

# The Gender Dynamics of Conducting Fieldwork and its Implications for the Writing of Ethnographies

Vivian Besem Ojong

## Abstract

This article is concerned with the ethnographic process and the knowledge which it may produce and is based on our involvement in fieldwork for the past six years using a gender lens. The findings revealed that the gender identity of the researcher and the gender relations in the field are important dynamics in shaping the research process which can significantly influence the kind of data obtained and consequently influence how knowledge is constructed. Gender relations are also implicated in the structure of particular research methodologies used. During fieldwork the researcher and the respondents are actively involved in the enactment of gender in the field, resulting in the knowledge produced either being influenced by empathy and/or tutelage. These dynamics are crucial to the construction of knowledge. In this article, I illustrate through the ethnography of African migrants in South Africa that anthropological truth is not just located in objectivity and subjectivity but also in the process of collecting data, with empathy being an integral part of the process and is also constrained by it.

**Keywords:** Gender dynamics, fieldwork, tutelage, empathy, knowledge production

## Introduction and background

This article is based on an ethnographic study exploring the discursive and social practices through which professional African migrants came to

perceive South African gender norms and how these new gender norms either challenged or supported their already acquired gender norms. The study was positioned within an interpretive framework and qualitative research paradigm. Within an interpretive framework the construction of knowledge is a communal process involving presenting the reality of the research respondents from their own views, the role of the researcher as a co-creator of meaning and the types of knowledge frameworks or discourses informing those particular views. The researcher contributes to the project by bringing in her own values and beliefs. She also shapes the project through her curiosities and worldview. The researcher also creates meanings by analysing texts to look for the ways in which social meanings emerge in discourses (Henning 2004: 20). This paradigm makes it possible for researchers to be sensitive to the role of the context in knowledge production.

My positioning as a researcher is also crucial because the research was inherently structured by my subjectivity. As a professional African migrant woman, I participate in a similar social world with my research participants and hence my choice of the research topic. The research process entailed self-reflexivity my part. Reay (1996: 59-60) describes reflexivity as a continual consideration of the ways in which the researcher's social identity and values affect the data gathered and a picture of the social world produced. Conducting fieldwork as a feminist anthropologist, I had to renegotiate my identity during the research process and in so doing I was able to observe my own role as a researcher in either enabling or constraining the production of gender performances in the data gathering process.

Self-reflexivity also enabled me to highlight how gender relations are embedded in research methods. The research employed semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation methods in order to elicit rich qualitative data. In-depth interviews were essential for understanding how the participants viewed their worlds. According to Rossman and Rallis (1998) in-depth interviews lead to a deeper understanding as both the interviewer and interviewee construct meaning. The participant observation method enabled me to observe what the professional migrants did in every day settings. This allowed for an understanding of how gender contributed to the interpretation of meaning in their interactions hence leading to a thick description rich in explanation and argument. A closer examination of these methods however revealed that they are not just data collection tools since they are hardly gender neutral but are layered with gendered meanings. The conflicts,

contradictions and enactments of gender I experienced as a feminist researcher during data collection using these methods were key findings of the study.

In the following sections I illustrate how my subjectivity and my research respondents' subjectivities mediated by my chosen data collections methods interacted leading to gendered encounters. The findings uncovered the researched phenomenon of the role of tutelage and empathy in fieldwork.

### **The Gendered Role of Tutelage in Constructing Knowledge**

William and Heikes (1993) make the observation that there is scarcity of research on gender interacting with qualitative in-depth interviews. Gender relations are an important dynamic in shaping the interview process which can significantly influence the kind of data obtained. The interviewer and the interviewee are actively involved in the co-performance of gender in the interview process. This kind of experience provides a new agenda on fieldwork for feminist researchers and especially how their identity and experiences point to new possibilities for the conducting of fieldwork.

While same gender interviewing may seem preferable supporting evidence is mixed. Some researchers such as Graves and Powell (1996) wonder whether women make better researchers because their feminine communication styles make them better listeners. Others argue that the status of a researcher accords a woman 'honorary male status' (see Fontana & Frey 1994). The adoption of an 'honorary male status' is perceived as requiring that one gives up your identity as a woman in order to adopt some attributes perceived as traditionally masculine. This poses challenges for feminists who see the 'honorary male status' as an extension of male privilege and not extending women's rights. This position may however be regarded as essentialist in attributing certain qualities to men and others to women. As Connell (2002) contends, a great majority of people combine both masculine and feminine characteristics in varying blends rather than being all one or another.

