
Feminist Methods in Social Research

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3

Feminist Ethnography¹

Feminist fieldwork is predicated upon the active involvement of the researcher in the production of social knowledge through direct participation in and experience of the social realities she is seeking to understand. . . . however, feminist field researchers add [another dimension] which is not included as a part of conventional field methods . . . *the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender as a basic feature of all social life and . . . understanding the social realities of women as actors* whom previous sociological research has rendered invisible.²

Introduction and Definitions

Contemporary ethnography or fieldwork is multimethod research. It usually includes observation, participation, archival analysis, and interviewing, thus combining the assets and weaknesses of each method.³ It does not typically include testing or large-scale surveys, methods identified with a positivist perspective in the social sciences. In the early stages of feminism's recent entrance into the academy, feminist critics demonstrated that positivist methods skewed knowledge in an androcentric or male-oriented way. For this reason, they argued that "alternative"⁴ or nonpositivist methods—particularly open-ended interviewing and ethnography⁵—must have a prominent place in feminist social science. These "alternative" methods focus on interpretation, rely on the researcher's immersion in social settings, and aim for intersubjective understanding between researchers and the person(s) studied.

Some feminist researchers continue to reject positivism as an aspect of patriarchal thinking that separates the scientist from the phenomenon under study.⁶ They repudiate the idea of a social reality "out there" independent of the observer. Rather, they think that social research should be guided by a constructivist framework in which researchers acknowledge that they interpret and define reality.⁷ In this context, feminist fieldwork has a special role in upholding a nonpositivist perspective, rebuilding the social sciences and producing new concepts concerning women.

Feminist fieldwork and "institutional ethnographies" can generate grounded concepts that will lead to new theories.⁸ For example, Kristen Yount did fieldwork with women and men underground coal miners guided by the following framework and procedures:

My interest . . . was generated by my commitment to feminism, the pressing need to facilitate the entry of blue-collar women into higher-paying jobs numerically dominated by men, and the relative paucity of data in the literature on these women. . . . To conduct the study, I lived in mining communities in two western states for a total of 5 months. . . . I first contacted district union officials and mine managers. . . . I then dissociated myself from this strata and [contacted] miners at . . . bars, private parties, baseball games and company picnics. [I became] a temporary member of the miners' social worlds. . . . [In addition to] in-depth interviews with mine employees . . . I spent some 44 hours observing work procedures and interactions in mines. . . . [taped] six group discussions with miners [and] . . . persons associated with mining . . . and taped workshops . . . at four national conferences sponsored by . . . a national advocacy organization for women miners. I transcribed and coded all of these recordings throughout the data collection process and then used theoretical sampling procedures to formulate propositions.

Using this method, she discovered a culture of sexual harassment in the mines to which each woman adapted by taking one of three different roles (Lady, Flirt, and Tomboy). By observing the development of interaction *in situ*, she was able to take her analysis beyond the formulation of these specific roles. Instead, she demonstrated that sexual harassment is an effective "means by which men are able to . . . preserve more prestigious jobs as male domains."⁹

Judith DiIorio explained the importance of feminist fieldwork in reforming such subfields as the sociology of sport. She argued that most research "on gender-socialization in sport or gender differences in the social psychological effects of sports participation has employed an [inappropriate] positivistic methodology." By employing ethnography, on the other hand, we could "'deconstruct' some of the patriarchal assumptions . . . and perhaps eliminate once and for all the term 'role-conflict' from our research agenda." Most important to her, ethnographic research could enable us to "ascertain which girls and women engaging in what forms of physical activity under what conditions develop and affirm what identities through what processes."¹⁰ Thus, for some feminists, fieldwork represents a struggle against positivism and androcentric concepts.

Others believe that it is misguided to link feminist critiques and ethnographic methods, or to put feminist research squarely in the qualitative, as opposed to the quantitative, "camp."¹¹ Psychologist Virginia O'Leary, for example, urges us *not* to link feminist research exclusively with qualitative methods. After endorsing the need for "alternative approaches," she writes:

[T]he current tendency to equate traditional modes of psychological inquiry with an exclusively masculine perspective and to replace it with the ethnological¹² approach as a feminine alternative . . . does little more than reify dichotomies that have proven inadequate.¹³

While arguing that fieldwork is important for correcting the patriarchal bias of social science, feminists generally have not claimed that fieldwork is *inherently feminist* or that qualitative methods such as fieldwork are the *only* research method

that feminists should utilize. If this were so, disciplines such as cultural anthropology would have been successful in avoiding male bias.

One feminist who demonstrated that fieldwork in and of itself does not rectify the problem of male bias is Annette Weiner, an anthropologist who studied Trobriand Islanders. Male anthropologists who preceded her, such as Bronislaw Malinowski,¹⁴ concluded that Trobriand women had little power. After studying these women's perceptions of their role, however, Annette Weiner concluded that Trobriand women *do* have power and that they "enact roles which are symbolically, structurally and functionally significant to the ordering" of their society. She then tried to understand why she and her male colleagues diverged and concluded that the source of the problem is male bias in cultural anthropology:

We have accepted almost without question the nineteenth-century Western legacy that had effectively segregated women from positions of power. . . . We unquestioningly accept male statements about women as factual evidence for the way a society is structured. . . . From this view . . . we should not be surprised that we arrive at the almost universal notion that women's status is secondary to that of men. . . . Any study that does not include the role of women—as seen by women—as part of the way the society is structured remains only a partial study of that society.¹⁵

By virtue of their sex and ideological orientation, male ethnographers had been unable to understand women. The challenge for feminist ethnographers is to use the potential of fieldwork to get closer to women's realities. Ethnography is an important feminist method of it makes women's¹⁶ *lives* visible, just as interviewing is an important feminist method if it makes women's *voices* audible.¹⁷ Thus, it is not ethnography per se, as Annette Weiner showed, but ethnography in the hands of feminists that renders it feminist.

Historical Roots

Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau's *Society in America*, published in 1837, is an example of an early feminist ethnography. The introduction to her book explains that the researcher's duty is to give detailed observational data so that readers may judge her interpretations. Heeding her own rules, Martineau gave a full report including dates and the principal means she used to "obtain knowledge of the country":

In the course of this tour, I visited almost every kind of institution. The prisons of Auburn, Philadelphia, and Nashville; the insane and other hospitals of almost every considerable place; the literary and scientific institutions; the factories of the north; the plantations of the south; the farms of the west. . . . I was present at orations, at land sales, and in the slave market. . . . It would be nearly impossible to relate whom I knew, during my travels. Nearly every eminent man in politics, science and literature, and almost every distinguished woman, would grace my list. . . . I travelled among several tribes of Indians; and spent months in the southern States, with negroes ever at my heels.

Martineau reports being told frequently that as a woman she was at a disadvantage in doing her study. To this she replied how helpful being a woman actually was, because

she saw much more of domestic life than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman travelling through the country. The nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen, are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people; and, as for public and professional affairs,—those may always gain full information upon such matters, who really feel an interest in them,—be they men or women. . . . I doubt whether a single fact that I wished to learn, or any doctrine that I desired to comprehend, was ever kept from me because I was a woman.

Whether being a man or a woman is more advantageous in fieldwork is a question still debated today.

Because of her thoroughness, self-confidence, and sensitivity to women's lives, Harriet Martineau was able to produce a devastating appraisal of the role of women in American society:

The Americans have, in the treatment of women, fallen below, not only their own democratic principles, but the practice of some parts of the Old World. . . . While woman's intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weaknesses encouraged, and her strength punished, she is told that her lot is cast in the paradise of women: and there is no country in the world where there is so much boasting of the "chivalrous" treatment she enjoys.¹⁸

In my view, *Society in America* deserves to be studied as one of the earliest feminist ethnographies and as a profound contribution to the understanding of U.S. women's lives. Sixteen years earlier (1821) Frances (Fanny) Wright, another radical young British woman, published her ethnographic study of the United States, *View of Society and Manners in America, in a Series of Letters from That Country to a Friend in England, during the Years 1818, 1819, 1820*,¹⁹ similarly criticizing the institutions of slavery and womanhood. These two books suggest that contemporary feminist ethnography is rooted in the travel literature of nineteenth-century radical British feminists.

