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The New View: WF27, Ethnographer, Seeks Homeless Male Informant to Live With in Platonic Relationship for Purposes of Data Collection and Research

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The effect of researcher gender on the process of conducting research is examined. The author draws on a number of personal research experiences to suggest that females may encounter unique problems in doing field research, particularly in male-dominated research settings. These difficulties are examined and recommendations for overcoming them are put forth.

INTRODUCTION

The dominant Weltanshauung from the times of the ancient Greek philosophers through the 1970's equated males with "noble" culture and females with "banal" nature (Leacock 1980; Ortner 1974; Sanday 1981). Many academics have pointed out that this patriarchal Western notion of male dominance adversely affects scientific progress (Albers and Medicine 1983; Kehoe 1983; Webster 1975). A plethora of studies show that data collection, analysis, and interpretation in the social and behavioral sciences is prejudiced by a decidedly male bias and, more alarming, that the scientific enterprise may be "male" at its very core (Rohrlich-Leavitt, Sykes, and Weatherford 1975; Spector 1983; Steady 1985). Recognizing this, new theories and frameworks are being developed by academics in disciplines such as feminist anthropology, the anthropology of women, and women's studies (e.g., Moore 1988; Nanda 1990; Pala 1985). Modern feminist research takes as its topic not women, but gender relations, and has been one of the factors which has spurred a paradigmatic shift of profound consequence to the manner in which scientists collect, observe, and interpret data.

Yet while the rise of feminism in the 1970's has led to some significant gains, most feminist literature still focuses on the interpretation and the outcome of research while the process of conducting research remains in need of scholarly attention. Although a growing body of publications is addressing the gender-based problems that affect female participant-observers (e.g., Golde 1986, Gurney 1991, Warren 1988), little of this information has seeped into the consumer behavior literature. Throughout this manuscript, I compare the tenets of good fieldwork (as suggested by both the literature and some of my colleagues) with the realities of my own field experiences for the purpose of creating a set of gender-sensitive recommendations to guide qualitative researchers. These propositions emanate from consideration of problems female researchers often face in male-dominated settings, but may be applied to problems male researchers face in female-dominated settings (e.g., Gregory 1984).

PROBLEMS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The first time I embarked on a qualitative research project (with virtually no knowledge of qualitative research methodology), I was instructed to ask a lot of questions and carefully listen to the answers, nodding my head and saying, "Uh-huh," "That's interesting," or "Really?" Later, as I delved into the literature on qualitative research methodology, I read pieces of advice like: "The interviewer accepts statements that violate his own ethical, political, or other standards without showing his disapproval in any way" (Whyte 1982, p. 111) and "...The urge to argue must be suppressed constantly..." (Gans 1982, p. 56). My impression of the qualitative researcher's role in an interview was equivalent to that proposed by Douglas (1985, pp. 56-57), who writes: "The name 'handmaiden' conveys the tone of the crucial truth about creative interviewing: being a creative interviewer really does largely subordinate the interviewer to the interviewee."

When I first read this literature, it never occurred to me that these authors are biological males, that males may carry out qualitative research differently than females, and, not unimportantly, that qualitative research methods are generally acknowledged to be an invention of male
researchers. To the contrary, I had read many critiques of qualitative research methods which described them using words like "soft," "subjective," "intimate," and several other adjectives which are most closely associated with females. Therefore, I presumed that qualitative research is "feminine" and comfortable to females (see Belk 1991 and Gherardi and Turner 1987 for another point of view). I presumed that males have more difficulty adjusting to the passive role of the qualitative researcher than their female counterparts. I continued to delude myself in this fashion for quite some time.

As implied by the tongue-in-cheek title of this manuscript, the focal point of this paper is on a particularly negative event I experienced when I attempted to live as a homeless person to gain a naturalistic, participant-observer perspective on the plight of being homeless. Looking back on this experience, I do not think I did anything wrong. Rather, I think I did too much right; I followed standard procedure for qualitative research. But would you tell your daughter to enter an all-male enclave and act passive, all-agreeing, and stupid? That is what I did. I enthusiastically discarded my identification, possessions, and money and linked up with a friend of a friend who happened to be homeless and living under a bridge. Ignoring the squalor, noise, and marauding skunks, I asked for permission to live with him under the bridge. In retrospect, I now realize that even the act of gaining entree may put the qualitative researcher in a submissive position. In agreeing to move in with him, I was agreeing to live by his rules.

Tom, as I shall refer to my homeless informant, quickly made his desires known. The following conversation is recorded on the first tape:

T: "Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz" sounds awfully materialistic.

I: And are you not materialistic?

T: Well, I don't know if I should go around wantin' any material things. Though I found myself...

