

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

Rebecca Hanson, University of Florida,
and Patricia Richards, University of
Georgia

Patricia Richards is a member of the ASA
Working Group on Harassment. This
article is part of a series of articles from
that working group.

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 withstand-

Continued on Page 6

Humanities

From Page 1

Over the last year, we have had the opportunity to further analyze this robust dataset. This work has led to countless conversations, at conferences and with practitioners across the country, about the impact of their work and the challenges they often face.

NHA drew on the projects we profiled to synthesize five overarching goals toward which many of the initiatives work:

1. Informing contemporary discussions on subjects such as the environment, race, and local history and culture;
2. Amplifying community voices and histories;
3. Helping individuals and communities navigate difficult experiences;
4. Expanding educational access; and
5. Preserving culture in times of crisis and change, from natural disasters to gentrification.

In the discipline of sociology and across the humanities, publicly engaged projects are working to accomplish one—and often more—of these goals. *Humanities for All* brings together a diverse cross section of projects that work to achieve these objectives. Our analysis of this dataset has also shown that these initiatives have had a strong impact on

academic life—creating opportunities for innovative teaching, research, and publication.

The profiles in *Humanities for All* showcase the many ways that publicly engaged work can create innovative teaching and learning experiences, empowering project-based learning that benefits both the higher education institution and the community partners. At Massachusetts' Salem State University, for example, Sara Moore's sociology courses work towards the dual goals of student learning and social change (bit.ly/2qoBgIW). In the spring 2019, Moore's public sociology students explored issues relating to food justice in Salem through photovoice, a methodology using photography to explore a communal challenge, in partnership with third-graders at the Horace Mann Laboratory School (humanitiesforall.org?thumbnail=photovoice-to-promote-food-justice). Led collaboratively by Moore and the school's literacy coach and third-grade teachers over the course of one semester, participating students created an exhibit of images from local supermarkets that showcased issues relating to food justice. The exhibition opening was attended by a range of university and community leaders, inspiring city council to take up the issue of food insecurity through legislation currently in development.

Other examples in sociology include the Eviction Lab (humanitiesforall.org/?thumbnail=the-evict-


ed-lab#projects) at Princeton University. This digital project, which grew out of Matthew Desmond's research on housing, poverty, and eviction, collects and presents eviction data from across the United States for use in advocacy, policy-making, and research. The project is not only public facing. Its dataset was built with and continues to solicit eviction data from citizen researchers. Its objective is deeply connected with the five overarching objectives listed above, informing, for example, contemporary discussions and policies concerning the difficult experiences of eviction, housing insecurity, and homelessness.

As we have discussed these and other projects in a variety of contexts at conferences and in conversations with individual scholars, we've found again and again that scholars remain concerned about how it is credited in the context of traditional expectations for faculty promotion and tenure in the humanities: research, teaching, and service. With this in mind, we have been working to showcase how publicly engaged work and scholarship can go hand in hand. To that end, we are delighted to partner with Routledge, Taylor & Francis to release *Publishing and the Publicly Engaged Humanities* (http://bit.ly/Humanities_Engaged), an open-access collection of recent articles featuring publicly engaged humanities work.

This collection, which is freely available online and will continue

to grow, shows some of the range of journals and edited volumes that publish articles on publicly engaged humanities work. These publications complement outlets dedicated specifically to publicly engaged humanities work (e.g., *Public and the Humanities* and *Public Life Book Series*). The breadth in format and venue available is encouraging, suggesting that scholars consider different approaches to publishing both in their disciplines and in connection with their work's areas of impact.

In the year ahead, we will continue to build *Humanities for All* by adding new content and creating new opportunities for connecting with practitioners of publicly engaged humanities. In addition to representing a wider and ever more diverse collection of sociology and other projects on the site, we will be opening a blog featuring posts by outside writers and publishing a series of long-form transcribed interviews with publicly engaged scholars and their partners. At the same time, we are beginning qualitative and quantitative research into the impact of select publicly engaged humanities initiatives on faculty, students, and their community partners and participants.

To learn more about publicly engaged humanities work in U.S. higher education, we encourage you to explore and share the *Humanities for All* website (humanitiesforall.org) and our new article collection. 

Harassment

From Page 4

ing 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.

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 demon-

strates 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. **S**

References

- Fujimura, Joan H. 2006. “Sex Genes: A Critical Sociomaterial Approach to the Politics and Molecular Genetics of Sex Determination.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32(1): 49–82.
- Hanson, Rebecca and Patricia Richards. 2017. “Sexual harassment and the construction of ethnographic knowledge.” *Sociological Forum* 32(3): 587–609.
- _____. 2019. *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research*. University of California Press.
- Hoang, Kimberly. 2015. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. University of California Press.
- Orrico, Laura A. 2015. “Doing Intimacy, in a Public Market: How the Gendered Experience of Ethnography Reveals Situated Social Dynamics.” *Qualitative Research* 15(4): 473–488.
- Schilt, Kristen and Christine Williams. 2008. “Access Denied.” *Men and Masculinities* 11(2): 219–226.

call for nominations

ASA Honors Program

2020 Annual Meeting — San Francisco, CA
August 8–11, 2020

Application Deadline: February 15

ASA is seeking applications from exceptional undergraduate sociology majors who would like to participate in the 2020 ASA Honors Program. The 2020 ASA Honors Program will take place during the ASA Annual Meeting in San Francisco. It provides undergraduate students with a rich introduction to the professional and intellectual life of the discipline.

Participants will give a roundtable paper presentation, attend events and workshops focused on careers and graduate school in sociology, meet prominent scholars, develop peer networks, and much more.

An Honors Program application from an undergraduate student requires a nomination letter submitted by a sociology faculty member from the student’s home institution. The nominating department also benefits from their students’ involvement in the Honors Program, as the program provides valuable institutional exposure and allows top sociology majors to represent their departments.

Visit www.asanet.org/honors-program for more information or send an e-mail with any questions to Dr. Jean H. Shin, Director of Diversity and Inclusion, at jshin@asanet.org. All application materials must be submitted online by **February 15**.