

CAN THERE BE A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY?

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Synopsis — Many feminist scholars have identified ethnographic methods as ideally suited to feminist research because its contextual, experiential approach to knowledge eschews the false dualisms of positivism and, drawing upon such traditionally female strengths as empathy and human concern, allows for an egalitarian, reciprocal relationship between knower and known. This paper discusses the irony that ethnographic methods also subject research subjects to greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher than does much positivist research. Fieldwork and its textual products represent an intervention into a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The paper calls for greater dialogue between feminism and the new ethnography which addresses similar methodological concerns and suggests certain constraints on that dialogue.

Most feminist researchers, committed, at a minimum, to redressing the sexist imbalances of masculinist scholarship, appear to select their research projects on substantive grounds. Personal interests and skills meld, often mysteriously, with collective feminist concerns to determine a particular topic of research, which, in turn, appears to guide the research methods employed in its service. Indeed, in such a fashion, I chose my last project, a study of patriarchy and revolution in China designed to address major theoretical questions about Western feminism and socialism. The nature of this subject, compounded by limitations in my training, necessitated the macro-structural, abstract approach based almost exclusively on library research that I adopted. And, as a consequence, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, its textual product, offered an analysis of socialism and patriarchy which, as several reviewers justly complained, left out stories about actual women or patriarchs (Stacey, 1983). My dissatisfaction with that kind of research process and outcome led me to privilege methodological considerations over substantive interests when I selected my current research project, a fieldwork study of family and gender relationships in Cali-

fornia's Silicon Valley. I was eager for a "hands on," face-to-face research experience, which I also believed was more compatible with feminist principles.

Although there is no uniform canon of feminist research principles, and many lively debates about whether there should be, and, if so, what one should contain, still it is possible to characterize a dominant conception of feminist research currently prevailing among feminist scholars. Most view feminist research as primarily research on, by, and especially *for* women and draw sharp distinctions between the goals and methods of mainstream and feminist scholarship.¹ Feminist scholars evince widespread disenchantment with the dualisms, abstractions, and detachment of positivism, rejecting the separations between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and political and personal as well as their reflections in the arbitrary boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. Instead most feminist scholars advocate an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge which grounds theory contextually in the concrete realm of women's everyday lives. The "actual experience and language of women is the

I am grateful to Gloria Bowles, Mary Frank Fox, Carole Joffe, Suad Joseph, and Barrie Thorne for challenging and constructive responses to an early draft of this paper

¹Perhaps the most comprehensive summary of the characteristic distinctions between these approaches which feminists draw appears in several pages of tables detailing contrasts between the two in Reinharz (1983: 168-72).

central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship," asserts Barbara Du Bois in an essay advocating "Passionate Scholarship," and only a minority of feminist scholars would dissent (Du Bois, 1983: 108). Indeed feminists tend to celebrate "feeling, belief, and experientially based knowledge," which draw upon such traditionally feminine capacities as intuition, empathy, and relationship (Stanley and Wise, 1983a). Discussions of feminist methodology generally assault the hierarchical, exploitative relations of conventional research, urging feminist researchers to seek instead an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her "subjects" (Duelli Klein, 1983; Du Bois, 1983; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a, 1983b). "A methodology that allows for women studying women in an interactive process," Renate Duelli Klein argues, "will end the exploitation of women as research objects" (Duelli Klein, 1983: 95).

Judged by such criteria, the ethnographic method, by which I mean intensive participant-observation study which yields a synthetic cultural account, appears ideally suited to feminist research. That is why in "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology," an essay reflecting on the limitations of feminist efforts to transform sociology, Barrie Thorne and I wondered with disappointment why so few feminist sociologists had turned to the ethnographic tradition of community studies within the discipline, a tradition that seemed to us far more compatible with feminist principles than are the more widely practiced positivist methods (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). Many other feminist scholars share the view that ethnography is particularly appropriate to feminist research (Duelli Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a, 1983b). Like a good deal of feminism, ethnography emphasizes the experiential. Its approach to knowledge is contextual and interpersonal, attentive like most women, therefore, to the concrete realm of everyday reality and human agency. Moreover, because in ethnographic studies the researcher herself is the primary medium, the "instrument" of research, this method draws on those resources of empathy, connection, and concern that many feminists

consider to be women's special strengths and which they argue should be germinal in feminist research. Ethnographic method also appears to provide much greater respect for and power to one's research "subjects" who, some feminists propose, can and should become full collaborators in feminist research (Duelli Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a).

