

Designer's Corner

The Politics of Feminist Ethnography

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To preface *ethnography* with the word *feminist* is to point out that ethnography (in feminist interviewing, survey research, or other "feminist" research approaches) cannot be conceived of as simply method or technique. Rather, *feminist ethnography* implies a political position in relation to the production of knowledge, which has come to be associated with certain principles.

Feminists invite people to understand and know the world in ways other than through the rigid, unilinear approaches of conventional social science (Smith, 1988). Secondly, feminist researchers are committed to ways of knowing that avoid subordinating their subjects (Ramazanoglu, 1992). Thirdly, feminist writers acknowledge the importance of conveying the complexities of people's lives (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Indeed, how these complexities are understood, by those experiencing them, lies at the heart of knowledge production (Stanley, 1990, 1991).

Designing feminist ethnography (or other feminist research) is not, therefore, simply a matter of following a set of either positivistic or interpretivist conventions in relation to sampling, data collection, and data analysis in order to establish the validity of the knowledge produced (although I would not want to diminish the importance of this "technical" aspect of the research). It is also, and most importantly, a political matter: how principles are put into practice, and for what purposes. In this paper I shall consider issues that arise from putting principles into ethnographic practice, bearing in mind that not all feminists would feel bound by each principle I have cited and that there is great diversity in the approaches taken by feminist ethnographers (Williams, 1993).

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Ways of Understanding and Knowing

Social scientists have tended to draw boundaries between the world of scientific theorizing and the world of everyday life (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1973; Garfinkel, 1967; Shutz, 1973), often concentrating on the former. And we should not assume that ethnography is necessarily a challenge to the emphasis of conventional social science on ideas about objectivity, neutrality, and the construction of a hierarchy of knowledge. Radical ethnographers (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Rabinow, 1977; Said, 1978) have questioned the extent to which an ethnographic text reflects the reality of a field of study, and they usefully demonstrate that ethnographic writing, in constructing "the other" (meaning research subjects), also constructs the ethnographer's "self" or "selves." However, what they have failed to recognize is that in the process they also construct distinct boundaries between researcher and researched that emphasize the differences between, on the one hand, analytic or professional knowledge and theorizing, and, on the other hand, lay knowledge and everyday theorizing (see Williams, 1991, for a fuller discussion of this point).

Feminist challenges to conventional ways of understanding and knowing range from what Harding (1993) describes as spontaneous feminist empiricism to feminist-standpoint theory. Empiricists "think that insufficient care and rigour in following existing methods and norms is the cause of sexist and androcentric results in research" (p. 52), and they aim to improve the rigour in existing research methods. Standpoint theorists, as exemplified by feminists such as Smith (1988), "propose and formulate a sociology from the standpoint of women and follow through its implications for research" (p. 1). This latter approach offers a strong critique of so-called radical alternatives to orthodox ways of knowing the world.

Smith is concerned with preserving the presence of subjects in research, as knowers and actors (1988, p. 105). She writes that "the development of a feminist method has to go beyond our interviewing practices and our research relationships in order to explore methods of thinking that will organise our enquiry," and she calls for ways of writing our texts that preserve the presence of actual subjects (p. 111).

Smith goes on to demonstrate how such research might be designed, and she includes in her discussion the example of how an ethnography might be designed from her own experience as a single parent. This ethnography, she says, would be part of a complex of women's experiences (a number of ethnographies), which when pieced

together would provide an analysis of the organization and relations of "women at work as mothers in relation to children's schooling" (1988, p. 202). In so doing, Smith breaks down the boundaries constructed by orthodox and more radical ethnographers between, on the one hand, analytic or professional academic knowledge, and, on the other hand, lay knowledge (chapters 4 and 5).

Avoiding the Subordination of Subjects

While the focus on a women's perspective is a clear challenge to conventional boundaries set between researcher and researched and between professional and lay knowledges, it has brought the criticism that feminist research is ethnocentric. Harding (1993) responds to this criticism by making the point that those who claim to have produced "universally valid beliefs – principles of ethics, of human nature, epistemologies and philosophies of science – are ethnocentric" (p. 60). Ethnocentrism is a function of the dominant class, which sets the standards (p. 60). The implication is that standpoint theory, insofar as it conceives itself to be historical and changing, is not ethnocentric.

This may be so, but Stanley and Wise (1993, p. 7) write that there is a contradiction in feminist social science:

On the one hand feminist social science proclaimed its egalitarian impulse, but on the other it seemingly welcomed a very traditional and elitist notion of "us," the theorising and researching elite (feminists), and "them," the experiencing researched (women).

Moreover, they argue that feminists have assumed

the existence of a single and unitary "Women" and ignored – or rather silenced – those who were not white, middle class, heterosexual, first world, able bodied, young... (Stanley & Wise 1993, p. 3)

Ahmad (1993) addresses such silencing in relation to the exclusion of black women by U.K. feminist health-care researchers. Ahmad uses the word *black* in its political sense, and he makes the point that exclusion of the experiences of black women fosters an "intellectual apartheid" (p. 27) insofar as the health needs of minority groups are interpreted by a white elite. The message conveyed by black feminist and other writers is that the experiences of minority groups should be re-interpreted through black perspectives. However, this approach is not problem-free, as Wheeler (1994) shows in relation to the in-depth interviews she conducted in her study of the mental health of women recently discharged from hospital. Wheeler points out instances "when being a black researcher is not enough" (p. 55). She notes that while she

could empathize with those she was researching, she could offer little practical help to the people actually participating in the research. While she took a political-action research stand and was able to lobby for changes in the provision of mental-health services for black women, she felt "powerless" to help individuals who had shown her kindness during the course of the research (p. 56).