Alice Fletcher

In 1881 Alice Fletcher got word from Susette La Flesche, an Omaha Indian woman, and Thomas Henry Tibbles, a Caucasian Nebraskan journalist, that she could camp with them for several weeks among the Sioux Indians and then continue her travels by herself. Alice Fletcher's biographer Joan Mark wrote that living "with Indians for scientific purposes, in order to study their way of life, was . . . new in the early 1880s" and had never been attempted by a woman. Joan Mark concluded that "to [Alice Fletcher and one or two others] we owe the whole notion of 'doing field-work,' that hallmark of twentieth century anthropology." Apparently, another woman, astronomer Maria Mitchell, worked closely with Alice Fletcher in the Association for the Advancement of Women and inspired her to undertake her scientific journey. Maria Mitchell believed that women should study "observational sciences like astronomy" and Alice Fletcher had the insight that

"ethnography could be an observational science" because, like astronomy, ethnography utilized "long periods of looking (and listening) and meticulous recording of what one saw and heard."²⁰

The place of women such as Harriet Martineau and Alice Fletcher in the history of ethnography is generally ignored or unknown. Instead, major reference works attribute the founding of ethnography to others such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* has the following entry:

The publication of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* in 1922 revealed the great potentialities of field work. This study of Trobriand Islanders, among whom Malinowski had lived for almost three years, set new standards for fieldworkers which continue to operate. Fieldwork came to mean immersion in a tribal society—learning, as far as possible, to speak, think, see, feel and act as a member of its culture, and at the same time, as a trained anthropologist from a different culture.²¹

In my view, Alice Fletcher developed the dimensions of what has come to be known as anthropological fieldwork, just as Harriet Martineau did for sociological fieldwork.

Helen Merrell Lynd and Faith Williams

Originally, Helen Merrell Lynd was one of four staff members of her husband Robert Lynd's study of Middletown, a midwestern U.S. city.²² The other three staff members were Faith Williams and Dorothea Davis, both statisticians, and Frances Flourney, a stenographer. When the group of five arrived in Muncie, Indiana, in 1924, they were unsure of their methodology. Helen Lynd later wrote:

There was a question about how to divide the work. We wanted to do it more or less in the same way one would do an anthropological study of a strange community. So the work was divided into the areas of getting a living, making a home, the things that people do everywhere and how they did them here. Then there was a combination first of interviewing some of the key people, and of going through the press. I did a lot of work on the press and the records of various organizations. Bob went to the Rotary Club and to high school ceremonies. The interviewing of ordinary people came later. Faith Williams insisted, "We're getting generalities. We need to talk to individuals." It was one of the best things we did.

In her view, Faith Williams' idea of combining fieldwork with interviews enabled the study to move from generalities to specifics, from examining the community as a whole to examining the individual in the community. This combination allowed them to see people in contexts, and to understand women (and men) from their own perspectives.

Helen and Robert Lynd spent the years 1926–1929 writing, rewriting, and collating the data they had collected. In her autobiographical essay, Helen recalled:

At first it was his study. Then when it came to writing, it was decided that we were sharing the book. . . . A funny thing was that Bob used *Middletown* as his doctor's dissertation and in order that it be his doctor's dissertation we had to take the volume and go through it and blue pencil everything I had written. This was an absurdity because what we did as we actually wrote it was that we would each write a chapter and then we would exchange and rewrite. The one absolutely unbreakable rule was that no matter how silly either of us felt to be something that the other had written, it couldn't be thrown away. We had to consult. Well, we did go through the manuscript and cross out the things that were obviously mine, but it was a fake process.²³

Later, Helen Lynd also earned her Ph.D., but her contribution to fieldwork theory may not be recognized.²⁴

Contemporary Feminist Ethnography

Feminist ethnography is consistent with three goals mentioned frequently by feminist researchers: (1) to document the lives and activities of women, (2) to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and (3) to conceptualize women's behavior as an expression of social contexts.²⁵ The next section illustrates each briefly.

Documenting Women's Lives and Activities

Sociologist Lyn Lofland voiced the importance of documenting women's activities in her critique of the androcentric tradition of community studies.²⁶ She claimed that, at best, women were simply "there" for participant observers because ethnographers had not seen how women played significant roles in the social settings of which they were part. A feminist orientation lifts these androcentric blinders, as Annette Weiner argued, and allows the participant observer to see women as full members of their social, economic, and political worlds. This vision was also the objective of Carol Stack²⁷ in her study of poor black women and of Denise Connors in her study of Irish, working-class women over the age of 90. To make these old women "real" to her, Connors supplemented interviews with involvement in their daily lives:

Whenever possible I spent time with them as they went about their daily routines. . . . In the process, I met and interacted with the families, friends, neighbors and acquaintances. We went shopping and out to eat together, we went on walks, to the bank, the library, the welfare department, drove by their old workplaces, visited their friends in their own homes and in nursing homes, and went on tours of local attractions.²⁸

Similarly, in a study of a small, rural town with a population size of approximately 2700, Susan Stall examined the world of its women by doing interviews in the context of a larger ethnographic approach:

The town has Scandinavian cultural ties, Lutheran religious beliefs, and conservative Republican politics. . . . I have interviewed a diverse cross section of

women: Women who serve on local volunteer boards, who are active in business clubs, who are involved in local political organizations, who work in local service organizations, who are members or officers of local women's clubs, who belong to church groups, or who participate in cultural activities in the town. One purpose of my study is to uncover the power of women within the volunteer structure of this small town.²⁹

Similar to people who do interviews of various members of a social system, feminist ethnographers participate in the social system, put diverse groups of women on the social map, and then sometimes use interviews to understand the perspective of individual women.

Understanding Women from Their Perspective

Understanding the experience of women from their own point of view corrects a major bias of nonfeminist participant observation that trivializes females' activities and thoughts, or interprets them from the standpoint of the men in the society or of the male researcher. Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was one of the few early social scientists to recognize this problem.³⁰ As he put it, "Almost all discussions of women deal only with what they are in relation to men in terms of real, ideal or value criteria. Nobody asks what they are for themselves."³¹ This problem is endemic in Western civilization and in the social sciences. The misogyny and gynopia³² of a culture are mirrored in its social science.

By contrast, Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith refers to research that asks "what women are for themselves" as research from "the standpoint of women."³² U.S. sociologist Irene Dabrowski's study of women workers is an example:

Working-class women appear to hold static jobs with little prestige, minimal pay, and no advancement potential. . . . I propose that women employed as clerks, waitresses, operatives, and the like, may experience paid work as positive and even growth-enhancing. A developmental framework for understanding their work combines an objective assessment of job movement with a subjective assessment of career path.³³

In a related ethnography, Roberta Goldberg studied the process through which women workers come to experience and name their dissatisfaction as workers.³⁴ Her study challenges conventional discussion of "class consciousness" and suggests that it must be reformulated when referring to women. Her conclusion supports other feminist critiques of the concept of class, such as that of Christine Delphy,³⁵ who argues that assigning women the class of their husbands is demeaning, unreliable, and inaccurate. Women's class consciousness may in fact be a general "gendered consciousness" that transcends class, or may be a precarious class consciousness. Other feminist sociologists, such as those cited below, routinely refer to working-class, middle-class, or upper-class women without considering class assignment to be problematic.

One of the ways feminist ethnographers attempt to understand women's experience is to have women serve as key informants. Sociologist Judith Stacey's three-year study of two nonethnic Caucasian kinship networks in Silicon Valley

during the period of postindustrialization is an example. Her "key informant in each network is a white woman now in her late forties who married in the 1950s and became a homemaker for a white man who was to benefit from the unusual electronics industry opportunities of the 1960s."³⁶ The relationships she developed with these women allowed her to observe the changes they experienced over time. In particular she explored the link between the woman's ideology and the quality of her marital relations, and the link between her daughter's and her own ideologies.

In another example, sociologist Carolyn Ellis's study of a mid-Atlantic fishing community relied on an 80-year-old primary informant and landlady with an unusual ability to discern social relations in the community.³⁷ Marjorie Shostak worked with a female key informant, Nisa, in her study of !Kung society.³⁸ Similarly, Carol Stack came "to know a young woman who had grown up on welfare in The Flats," had entered the university where Carol Stack taught, and who introduced her to two families. These people, in turn, led Carol Stack to two women and a man who became her "part-time and casual assistants"³⁹ and enabled her to understand the socioeconomic system that these women managed.

Understanding Women in Context

Feminist ethnographers try to interpret women's behavior as shaped by social context rather than as context free or rooted in anatomy, personality, or social class. Another excerpt from Irene Dabrowski's study of working-class women illustrates the importance of context. Specifically, she uncovered types of female working-class workers, each with its own marital relation:

The cooperative attitude of the "continuous workers' " husbands became obvious to me during the interviews. These men were polite and seemed to understand and respect their wives' need for privacy with me. In fact, as I was speaking with their wives, these men nonchalantly diverted themselves to household and child care responsibilities . . . washing dishes and helping children with their homework.