This, at least, is how ethnography appeared to me as I found myself unintentionally but irresistibly drawn to it in a study originally intended to be based on more conventional interview methods. An ethnographic approach seemed to resolve the "contradiction in terms" involved in interviewing women that Anne Oakley had identified in her critique of classical sociological interview methods (Oakley, 1981). Oakley rejected the hierarchical, objectifying, and falsely "objective" stance of the neutral, impersonal interviewer as neither possible nor desirable, arguing that meaningful and feminist research depends instead on empathy and mutuality. And I was reassured by Shulamit Reinharz's assertion that the problems of experiential fieldwork methodology "seem minor in comparison with the quality of relations that I develop with people involved in the study and the quality of the understanding that emerges from those relations" (Reinharz, 1983: 185).

But now after two and half years of fieldwork experience, I am less sanguine and more focused on the difficult contradictions between feminist principles and ethnographic method I have encountered than on their compatibility. Hence the question in my title which is modelled (but with a twist) on the implicit question in Oakley's "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." The twist is that I now perceive the opposite contradiction between feminist ethics and methods than the one that Oakley discusses. I find myself wondering whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation.

There are two major areas of contradiction I wish to discuss. The first involves the ethnographic research process, the second its product. Precisely because ethnographic research depends upon human relationship,

engagement, and attachment, it places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer, as the following vignette from my fieldwork illustrates. One of my key informants, now a married, fundamentalist Christian, was involved in a closeted lesbian relationship at the time of her conversion. I first learned of this relationship from her spurned lesbian lover, and this only six months after working in the field. Of course, this immediately placed me in an extremely awkward situation ethically, a situation of triangulation and potential betrayal in relation to these two women and of inauthenticity toward the more secretive one. Several months later (partly, I believe, in response to her perception of my inauthenticity) this informant "came out" to me about this affair, but she asked me to respect the confidentiality of this knowledge when relating to her relatives, friends, and co-workers. Moreover, she and her rejected lover began to compete for my allegiance, sympathy, and ultimately for my view of their shared history.

I could give numerous other examples (such as the case of a secret of paternity, of an illicit affair, and of illicit activities). All placed me in situations of inauthenticity, dissimilitude, and potential, perhaps inevitable betrayal, situations that I now believe are inherent in fieldwork method. For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker's presence may appear to "natives", fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship seems inescapable.

So too does the exploitative aspect of ethnographic process seem unavoidable. The lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power. More times than I would have liked, this study has placed me in a ghoulish, and structurally conflictual relationship to tragedy, a feature of ethnographic process that became particularly graphic during the recent death of another one of my key informants. My ethnographic role consigned me to experience this death both as friend and as researcher, and it

presented me with numerous delicate, confusing dilemmas, such as whether or not, and to whom, to make a gift of the precious, but potentially hurtful tapes of an oral history I had once conducted with the deceased. I was confronted as well with the discomforting awareness that as researcher I stood to benefit from this tragedy. Not only would the funeral and family grieving process serve as further research "opportunity," but also the death may free me to include more of this family's "truths" in my ethnographic account than would have been possible had he lived. This and other fieldwork experiences forced my recognition that conflicts of interest and emotion between the ethnographer as authentic, related person (i.e. participant), and as exploiting researcher (i.e. observer) are also an inescapable feature of ethnographic method.

The second major area of contradiction between feminist principles and ethnographic method involves the dissonance between fieldwork practice and ethnographic product. Despite the aspects of intervention and exploitation I have described, ethnographic method appears to (and often does) place the researcher and her informants in a collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding, but the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants. With very rare exceptions it is the researcher who narrates, who "authors" the ethnography. In the last instance an ethnography is a written document structured primarily by a researcher's purposes, offering a researcher's interpretations, registered in a researcher's voice.²

Here too, therefore, elements of inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal are endemic to ethnography. Perhaps even more than ethnographic process, the published ethnography represents an intervention into the lives

²For just this reason Duelli Klein (1983), Mies (1983), and, to a lesser extent, Stanley and Wise (1983b) argue against this approach and for fuller collaboration between researcher and subjects, particularly for activist research in the tradition of Pablo Freire generated by and accountable to grass roots women's movement projects. But, as Carol Smart (n.d.) as well as Stanley and Wise recognize, such an approach places severe restraints on who and what can be studied and on what could be written, restraints that could seriously harm feminist interests

and relationships of its subjects. As author an ethnographer cannot (and, I believe, should not) escape tasks of interpretation, evaluation, and judgement. It is possible (and most feminists might claim it is crucial) to discuss and negotiate one's final presentation of narrative with informants, but this does not eliminate the problem of authority, and it can raise a host of new contradictions for the feminist ethnographer.³ For example after more than a year and a half and scores of hours of mutual reflections on the meaning of the lesbian relationship mentioned above, this "research collaborator" has asked me to leave this part of her history out of my ethnographic account. What feminist ethical principles can I invoke to guide me here? Principles of respect for research subjects and for a collaborative, egalitarian research relationship would suggest compliance, but this forces me to collude with the homophobic silencing of lesbian experience, as well as to consciously distort what I consider a crucial component of the ethnographic "truth" in my study. Whatever we decide, my ethnography will betray a feminist principle.

