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REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY IN GENDER RESEARCH

1.1 Can there be a feminist ethnography?

Is there something that could be called a feminist ethnography? This is a question that has been discussed by ethnographers for decades, and well, yes... I do believe there to be a methodological difference between ethnography in general and a feminist methodological approach, and I also see ethnography as a specific tradition within gender research. By this I do not refer to a method within the discipline of gender studies but instead to interdisciplinary research with a gender perspective, using a feminist lens to approach and apply methods, theories and research ethics. With this in mind, I was grateful to be given the opportunity to design a research course in ethnography of relevance to gender researchers from different disciplines and using different practical methods. In addition to myself as course leader and one of the teachers, Eva Svedmark (associate professor in Informatics) Eva Silfver (professor in Education), Catrin

Wasshede (associate professor in Sociology) and Jenny Ingridsdotter (researcher in Ethnology) also participated as teachers on the course. The interdisciplinary discussions where always related to the represented disciplines: Industrial Design, Sociology, Gender Studies, Ethnology, Informatics, Education, Religious Studies, Economics, Human Geography and Political Science. The different chapters in the book reflect topics with feminist perspectives in a larger methodological field where ethnography becomes ethnographies.

This chapter is an introduction to our joint work, to feminist ethnography with a focus on themes discussed on the course, together with reflections related to my own research. The chapter is followed by a section where all the subsequent chapters are presented.

Questions regarding feminist ethnography have been repeatedly asked for decades, specifically since the beginning of the 1990s. *A Thrice-Told Tale* (1992), by anthropologist Margery Wolf, was my introduction, as an anthropology student, to a postmodern feminist approach to ethnographic work through her writings and reflections on fieldwork in Taiwan. Wolf responds to the poststructural, feminist and anti-colonial critique against traditional ethnography by using three texts based on her research. Each of these texts consider a social situation in a community in which people are talking about a woman in their neighbourhood. The woman, Mrs. Tan, is acting unusually, and her neighbours believe she might be possessed by a god, while others think she is being manipulated by her husband to take resources from the community; still others view her as

being mentally ill. In different ways, the texts are discussing the situation and yet, at the same time, scrutinising criticism of ethnography. The first text is a short story (fiction), the second includes copies of field notes, and the third is an article published in *American Ethnologist*. Each text is followed by a commentary section in which Wolf unpacks and problematises themes such as reflexivity, polyvocality, fiction versus ethnography, and what experimental ethnography can be. *A Thrice-Told Tale* begins and ends with chapters in which the ethnographer discusses feminist critiques regarding (neo)colonial research methods and argues for the importance of responsibility as an ethnographer to listen carefully to participants but without handing over (imaginary) responsibility for the research process. I highlight this text because it captures something significant for feminist ethnography: Ethnography is not easy scholarly work devoid of affective challenges – on the contrary, it takes time, and it is a messy practice in various ways (Jauregui 2013; Silow Kallenberg 2015; Plows 2018). In an era of globalization, ethnographic work may serve as a means to capture how people, things, and both local and global spheres are interconnected – to speak with Anna Tsing, it can be a methodological approach characterised by friction (Tsing 2005). Ethnographic work involves emotional labour and, in practical terms, a series of steps that must take time. Throughout the course, we have all returned to the fact that studying social life, interactions with humans and non-humans, can be complicated, and sometimes even hard. In our discussions, in dialogue with the scholarly work of others, it has been stated that we need to recognise the importance of reflexivity, the need for different ways of understanding and doing but also of writing, and expressing (various styles, voices, formats), ethnography (Ingridsdotter & Silow Kallenberg 2018).

Sociologist Judith Stacey (1988) and anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) both wrote articles with the title 'Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?' (without knowing about the other article), inspired by postmodern theories, the results of which became classical subjects for the field. Stacey and Abu-Lughod in different ways critiqued the idea that sharing a position as 'woman' could automatically reduce a power relation. They argued instead for being uncomfortable, and viewed the search for identification as turning into something that may affect the participants' integrity. Stacey pointed at contradictions between feminist principles and the desire to obtain ethnographic material, which, ultimately, becomes results, publications, and merits to the scholar but not (necessarily) to the participant. Establishing identification through gender identity within ethnographic work can undeniably be deceptive if it carries assumptions of similarities which result in reductive answers from observations, interviews or other ethnographic work that include interactions with research participants. Abu-Lughod deepened the critique regarding 'woman' as an imagined shared position that excludes the broad differences between women's experiences. Abu-Lughod discussed problems with radical feminist ideas about 'women' with an understanding of women as sharing global, transnational, and transcultural experiences of patriarchal oppression. In line with thoughts prevalent during this time, a thread running throughout the doctoral course has

