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Feminist Methodology as a Tool for Ethnographic Inquiry on Globalization

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It has been suggested that leading scholars of globalization (such as Anthony Giddens and David Harvey) have tended to write from the vantage of “a privileged airspace above the world they theorize” (Burawoy 2000b:340; see also Lewellen 2002:95 on anthropologists who analyze transnational and global concerns). This observation certainly does not discount the value and usefulness of this body of theoretical discourse generated by sociologists, geographers, and other social scientists. It does, however, emphasize the importance of documenting, elucidating, and explaining the complexities and intricacies of global “forces, connections, and imaginations” (Burawoy 2000a:28, 2000b:342) from a diversity of partial perspectives, grounded in lived, embodied, and differentially situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Such culturally diverse knowledges and the socially negotiated experiences on which they are based are among the concerns of *ethnographic inquiry* and the theories and analytical perspectives that inform and compose this approach. As much more than a genre for writing and textualizing culture (Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford and Marcus 1986), ethnography has long inspired sociocultural anthropologists and, increasingly, researchers in other fields (for example, Brown and Dobrin 2004).

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SEEKING A VIEW FROM THE BOTTOM UP THROUGH GENDERED LENSES

The ethnography of globalization typically builds its view of historically contingent phenomena from the bottom up rather than from the top down, a perspective made possible by dialogic relationships cultivated between ethnographers and ordinary, often economically and politically marginal, people who struggle to negotiate the everyday conditions of the changing world. The contributors to this volume analyze globalization's gendered character, particularly the ways in which women across diverse local, translocal, and transnational fields of culture, power, and political economy exercise agency, engendering and negotiating the dynamics of globalization from below. The contributors achieve this ambitious goal by employing tools promoted by feminist methodologies for producing knowledge that can be linked to advocacy and activism for women's rights and, more generally, human rights and social justice for all.

Proponents of feminist methodologies have long debated how best to deploy techniques from established methodological toolkits, including the empiricist tradition, in order to meet their research and advocacy objectives. Ethnographic inquiry shares a great deal in common with the research priorities of many feminist and women's studies scholars. Although feminist research is generally a heterogeneous enterprise that includes survey research, some have insisted that feminist research should ideally embrace an egalitarian ethic of care that promotes face-to-face, hands-on, reciprocal relations between researchers and those being researched. Feminist research, according to this view, should redress the exploitation of women as objects of research. Those who subscribe to this view assert that feminist research should represent an alternative approach that emphasizes the experiential, takes a contextual and interpersonal approach to knowledge, is attentive to the concrete realm of everyday life and human agency, and is conducted with empathy, connectedness, dialogue, and mutual consciousness raising (for example, Nielsen 1990; Reinharz 1992).

Ethnography seems to be a most suitable approach to these criteria. However, debates over the years have shown that in even its feminist applications, ethnography does not automatically resolve the power disparities involved in women studying women (Stacey 1988). Although feminist anthropologists still struggle over this issue, ethnographic methods are certainly amenable to deploying a "logic-in-use" (Pelto and Pelto YEAR?:3) consistent with a feminist methodology that underscores the value of women's voices, experiences, and agency and the sociocultural and political-economic contexts in which they are situated.

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To identify, probe, and interpret the gendered dimensions of globalization, anthropologists and allied social researchers must use appropriate tools to illuminate lived and embodied experiences, as well as the workings of various kinds of global flows, markets, corporations, unions, NGOs, states, and the policies that the latter mandate. Feminist anthropologists (for example, Freeman 2000; Nash 2001) have already set some impressive precedents for thinking critically and creatively about matters of methodology and gender—as it is embedded in wider matrices of inequality and power.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT CONFLATING METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Because this chapter focuses on feminist and pro-feminist researchers' deployments of method and methodology, it may be useful to clarify my understanding of the meanings of these two interrelated terms—which are sometimes used synonymously. In my view, it is important not to conflate them, although they are mutually constituted. Methods are the specific procedures, operations, or techniques for identifying and collecting the evidence necessary to answer research questions. On one hand, in and of themselves, they are not feminist or non-feminist. Therefore, there are no “feminist methods” per se. On the other hand, there are “feminist methodologies,” because methodologies articulate conceptual, theoretical, and ethical perspectives on the whats, whys, and hows of research and the production of knowledge—from “low-order propositions” to “middle-range and general theory” (Pelto and Pelto 1970:3).