In contrast, the husbands of the "housewives" were less open to my presence and even hostile in some instances. After interviewing a few of the housewives, I could expect to be snubbed by their husbands. Husbands insisted their wives hurry to finish, and even demanded meals. To avoid such encounters, I made an effort to schedule interviews when the husbands were absent from the home. Some housewives themselves made such a suggestion. For instance, "I really can't talk when my husband is here. It would be best to come Wednesday night. He is out bowling."⁴⁰

Faye Ginsburg's ethnography of pro-life and pro-choice activities surrounding an abortion clinic in Fargo, North Dakota, also revealed the importance of social context.⁴¹ Participant observation enabled her to see the commonality of the two groups beneath their polarized ideologies. She understood that their common purpose was to support other women in the context of values that permeate the city. As an ethnographer, she experienced the sense of community she observed.⁴²

Although feminist fieldworkers seem to prefer studying women, they some-

times interview and observe both sexes for the purposes of examining how behavior is patterned by gender. For example, in their studies of families and food, sociologists Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr reported that men in two-parent families consumed larger portions of meat and ate meat more often than did women and children. The researchers interpreted this behavior as a reflection of the men's breadwinner status.⁴³ In an observational study of women and men in TV panel discussions, sociologist Jessie Bernard found that "males out-talked females by a considerable margin . . . [and that] women have a harder time getting the floor in groups and are more often interrupted than men."⁴⁴ Her study is an example of feminist observational research in a mixed-gender setting.

A Typology of Settings

Lois Easterday and her colleagues developed a typology to conceptualize the range of field settings. She used the variables traditional/nontraditional (in terms of culture) and heterogeneous/homogeneous (in terms of demography). This typology allows us to see that canonized sociological ethnographies such as William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*,⁴⁵ Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner*,⁴⁶ and Laud Humphrey's *Tearoom Trade*⁴⁷ represent only three types of settings: primarily male, traditional male-female, and nontraditional male-female.⁴⁸ Moreover, these studies are male oriented in three ways: they were carried out by male researchers in male-dominated settings and focused on male behavior.⁴⁹ John Van Maanen commented on this male orientation as well. After pointing out some exceptions, he concluded that "most ethnographic writing was created by male fieldworkers concerned mostly with the comings and goings of male natives. . . . One result of the growth of feminist scholarship is the realization that there are many tales of the field to be told."⁵⁰ Arlene Kaplan Daniels is one of the few ethnographers who discussed the effect of studying settings with different gender compositions, specifically a male-dominated military group and the exclusively female Junior League.⁵¹

Ironically, although the classic ethnographies were done in a limited range of settings, their methods are considered generic for all types of settings. Sociologist Joan Gurney wrote an important critique of these guidelines for feminists who conduct studies in gender-heterogeneous settings:

a frequent suggestion is that the beginning fieldworker adopt a passive, submissive, nonexpert, incompetent, nonthreatening or nonassertive role vis à vis settings members. . . . Once accepted and trusted by setting members, the researcher is advised to discard the naive incompetent role in favor of the competent, somewhat knowledgeable, professional role. . . . Failure to accomplish this transition can preclude observation of anything setting members consider too complex for the naive observer to understand, even with their expert assistance.

While stereotypical attitudes toward females generally assure their acceptance in the naive incompetent role in a male-dominated setting . . . , those same attitudes hamper females' efforts to make the transition to the professional role. Female researchers must work especially hard to achieve an impression combin-

ing the attribute of being nonthreatening with that of being a credible, competent professional. By failing to acknowledge this problem, the fieldwork instructional literature does not offer realistic guidance to novice female researchers.⁵²

Realistic guidance can come, instead, from accounts written by feminist ethnographers in the whole gamut of settings.

Building on Lois Easterday's typology and Joan Gurney's example, we can now extend Judith DiIorio's definition of feminist fieldwork with which this chapter started. Feminist ethnography is research carried out by feminists who focus on gender issues in female-homogeneous traditional or nontraditional settings, and in heterogeneous traditional and nontraditional settings. In feminist ethnography, the researchers are women, the field sites are sometimes women's settings, and the key informants are typically women.

An example of a feminist ethnography is sociologist Sheryl Ruzek's study of workplaces in the women's health movement. This project compares 19 feminist settings with 5 nonfeminist settings. To understand the women's health movement, Sheryl Ruzek did more than study these settings, however. Rather, she attended many public events such as

university lectures on women's health issues, abortion rallies, self-help gynecology demonstrations, women's health films, health fairs, and conferences. At these events, [she] learned of health projects, chatted informally with health activists, and made contacts for interviews and additional fieldwork. [She] also participated in, obtained printed material from, and/or interviewed members of major feminist organizations involved in health work. . . . Similar information was gathered from non-feminist organizations . . . that provided obstetrical and gynecological services.

In her view of feminist ethnography, the boundary between her life and her field site disappeared. Feminist ethnography meant going to bookstores in the course of her regular travels, enlisting her friends to send her materials they found, and subscribing to a wide range of periodicals.⁵³ Because every field setting can be thought of as immersed in a larger social context, which itself is imbedded in a larger social system, field settings can be amorphous. It is easy to understand how a feminist ethnographer can take information in from everywhere, at all times, for her project. Although this attitude may be true of all ethnographers, it is significant for feminists who seek an understanding of the links between the micro- and macrosystems of gender politics.

Women-Only Field Sites

Certain field sites are particularly accessible to female ethnographers that are either inaccessible or uninteresting to male ethnographers. By virtue of being a woman, for example, Laurie McDade had access to women's everyday experiences in college residences. She defined these places as "female households" and noted the abundance of "symbolic markers that the female students" use to signify "physical and social maturities." These markers were consumer products such as sanitary napkins, bras, deodorants, make-up, and other "hygiene and beauty aides."⁵⁴

Feminist ethnography includes the study of women's private domains, workplaces, and organizations. Indian scholar Ursula Sharma, for example, conducted

a theoretically rich ethnography of women's work and urban life in Shimla, North India. Her objective . . . was to explore the nature of women's household work in a modern Indian city and show how it contributes to the maintenance, and sometimes mobility, of the household. To accomplish this, she combined participant observation with interviews of 72 women in different income groups . . . between the ages of 20 and 55, who had one or more children, and who had at least one child still living at home.⁵⁵

Although the household itself was sex-integrated, Ursula Sharma studied it as a women's work setting. It would be very useful for further development of the methodology of feminist ethnography to have additional studies of female-only settings. One promising development is the ethnography of lesbian life.⁵⁶

Mixed-Gender Field Sites

Cathleen Burnett and Mona Danner's examination of 300 deviance and criminology field research studies published between 1960 and 1985 found that female researchers study mixed groups (56%) much more than they do female-only (25%) or male-only (19%) settings, while male researchers tend to study male-only groups (56.6%) rather than mixed (36.6%) or female-only groups (6.6%).⁵⁷ Feminist ethnographies of mixed-gender settings are similarly plentiful. An early example is Gloria Steinem's covert participant observation study of a Playboy Club.⁵⁸ Although a very brief investigation, her study succeeded in exposing women's complicity, underpayment, and harassment in this line of employment.

A prize-winning large-scale feminist ethnography of female workers in a mixed-gender setting is Rosabeth Moss Kanter's study of the role of women and men in corporations. She chose her method because of a debate within feminism concerning women's relative lack of success in corporations. Macroscopic explanations relied on "global variables such as general rates of work force participation by time period and social class," while microscopic explanations referred to "the psychology of women." Her participant observation study, by contrast, tapped a "third, intermediate level" of "forms of work organization and conceptions of roles and distributions of people within them."

Rosabeth Kanter designed her study to demonstrate how organizations affect women. At the same time, she was interested in finding ways to promote equal opportunities for women in organizations. Her methodological "Appendix" lists 10 different "sources of information" she used, including open-ended interviewing of people in sales, a mail survey, individual and group interviews with the first 20 women to enter the sales force, analysis of preexisting survey data, a content analysis of performance appraisal forms, interviews with secretaries and bosses, group discussions recorded verbatim, participant observation in meetings, training programs, official events, and informal interaction at social events. In addition, over the years she developed close working relationships with a small group of people. In the classic style of participant observers, she writes that

I tended to record everything I could that occurred in my presence. . . . I found even time waiting outside of people's offices valuable. Time designated as "social" in which I engaged in informal discussions with people was perhaps the most valuable of all.⁵⁹

The detail and range of these methods enabled her to demonstrate the corporation's unacknowledged dependence on female labor.

Some have suggested that women have an easier time than men as ethnographers in mixed-gender settings. For example, David Riesman wrote that Laura Bohanan's

Return to Laughter . . . illustrates . . . the advantages women can sometimes have in field work because they have access to all the private worlds of women as a member of their sex, and they are also able to penetrate such male worlds as magic and statecraft by virtue of their occupational role and the kind of assertiveness it allows them.⁶⁰

U.S. anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker wrote that a female anthropologist's advantage over her male colleague stems from the fact that "No one fears her."⁶¹ Anthropologist Laura Nader tentatively agreed, writing "that it is easier for women to achieve good rapport—at least working in Mexico or Lebanon." People living in societies characterized by highly differentiated sex roles may perceive a female anthropologist as a biological female and a cultural male. The cultural male status stems from being educated, living alone, and initiating conversation and questions. In this regard, the "foreign female researcher" is more akin to the native male than to the native female. This was Laura Nader's experience:

I was respected as a woman somehow different from their women. Consequently I had access to both men's and women's culture. No man, even if he was considered different from the local men, would have had access to women's culture equal to mine to the men's culture. Of course it may be said that personality makes for considerable variation; but I would still support the common hypothesis that women anthropologists, if they want it, have access to a wider range within a culture than men.⁶²

An example from Laura Bohanan's account, however, shows how complex this androgynous role can be for the female field researcher. As neither a male nor a female, she was dangerously close to being a demon. Her asexual role paradoxically simultaneously distanced her from men and women, while giving her access to both.