been positions of identification and the ways in which they may be fruitful, how they can strike a delicate balance, and how they can, at times, not be the space we thought they were. Sharing an identity as queer may be overshadowed by economic conditions; being migrants evidently does not erase racialised or educational differences; both participants and researchers, as entrepreneurs, cat lovers or feminists, assume identificatory positions. We have turned and twisted on positions that invite conversations, but which therefore must also be considered in ways other than positions that establish dis/identification.

Throughout the course, and reflected in the different chapters, we have discussed how theories are intertwined with our methodologies – where feminist ethnography has, just like broader discussions within gender studies, been influenced by poststructuralism, phenomenology, new materialism and new ways of approaching standpoint theories. A range of theoretical concepts and ways of doing and writing ethnography have made the field better suited to follow and discuss fluidities and multiple meanings.

Ethnographic work is, for many of us, a learning experience that develops over time. The ideas for the ethnographic work in my own doctoral thesis grew out of engagement in feminism and in the international solidarity movement (Berg 2007). Previous studies and work tasks in Central America sparked the idea of following 'aid workers' from Sweden to gain a deeper knowledge of Nicaraguans with respect to developmental cooperation. Engagement in postcolonial studies led me to a conversation between postcolonial theorist Robert Young and critical theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1991) about neo-colonialism and knowledge production, which affected the plans for my upcoming field trip to Nicaragua. The conversation between Young and Spivak addressed issues that became decisive for my work – namely, the geopolitical production of knowledge and who has the right to research (whom). More importantly, their conversation directed my attention to Swedish citizens who were committed to international solidarity with ideals revolving around how 'to contribute' to people in the so-called Global South. This resulted in a thesis that explored identity and estrangement in narratives by Swedish solidarity workers, narratives that bare traces of colonial discourses and experiences of relations, work, politics, and everyday life. These narratives often repeated a binary opposition between good and bad, with the ambition of doing good in the Nicaraguan context – but they also incorporated voices that were critical to the possibilities for developmental cooperation and, amongst other forces, the gender mainstreaming politics from Sweden. In retrospect, I can see that I avoided contributing to reductive representations of Nicaraguans, but, in my ambition to embrace a postcolonial critique, I made hard drawn power analyses on the Swedish narratives and voices from people in Nicaragua were excluded, being presented only via reflections and silences in the Swedish volunteers' stories. If I were to do this work today, I would have done a few things differently.

Mistakes have also been a theme during the course. In her long experience of doing online feminist ethnography, since the very

beginning of the internet, Eva Svedmark talked about 'productive mistakes' in her previous research and highlighted ethical dilemmas that emerge as we shape each other and are shaped by the technical scripts of which social media is built. In presentations by Eva Svedmark and Eva Silfver, they both talked about what they had learnt through difficult experiences in their ethnographic work, problems accompanying their specific positions as researchers (white, authority, social class), and how these affected choices they made in future research (Nyström 2007; Granholm & Svedmark 2018). Feminist ethnographic ideals regarding building trust, collaboration, mutual participation and egalitarian knowledge exchange are important, but the same principles can ultimately produce problematic results if the researcher does not acknowledge the power distinction between researcher (with scientific interests) and the participant (taking part in the project) (Stacey 1988, see also Davies & Craven 2016: 57-58).

A new reflexive turn led me back to Nicaragua to conduct ethnographic research among lesbian, gay and trans* activists in 2009. This turn, which at first resulted in the generation of knowledge for me, was nothing more than a few presentations to other people (Berg 2012) because of suffocating 'white guilt', and because of the failure to find ways to make something relevant out of the narratives (translating from activist communities in Central America to European academic journals became too difficult). I stayed in contact with activists in Nicaragua and performed new ethnographic research in 2019, which resulted in deepened knowledge regarding religion and politics in Nicaragua and contemporary obstacles to feminist political progress (Berg & Alm 2021; Berg & Alm 2023; Berg & Mulinari forthc.). It took me decades to formulate the first publications, but I could no longer see how not writing was a responsibility after seeking knowledge and developing a social network in Central America since the mid 1990s, with a continuous interest in social circumstances in Nicaragua and the knowledge that was lacking in the European, Swedish contexts in which I am anchored. But the need to stay with trouble whenever writing about something that relates to a Nicaraguan context remains, just as ethnographers must be reflexive wherever we do ethnographic work. This was something that all participants in the course could agree upon without hesitation: that good ethnographic work must take power dynamics into account in the social and cultural processes being targeted by the researcher (Davies 2008). In line with Beatrice Jauregui's *Dirty Anthropology* (2013), we must remember that our ambitions with our projects change over time, and that we – just as the people we study – also change. The narratives that we get are (to some extent) bound to situation, are contradictory, and affect both researcher and researched by (temporarily) driving forces when realities are being shaped.