Indeed the irony I now perceive is that ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and "masculinist" research methods. The greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship, the greater is the danger.

The account I have just given of the paradoxes of feminist ethnography is itself falsely innocent. I have presented my methodological/ethical quandaries the way that I first conceptualized them as a feminist researcher, innocent as then I was of relevant methodological literature by ethnographers who long have grappled with related concerns. I am no longer so innocent and ignorant, but I retained this construction to help underscore a curious fact. There has been surprisingly little cross-fertilization between the discourses of feminist epistemology and methods and those of the critical traditions within anthro-

pology and sociology.⁴ Most pertinent is the dearth of dialogue between feminist scholarship and the contemporaneous developments in the literature referred to as the "new" or "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" ethnography.⁵ This is curious, because the new or postmodern ethnography is concerned with quite similar issues as those that concern feminist scholars and, at first glance, it offers a potential resolution to the feminist ethnographic paradox.

Postmodern ethnography is critical and self-reflexive ethnography and a literature of meditation on the inherent, but often unacknowledged hierarchical and power-laden relations of ethnographic writing.⁶ Like feminist scholars, critical ethnographers tear the veil from scientific pretensions of neutral observation or description. They attempt to bring to their research an awareness that ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other. In James Clifford's words the "historical predicament of ethnography" is "the fact that it is always caught up in the intervention, not the representation of cultures" (Clifford, 1986: 2). And at rare moments, critical or "postmodern" ethnographers incorporate feminist insights into their reflexive critiques. Vincent Crapanzano, for example, suggests that "Interpretation has been understood as a phallic, a phallic-aggressive, a cruel and violent, a destructive act, and as a fertile, a fertilizing, a fruitful, and a creative one," and he self-consciously retains the male pronoun to refer to the ethnographer "despite his or her sexual identity, for I am writing of a stance

⁴Critical reflections on the ethics and politics of fieldwork have a long history in both disciplines, and by now the literature is vast. (For important examples from the past two decades, see Asad, 1973; Emerson, 1983; Haan, Bellah, Rabinow, and Sullivan, 1983; Hymes, 1974; Thorne, 1978, 1980.)

⁵Howard Becker makes a similar point about the unfortunate paucity of exchange between critical traditions in sociology and poststructuralist anthropology in a review of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), a major text on new ethnography (Becker, 1987).

⁶A good sampler and bibliography of postmodern ethnographic criticism appears in Clifford and Marcus, 1986. Other important texts include Clifford (1983), Crapanzano (1977), and Marcus and Cushman (1982).

³Carol Smart (n.d.) offers important reflections on the adverse implications of this ethical principle when feminists study, as she believes we should, the powerful and the agents of social control rather than their targets.

and not of the person" (Crapanzano, 1986: 52).

As I understand it, the postmodern ethnographic solution to the anthropologist's predicament is to fully acknowledge the limitations of ethnographic process and product and to reduce their claims. Like feminists, critical ethnographers eschew a detached stance of neutral observation, and they perceive their subjects as collaborators in a project the researcher can never fully control. Moreover, they acknowledge the indispensably intrusive and unequal nature of their participation in the studied culture. Even more than most feminist scholars, I believe, critical ethnographers have been excruciatingly self-conscious about the distortions and limitations of the textual products of their studies. Here they have attempted first to fully acknowledge and own the interpretive authorial self and second to experiment with dialogic forms of ethnographic representation that place more of the voices and perspectives of the researched into the narrative and that more authentically reflect the dissonance and particularity of the ethnographic research process.

Finally postmodern ethnographers, influenced by deconstructionist fashions, aim only for "Partial Truths" as James Clifford titled his introduction to a major collection of this genre:

Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted—and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact (Clifford, 1986: 7).

This reflexivity and self-critique of "postmodern" ethnographic literature parallels and has much to contribute to feminist methodological reflections. Perhaps it unwittingly exploits some of the latter as well, as feminist social scientists have published similar reflections on matters of the self, commitment, and partiality in research (Krieger, 1985; Mies, 1983; Rosaldo, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a, 1983b). At the least it could

temper feminist celebrations of ethnographic methods with a salutary note of humility about the limitations of cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding and representation. Certainly I favor much more dialogue and exchange between the two than has taken place to date.