There are many sights forbidden to women, but only to protect the women from powers they are not strong enough to withstand. As a European, I was considered probably immune to many of these influences; my continued survival confirmed their opinion. Only some of the women interpreted my hardihood as a sign of more occult powers; they thought I might possibly be a witch. But today even the men looked curiously at me as I stood by the side of the open grave and watched them lower Amara's body into it.⁶³

The passage suggests to me that if the female researcher role is asexual, she is considered nonhuman.

Sociologist Barrie Thorne has also written about fieldwork relations in a mixed-sex field site, in this case, the Boston Draft Resisters Group.

The Resistance had a sexual division of labor which placed women in a subordinate and derivative position. . . . Exempted from conscription, women did not personally confront choices about the draft, and they were, at least initially, exempted from some of the pressures toward risk-taking that were directed at men. If I had been a male participant observer, especially in the N.E.R., I would have been under continual pressure to turn in my draft card and risk jail. As a woman, I entered with relative distance and immunity from risk.⁶⁴

Being a woman enabled her to retain her research role while uncovering gender-based inequality in the organization.

Negotiating Gender in the Fieldwork Setting

Feminists conducting field research in mixed-gender settings are vulnerable to a special set of obstacles. Fortunately, much feminist ethnographic writing includes a frank, reflexive discussion of these problems, particularly sexual harassment, physical danger, and sex stereotyping. In a society that is ageist, sexist, and heterosexualist, the researcher who is female and young may be defined as a sex object to be seduced by heterosexual males. For example, in a study of homeless people in Boston, the researcher reports that she converted her project into a team study so as to reduce the possibility of rape.⁶⁵ Another researcher reports that "a few male interviewees asked for dates . . . and . . . one threatened me when I refused."⁶⁶

Furthermore, both the men and the women in the field site may conspire unwittingly to put the female observer in the role of a daughter to be protected,⁶⁷ a non-sex-object-non-daughter female to be ignored, a nurse/mother who will care for them, a lesbian of limited interest to men, a teacher, or some other conventional stereotype.⁶⁸ The fieldworker then must decide if she is willing to "go along" in order to "stay in the field" or if she can find some other way to maintain her study without collaborating in these roles.

Female fieldworkers have handled sexual harassment in two classic ways: forgoing the right to continue their work (i.e., "making the choice" to leave),⁶⁹ and/or engaging in "interactional shitwork."⁷⁰ I call the latter another form of field "work." Joy Browne described interactional shitwork in her study of used car salesmen:

[T]hat used car lots have little shacks which can cozily accommodate a salesman (nearly all are men, and all those I encountered were men) and a researcher (who happened to be a woman) created a methodological problem. I had to develop a method of convincing a sometimes overeager informant that I did not want to be *that* kind of participant. (The solution, as is often the case, was to leave the field for a while and let things cool off naturally rather than face a showdown and lose an informant.)⁷¹

Anthropologist Peggy Golde engaged in interactional shitwork to keep her suitors at bay and to convert their sexual interest into a research asset:

A man or boy might come to my house to ask for medicine or to have a letter typed, and we would chat. When he called a second and third time without an ostensible purpose, I sensed what might eventually happen [i.e. I would receive a marriage proposal], but nonetheless I took advantage of his presence and willingness to talk until the moment when the covert would be made overt and I would have to reject any proposals. . . . I came to have no serious compunctions about playing the innocent or prolonging the game, since there was no deep feeling involved and since they were, in effect, trying to exploit me too.⁷²

When she studied auctions, on the other hand, sociologist Mary Jo Deegan could not tolerate the sexism of certain auctioneers. She decided to avoid particular auctions even though it meant altering her sample.⁷³

Other feminist ethnographers may decide to not reject the harasser completely to avoid losing him as an informant or provoking him to redouble his effort. At the same time, female researchers usually avoid any expression of their own sexual interest, should it exist. Sometimes feminist researchers are so committed to their "job" that they cannot bear to acknowledge being harassed. Sociologist Joan Neff Gurney provides an example:

During my field research I overlooked incidents which my colleagues regarded as sexist. I explained away my problems and believed they were related to something else, such as my youth. This oversight was not due, I believe, to an inability to recognize sexist statements or treatment. In other settings and contexts I am quick to recognize such biases and discrimination. However, the thought that my work as a researcher had been compromised by my gender was so discomfiting that I persisted in denying this fact for many months after leaving the field. It was only after carefully examining the negative treatment accorded other women in the organization that I was able to recognize that I was being treated the same way. . . . Extensive self-reflection and debriefing with colleagues were required before I was able to acknowledge that my informants were not as kind as I had thought.⁷⁴

Reflexive accounts of feminist participant observation research include tales in which the researcher was unable to control her relationships in the field. To me this suggests that general methodological writings about participant observation have an unwarranted (male-oriented?) assumption that the researcher can control his/her stance. It also highlights the common attitude among patriarchal scientists, including natural scientists, that one does not talk about problems or failures and only reports "positive" research results.

Since women are relatively powerless vis-à-vis men and are at greater physical risk if attacked, female researchers are less able than men to control the way others interact with them. Many of the classic ethnographies simply could not have been done by women because of physical danger. Perhaps the unconscious avoidance of danger led some female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead to the study of adolescents and children who are even less powerful than they.⁷⁵ Judith A. DiIorio, a sociologist who studied a leisure club called "Vanners,"⁷⁶ highlights the fact that since the fieldworker usually works alone, she typically lacks the emotional support necessary to challenge the way she is treated. If she

lacks the physical strength to ensure her own safety as well, the female researcher must find ways of adapting that men do not have to learn.

In some settings women fear that a female researcher might "take away their man." In these cases, the researcher finds that as her closeness to men increases, so does her distance from "their women." Under these circumstances, research relationships are fraught with potential intrigue, suspicion, and danger.⁷⁷ In projects where the community studied consists of lesbians or gay men, the dynamics of jealousy may be similar.

Female researchers may find that their very presence threatens anyone who believes that the [hetero]sexual balance should not be tipped. These researchers will be confined, or confine themselves, to the world of their own gender. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes the way Irish peasant men kept her in her place, that is, in the world of women:

In one rather trying experience, a local shepherd made belligerent by alcohol and losses at the local sheep market announced to all and sundry that he had been told by some Dubliners that "the anthropologist" was only interested in the villagers' sex practices and that I would write a book which could convert "people into numbers," and that I would ultimately degrade the Irish way of life. . . . As it became increasingly apparent that I was concentrating on mothers, children, and adolescents, the village seemed to relax somewhat.⁷⁸

Sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels describes how military men demanded extensive deference and "feminine" behavior from her before they would cooperate:

The military officers resented the introduction of a sociologist, a civilian and a female into their midst. . . . In the view of the liaison chief and his officers, my attitude was overbearing, demanding, and all too aggressive. . . . the behavior these officers found most difficult to tolerate was my assumption that I was the director in the situation. . . . Interpersonal problems with the officers were exacerbated at each contact by my initial obtuseness about and resistance to the demeanor they thought I should exhibit. My manner tended toward the brisk, businesslike, and friendly. I usually entered offices quickly and in an assured manner. I looked each officer directly in the eye, presented my hand for a firm grasp, and proceeded to an agenda for the meeting which I had drawn up and distributed in advance. I never hesitated to interrupt, contradict, or control the conversation, pulling it back to the agenda when necessary. If any jokes or pleasantries were introduced, I initiated them.

Arlene Daniels' behavior reflected her identity as a feminist and professional researcher. The officers, however, wanted her to behave differently.

Two main lines of opposition in response to my demeanor developed. One line took the form . . . of "passive aggressive" behavior. . . . The other main line of opposition was to respond in frankly seductive fashion. . . . I interpreted both sulky and seductive responses as expressions of hostility and resentment against a woman exhibiting inappropriate behavior to a man.

