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## Gender Identity and Research Relationships

The importance of gender reflexivity in the research process

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In qualitative research clear insider and outsider boundaries have traditionally been drawn between the researcher and groups of participants who are marginalised in terms of their class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. In particular, the concerns around how gender can be of significance when building field relationships or during qualitative interviewing has been a central part of feminist and feminist inspired concerns since the early 1980s (Broom, Cheshire, & Emmison, 2009; Finch, 1984; Hopkins, 2010; Horton, 2001; Oakley, 1981; Pini, 2005). Feminist standpoint theory holds that the experiences of oppression create and allow for researchers and participants to share similar knowledge. However, such discourses of epistemic privilege and the power relationships between those conducting research and those being researched can be problematic as these can produce a false binary, which does not take into account the multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives. The question of a researcher's gender on building good relationships also has roots in older social science. Goffman (1961, p. x) for example suggested that 'I want to warn that my view is probably too much that of a middle-class male' when reflecting on the limitations of his own gender for social analysis. So while it would appear that gender reflexivity is undoubtedly important in research relationships, how do other forms of identity (e.g. class, ethnicity, sexuality) and identity markers (place, speech, age) impact on our ability as qualitative researchers to build relationships and to elicit data that is valid, truthful and useful, whilst also being aware of power dynamics?

When I began my own qualitative study with young men in a de-industrial community in the United Kingdom (Ward, 2015), I naively did not expect my gender to be a particular issue. I assumed that as I was a man who came from a similar community, I would be able to easily talk with other men (albeit a few years younger than myself) and would have

little problem in building rapport and trust. Nonetheless, the rapport building and the trust I gained over time took longer with some participants than others. I learned that I had to adopt different strategies with different individuals and to negotiate my performance of masculinity in different ways. Being male or coming from a similar community was just not enough. I found that with some young men who were academically studious, I had to rely on my status as a university PhD student to gain trust and respect, whilst with those young men who seemed more interested in sports, cars, computer games or partying, I had to be able to discuss and talk about practices which I often knew little about. These negotiations continued throughout the fieldwork phase of my ethnography and I discovered the success of the project would depend on me finding appropriate displays of masculinity to enable me to successfully impression manage my field relationships. As a researcher I therefore had to be flexible and adapt to different situations.

In this volume established and emerging gender scholars from the United Kingdom, Ireland, North America and Australia explore some of the same issues I tackled by drawing on their own experiences of collecting data. What this book shows is that while the gender identity of the respondent/researcher relationship is undoubtedly important, what must also be acknowledged are the attributes which create good fieldworker and competent social science researchers capable of understanding and engaging in different social situations and thought interaction with different participants.

Each of the authors looks back on a significant piece of work from their emerging, or long career and debate some of the following questions. How important is the role of the researchers' gender in building positive or negative fieldwork relationships? Does sharing the same gender identity help create rapport during interview settings? How do other forms of identity or shared interests alongside one's gender shape the direction of research? How do our biographies and life experiences influence our social science interests? What are the key attributes that create effective fieldwork relationships? What processes produce competent social science researchers capable of understanding and engaging with multiple standpoints and perspectives? What are the implications for reflecting on the knowledge that qualitative research yields and how does this offer different orientations towards power?

In order to address these questions, the authors in this volume take their gender identity [male, female, cisgender] as a starting point, but alongside this, other key makers of their identities [such as class, age, race and

ethnicity, sexuality and nationality] are brought into focus in order to challenge their preconceptions as researchers and the propensity for their research to be clouded by their subjective assumptions of gender and other social divisions. In order to outline what strategies the authors believe create successful or unsuccessful pieces of qualitative research, and to provide some guidance for others adopting similar methodological practices, each chapter contains a 'lessons learned' section. Ultimately, these reflections are part of an essential political and critical strategy for envisioning a feminist practice of critical researcher reflexivity when conducting qualitative studies. In the remainder of this introduction I now outline the different parts of this volume and the key areas each author focuses on.