Recently feminist anthropologist Marilyn Strathern also noted the surprising paucity of engagement between feminism and the new ethnography and, in an important contribution to such dialogue, offered an analysis of the grounds for mutual resistance that undergird what she termed the "awkward relationship" between the two (Strathern, 1987). Feminism and critical anthropology, Strathern claims, are mutually "vulnerable on the ethical grounds they hold to be so important": "each has a potential for undermining the other" because they rest upon incompatible constructions of the relationship between self and "Other" (Strathern, 1987: 289). Feminism, Strathern argues, presumes an antagonistic relationship to the male Other, a presumption which grounds its acute sensitivity to power inequalities and has the power to undermine those anthropological pretensions of alliance and collaboration with the Other upon which new ethnographic strategies for multiple authorship reside. Anthropology, in turn, from its cross-cultural vantage-point, suggests the illusory nature of feminist pretensions of actual separation from men of their own culture.

I view the resistances somewhat differently. Feminism's keen sensitivity to structural inequalities in research and to the irreconcilability of Otherness applies primarily, I believe, to its critique of research by men, particularly to research *by* men, but *about* women. The majority of feminist claims about *feminist* ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research, however, presume that such research occurs almost exclusively woman-to-woman. As such feminist researchers are apt to suffer the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness and to suffer it more, I believe, than do most poststructuralist ethnographers. Recall the claims about empathy and identification between feminist researchers and the women they study and the calls by feminist scholars for an egalitarian research process, full col-

laboration, and even multiple authorship with which this essay began. Hence, it strikes me that a fruitful dialogue between feminism and critical ethnography might address their complementary sensitivities and naivetes about the inherent inequalities and the possibilities for relationships in the definition, study, and representation of the Other.

While I hope to further such a dialogue, in the end, I agree with Strathern that the relationship between feminism and ethnography is unavoidably ambivalent. I am less convinced than she of the virtues of this awkwardness, but I agree that while it can be mitigated, it cannot be effaced. Even an exhaustive, mutually beneficial exchange cannot resolve the feminist ethnographer's dilemma. The postmodern strategy is an inadequate response to the ethical issues endemic to ethnographic process and product that I have encountered and described. It acknowledges, but does little to ameliorate the problems of intervention, triangulation, or inherently unequal reciprocity with informants; nor can it resolve the feminist reporting quandries. For example, acknowledging partiality and taking responsibility for authorial construction cannot reduce my handling of the lesbian affair into a matter of "representational tact."

My current response to the question in my title is that while there cannot be a fully feminist ethnography, there can be (indeed there are) ethnographies that are partially feminist, accounts of culture enhanced by the application of feminist perspectives. There also can and should be feminist research that is rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other. Moreover, even after my loss of ethnographic innocence I believe the potential benefits of "partially" feminist ethnography seem worth the serious moral costs involved.

Indeed, as Carole Joffe has suggested to me, my assault on the ethical foundations of fieldwork may have been unduly harsh, a fairer measure, perhaps, of my prior illusions about ethnographic virtue than of ethnographic vice (Joffe, 1986). Certainly, as she and Shulamit Reinharz assert, fieldworkers can and do form valuable relationships with many of those we study, and some of our unsolicited interventions into the lives of our informants are constructive and deeply

appreciated. Just last week, for example, a daughter of the informant whose death I mentioned above consoled me on the sudden death of my own father and thanked me for having allowed her to repair her hostile relationship with her father before he died by helping her to perceive his pride in and identification with her. In certain circumstances fieldwork research offers particular research subjects practical and emotional support and a form of loving attention, of comparatively non-judgmental acceptance, that they come to value deeply.

But then again, beneficiaries of such attention may also come to depend upon it, and this suggests another ethical quandary in fieldwork, the potential for, indeed the likelihood of desertion by the researcher.⁷ Yet rigorous self-awareness of the ethical pitfalls in the method enables one to monitor and then to mitigate some of the dangers to which ethnographers expose their informants. I conclude in this Talmudic fashion to leave the dialogue open, believing that an uneasy fusion of feminist and critical ethnographic consciousness may allow us to construct cultural accounts that, however partial and idiosyncratic, can achieve the contextuality, depth, and nuance I consider to be unattainable through less dangerous, but more remote research methods.

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⁷In her inimitable witty style, Arlene Kaplan Daniels discusses the etiquette of abandoning one's research subjects as well as other ethical questions in fieldwork (Daniels, 1983). I believe that the problem of desertion is more serious in longterm ethnographic studies than in those based on more limited contact characteristic of other forms of qualitative research.

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