To gain their cooperation, she did her share of "interactional shitwork":

I developed mediating and soothing strategies. . . . I learned the necessity for changing my tone. And, once I was in the field, I abandoned my picture of

myself as the director of a research project and returned to the role of student and humble observer. . . . What I began to learn was that certain kinds of deference to the idea of superior male status had to be paid. Certain behavior was considered inappropriate or even insulting from women: a firm hand clasp, a direct eye-to-eye confrontation, a brisk, businesslike air, an assured manner of joking or kidding with equals were all antagonizing. Most galling of all was my naive assumption that, of course, I was equal. It was important to wait until equality was given me. When I learned to smile sweetly, keep my eyes cast down, ask helplessly for favors, and exhibit explicitly feminine mannerisms, my ability to work harmoniously and efficiently increased.⁷⁹

Issues of deference and access are acute when feminist ethnographers study women who are newcomers in a primarily male setting, as in Susan Martin's study of female police. To enter the setting and understand the experience of new female recruits, or "rookie cops," she took on the role of a patrol officer in a Washington, D.C. district in which 30 of the 400 officers were female.⁸⁰ Susan Martin's description of her participant observation techniques, including use of material gained in the women's lockerroom, demonstrates a commitment to thoroughness. She was barred by her gender from gaining material in the men's lockerroom, and thus her understanding of male perceptions of female police officers rested on interviewing. Regardless of her research intentions, being a woman made it possible to do certain things and not others.

Sociologist Nancy Shaw wrote that being a woman undercut her desired role as a nonparticipating observer in delivery rooms.

On my first day on the delivery floor, I found myself running errands and giving simple nursing care to patients I was near. I was never able to abandon this role, and was encouraged in it by subtle staff pressure and my own feeling that I had no right to stand by while another suffered in front of me, or to write while someone else was doing a job that needed two people.⁸¹

Although Nancy Shaw expresses a lot of ambivalence about her helpfulness, the practice of making themselves useful to others is a theme of many feminist ethnographic accounts. Being involved in the setting where work is done leads many such ethnographers to help out. Just as the desire to be helpful appeared in many discussions of feminist interviewing, so too it characterizes much feminist ethnography.

A final example of negotiating gender in fieldwork settings comes from Pamela Dorn, who traveled from the United States to Turkey to study ethnomusicology. She soon learned that there were two significant social classes in the community she was studying (nouveau riche and elite), and that her status as a "nice, middle-aged, unmarried 'girl'" would give her the label "promiscuous" among the nouveau riche if she interviewed men. They would see her research as a pretext covering her immoral intentions. In the excerpt below she refers to herself as "the researcher" or "the anthropologist":

The nouveau riche segment of the society, while being outwardly Western . . . in cultural style, had yet retained very Ottoman . . . ideas about women, e.g., women belong at home and they are held accountable for their activities at all

times. Since the nouveau riche segment of the community had decided that the researcher was really in Istanbul to find a husband (unlike the elites who knew better and had some idea about what ethnology entails), the researcher's appointments were viewed as capricious and inappropriate behavior. These nouveau riche families immediately began making arrangements for proper introductions to eligible young men and supplied "cousins," a mixed group of young people (male and female) for the researcher to socialize with. Thus, the first task of the researcher in the field was to better understand perceptions of women's gender role and, in general, constructions of appropriate behavior for her own age and gender designation.⁸²

She was compelled to study norms concerning men's and women's behavior, although this had not been her plan.⁸³ Pamela Dorn converted this communal push into an asset. She decided to do a study of gendered proverbs and the construction of "personhood."

Heterosexual couples who do field research together are likely to divide their roles, or have them divided, in line with the sex-role division in the community studied. Anthropologist Hans Buechler's statement is typical:

(My wife)⁸⁴ was studying child-rearing patterns and market relations. Her position in the community differed from my own because her informants were primarily women and children, while mine were for the most part men. . . . As a man I had not been able to talk to many women; in fact the female view of society was practically closed to me, except for relatives, Aymara men do not interact with women frequently.

He also explains that this community's particular culture also placed obstacles before his wife:

Women attend community meetings only when the male household head is absent, and it is imperative for the household to be represented at the meeting, or when a complaint is lodged against them; and they do not hold separate meetings. Therefore, it was impossible for my wife to explain the nature of her study to the women as a group.⁸⁵

In other words, women in the field are forced to deal with issues of gender in ways that are not always consistent with their own values. Although it is possible that there is more awareness nowadays of women's rights to engage in nondeferential behavior, feminist ethnographers must always be prepared to deal with the intersection of their behavior and the gender ideology of the setting they are studying.

I draw two conclusions from this material. First, women ethnographers have difficulty escaping the study of gender no matter what their research agenda. Second, generalizations about the relative advantage of women or of men in fieldwork settings are useless. Societies differ in their receptivity to and treatment of female researchers. While in some it may be advantageous to be a female, in others it is clearly problematic, and it can even be both in any society.

Being Consigned to the Role of Daughter

In numerous cases female researchers face problems that male researchers typically do not face. One example is placement in the role of daughter, particularly

if they are alone in the field and are young, and if the field consists of families or older people. The daughter role can be as problematic as the sex object role. Ironically, the more successful the feminist researcher is in gaining access to a family-oriented community, the more likely she will be seen as a daughter and the more difficult for her to muster a rationale eschewing this role. Furthermore, the role of daughter may be attractive, comforting, and useful if it is consonant with her emotional needs and research interests.⁸⁶ This was the case for Jean Briggs in her study of an Eskimo group⁸⁷ as well as for Marjorie Shostak who wrote: "With older women, I went further, presenting myself as a child in need of help in preparing for what life might yet have to offer."⁸⁸

For anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, perception as a daughter in a setting of elderly Jews meant inculcation with guilt:

Many of the Center people continued to "make" me feel guilty. After greeting me warmly, Basha would often ask, "Never mind these other things you all the time ask about. Tell me, who's with your children?" . . . When I was away too long, they scolded and snubbed me . . . at times their resentment spilled over. My presence was a continual reminder of many painful facts: that it should have been their own children there listening to their stories; that I had combined family and a career, opportunities that the women had longed for and never been allowed. And too, that I knew so little of their background suggested to them that they had failed to transmit to future generations any but fragments of their cherished past. . . . Diffuse and even irrational guilt plagued me until I had to laugh at myself. I had become a tasteless ethnic joke, paralyzed by Jewish guilt: about my relative youth and strength, about having a future where they did not, about my ability to come and go as I chose while they had to await my visits and my convenience, when I relished food that I knew they could not digest, when I slept soundly through the night warmed by my husband's body, knowing the old people were sleeping alone in cold rooms. . . . I considered quitting.⁸⁹

The role of daughter may threaten the fragile identity the female researcher tries to construct as a competent adult researcher. As a result, her identity may begin to dissolve, as anthropologist Dorinne Kondo described:

As an American researcher, I had been taught to act: independence, mastery, competence, were deemed key virtues. As a Japanese daughter, independence and mastery of one's own fate were out of the question: rather, being a daughter meant duties, responsibilities and interdependence. The more I adjusted to my Japanese daughter's role, the keener the conflict became. In exchange for the care the family accorded me, I was glad to help around the house in any way I could: cleaning, some laundry, cooking for the head of household when his wife was away at meetings of the many volunteer organizations in which she participated. It was this last task, however, that produced profound conflicts for me as an American woman. The cooking in and of itself did not offend me. . . . But the etiquette surrounding the serving of food—e.g., that the head of the household is always served first and receives the finest delicacies; that men ask for a second helping of rice by merely holding out the bowl to the woman nearest the rice cooker, perhaps uttering a grunt of thanks—was irritating to me. I carried out my duties uncomplainingly, in what I hope was reasonable good humor. But I was none too happy about these things "inside." Moreover, I began to chafe under

certain restrictions on my movement, such as having to come home at a certain hour. These are perfectly understandable, given the responsibility the family had for the welfare of their female guest, and I abided by their regulations. But I was still exquisitely sensitive to the constraints of my position, and I felt keenly the deconstruction of the self into various constituents at war with one another.⁹⁰

As with the sex object role, female researchers sometimes retain people's cooperation by enacting a daughter-like role. The critical issue here is not the particular role the researcher is compelled to adopt, but whether she is able to negotiate the role after she adopts it. Barbara Myerhoff, for example, gradually understood that she was volunteering for guilt. This recognition enabled her to "reenter" the setting with a new role and identity.