## **POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS**

Part I begins with Sara Delamont's reflections on power relationships when leaving the field after a successful research career spanning 40 years. In her chapter Delamont shows how the ethnographic literature is replete with accounts of access, either giving prescriptive advice or describing the processes reflexively. However, there are fewer studies that have looked at what happens when a research project is completed and the researcher leaves the field. Drawing on studies conducted in schools and martial arts settings, this opening chapter focuses on the multiple ways in which issues of power, gender and age become problematic when it is time to draw fieldwork to a close. Delamont argues that the exit strategies of successful ethnographer's must be noted, so that novices can learn to maximise the intellectual payoff for themselves.

## **GENDER AND AGE**

With much of the now extensive research on the social construction of masculinity having focused on adolescent boys and young men, the performance and experience of masculinity as it changes across the life course, and in later life in particular, is an under developed area of gender studies scholarship. Further still, the methodological implications of researching masculinity across the life course have seldom been addressed. In seeking to remedy this, in Part II, Thomas Thurnell-Read and Anna Tarrant both

explore gender, and in particular masculinity, through an intergenerational lens. While both were young researchers at the time they conducted their research studies with older men, both found similar issues arose, despite displaying different gender identities.

Thurnell-Read's chapter explores how the intersection of age, generation and masculinity influences interactions within qualitative fieldwork settings and, in particular, the development of rapport between the researcher and research participants. Looking back on his experiences of conducting ethnographic research in a number of male dominated settings (firefighting, pre-marital stag parties, pubs) the chapter observes that, as the social construction of masculinity is contingent upon age and positioning within the life course, fieldwork interactions may be influenced by age-specific expectations of gender and life experience. In particular, key life events such as entry into employment, marriage, parenthood and retirement may draw boundaries of (dis)identification among the researcher and participants which, on reflection, highlight the complexity of gendered relationships within social research.

In her chapter, Tarrant presents a further interrogation of the research relationships that were established and negotiated during a study that explored the familial and social networks of men who were grandfathers. With a particular focus on gendered and generational differences, Tarrant reflects on narrative instances during interviews in which her positionality as a young, female researcher influenced the relationships with her participants which afforded particular insights, but also created specific silences. Tarrant employs the concept of 'betweenness' to interrogate the complex and 'knowable' negotiations of similarity and difference that are significant in shaping the outcomes of the research process.

## GENDER AND CLASS

While the issues of social class have been acknowledged by other authors in the first two parts of this volume and continues to appear in many of the remaining chapters, it is in Part III specifically where the focus turns to show how gender and social class intersect within research relationships. In the chapter 'A Monster Lurking in the Shadows? One Researcher's Crisis of Representing Class and Gender', Alexander Allen draws on her fieldwork experiences of conducted ethnographic research with young women in an elite, single-sex school. Allen asks particular questions about the ways

in which class and gender intersect in fieldwork and the ways these might be managed, constructed and accounted for ‘responsibly’ in resulting representations of the research. Whilst the single-sex, elite school might be regarded as a somewhat unique setting, the chapter argues that it presents an interesting context from which to explore the intersection of class and gender, and to examine the different ways in which these subjective constructions might shape the direction of research. In particular, the chapter examines the difficulties Allen faced when engaging in a process of rapport, which was always complete with classed and gendered recognitions.

In the chapter ‘Similarity and Familiarity: Reflections on Indigenous Ethnography with Mothers, Daughters and School Teachers on the Margins of Contemporary Wales’, Dawn Mannay and Jordon Creaghan reflect further on the process of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ binaries through their roles as indigenous researchers when conducting separate studies in the same marginalised community. The chapter explores the advantages of similarity in relation to trust, access, gender and an understanding of locality, but also complicates this position by examining the problem of familiarity. The chapter argues that the ‘insider’, ‘outsider’ binary is unable to capture the complexity of research relationships; however, these distinctions remain central in challenging the researcher’s preconceptions of class, gender and community. Mannay and Creaghan present strategies to fight familiarity, in the process of data production, and consider the ethical issues that arise when research is conducted from the competing perspectives of both ‘insider’ and academic.

