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Situating reflexivity: Voices, positionalities and representations in feminist ethnographic texts



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SYNOPSIS

This article traces the feminist discussion concerning the importance of reflexive analysis and reflexive writing for feminist research. It starts by describing two feminist currents that concern the way to be reflexive. The first, reflexivity as a corrective measure accords a great deal of significance to self-reflexivity and consequently, the analysis of the researcher's positionality is incorporated into the text. There are other feminist researchers that challenge this type of reflexivity claiming that this type of reflexivity innately reproduces the same relations they attempt to abolish. Their solution lies, among other things, in unsettling the research subject in a postmodernist text. While both currents consider their use of reflexivity as multi-vocal, intersubjective and post-colonial, they both nonetheless, depart from an ontologically predefined research relationship which confines the use of reflexivity to certain pre-defined scenarios. The article suggests the need to conceptualize reflexivity as situated. How to be reflexive will depend on the objectives of the research, the type of knowledge produced, the position of the research subject in the broader society and the particularities of the research context. Representational strategies will flow out of these decisions. This position is supported by illustrating the decision-making processes concerning the representational strategies taken in two research projects conducted in Lima, Peru. Because of the particularities of each context different textual strategies were used regarding the representation of the researcher's and research subjects' positionality in the text. It concludes with an epistemological discussion concerning engagement and adoption of a radical politics of empathy to ensure that the conceptualization of reflexivity as situated will not lead to a feminist research in which "anything goes".

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Introduction

For a substantial group of feminist anthropologists, being reflexive throughout the research process and writing oneself into the text, comes virtually as second nature. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this special issue about embodied engagements contains an article specifically focused on reflexivity. Feminist ethnographies are read by different audiences evoking different reactions. There are those who take an anti-reflexive stance and prefer the researcher's presence in the text to be minimal if present at all (O'Connell Davidson, 2003; Patai, 1994). For the anthropological audience the presence of the feminist researcher in the text is not problematic. Her presence, like many of her anthropological

colleagues, is a consequence of the (feminist) critical or literary turn in anthropology, which refutes the idea of the "ethnographic present" tightly woven into its colonial legacy by experimenting with textual representation of the researcher in the production of "messy texts" (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). Reflexivity comprises an essential component of this endeavor. Finally, feminist ethnographies speak to a broad group of academics who practice gender studies, women studies or feminist studies. It is amongst this group wherein there is an on-going discussion concerning feminist epistemology, reflexivity and what types of text the relationship between the two should produce. It is this discussion which I address in this article.

Reflexivity is both epistemological — how we should learn about knowledge, as well as methodological — how we should do research to obtain this knowledge. Reflexive analysis and practices are intimately related to the researcher's epistemological standpoint. Reflexivity creates possibilities to analyze “the complexity of the data, avoiding the suggestion that there is a simple fit between the social world under scrutiny and the ethnographic representation of it...” (Brewer, 2000, 132–133). Feminist researchers write reflexive texts in many different ways. The most common form is a self-reflexive exercise which deconstructs the researcher's positionality. A rich amount of articles have been written from this perspective (e.g. Banister, 1999; Henry, 2003; Narayan, 1993; Sherif, 2001; Thapar-Bjorkert, 1999). In this context, the researchers' positionality can be defined as an analysis of how “Ethnographers need to reflect upon and write about how their situatednessⁱ or their terministic screens-to evoke Burke's phrase-influence an understanding of their data” (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, 117). This exercise is done in retrospect and more often than not focuses on fieldwork. Hence, the analysis of positionality leads to making choices concerning the researchers' presence in the text or as Chiseri-Strater (1996) calls this the “measure of disclosure” revealing her assumptions, histories and identity and how they influenced the construction of intersubjective research relations and the research process. Self-reflexivity is an essential component for unsettling hierarchies in the feminist research project. The text becomes a co-constructed space that reveals the interaction between the researcher's assumptions and positionality and the voices, stories and experiences of the research subjects. Consequently, the ethnographic text whether it is a full ethnography, an article or any other publication — is the outcome of the embodied, lived experience of fieldwork. The particularities of the text are directly linked to the material conditions and circumstances of fieldwork. In feminist anthropology, the text cannot exist independently of the subjective conditions through which it is constructed.ⁱⁱ