Racially Heterogeneous Research

Discussions of feminist methodology must take into account the fact that in many societies, sex role differentiation is supplemented by deep racial divisions. In such societies, the female researcher is likely to have access to men and women of her race and to women of other races, but to be discouraged from solitary interaction with men not of her racial group. Abiding by these norms reinforces these divisions. If she does not cooperate, she may be stigmatized and have access reduced to people of her own race. U.S. sociologist Patricia Remington acknowledged this issue in her study of a police department:

Since the researcher is a white female, this study is based more on the white segment of the Atlanta Police Department than on the whole force. . . . the researcher rode with almost every white male, white female or black female. However, few black males were interviewed or observed. The prevailing ethos largely precluded a white female—be she officer or observer—from being a partner of a black male. At the time of the study, the Commissioner of Police was black and according to white officers had followed a course of reverse discrimination in hiring and promoting policies. Deep racial tension in the force was expressed daily in comments made to the researcher and in informal racial segregation at roll calls, dinner stops, encounters between officers, and social activities.⁹¹

As a black woman, Laura Fishman was careful to develop credibility in her study of white women whose male partners were incarcerated.⁹² And Carol Stack, a white woman, discussed at length the special dynamics of her attempt to study a poor black community.⁹³ In both cases, being a woman seemed to create a bridge with women of a different race. Feminist consciousness typically makes researchers sensitive to gendered behavior, racism, cultural misogyny, and coping behaviors.⁹⁴ The ability to understand a setting, however, is linked to the researcher's own ways of dealing with these issues. The most favorable scenario is one in which she can create a role that balances safety, self-respect, and the ability to do her work.

Dilemmas of Feminist Ethnography

Despite its rich historical roots, feminist ethnography is burdened with many controversies and dilemmas. I have labeled these the problem of trust, the closeness/distance dilemma, and the dilemma of the complete observer and complete participant roles.

The Problem of Trust

Even though feminists try to study women from the standpoint of women and generally have access to women's settings, the women they study do not always trust them. Feminists' access to women is potentially as problematic as men's access has been to men,⁹⁵ particularly when there are differences of social class, race, ethnicity, or sexual preference. This is a dilemma for these researchers as feminists and as ethnographers. Sociologist Ruth Horowitz's study of Chicano gangs provides an illustration:

One evening I was sitting with two young women in the bedroom of one of them and asking a series of very pointed questions about school, who was friendly with whom, whether friendship networks in the school and street overlapped, and whether they ever had been friends with any of the more street-oriented youths. They both jumped on me, saying that I was just a researcher and not there because I liked them. One of them ran out of the house crying that she never wanted to see me again. I had a long talk about fieldwork with the other young woman, who was equally hurt but willing to listen. . . . It took me more than two weeks to rebuild an understanding with the second young woman, but she remained wary of our relationship for a long time afterward. I felt uncomfortable and worried also.⁹⁶

This excerpt suggests that a bond of sisterhood must be earned. Differences exist in socioeconomic status, life-style, sexual identity, marital status, and more, and must be overcome to gain access to the views of a diverse range of women.

A relationship between women is not necessarily one of intersubjective agreement or even understanding. If a feminist is unable to earn the trust of the women she is studying, she potentially suffers a sense of failure both as a researcher and as a feminist. Lois Easterday and her colleagues report that in their study of "parent groups composed primarily of poor, divorced women in their twenties and thirties," the researcher was challenged—"How can you [single, childless] understand what it's like for us?"⁹⁷

Feminist researchers are sometimes forthright in questioning the degree to which a female researcher can understand women of a class different from her own. For example, in her study of a high school clerical preparation class, Linda Valli wrote:

Although I am convinced that the culture of femininity the students produced functioned to bind them to subordinate and inferior societal roles, I am not clear about whether this culture was perceived by them as inferior to masculine culture

or just different from it. Because I so strongly perceived traditional feminine culture as working against women, I . . . failed to systematically explore the consciousness with which the students produced that culture.⁹⁸

She admits not understanding the women because she did not want to deal with the fact that their view of the world was different from her own. This confession brings to mind Margaret Andersen's interview-based study of wealthy women (discussed in the previous chapter), who resented her interpretation of them as suffering from false consciousness.

The problem of "false consciousness" pervades feminist ethnography of non-feminist groups. Sherryl Kleinman encountered this problem studying a counter-cultural setting:

I was disappointed that the women seemed unaware of their subordinate position in the organization. Could they not see through the veneer of equality that the hugs and friendly relations provided? . . . I felt that because of their identification with the counterculture they should see things the way I did. This reflected my own view of feminism at the time—women could and should achieve like men and they are responsible for advancing themselves.

Recognizing that she had no empathy for the women, she began to look at her own history:

As a woman who had just left graduate school and who needed to believe in the meritocracy while on the job market, it is understandable that I held this view. What kind of sociological story was I writing, then? The men have the power, the women have false consciousness . . . , and the status quo continues. But, I was also bothered by my lack of empathy, angry at myself for being angry at them. I had the sense that something was wrong, but put those uncomfortable feelings aside. Instead, I kept collecting data.

Only when I did in-depth interviews and also found my own view of feminism changing, did I develop empathy for the women. I began to see that they valued the organization as a community rather than as an instrumental place of work and that they did not join the organization for money. Rather, they wanted to feel they were participating in a good cause while developing loving relationships. This change in my feelings toward the women coincided with changes in feminist theory, spawned in part by Carol Gilligan's work (1982) on differences in moral reasoning between men and women. . . . I began to question the sociologist's taken-for-granted concept of inequality. If the women largely wanted feelings of connection in the organization—and got them—and the men largely wanted a place to practice their trade—and did so—then could one speak of inequality, or was the situation fair?

I tried to live with the "different but equal" story, but my gut reaction told me this was wrong. . . . I think it reflected my role as . . . feminist sociologist. . . . [Eventually I constructed a new story that] reflects my current feminist perspective, which adopts humanist values and looks at the cost to women (and men) of trying to live out those values in conventionally gendered environments.⁹⁹

Lois Easterday and her colleagues pointed out variations on Sherryl Kleinman's dilemmas:

The researcher may find herself more attracted to "feminist" men and women. Tensions among non-feminists and feminists in such settings are problematic; the researcher may find herself typed as a "female libber" and tested for "where she stands"—as either friend or enemy, but clearly as female.¹⁰⁰

Feminist ethnography introduces new questions about political rapport or lack of rapport when both the researcher and the setting members are feminist, or when one is feminist and the other is not.

Redefining the Closeness/Distance Dilemma: Nurturing as a Field Method

The methodological literature on participant observation is divided among those who advocate closeness and those who advocate respectful distance between the researcher and the person studied.¹⁰¹ Respectful distance is supposed to avoid the danger that the researcher will "go native" or identify with the people studied; closeness is supposed to enhance understanding. In the "respectful distance" model, overrapport represents the researcher's neurotic failing to maintain objectivity or maintain his/her separate identity.¹⁰² Many feminist researchers, by contrast, take the position that closeness with women is necessary in order to understand them.

The question then arises—would the methodology of participant observation have been defined differently if it had been based on the way women study women in all-female settings? Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has two interesting responses to this question. She suggests that ethnography done by women [not all of whom are feminist] is different from ethnography done by men to the extent that men and women interact in different ways. She notes that when women study the elderly and/or when women study women, they can act on a "nurturing" impulse that is reciprocated.¹⁰³ Denise Connors' study of elderly Irish women, mentioned earlier, is a case in point of reciprocated nurturing:

We shared experiences, stories, letters, cards, photographs, newspaper clippings and poems. After a visit with Hannah she told me that our talk about music motivated her to play her accordion which she had set aside years ago. I was treated to tea, coffee, soup in a bowl preheated in the oven, cheese, crackers, cake, muffins and cookies. One woman saved quarters to make change for me to use at the toll booths. I was sent home with Irish bread, "holy cards," a pot-holder and once with a bottle of non-alcoholic wine that had been a gift from an alcoholic priest.

I often brought something with me when I went to visit . . . I brought dulse (seaweed) to Mary after hearing how she used to collect it along the shore and plants to the women who "loved flowers." I brought D-Zerta to Norah who is diabetic and couldn't find it in her local supermarket. . . . The enduring friendships that have evolved are based on a sense of reciprocity and understanding of one another's lives.¹⁰⁴

Reading these descriptions suggests to me that the friendship between researcher and "subject" Ann Oakley advocates in *interview* research is more likely to be the product of *ethnographic* research. In Australian anthropologist Diane Bell's fieldwork, for example, full reciprocity led to mutual identification.

At Warrabri the first question concerned my marital status. Where was my husband, I was asked. I explained I was divorced. How did I support myself, was the next question. On a pension from the government and a scholarship from the university which had sent me to learn, I explained . . . "In that case," said Nakamarra, my older sister, "you are just like us." In the next eighteen months I came to understand the ramifications of the comment.¹⁰⁵

According to this feminist view, not only is closeness necessary for understanding, but the case for respectful distance must be understood as a product of males' developmental history that requires distance from their mothers in order to produce the male identity.¹⁰⁶

In general, feminist participant observation values openness to intimacy and striving for empathy, which should not be confused with superficial friendliness. Rather it means openness to complete transformation. This transformation—or consciousness-raising—lays the groundwork for friendship, shared struggle, and identity change. It is important, however, that the possibility of developing close relationships in the field not become an oppressive mandate.

