

What Does Sexual Harassment Tell Us about the Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge?

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Karina was conducting research in Rwanda when a government official assaulted her in his office. This experience, combined with other disturbing interactions in the field and a general lack of security in the country, led her to change her dissertation topic. However, when asked about her decision, she doesn't talk about the assault but sticks to the political context. Harriet, who studies organizations, went back to a hotel room with her research participants—all men in their 40s and 50s—while at a conference with them. She reflected that in her “normal” life she would never do something like this but as an ethnographer she saw this as an opportunity to get “good stuff.” And when Phoebe was hit on by a key informant, some of her peers and mentors responded with, “You should have expected it. You are hanging out with this guy until 9 pm.”

Why did Karina feel she had to remain silent? Why did she feel it was necessary to cope with the repercussions of this event on her own? Why did Harriet find it necessary to suspend rules related to personal safety while in the field? And why did members of Phoebe's sociological community blame her when she faced harassment in the field? What can these experiences teach us about epistemological foundations of ethnographic methodology? This is the issue we set out to examine in our recent work (Hanson and Richards 2017; 2019).

Using interviews with 47 women qualitative researchers, we show how disciplinary expectations for “good” ethnographic research reproduce silence around sexual harassment and violence. These women faced a variety of unwelcome behaviors in the field, ranging from light flirtation and sexual banter to stalking, assault, and in one case, rape. We identify three intersecting standards—solitude, danger, and intimacy—that our participants made recourse to when discussing “good” ethnographic research. Solitude refers to the value placed on withstanding the difficulties of conducting ethnographic research alone. Danger refers to the belief that worthwhile ethnographic research requires facing hazards in the field and doing “anything for the data.” And intimacy—becoming as close as possible with research participants—is frequently held up as *the* approach to create access to the best data.

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We call these standards “fixations” because of the importance placed on them by our participants and their perception that they are fundamental standards held by the larger sociological community. The valorization of these standards was reinforced by their coursework, the ways they were or were not mentored, and by many of the ethnographies held up as “exemplars” in the discipline. We argue that these fixations encourage women ethnographers to hide experiences that bring their embodiment to the fore as they strive to conduct research that meets these standards.

We also interviewed nine men and found that men's fieldwork is likewise structured by these standards, albeit in distinct ways. We therefore do not focus on women's experiences because

only knowledge produced by women is structured or negatively impacted by these fixations. Rather, by examining the experiences of women ethnographers we can better identify and understand underlying assumptions about the construction of ethnographic knowledge.

When faced with harassment in the field, many participants reverted to epistemological assumptions rooted in prevailing standards about how the construction of knowledge is supposed to proceed. The fixation with intimacy is a particularly good example. The emphasis on the body as a tool with which ethnographers can achieve intimacy ignores the different challenges researchers will encounter precisely due to what their bodies signify (Orrico 2015). Concerns that the academic community might consider their research polluted or invalid led some participants to avoid talking openly about their experiences with harassment or assault in the field. This self-imposed silence demonstrates the degree to which women ethnographers can—sometimes consciously—become carriers of a discourse that marginalizes their own experiences. The potential delegitimation of their work is not a misplaced worry; participants who discussed their experiences with peers and advisors were sometimes supported, but, just as often, they were not. Participants recalled advisors telling them to “suck it up” or laughing at their stories, as if they were just one more awkward moment or uncomfortable situation *all* ethnographers face in the field.

What are the implications of the three fixations for the construction of ethnographic knowledge?

First, interactions that bring sex, gender, and the body to the fore often become residual data or are ignored altogether. Most participants were blindsided by their experiences and, as a result, tried to ignore or set them aside. Borrowing Joan Fujimura’s (2006) term for the data scientists misrecognize because they do not fit with their preestablished categories of analysis, we refer to these experiences as “awkward surplus.” Participants often described sexual harassment as just part of life as an ethnographer—it was present, and bothersome, but not necessarily examined reflexively. Because these interactions seem unrelated to the research, they can be perceived as unimportant. In retrospect, experiences like these often shape the ethnographer’s trust in her participants and how she chooses to interact with them. Allowing these interactions to be set aside meant that some research opportunities were unconsciously avoided: less time was spent with certain participants and research sites were removed in favor of others that felt safer.

Secondly, despite an emphasis within sociology on reflexivity and positionality, the ongoing influence of the ethnographic fixations leads to only a superficial attention to the effects of the researcher’s embodiment in the field. When we write about race, class, and gender in the field as obstacles over which we must prevail or set aside, we miss, as Kristen Schilt and Christine Williams (2008: 222) point out, “the opportunity to reflect on how being a gender [or race, class, etc.] outsider impacts the actual process of field research.”

It is people of color and women who are more likely to have their work questioned, often because of the ways they are embodied, so there can be a real risk in accounting for these issues in our texts (see Hoang 2015). We seem to both expect “others” to be more reflexive and then punish them for it. The solution is not to jettison reflexivity, but to work to change prevailing ethnographic standards that penalize those who can never measure up to the dominant archetype. Indeed, these fixations become salient for women ethnographers because the dominance of the

notion of a disembodied “neutral” researcher has a silencing effect on women after they have experienced unwanted sexual contact in the field. Of course, there are more women, LGBTQ folks, and people of color in academia now than a few decades ago, but this has not dislodged the methodological expectations and epistemological standards that came out of a notion of neutrality built on the experiences of white, elite cismen.

The incongruence between ethnographic standards and the embodied reality of fieldwork is clarified when we examine the experiences of those who have historically not been included in setting the standards. By fetishizing a particular type of ethnographic journey, the three fixations limit the ways in which we envision gathering quality data. *All* researchers must consider how their embodiment influences the data they collect and relationships they build in the field. Sociological ethnography must end its fixation on danger, the solitary researcher, and intimacy and instead privilege the ethnographer’s safety and a more complex telling of the field.

References

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