Methodologies provide the philosophical or logical rationale for the links researchers make among theory, pragmatic research strategies, evidence, and the empirical world. In simpler terms, a methodology is “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Harding 1987 quoted in Naples 2003:3). A feminist methodology clues us in on which combination of methods is likely to be most suitable for meeting the pragmatic and ethical objectives of a feminist research project. Feminist research, on a whole, is a heterogeneous enterprise supporting a wide range of projects; consequently, there is ample room for both survey research and qualitative investigations such as historical and ethnographic case studies.

IS ETHNOGRAPHY A METHOD OR A METHODOLOGY?

To understand globalization in its fullest human dimensions—including those that are gendered, as well as raced and classed—critical learning

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and research communities should, to the extent possible, seek both evidence that provides general or generalizable answers and documentation that illuminates the many ways in which culturally diverse and geographically dispersed human beings make meaningful sense of, experience, and shape the rapidly changing world. These particular interpretations and experiences are often conveyed through the discursive and, as Barbara Sutton's chapter makes clear, bodily practices of everyday life. These are identified as data to be gathered, interpreted, and explained by social researchers whose toolkits may include the techniques, procedures, and strategies we associate with ethnography.

It is important to note that although ethnography is typically characterized principally in terms of qualitative methods, its methodological repertoire may indeed include quantitative techniques, particularly those appropriately and meaningfully triangulated with the styles and procedures that are ethnography's traditional cornerstones—participant observation and various kinds of intensive interviewing (Bernard 2005). Ethnography, therefore, is a multimethods approach that may comprise both qualitative and quantitative techniques and strategies to “[learn] about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other [social] settings” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:1).

We might even claim that ethnographic methodologies cover the range of research theories that consider experience-near participant-observation or participatory-immersion approaches central to the process of asking researchable questions, finding the best answers by some combination of techniques, and producing new layers of knowledge from analyzing and theorizing the research results. Given the common threads that bind together the chapters of this book, I would argue that similar feminist methodologies inform the gendered ethnographic analyses here. In other words, ethnography has been conceptualized and deployed as a feminist methodology.

THE INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL VALUE OF WOMEN'S STORIES AND PRACTICES

The ultimate symbiosis and complementarity between qualitative and quantitative research methods is too often discounted in research and policy-making arenas in which numerical data and statistical calculations are presumed to be more accurate, reliable, and useful than the “anecdotes” and “stories” accumulated through intensive ethnographic fieldwork. However, sociocultural anthropologists understand that stories can be a rich and invaluable source of knowledge and theory. For example, in acces-

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sible non-elitist language, Ann Kingsolver has written that “theory” can be viewed as “the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of life and to determine where we are as we navigate social space” (Kingsolver 2001:4). All human beings, from social science and policy experts to ordinary folk, narrate socially situated yet “differentially empowered” (2001:24) stories. Anthropologists are “ethnographic listener[s] and storyteller[s]” who weave together “larger patterns of stories” to develop social analyses, often those that link complex macrostructural forces to the intricate micropolitics of everyday lived experiences (2001:??). All of the chapters in this book make these kinds of conceptual and analytical connections.

Q: What are the page numbers for the last quotations?

Postmodernism amplified long-standing tensions between so-called “hard” and “soft” social scientific approaches. However, contrary to the fear that postmodernism would lead anthropology to a full-fledged retreat from solid empirical evidence and rigorous fieldwork, as anthropologist Ted Lewellen has observed, “many anthropologists regularly apply postmodern concepts in the interpretation of *meticulously collected empirical data*” (Lewellen 2002:47, emphasis added). He goes on to write that “[w]hat is impossible in radical postmodern philosophy—namely the blending of materialist, social-scientific practices with postmodern assumptions—is actually quite routine in practice. Realism, defined as the belief that entities exist independently of our perceptions or theories about them, can be reconciled without a great deal of difficulty with the postmodern emphases on reflexivity, situated knowledge, and social constructionism” (Lewellen 2002:47).