I: I'm listening.

T: I found myself praying that if it was your wish also, I want to get it on with you.

I: So am I a material thing?

T: No. You're not. The important part in this was if this was your wish too.

I never indicated my wishes and the conversation returned to other subjects. However, in retrospect, I think Tom interpreted my failure to reject his offer as an indication of my willingness to consider it. The outside observer might wonder why I did not state my displeasure at Tom's suggestion. At the time, I assumed that any deviation from "Uh-huh," "That's interesting," or "Really?" is tantamount to poor qualitative research.

Two days and two nights were spent in relative peace, albeit with far too many sexual connotations emanating from Tom. I continued to passively nod my head, say "Uh-huh," and wait for the conversation to change. I should not have been surprised (although I was) when I awoke the third night to find Tom's hands on my body. He requested sex. I refused. The field experience exploded.

T: Why have we spent the past 45 fucking minutes arguing with each other about whether or not you are going to give me a hand job? It could have been done and over with in 5 minutes. But you, you, being the strong-willed, passionate...

I: Impossible.

T: Yes, you, because of the kind of person you are, deny this to me. Even after I ask you, you say 'No.' What kind of deal is this?

I: You're not willing to follow the rules.

T: Should I follow your rules or should I follow the rules that make sense to me?

In retrospect, I do not know why I did not leave immediately. I guess I still had some hopes of continuing my research, as is evidenced by the fact that I continued to tape record our conversations. Unfortunately, our argument built to a crescendo because Tom would not stop. We tussled. I hit him on the head with my tape recorder and prepared to throw my camera at him. For reasons not entirely known to me, he relented and responded apologetically.
T: I really didn’t mean to wake you up. I wanted to give you a hickey. I really wanted to give you a hickey and I wanted to lay next to you like a little baby. You are beautiful when you sleep. You aroused my sense of vulnerability.

Not relieved by his apology and shaking with fear, I quickly packed my things, trying to maintain my composure.

T: The problem is how are we going to leave this place peacefully, sweetly, warm memories?

I: By walking out the door.

T: Yes, well I’ve got blue walls. [Apparently a reference to the blueish underside of the bridge.]

I: Blue walls?

T: I’ve got blue walls because I’ve wanted so much to come inside of you.

I: I am leaving.


I: No.

T: Bullshit. Just lie here next to me and let me feel the warmth of your body.

I: No, no, no, no.

With these words, I left. In retrospect, as I listen to the twenty surviving tapes from this field experience, I feel that I was far too agreeable to Tom’s sexual suggestions. I should have clearly stated that sex was not part of our agreement when he made the first comment. I should have left immediately when he made the first physical gesture. Though these lessons are well-ingrained, I have since embarked on other field exercises, had similar problems, and made new mistakes. The following set of five recommendations is designed to assist other qualitative researchers in avoiding the mistakes I have made.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: When an interview or a field experience interaction begins to take on unwanted sexual connotations, disengage from the interaction.

In the simplest case, successful disengagement may take the form of failing to endorse the informant’s sexual remarks. To illustrate, during a conversation about alcoholism in the Soviet Union, one of my informants said, “I also am addicted to sex.” Although it might have been interesting to pursue this, and although there was no indication that his remark was the forebearer of a later suggestion that we have sex, I responded by saying nothing because I did not want to encourage him to continue in this direction. My caution may have been unwarranted, but the old maxim “It is better to be safe than sorry” prevailed. The qualitative researcher learns that subtle beginnings may lead to overt and unwanted endings and, considering that this interview took place in a two-person train cabin where we would be spending the night together, I decided to lose a research opportunity rather than potentially get into an unwanted situation.

In the above example, a simple lack of encouragement was successful in that the interview returned to a discussion of alcoholism. More forceful approaches are sometimes necessary. For example, an interview with two drunken men outside of a darkened and deserted Soviet hotel deteriorated when one informant insisted on putting his arm around me and kissing my hands. I first responded by saying words of discouragement and removing his hands, then, as this failed, by edging away, and finally, after being pursued, by pushing him away from me and quickly walking away. Participant-observers do not have to participate in undesired activities. Although this may seem intuitive, many participant-observers spend years practicing the art of being agreeable and unobtrusive researchers -- often struggling to do so -- and therefore may feel consciously or subconsciously self-restrained from disagreeing with the sexual innuendos of an informant even when the situation requires it. A rule of thumb is to be alert to unwanted sexual innuendo and whenever it is sensed, to act disinterested, state disinterest, or if necessary, leave. One of the best pieces of advice I ever received from a mentor occurred just before I left on a lengthy field project: “If you do not like it, go home.” Until she said this, I had not realized that this is an option -- not a disgrace -- for any reason during any research project.
Recommendation 2: The qualitative researcher should not make sexual remarks, sexual innuendos, or other sexual connotations.