We do not have to delimit what feminist knowledge production is, but feminist ethnography is evidently *not* something exclusive to and about women or certain groups, but is instead the study of genders and sexualities interconnected with theoretical discussions regarding geopolitics, intersectionality, racialisation, capital, ableism, queer, trans, vulnerability and the continuous

development of ideas regarding power, subjectivity and society.

1.2 Positionality, reciprocity and ethics

Following the tracks of feminist ethnographic scholars, such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Jackey Stacey and several others, discussions regarding the identity positions of the scholar and the participants have long sparked vivid debate, just as ethnography in general has discussed the challenges of being an insider or an outsider with regard to the individuals, groups, areas or situations being researched. Some argue for the importance of insider knowledge in gaining access to and legitimacy among a group, while others emphasise the importance of distance to acquire more correct knowledge – most, however, are aware of the messiness that makes it difficult to divide these positions. As Dána-Ain Davies and Christa Craven (2016) formulate it:

> Feminist ethnographers, indeed, researchers in general, typically recognize the fluidity and complexity of human experience and know that the spaces between the poles of insider and outsider are far more complicated (p. 61).

Discussions regarding experiences, identities and knowledge have long been part of gender research, including feminist ethnography. Identifying factors such as gender, class, sexuality, racialisation, place, religiosity and abilities affect perspectives and have all been discussed as part of knowledge making during our conversations in the course and as reflected in this book. Identification between participant and researcher, may be an

advantage and very fruitful for collaboration in joint knowledge production. But as feminist ethnographers, we must explore positionality when identifying problems regarding people being part of our research and in our concluding results and presentations of new knowledge. With reflexivity, it is important to emphasise that it does not refer to an 'obligatory' reflexivity section in the introduction of a thesis but rather to the ongoing critical review of dilemmas with cultural and social positions and their knowledge production. The reflexive (external and internal) dia-logue is something that follows the feminist ethnographer in various ways – amongst others, our choice of subjects and ways of reaching, producing, and using our knowledge. Some feminist ethnographers make action research, conduct memory work or, in other ways, collaborate with participants and/or use ourselves in our research. At one of the seminars, Catrin Wasshede presented autoethnography and her own experiences of putting herself at stake in research as a methodological grip within gender studies to confront knowledge production as something 'out there' (Wasshede 2020). Including fragments from oneself, with an ethnographic approach, has become a more common way to present how one's own experiences are entangled in larger political discourses.

Ethnographers in general often invite participants to express when they want something to be taken out of interviews, with the possibility to read or listen to interviews afterward if they so choose. Aiming to include participants, interlocutors, and co-writers in a joint work towards more collaborative research, possibilities and obstacles has been discussed generally within

ethnography and specifically by gender researchers as the present group of authors.

Research on humans, animals or which affect the earth must be discussed with ethics and politics in mind – and for ethnographers, this can never stop with the acceptance of a research ethics committee. This is also an area that has been important for feminist ethnographers, whose work often includes vulnerable positions and deals with sensitive topics with the need for deepened understanding. In a range of different ways, the current chapters discuss how we want to do research – with a focus on ethnographic work. Studies may be relevant for the research participants in a project, but they often do not immediately benefit from the results while they give the researcher their time and energy and risk being recognised and losing some of their personal integrity. How do we take responsibility as researchers? In this book, several of the authors discuss the challenges of getting and giving back, with an emphasis on what is fruitful for all participating in the process. In sum, all of the chapters reflect, in various ways, processes in ongoing doctoral projects, focusing on crucial issues within ethnographic work. You will find methodological choices, epistemological decisions and/or theoretical concepts anchored in various forms of feminist knowledge production. The book is divided into two sections, with chapters anchored more or less in discussions regarding positionality, reciprocity and/or ethical considerations.

A short summary and presentations by the subsequent authors follow below.

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