Wheeler's words reflect the irony of power in researcher-researched relationships. On the one hand, researchers set research agendas and they have the skills to persuade policy-makers of the significance of their research. On the other hand, they are never simply researchers. Their engagement with the people they encounter in research is complex. Researchers may also be women – black women, white women, sometimes nurses – all of whom, in common with their "subjects," are constrained by socioeconomic factors and what they can actually do to help the people who participate in their projects.

Acknowledging Complexities

Acknowledging and conveying the complexities of people's lives presents a challenge. Crenshaw (1994, pp. 39-52) observes that it is difficult to analyse the multidimensionality of black women's experiences within a single-axis analysis. She is referring to the absence of patriarchy and gender in anti-racist analyses and to the absence of race in feminist analyses. In a similar vein, Maynard (1994) observes that "whiteness is not seen as a racial identity" and that it is thus not problematized (p. 21). She writes:

It is important to look at the taken-for-granted everydayness of white privilege, as well as the circumstances in which it is more directly expressed. Also significant in this context is the process of unravelling what the term "white" actually means, for it is by no means a homogeneous category. (p. 21)

Analyses that take complexity into account can be applied across researcher-researched boundaries. Wheeler (1994) goes some way towards attempting this. The account of her relationships with her interviewees suggests the various ways in which researchers encounter their subjects. Wheeler encountered the black women she interviewed as a researcher, as a woman, and – importantly – as a black woman. Conventionally, these aspects of self (if a researcher's self is acknowledged at all) are subsumed under the category "researcher."

A sense of complexity in written accounts can be communicated in works that focus on the textual analyses of ethnographies. Smith (1988),

who in the research cited earlier is aware of her role as mother as well as researcher, acknowledges her similarities with those she encounters as well as their differences. Her recognition that she does not relate to the subjects of her research as simply researcher to researched (but also, in this case, as woman to woman and mother to mother) underlines the complexity of research encounters; she portrays the women she encounters as having an active and equally complex presence in the research.

Stanley (1987, 1990, 1991) is also concerned to show that women who are the subject of her research are "active," in the sense that they share with her the ability to theorize about their lives. It is not simply that Stanley theorizes as an academic while the women she encounters theorize as lay people. In certain circumstances this may be the case, but not always. In my own ethnographic research (Williams, 1990, 1991) I have found that those I encounter as "subjects" (but who are colleagues insofar as I am a nurse as well as an ethnographer) share with me the ability to theorize about nursing and other aspects of their lives. Indeed I can never be certain that those I encounter as "subjects" do not include ethnographers doing an ethnography in which I am "subject" (1990, p. 46).

It is tempting to focus on the common experiences of women at the expense of recognizing differences and diversity. Maynard (1994) calls for an exploration of how unity and difference in relation to women's lives are implied in and experienced through each other (p. 21). Certainly taking both unity and difference into account in feminist ethnographic practice allows for a departure from "unilinear" (Smith, 1988) or "single axis" (Crenshaw, 1994) modes of analysis, which tend to subordinate views of and experiences of minority groups and thus to create a hierarchy of experiences and knowledge.

For example, within the field of women's health there is a call for justice in the provision of health care. However, justice is experienced differently, according to whether one is a black woman or a white woman (Anderson, 1991; Anderson, Blue, Holbrook, & Ng, 1993; Bryan, Dadzie, & Scafe, 1988; Davis, 1984, 1988). And even these categories are not homogeneous. Further factors add to the complexity of women's experiences of health, among them age, class, employment status, and geography. These and other socioeconomic factors that affect how women experience health care (Anderson) must be taken into account in ethnographic practice (and indeed in nursing practice), so that the experiences of a minority are not subordinated to those of the majority

and silenced, or relegated to the bottom of a hierarchy of knowledge about women's health needs.

Conclusion

I took as my starting point principles drawn from the work of feminist ethnographers and other writers in order to consider how they might be put into practice – in short, to elucidate the politics of feminist ethnography.

I have offered only a glimpse of the challenge of putting principles into practice. Clearly, there are diverse ways of implementing these principles, for feminist ethnography is far from a homogeneous enterprise. There are also problems. For example, from one perspective I might accept the fact that knowing the world in ways other than those offered by conventional social science avoids subordinating research subjects. However, while I am concerned that my ethnographic practice should not favour scientific knowledge over lay knowledge, I could argue that the women in my research would be best served by "scientific" research that presents the "facts" of, for example, discriminatory practices in access to health care (see Jayaratne, 1983; Kelly, 1978, for similar arguments).

However, from my experiences as a nurse and as an ethnographer, I know something of the complexities of women's lives and women's health needs, and strive for analyses that take very seriously the understandings of both the researcher and the researched. I seek to design research that allows for the exploration of differences while recognizing the importance of similarities of experience, and I seek to produce knowledge that conveys something of the complexities of life and health needs as understood by those experiencing them.

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