Another way to think about the dilemma of closeness/distance is to acknowledge that each setting requires the fieldworker to take a different approach. Some settings require anonymous relationships¹⁰⁷ while others require intensely personal relationships.¹⁰⁸ From this perspective, any stance is acceptable as long as research findings are analyzed in terms of the particular types of relationship that occurred. The setting, rather than methodological ideology, defines the appropriate role.

It should also be remembered that fieldwork relationships are fluid over time.¹⁰⁹ In contrast to Raymond Gold's frequently cited idea¹¹⁰ that a researcher's stance has a particular form in a given project, Sheryl Ruzek's study, mentioned earlier, highlights the fact that the stances change over time and can be multidimensional at any time. The different dimensions of the study of a social movement, in this case the women's health movement, rather than of a particular setting, called for this multifaceted approach. Moreover, researchers inevitably have different types of relationships with different individuals or groups in any particular field setting, and as long as the researcher is self-aware, whatever happens is useful data.¹¹¹

Arlie Hochschild claims that empathy is enhanced in feminist ethnography because empathy emerges easily among the relatively powerless.¹¹² Judy Wajcman offers an example from her study of a women's cooperative:

The women were friendly and tried to put me at ease. I think they felt sorry for me. The role I quite consciously adopted, which was not hard in the circumstances, was that of a shy student. . . . As it turned out, my inability to use a sewing-machine was also an advantage. . . . Doing odd jobs gave me the freedom I needed to move around the shopfloor. . . . After they had sewn several items, the women would cut off the loose threads and pack the items in bundles. I often sat by a few machinists and did this job for them, folding the jackets into plastic bags, and stacking them near the fire exit, where work was collected and delivered. . . . Trying to make myself useful, I ran errands, did bits of shopping and sometimes made the tea, which was a great joke, as I myself drank lemon tea and always made a weak brew. More helpfully, I would collect some of the

children from school if their mothers were having to work late to finish a contract on time.¹¹³

Women are concerned with many things other than nurturance; and women do not always identify with other women. It is important, therefore, not to think about feminist fieldwork only in terms of traditional female stereotypes, but to include these stereotypes as one possibility.

Complete Observer and Complete Participant Roles

In addition to the closeness/distance dichotomy, methodological literature concerning fieldwork suggests that there is a dichotomy or continuum of "complete observer" to "complete participant" roles.¹¹⁴ The two variables in this continuum are the extent to which those observed know they are studied, and how much the researcher *participates* in the ongoing activities. Feminists conducting participant observation research have adopted stances within this entire range. Some feminists such as Sheryl Ruzek reject as unethical the complete observer role.

Although many fieldworkers disagree, I object to participant observation without revealing one's role as a researcher in any but public settings, partly because it impedes asking simple questions outright ("normal" behavior for a researcher but not for everyday participants). I also believe that it is important to explain one's role and specify what is to be investigated, as well as why and how. [P]resenting an identity other than one's own violates the ethos of many groups and individuals.¹¹⁵

In contrast with Sheryl Ruzek's careful delineation of her researcher role, Karen McCarthy Brown¹¹⁶ first presented herself as researcher in her study of a Haitian Vodou cult, then adopted the "complete participant" stance, eventually becoming one of the people she was studying. Many feminist researchers have written about the ethical and epistemological importance of integrating their selves into their work, and of eliminating the distinction between the subject and the object. The complete participant approach fits this particular feminist goal, although it is not shared by all researchers who consider themselves to be feminists.

Feminist ethnographers who emphasize closeness rather than distance in fieldwork relations believe that understanding based on participant observation is enhanced by total immersion in the world one is studying.¹¹⁷ Total immersion comes about when the researcher begins to share the fate of those she is studying. In a brief self-reflexive essay about her study, Karen McCarthy Brown mentioned that her experiences in other cultures sensitized her to the social construction of reality, particularly gender hierarchies. This understanding shaped her distrust of social institutions, including her vocation as an anthropologist. When she became disillusioned with the "objective" stance in which she had been trained, she began to rely more on her "intuitions about people and processes" and to draw on her relationships as "primary resources." The alternative feminist stance was open, receptive, and waiting, an approach she believes reflects her experiences as a woman, "socialized as women are to the skills of empathy, the importance of relationships, and the interconnection of thought and experience."

Increasing her involvement in an "alternative world view," Karen Brown "submit[ed] her own life to the Voudou systems of interpretation and healing."¹¹⁸ She came to believe that her deep involvement in this world view was personally fulfilling and the most useful way to accomplish her research goals of understanding Haitian religion. By trying to act "as if" Voudouism were her religion, she engaged "the deepest parts of who she is." Thus her fieldwork took her out of the context of academic compartmentalization and allowed her to fuse her self and her work, a principle she believes underpins feminist methodology and is rejected by mainstream social science.

Many feminist ethnographers have eliminated the distinction between the researcher and the researched and have studied their own experience. Taking this point to the extreme, British sociologist Liz Stanley wrote that the subject matter of feminist research must be the everyday life experiences of feminists,¹¹⁹ a view many feminists would reject as limiting. In some cases such as that of Karen Brown, the researcher begins as an outsider and then changes profoundly during the course of her study. Sheryl Ruzek's involvement deepened throughout the course of her research on women's health settings, so that by the end of the study she considered herself a member of the women's health movement.

Another way feminist ethnographers address the question of closeness versus distance is their decision concerning working in the setting. In her report on a shelter for battered women, for example, Noelle Rodriguez reports being told by "the administrator that [she] was 'welcome to just hang around,' " which she interpreted as meaning that she did not have to be a "shelter worker" but could adopt the role of "inquisitive researcher":

Aside from occasionally helping out in the kitchen or with child care, I generally took the role of a nonparticipant observer and identified myself to everyone as "a researcher, interested in understanding how the shelter operates." I attended 47 meetings of the staff and visited the shelter every few days to attend meetings, to conduct interviews, or to observe daily life.¹²⁰

In contrast with Noelle Rodriguez, Kathleen Ferraro conducted an ethnography of a shelter in which she was employed.

As staff researcher, I had access to all aspects of life and decision making in the shelter. I gave particularly close attention to the staffing sessions held weekly to discuss and evaluate the cases of all women in the shelter at that time. I sat in on and tape recorded all such sessions during the 14-month period I worked at the shelter.¹²¹

In her case, her role as worker became the basis of her ability to do participant observation research.

When studying a hierarchical women's setting, feminist ethnographers face the classic dilemmas of not appearing to align themselves with one group rather than another. In the case below, Judy Wajcman explains how this conflict arose in the workers' cooperative she studied.

The first thing that struck both Hilary and myself during our initial visits was that we were always greeted by Nancy and Jackie, who would take us into the office

to discuss the firm's problems. The possibility of replacing Jackie [a feminist helping out in the factory] foreshadowed some of the difficulties I was to experience during my stay at Fakenham Enterprises. Jackie had spent most of her time at the factory in the office and was seen by the other women as Nancy's assistant. She often answered the telephone and had access to information simply by virtue of being in the office. I did not want to inherit her position because, in order to carry out my study, I wanted to work on the shopfloor with the women and talk to them. I wanted to avoid being identified with Nancy and restricted to the office. This was the classic problem of a researcher trying to avoid identification with the management, but in the strange context of a workers' cooperative.¹²²

She resolved this dilemma by requesting permission to work in the factory.

By contrast, Sheryl Ruzek avoided working in the settings she was studying, for precisely the reasons that led Judy Wajcman in the opposite direction.

My decision not to actively work with or for any particular group was also influenced by concern that "joining" would force me to take sides in schisms and squabbles. By maintaining some distance, I could learn more about all sides of disputes and could maintain a critical stance—difficult when too closely associated with one group. (I was reminded of the importance of this after observing a clinic a colleague was studying. When reviewing my observations of the clinic's problematic features with her, she bristled; she later told me she was surprised that she felt so defensive over my criticizing "her" health group.) Overall, the advantages of maintaining some distance seemed to outweigh the advantages of being a true "insider."¹²³

Finally, Canadian sociologist Patricia Baker took a position as a teller in order to study a bank, a "complex capitalist organization." She found that the differential power and gender inequality in the setting, and her membership in one position in the hierarchy, had a major impact on her ability to conduct her research and maintain her critical perspective.¹²⁴ The dilemmas I reviewed above are true dilemmas—there seems to be little consensus as to how they should be resolved. For this reason, feminist ethnographers typically make double contributions when they conduct their research. They contribute to our understanding of feminist ethnography as a method of social research, and they contribute to our understanding of the subject matter they chose to study.