However, there are other feminist scholars who also consider reflexivity an essential component of good research practice but take a different position towards it. In fact, they criticize the above way of doing and writing reflexively and claim that it constructs the research participant as a modernist subject and innately reproduces colonial relationships (Lather, 2001; Nagar, 2003; Pillow, 2003). In their critique they argue, among other things, that it is still the researcher who “gives voice” to the research subject in the text. These authors experiment with other textual strategies in an attempt to represent their research relationships as postmodern and postcolonial.

While I recognize that equating reflexivity to an analysis of the researcher's positionality can be problematic, I nonetheless, do not consider the counter-proposals of scholars such as Pillow (2003) and Lather (2001) as the only alternative (these will be discussed below). Both positions are guilty of the same error: they conceptualize the research relationship as “ontologically pre-defined” (Nagar & Geiger, 2007).ⁱⁱⁱ Sticking to its methodological use, ontology signifies here how one defines reality. Thus, what constitutes the contours of a feminist research relationship — the power relationship between the researcher and research subjects — is assumed beforehand; whether these are defined as non-hierarchical, collaborative or postmodern, researchers

who ontologically predefine this relationship limit the possible experiences and the subsequent ways they are represented in the text.^{iv} In this paper, I argue that as engaged feminist researchers, reflexivity as well as intersubjectivity are experienced and performed situatedly, depending on the research contextuality. Consequently, the textual representation of both actors as well as their relationship flow out of the particularities of the research context/process.

Two underlying thoughts inspire this argument. In the first place, since the 1980's the universality of categories such as “woman” has been fervently criticized^v and has been replaced with concepts that recognize fragmentation, partialness, difference and situatedness. In other words, theoretically and empirically diversity in all its forms is recognized. In fact it would be unheard of for a researcher to attempt to reduce women's and men's experiences to a singular reality. The question arises, if this is unacceptable for feminist theory, why is it commonly expected that feminist epistemology, reflexivity and writing are done from one particular perspective?

The second point stems from the contemporary climate in which feminist scholarship is practiced. It has become nearly a platitude to describe feminist studies as embedded in a globalized world, nonetheless, its contemporary significance cannot be denied. As academics we connect with new audiences, our expertise is being sought out by different social actors, and through social media the public has increased exponentially. This implies that a high degree of flexibility is needed regarding the texts we produce as academics. The need to use different representational textual strategies has grown, and brings into question whether it is wise to cling to a particular set of epistemological principles which dictate the parameters of acceptable reflexive writing or is it better to envision feminist epistemology as a constellation of different alternatives used situatedly. From this standpoint, the two different epistemological positions discussed above become two possible reflexive alternatives.

In the following pages, I would like to contribute to conceptualizing reflexivity and writing about it as a situated act. This will be accomplished by tracing the textual decisions I made concerning the “measure of disclosure” and its consequences for the representation of the research subjects in two different projects.^{vi} The first project concerns a study I conducted on prostitution in Lima, Peru (Nencel, 2000, 2001). This ethnographic study demanded a critical reflexive stance throughout all its phases. I was intentionally present throughout the text. The second project concerned public sector secretaries working at two Peruvian ministries (Nencel, 2005b, 2010), like the former project, the study was in part conducted to question existing power relations and invoke ideational change. However, in this project the reflexive analysis as well as my own presence were less visible in the texts. A more traditional form of representation was required. The concluding section will make clear that making reflexivity situated should not be misinterpreted to mean that in feminist research “anything goes”. Decisions concerning positionality and representation are founded on shared feminist epistemological values that are grounded in notions of engagement and radical empathy, and additionally, a methodology that highlights agency and creates dialogical, discursive spaces. However in order to

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