The integration of interpretive and materialist approaches has been a productive strategy for a number of feminist anthropologists who have integrated culture and political economy or interpretive political economy approaches, producing significant outcomes (for example, di Leonardo 1991; Kingsolver 2001; Nash 2001). The chapters here also reflect this approach to synthesizing the discursive and the material, the performative and the structural. For instance, Nandini Gunewardena’s insightful cultural analysis of the aesthetically resonating self-presentation styles and the performance of modern identities among Sri Lankan female factory workers is clearly situated in the political economy of Sri Lanka’s export-driven development. The “arranged marriage” or “marriage of convenience” between Sri Lankan workers and global capitalism is the stage upon which the flamboyantly adorned young women perform. Mary Moran’s analysis of the production and marketing of textiles in the West African context points to the significance of these commodities for both the world system and

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West Africans, for whom gendered meanings of cloth have had considerable currency within changing status hierarchies.

INSIGHTS FROM CONTRIBUTORS' ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAXES

Some of the chapters in this collection focus more centrally on methodological issues. They raise important questions relevant across and beyond the volume: for instance, the ethical challenges involved in negotiations for informed consent, addressed in Akosua Darkwah's chapter on Ghana's transnational traders. This is an issue that Darkwah obviously manages effectively; however, negotiations for informed consent, which must be ongoing during the course of fieldwork, are not unproblematic matters. This matter-of-fact issue can be laden with serious ethical dilemmas in parts of the world where anthropology and ethnography are often maligned, viewed as remnants from the colonial past, and not conducted in the best interests of local communities. Darkwah's fieldwork places her in her home country, where, to negotiate informed consent, she had to convince the traders of the relevance of contemporary anthropology as a tool for illuminating their worldly experiences in constructive ways.

Sandy Smith-Nonini's chapter addresses the ethics and politics of ethnographic research in a particularly compelling way. The case she presents implicates and challenges US-based anthropologists to do the kind of serious "homework" (Williams 1996) that should force more of us to recognize our responsibility in working to resolve the conflicts and social suffering that globalization exacerbates. In her analysis, ethnographic fieldwork is a tool for building politically engaged advocacy for economic justice and human rights.

The chapters reveal that field sites proliferate beyond the conventional features of ethnographic maps. Although several chapters make reference to communities being affected by structural adjustment programs, neoliberal public policies, tourism development, and globalization-induced shifts in status and stratifications systems, sites more clearly in the foreground include websites and online associations, NGOs, plurinational organizational networks, political coalitions, union picket lines, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and its dispersed membership, the multisited mobility of transnational traders and domestic workers, commodity chains and flows, the landscapes of big and small tourist hotels, and even marriage and family therapy sessions.

Ethnographic research is conducted across transnational spaces, often following research participants or consultants as they move from place to

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place, both intranationally and transnationally, in pursuit of livelihoods, economic development, and alternative political and policy outcomes. The contributors deal with the location of their research in interesting and innovative ways. For instance, Ulrika Dahl contributes an ethnography of what might be considered an oxymoron, a northern European periphery in which men are culturally assigned to tradition and women to modernity. Gunewardena's study of female factory workers is sited not "at the point of production" but in after-work activities, the practices and performances of social reproduction and female bonding. Rhacel Parreñas' study of Filipina domestics in Rome and Los Angeles describes the "placelessness" they experience in the former setting when they congregate and interact during their off-work hours. Parreñas adopted snowballing and shadowing techniques to map Filipina domestics' movements across the urban landscape, as well as the unofficial and often shifting venues in which they spent their leisurely and regenerative time together.

Issues of positionality are particularly relevant to the discussions in this volume. In pointing out that Parreñas' mother's social network was helpful in a nonprobability (snowball) sampling, for example, Parreñas acknowledges her own relationship to Filipino "community" or "communities" in Los Angeles and transnationally. Interestingly, she is perhaps most explicit about the data-gathering methods used to carry out her study. We know the type of interviews conducted, the number, and the average length of time spent with the interviewees. We also know that she herself has experienced xenophobia in ways not unlike those confronted by her research subjects. We might also infer that the ways she experienced and confronted those assaults were inflected somehow by class privileges that her informants do not enjoy. Parreñas presents a balanced picture of her quasi-insider positionality and the methodical strategy she executed to carry out her fieldwork. In other words, she helps readers revisit her research route in order to offset the suspicion (should anyone have it) that her knowledge claims are largely grounded in her insiderness, her status as a "native anthropologist."