The researcher also may be the source of unwanted sexual connotations. For example, one of my informants in the Soviet Union remarked, "Women like my body, but my face isn't so good." I replied, "I think you are very handsome." In saying this, I made two mistakes. First, although the conscious intention of my comment was to increase rapport with my informant by complimenting him, I unintentionally revealed my opinions of him and thereby potentially biased his further remarks. It would have been preferable to simply probe, "Uh-huh," a non-committal comment which would have allowed him to continue the discussion without interruption. Second, and more important for my present purposes, his next remarks led me to believe that my comment was judged as an indication of my sexual interest in him. This put me in an uncomfortable position. Having said, "I think you are very handsome," I now had to delicately imply a caveat, "But I am not sexually interested in you." This was particularly difficult because subconsciously I was sexually interested in him, something I had not realized until after my comment. The question of whether or not it is "okay" to pursue sexual relations with an informant is a much-encountered issue every researcher will face. It is prudent to point out that sexual interests toward informants (or sexual relations with informants) are likely to disrupt the research project and, much like teachers with students, doctors with patients, or attorneys with clients, the researcher has an ethical obligation to refrain from having sexual relations with informants during the professional engagement.

Another, more subtle illustration of how the qualitative researcher may be a source of unwanted sexual connotations became apparent to me in the course of conducting research of mountain men. These men typically assume rendezvous names such as Two Deer, Weird Harold, or Shortcut; names which are often given to them based on their humorous exploits. In a spirit of communitas, the researchers in our group also assumed rendezvous names. For unknown reasons, my colleagues dubbed me "Little Beaver," a name with not-too-subtle sexual meaning, as I would soon learn. Needless to say, this gift proved to be a psychological disaster, as I was unable to state my name at rendezvous without myself, my colleagues or my informants smirking. Although humorous at the time, I now believe that this unintentional and unwanted sexual connotation hampered my ability to conduct personally-satisfying research of mountain men.

Recommendation 3: Despite the existence of many gender-related field research problems, qualitative researchers and their colleagues should not restrict qualitative researchers to "safe" research topics.

Female researchers who experience gender-related problems while doing fieldwork in male-dominated settings may opt to focus on women's or children's worlds and no longer attempt to gain entree into men's worlds and vice-versa (Warren 1988). While nothing is wrong with this, per se, qualitative researchers should not allow such difficulties to lead them to conclude that a particular subject cannot be researched by them because it is not physically (or psychologically) "safe." To illustrate, I continue to alternate between participating in and withdrawing from the group research project on mountain men (even with a new name), primarily because of my difficulty coping with a field setting in which women are reduced to "squaws," a derogatory role which seems to equate women to handmaidens or sexual slaves of men. I return from playing a "squaw" feeling like I have spent the past few days totally subordinating my personality to men. As a new phase of this research looms before me, I am debating several ways to permit my enjoyable participation in this male-dominated setting. My preference is to isolate women within this field setting who are playing roles that are more consistent with my own self-concept and to emulate them. One possibility is to join the "Squaws from Hell," a group of women who effectively proscribe sexist behavior through group action. In this way, I hope to feel physically and, more important, psychologically "safer."

Aside from the limitations qualitative researchers may place upon themselves, colleagues also may place limitations upon them. For example, before beginning fieldwork in the Soviet Union, I was asked to make the following self-written statement:

I, Melissa Martin Young, hold neither the International Management Institute at Kiev nor
the University of Utah, nor any individuals employed by these schools responsible/accountable/liable for anything related to and/or that occurs during my 2-5-91 to 6-12-91 research trip to the USSR. This research trip is instigated by myself for my own behalf and I, alone, am responsible/accountable/liable for everything related to it and/or that occurs during it.

Although this statement may be sadly necessary in our lawsuit-prone society, and although I cannot prove that the need for this statement was instigated by my gender, I continue to wonder if a man would have had to make the same statement.

Then, after arriving in the Soviet Union, the situation worsened as my colleagues (all of whom were male) paternalistically tried to prevent me from researching Soviet black markets because it is not "safe." As above, I am unable to prove a gender-relation, but I question if a male researcher would have faced the same discouragement.

The moral of these stories is quite clear: Colleagues of qualitative researchers should recognize that females must not be restricted to "safe" research topics or in other ways discouraged from dangerous research topics any more than their male counterparts. Everyone should remember that no research setting is entirely "safe," and that same-sex research settings or informants may lead to just as many gender-related problems as opposite-sex research settings or informants (either due to the reluctance of informants to open up to same-sex researchers or due to same-sex sexual connotations).