Andrew Parker’s chapter ‘Staying Onside on the Inside: Men, Masculinities and the Research Process’ then explores further the ‘insider’, ‘outside’ role and how difficult it can be to be both academic and working-class. Parker looks at the anxieties, pressures and problems that shaped the contours of his ethnographic study with young trainee football players in the early 1990s. In particular, he reflects on the strategies he adopted in the all-male, all working-class domain, in relation to the establishment of researcher/respondent associations and the development of intimate interactive rapport.

## **GENDER, RACE, PLACE AND NATIONALITY**

In the chapters ‘Let Me Know When You Figure Everyone Around Here Out’: Placing Gender in the Ethnographic Process’ by Garth Stahl and

'Relationship-Building in Research: Gendered Identity Construction in Researcher-Participant Interaction' by Edward W. Morris the focus of the volume turns to the role of race, place and nationality alongside a researcher's gender identity. Drawing on fieldwork with young people in two low-income high schools in the United States – one rural and predominantly white, the other urban and mostly African-American – Morris explores the connections of gender to race and place. In particular Morris' presence at the schools as a researcher is reflected on and the social distance between himself and his participants is made clear. The chapter also discusses the assumption made in the schools by teachers and students that Morris was conducting research because there was something wrong with them, this view affected Morris' access to participants and raised issues of representation.

Stahl's chapter continues the theme of representation as started by Morris. Stahl argues that as researchers our understanding of power relations in research settings is crucially informed by analyses of the gendered character of contemporary societies and global politics. The research presented in this chapter is based on Stahl's exploration into the construction of masculinities among white working-class boys in three schools in the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2012. Stahl's study found that themes of embodiment, physicality and performance played a part in the ways in which informal groups of students actively ascribed meanings to issues of gender identity. This chapter explores how constructs of gender, nationality and class can be of significance when building field relationships and during qualitative interviewing. The research critically considers semi-structured interviews and focus groups in an effort to take into account the multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives. As a researcher Stahl found it useful to capitalise on his 'outsider' status in terms of nationality, but also his 'insider' status in terms of gender, and interestingly, clothing choices.

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Part V of this volume explores the issues of sexuality and complex identities when conducting qualitative research. In the chapter 'Is She One of Us? Intersecting Identities and Social Research' Nathalie Lozano-Neira and Jen Marchbank problematise and explore their 'insider' and 'outsider' positionalities in relation to two recent fieldwork projects with different



marginalised populations. Beginning with a discussion of the source of their research questions, the authors consider the various dimensions of how gendered and other identities affected their research relationships. The populations which the authors focus on are LGBTQ + youth (in Surrey, BC – a rapidly growing city south of Vancouver, Canada) and self-identified migrant women working in the settlement sector with migrants (in Vancouver).

In the final chapter Leslie Sherlock uses queer and feminist theories to explore the relationships between researcher and participants who belonged to a shared peer group of sex education professionals. Sherlock argues that research which critically examines gender roles and identities often falls short of empowering the research participants to be reflected fluidly through use of labels for gender identity and sexual orientation. Research with ‘elite’ participants which are also part of the researcher’s peer group adds complex dimensions to methodological elements which are sometimes over-simplified within research. Sherlock examines the choice to avoid pronoun usage or collection of demographic data, and reflexively contemplates the impact and practicalities of friendship relationships within the research context.

Before I bring this introduction to a close, and hand the volume over to the authors, I want to thank them for their contributions and for being so open to comment, critique and at times criticism. It is no easy task to be open and reflexive and then to be told by the editor that one’s chapter is not being reflexive ‘enough’! It has been a pleasure to have been part of the debate that appears in this volume and to provide guidance to others who might be thinking about the same issues. Finally, I hope this volume also helps illustrate to researchers how their gendered selves intersect with so many other parts of their own, and their participant’s identities.

Michael R. M. Ward

*Editor*

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