Feminist Analysis of Ethnographic Data

A feminist perspective on data analysis includes many components such as understanding women in their social contexts and using women's language and behavior to understand the relation between self and context. It includes the problem of finding a way not to omit any person's voice while still having a manuscript of manageable length. It includes the use of feminist theory to analyze data¹²⁵ as well as flexibility and creativity in format. Susan Krieger, for example, argued that feminist ethnography must be redefined to include autobiography and fiction¹²⁶ and Marianne (Tracy) Paget argued that feminist research should be performed as theater.¹²⁷

Much feminist ethnography hopes to contribute to feminist theory. As participant observation research is done on a growing spectrum of settings relevant to women's lives, researchers are using their data to evaluate, not only to apply, feminist theory. For example, in a review of Carole Joffe's participant observation study of a family planning clinic, Marian Sandmaier points to the significance of Carole Joffe's discovery that "'front-line' birth control and abortion counselors play a pivotal and largely unacknowledged role in the regulation of sexual behavior." This role reflects the fact that the Federal Government, the feminist movement, and the New Right "fail to adequately address the often wrenching conflicts faced daily by birth control and abortion workers."¹²⁸ These unaddressed conflicts suggest that feminist theory must find a way to help these counsellors. It is not simply a question of feminism's developing a "pro-choice" position.

When doing data analysis, feminist ethnographers point out the important difference between *drawing on* feminist theory and *imposing* feminist theory. Susan Stall, for example, believes that feminists will be able to see the changes women are making in their lives only if they do not measure everyone against their own standards. She writes:

If we utilize liberal . . . feminist arguments that emphasize abstract and universal (simple) conceptions of equality as the basis for meaningful political activity for women, we may be oversimplifying our understanding of the roots of social resistance and innovation in the everyday experience of women. A politics of community promises to avoid the dangers of abstraction and simplicity by starting from the diverse forms of social change women already make to subvert the inequality of discrimination and exploitation—forms that emphasize a different political agenda than the popular feminist arguments allow for.

Feminists should obviously be vigilant lest "research from the standpoint of women" be a slogan masking the feminist researcher's application of her own ideas onto the women she studies. As Susan Stall put it,

Current *feminist arguments* about political action are limiting and inadequate because they do not take into account the complexity of women's lived experience within community, and thus reinforce and call for political activities which are similarly limiting.¹²⁹

The challenge for feminism is to both develop feminist theory and find ways of understanding the way it is rejected by some of the very people whose lives it tries to explain.

The analysis of feminist ethnographic materials and the manner in which they are reported also leads feminist researchers to questions posed by scholars who are interested in problems of writing. To what extent should the ethnographer utilize her own voice, to what extent should the members of the setting have control over the product, and to what extent should materials be interpreted in ways that diverge from members of the setting? These are some of the current dilemmas.

Feminist Ambivalence toward Ethnography

In a provocative article, U.S. sociologists Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne wrote in 1985 that if there *were* a theoretical link between feminism and interpretive methods, there would be more feminist ethnographies.¹³⁰ I have two approaches to this complaint about the paucity of feminist ethnography. First, there seem actually to be quite a few. In addition to those I have discussed in this chapter, I would include Sue Webb's study of a department store,¹³¹ Kathleen McCourt's study of Chicago working-class neighborhoods,¹³² Arlene Kaplan Daniels' study of upper-class women's volunteering activity,¹³³ Michelle Fine's ethnography of a New York public high school,¹³⁴ Rahel Wasserfall's study of Moroccan Jewish marital relations in an Israeli moshav,¹³⁵ Eleanor M. Miller's study of female criminals,¹³⁶ Marcia Millman's study of obese people,¹³⁷ Arlie Hochschild's studies of old women and of stewardesses,¹³⁸ Jeanne Guillemin and Lynda Holmstrom's study of intensive neonatal care units,¹³⁹ Lynn Davidman's study of Jewish women who become orthodox,¹⁴⁰ Laura Fishman's study of wives of prisoners,¹⁴¹ Kathleen Kautzer's study of the Older Women's League,¹⁴² and Mary Eaton's study of a courtroom,¹⁴³ among many others.

Second, if it *is* the case that ethnography is underrepresented in feminist research, it may be for the same reasons that limit the production of participant observation studies generally—the difficulty of gaining access to the study site, their time-consuming nature, the inadequacy of training, the difficulty of obtaining funding, and the derogatory attitude of some powerful groups within social science toward nonquantitative research.¹⁴⁴ To do intensive ethnography frequently requires the ability to suspend personal and work obligations, to travel, and to expose oneself to risk.

Although the practical demands of fieldwork may inhibit some women from undertaking it, I also believe that participant observation research has provided some nontraditional intellectual women a legitimate avenue for freedom and adventure.¹⁴⁵ One reason for studying other cultures and groups is to circumvent one's discomfort as a woman in one's own culture. In the field, the woman may intensify her search for freedom, finding herself increasingly distanced from conventions such as marriage. In her frank account of fieldwork experiences, Manda Cesara discussed that

something was happening to me and I needed solitude. I know that if I could have wiped away our marriage with a magic wand I would have done so. It was not Bob who bothered me. Rather, in the Maloba environment, free among my equals who were all preoccupied with similar worries, the oppression of marriage hit me "like a ton of bricks." Even when "happy" couples passed through our research quarters I pitied them. I would find myself observing their every demeanor, nonverbal signs and signals used to keep the other in line, and I felt repulsed. The recognition of subtle controls passing back and forth between man and woman made me feel nauseous. In the presence of these couples I felt as if their iron bars were also enclosing me and my fury increased and I wanted to

burst through these bars with the rage of a maniac. It occurred to me then that during times of mental growth and change, one must be alone. . . . It was not Bob but marriage that oppressed me. It is what marriage does to one's brain, anyone's brain, that I dislike. There are simply times in the lives of men and women when marriage is inappropriate. It suffocates the flow of creative thought and personal growth, something that is understood by every living and dead creative mind.¹⁴⁶

Ironically, women may also undertake participant observation because it is considered consonant with the traditional role of women. In fact, some argue that women have been disproportionately attracted to and successful in anthropology because participant observation is the predominant method of that discipline.

Whether or not women are more likely to do fieldwork than are men, and despite the complexity of a particular feminist's motivation for undertaking fieldwork, it seems to be the case that the written text that emerges from the study is a blend of writing about the self, the group studied, and the methods by which that group was studied, or as I previously put it, "person, problem and method."¹⁴⁷ In her study of Women's Studies practitioners, Women's Studies scholar Renate Klein wrote that this is the mandate of feminist ethnography: "doing feminist research explicitly demands transparency in all stages of our research, making visible why we do what we do—and how we do this."¹⁴⁸ This self-disclosure reveals the extent to which the researcher learned about herself and helps instruct the reader how to engage in similar work. As sociologist Carol Warren put it:

Entering the field, developing a place within the social order, talking, feeling, and living in the setting, are the terrain of understanding the intersection of gender, self, and others in fieldwork. Writing field notes, writing essays, seeking and incorporating reviews and editing, are the terrain of understanding the web of data, self and discourse.¹⁴⁹

In an article published in 1988, Judith Stacey goes beyond her original comment on the paucity of feminist ethnographies, and questions if there can actually be a feminist ethnography, implying some agreed-on definition of feminism.¹⁵⁰ She claims that fieldwork relations are inherently deceptive and instrumental, and that feminists should not relate to women in this way.¹⁵¹ Her criticism echoes that of Ann Oakley who called interviewing a contradiction in terms. Unlike Ann Oakley, who suggested that we reform interviewing by introducing more commitment, Judith Stacey implies that to do so would add even more hypocrisy to an inherently manipulative relationship. My view on this matter is that there is no agreed on definition of feminism, but that there are many people who call themselves feminists and whose ethnographic research follows their own definition of feminism. Moreover, fieldwork relations that may seem manipulative might, in fact, be reciprocal. The possibility of manipulating someone can easily be reduced by reminding them of your research intentions. There is always the chance that the setting member will have expectations of the researcher that cannot be fulfilled, but it seems unreasonable to me to abandon all ethnographic studies because of the impossibility of the researcher being all things to all people at all

times. The feminist ethnographer like all ethnographers is simply human and is motivated by concern for women, not for their exploitation.

Feminist fieldworkers are likely to examine how the setting itself affected them as women and how being female affected their ability to study the setting.¹⁵² They are likely to report these findings as part of their formal ethnographic manuscript. Although female fieldworkers' unique difficulties (and a few advantages) in the field have been analyzed for some time, these insights have not yet been incorporated into mainstream methodological writings about participant observation research. Because women have remained on the outside, their challenges to conventional methodological procedures have not been recognized and definitions of ethnographic practices have not yet been modified. A shared conceptual framework has not yet developed and perhaps should not be developed, to embrace all the components and dilemmas of feminist ethnography.¹⁵³ Every feminist ethnography seems to generate its own new sets of concerns in addition to touching on familiar ones. I therefore do not share Barrie Thorne and Judith Stacey's assessment that there are substantially fewer feminist ethnographies or that they are inherently contradictory. Rather, I think we have been slow in weaving the connections among all the studies that exist and therefore deficient in reaching a grounded understanding of what feminist ethnography actually is.