Recommendation 4: In finding one's gender role, the qualitative researcher should not assume that it is necessary to play the role of an "average" man or woman as defined by informants in the field setting.

Qualitative researchers often conduct research in cultures that may have very different gender roles than the researchers' native cultures. For example, earlier I suggested that the role of females in mountain man settings equates to squaws which equates to second class sexual slaves. Upon reflection, I must admit that, while many mountain men make comments implying that women should behave like second class sexual slaves, I have not yet observed women in mountain man settings who actually behave like second class sexual slaves. Therefore, I believe it is important to distinguish between the often narrow ideal, as expressed by some informants, and the often broad reality. While this may seem obvious, a researcher who is trying to gain initial acceptance into an unfamiliar field setting is typically unaware of the spectrum of possible gender roles and may feel compelled to fit into the real or imagined "norm." Although qualitative researchers often research things that are in opposition to their personal points of view (and often play roles that are not natural for them), I attempt to avoid playing roles in field settings -- gender or otherwise -- that are personally bothersome.

However, Warren (1988) suggests that this may be difficult because role taking in field research is a more interactive process in which informants assign the researcher to what they see as his or her proper place in the social order. An illustration of this occurred during my fieldwork in the Soviet Union. I was preparing to give a lecture to a large group of influential Soviets when I was abruptly informed that the first ten minutes of my lecture would be filmed by a national television crew and that I could not use my overheads because of lighting requirements. There was no time to debate the issue, and I was quite nervous as I began to give my lecture -- without the teaching aids I had counted on and with floodlights shining in my eyes -- to a demanding audience. As things turned out, the lecture went very well and as I exited into an anteroom reserved for instructors I felt elated. I was then ushered into another room to receive my fee and a gift, just prior to leaving for the next series of lectures in another city. Feeling very much in control and quite professional, I was flabbergasted when my hosts presented me with an apron as a gift of appreciation. My ego was quickly deflated and even as I shook their hands, I resented the gender role symbol I had just been given. Qualitative researchers, like everyone else, enter situations where they may be forced into many gender roles which do not fit. The choice is always between enduring the role for the sake of the research or favoring one's natural role at the risk of being perceived as deviant within the field setting. In the above example, I smiled and went home because, while the role did not fit, I did not find it personally bothersome enough to openly refuse from it.
Recommendation 5: Utilize bigender teams whenever possible.

Because gender affects both the process and the outcome of research, bigender teams permit a fuller gathering of data with less likelihood that the researchers will be forced into uncomfortable gender roles to obtain it. In my research of both the homeless and consumers in the Soviet Union, I worked alone and had to fit into too wide of a range of gender roles to collect the data I wanted. In contrast, I work with a bigender team in the mountain man research and do not have to be as flexible. Bigender teams do not eliminate gender-related problems with qualitative research, but they may reduce them. For example, my informants in the mountain man research often assume that I am "attached" to one of the male members of the team as either a sister, daughter, or spouse. I sometimes fail to discount this interpretation because I find that it reduces the likelihood of unwanted sexual innuendos. Of course women should not have to be (or have to appear to be) "attached" to be left alone, nor does being "attached" ensure that one will be left alone. Nonetheless, it can be a useful short-term strategy. Experience has taught me that when sexual conquest is central in an informant's mind, the data become distorted (e.g., Warren 1988). For example, team discussions after a rendezvous in which I did not allow myself to be "attached" revealed that my informant told a male colleague one version of reality and told me another. While neither my male colleague nor myself know the motivations driving this difference, we suspect that the version I heard was motivated by the informant's sexual desires. Had this been discussed earlier, I could have indicated my "attachment" or, more preferably, my open disinterest in sexual relations.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed five recommendations for reducing gender role conflict in the process of conducting qualitative research. I do not consider them a panacea that will solve all problems of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual hustling during fieldwork. Instead, they are intended to raise people's consciousness to the frequency of such problems (while not forgetting that the vast majority of my male informants have been very enjoyable to work with) and to offer some guidelines for coping with them. While I agree that gender-related problems exist in all walks of life (to include academia), I believe they are especially rampant in qualitative research where the researcher is supposed to say "Uh-huh," "That's interesting," and "Really?" My message to researchers is that it is perfectly OKAY to say "No," "Forget it," and "I'm not interested." I urge researchers to use these phrases as soon as a problem is noted and to risk losing data (or the entire project) rather than to collect data that is distorted or to get into dangerous situations. We do not have to endure unwanted sexual degradation. Female researchers -- like our male counterparts -- are pursuing data, not sexual assault or humiliation.

REFERENCES


Gherardi, Silvia and Barry Turner (1987), Real