Her chapter shows that her fieldwork adhered to sound methodological guidelines that can be evaluated as a component of her ethnographic analysis. She reveals that her view of herself as an ethnographer is clearly not shaped by any essentialized notion of being native or subaltern (Narayan 1993). The same applies to a number of other contributors. Annapurna Pandey, for example, did her fieldwork in her home province of Orissa, India, where her research involved, to some extent, negotiating differences along lines of caste, class, and the tribal-Hindu divide. Natives

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are always heterogeneous and fractured, so to establish rapport and build relations of reciprocity and solidarity, the ethnographer has to pay dues of some sort to gain access to the organizations on which her ethnographic research focuses. Negotiating difference is an integral feature of all the research projects represented in this book.

Finally, I wish to re-stress that ethnographic inquiry is not restricted to anthropological praxis. The anthropology of gendered globalization is part of a wider interdisciplinary conversation among intellectual allies sharing overlapping interests and goals. William Conwill's chapter on the impact of neoliberal policies on African American families, households, and marriages represents the gendered and pro-feminist perspective of a research clinical psychologist who recognizes the similarities between ethnographic observation, listening, and dialogue and the psychosocial case study method that therapists use to develop appropriate therapies to promote individual and community mental health and to heal the wounds afflicted by neoliberal globalization's psychosocial assaults. He juxtaposes his qualitative analysis of a few counseling cases with his analysis of aggregate data from a national, publicly available survey conducted by other researchers. His chapter attests to ethnography's usefulness in multimethodological research based on principles of triangulation. He also points to the usefulness of situating ethnographic results in wider interdisciplinary contexts that include critical analyses and assessments of quantitative data sets, recognizing their limits and partiality despite their representativeness in statistical terms.

Representativeness, however, does not adequately elucidate nuances of sociocultural meaning and experience that can be seen through ethnographic lenses. The bodily inscriptions and embodied responses to Argentina's structural adjustment that Sutton's ethnography highlights, the shifts in the language of market bargaining that Darkwah's participant observations expose, the playful performances of gendered identity that Gunewardena's research foregrounds, and the unspoken placelessness that Parreñas encountered in Rome would most probably be lost to the measurements of survey instruments.

REFLECTIONS ON A LARGER PROJECT

Feminist methodologists, cognizant of the limits of the partial perspectives that any particular method or methodology yields, have advocated a multimethodological approach. This approach can be strengthened by epistemological and methodological coalitions among feminists who recognize the value of cross-pollination and collaboration.

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Methodological diversity among differentially positioned feminists, especially when they share basic ontological assumptions about the world, can enhance our ability to achieve a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the world (Naples 2003:202). This kind of coalition building is consistent, I believe, with the web of connections that Donna Haraway envisions for connecting and stimulating dialogues among diverse, situated knowledges. Working constructively and productively with the epistemological and methodological implications of our varying positionalities will better enable us to better address issues of power that complicate and sometimes sabotage our best intentions as ethnographic fieldworkers, theorists, and social justice advocates.

Because we understand that gendered globalization also implicates racializing and classed differentiations, it is important for us to acknowledge that feminist ethnography should be in meaningful dialogue and active solidarity with potentially allied projects, especially those of critical ethnography, the methodology of the oppressed, and the decolonizing methodologies of indigenous, subaltern, minoritized, and anti-racist researchers (Brown and Dobrin 2004; Sandoval 2000; Smith 1999; Twine and Warren 2000). Together with these critical projects, feminist ethnographers should be better able to retheorize their ethnographic practices in ways that allow self-critical reworking and refinement to remove whatever problems or contradictions might limit ethnography's capacity to evoke socially meaningful and responsible intellectual, emotional, and political responses.

Notes

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