating us won't happen.

Here, Ravi takes an authoritative approach in proposing solutions for their predicaments. While the transnational solution he recommends could potentially be feasible, his activist approach here belies his lack of agency in making this happen. He possibly looks to the institutional support of Migrant Voices and its NGO partners to raise awareness and effect policy changes.

Tamil Positionality 2. Perpetuating the Migration Cycle

A dominant narrative which surfaces in all three interviews is the issue of perpetuating the migration cycle by not fully informing family back home on their experiences here in Singapore. Mahesh and Ravi raised this in their interviews:

> Mahesh: My brothers have been here for a while and I was convinced to come by them. They struggled and yet told me to come without warning me about the challenges here – I have struggled here.

> Ravi: One of my friends Naresh, came here to work with a company and in four months, he wasn't needed for work even a single day. He was given 200 dollars for his expenses. He then took the case to MoM and fought and went back home finally. We don't tell our families of these troubles…they will worry a lot.

The contradiction is even starker in Selvaraj's interview:

> Selvaraj: If there's no place at the HOME shelter then it's very difficult. Some companies are good, some cheat us. *Many people come here from India thinking it's really nice here…but it's a struggle.*
> Prashant: Have you told your family about this?
> Selvaraj: *My folks back home don't know about my injury. They will be really pained if they learn of it.* This has happened once before. I hadn't called home for about 8 months when I was in Malaysia once, and my grandma was very upset. And they will fight, that's why I don't tell them. If I tell my Dad I'm hurt, he will start drinking, then he will fight with my mother. Such things happen, that's why I don't tell them.

While Mahesh and Selvaraj attribute their problems in Singapore to a lack of full knowledge of the working conditions here, all three interviewees seem to

perpetuate this by not informing their family of the negative aspects of their experiences here. Constrained by the fear of the impact on their future in Singapore, the stories they tell their families will inevitably continue the vicious cycle of ill-informed migrant workers coming to Singapore in search of a better life. A key observation here is that even though the interviewees were 'enlightened' by their experiences here, they seem to perpetuate the problems that they criticise. This contradiction can be reflective of their positions of 'knowing what is good' and yet unable to 'do what is good' due to external reasons such as institutional and structural constraints.

Final observations on our findings and where this all leads us

Oral life narratives are, by their very nature, personal and subjective. This is where their strengths lie. We are told, in the interviewee's voice, about the events in her life, and how she makes sense of and attaches meaning to them. However, the way that human beings make sense of the world and their experiences is mediated by intersubjectivity and filtered through their specific understanding of their own positionality and those of their interlocutors.

> All personal narratives have a political function in that they produce a certain way of seeing the world which privileges certain interests (stories and meanings) over others, regardless of whether or not they contain

explicit political content (Langellier, 1989, p. 271).

As our discussion above illustrates, we cannot separate the construction of a personal narrative from the role and identity of the interviewee and the interviewer, the setting in which the interview is conducted, nor the institutional fabric that individuals are embedded in. This is even more palpable in the case of the Oral History Project. All of the narratives collected were produced in the context of an activist milieu – the actors were drawn from NGO institutions and associated networks. In fact, as illustrated above, interviewees were often confused or bewildered when the interviewers attempted to divert the narrative away from an explicit activist agenda.

Knowing that the narratives will inevitably be guided by personal and wider contextual factors, does this mean that the creation of an archive of personal stories is any less valid and worthwhile? This depends on the purpose of the archive; the aims of the Oral History Archive Project are to inform social activism, education and scholarly research. It is argued here that these purposes can be fulfilled, as illustrated by other archival projects, such as Panos London, which focuses on advocacy, and the Centre of Oral History and Digital Story telling at Concordia University which focuses on academic research.

However, we need to approach this enterprise responsibly, fully cognisant of

the implications of our actions. The very act of interviewing, recording, analysing and (re)presenting oral life narratives in an archive is a process by which a body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established as 'reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). At the very least, the role, identity and positionality of the actors and institutions involved in the Oral History Project need to be made explicit. Stories are circumscribed by individuals' perceptions of time and space, and are limited to the immediacy and physical proximity of actors and networks; they are isolated from institutional and social frameworks and they valorize the personal over the institutional. Thus, an archive of the life stories of migrant workers has to be valued and recognised for its contribution to our understanding of the social, political and economic realities of migration in Singapore, but this has to be done within the context of institutional and social structures, the data for which may not necessarily reside in life stories.

In addition, including certain narratives, and not others, legimitises—and by default, delegitimises—certain groups of migrant workers and their life experiences. If the purpose of creating an oral archive is to give voice to migrant workers living in Singapore, it follows that we cannot record only the voices of those who are louder or already being heard. We need to look actively for migrant workers who are not involved in or enfolded within the activist institutional

framework so as to present narratives that represent as wide a section of the migrant worker population as possible.

Conclusion

To approach the interviews with migrant workers with the goal of minimising the dominant structures of relevance is futile and unmeaningful. What we have learnt is that knowledge production is peripheral, reciprocal, and mediated, and that the processes of knowledge production and collaboration within the prevalent political and institutional structures have to be articulated, acknowledged and accounted for more explicitly.

In addition, what we have learnt is that we cannot use the methods in their current form. There needs to be more collaboration with migrant workers about the relevance of these interviews to them. Indeed, these narratives should be seen as a by-product of a far more important process, of assisting migrant workers in the goals towards self-actualisation, whatever that means to them. We propose that assistance for workers needs to be more decisively integrated into the project, not just as a formal partnership but also as a practical one. This requires a process that is participatory, that gives voice to migrant workers not as circumscribed by the personal and political inclinations of project leaders or nongovernmental

organisations, but by co-designing an interview method that serves the purposes of the interviewees as well as the archive. This understanding of the project's collaborative practices extends also to our networks of interviewers. In order for the interviewers to elicit more meaningful and fuller narratives from their interviewees, they need more time to form friendships that are not solely functional for the time allocated to the interviewing process. One possible solution is to enlist more interviewers and to assign a small number of interviewees to them, while extending the time frame of the project. A more exact approach ought to be developed which will enable activist-interviewers to be more 'conscientised' in order for them to be more self-reflexive.

An oral history project about migrant workers in Singapore has to cope with particular and difficult challenges of positionality. We argue that instead of seeing these as limitations in and of themselves, they are also the conditions of possibility for a reflexive and politically engaged collaborative endeavour.[1]

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[1] Note: we have preferred the feminine as the default, gender-neutral pronoun in the essay so as to identify with the feminist philosophy of language, and to counter the male bias which is particularly ingrained in the English language.

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