One major observation in this study as a female researcher was that in interviewing men tutelage took precedence as men sought to explain what they felt was significant as opposed to what I was asking them. These men were not as forthcoming with information as women in response to the

questions. Most of them would give general answers to specific questions as opposed to giving reflective answers based on their personal experiences in what Tannen (1990) characterises as ‘report talk’ associated with ‘public’ speech contexts, a masculine communication style. This is in contrast with ‘rapport talk’ which is associated with ‘private’ speech contexts and a feminine communication style. These same men were however comfortable to initiate their own topics for discussion thereby adopting the role of an instructor or a tutor.

For instance, a respondent from Kenya initiated a topic concerning his recent training with a group of educated men from his ethnic *Kikuyu* community while he was on one of his trips to Kenya. The group was involved in an initiative to harmonise their modern education with traditional rites of passage of becoming a man. This respondent went into a lengthy explanation concerning the training and how he had been appointed a junior elder in his ethnic community. This appointment qualified him to have his son go through circumcision; a rite of passage into manhood. He even showed me notes on the several stages one had to undergo before they become a senior elder.

This rich information was in keeping with qualitative research and in particular in-depth interviewing whose strength is that of allowing participants more opportunity for creativity and self-expression leading to additional information. As a researcher when one comes across a respondent who is willing to provide additional information, one should be willing to learn. In this case I was able to gather a lot of information concerning the rite of passage and what it meant for this respondent’s identity as a *Kikuyu* man and how it would affect how he negotiated his life in a new context in South Africa.

I would however like to make the observation that inherent in this opportunity for self-expression was the allowance for the enactment of gender in the in-depth interview. It is instructive to note that this initiative on the *Kikuyu* rites of passage is exclusive to men and there are no women involved. It is possible that the respondent was re-asserting himself in the interview as an educator and enlightener and in so doing reinforcing his masculine gendered identity concerning his expert knowledge which as a woman I was not privy to.

Another instance where the role of tutelage was highlighted was in the case where in some transcripts some men spoke in long blocks of texts. A

second male respondent from Kenya in response to the initial interview began by asking if I had a notebook. He then proceeded to answer the question on how he came to South Africa lengthily as if delivering a lecture. In the process of responding to one question at length, he would end up answering a host of other questions. I only interrupted him on a few occasions to ask some questions or to clarify a point he had made. This respondent was very informative and within the paradigm of qualitative research it was acceptable for me as a researcher to adopt the role of a respectful listener so as to glean as much information as I could. A critical examination of this process revealed the interaction of gender relations in the in-depth interview. Winchester (1996) asserts that a female researcher's interviews with men may reinforce stereotypical gender discourses which suggest that women's role in conversations is to be an empathic listener and facilitator for men's narratives while men assume the role of tutor.

While from the above instances it may appear that only men sought to adopt the role of an educator in seeking to re-assert their masculinities in the interview context, the interaction was much more fluid and power more dispersed and contested since it is not held exclusively by men over women. Despite the assumed rapport between a woman interviewing another woman, women's social, cultural and personal beliefs determine a power relationship within an interview. Among older female respondents I was often relegated to the position of mentee as they used the research interaction to transfer relevant life experiences.

In an interview with a female respondent from Liberia older than me, she adopted an advisory role by telling the following in terms of the future prospects of a life partner, 'Let me advise you as a Christian and one older than you, do not be proud because of your education, remain humble'.

While most African cultures have a patriarchal system which governs gender relations between men and women with men having positions of authority over women, older African women possess greater power than younger ones since they are charged with the responsibility of preserving indigenous cultures and traditions. Within Christian religion older women are also expected to train the younger women on how to be good wives. This kind of discourse became highlighted in the 'private speech' contexts associated with women after having established a rapport and hence more conversational partnerships. In the interview with the respondent, I realised that other social identities such as age would confound attempts to make

claims on gender-based differences in fieldwork. On account of her age, the respondent adopted the role of tutor in advising or enlightening me.

## **The Role of Empathy in Fieldwork**

Focusing on my experience in the field empathy emerged as a source of knowledge rejecting objectivity and to a lesser extent subjectivity as the only valid way to study social life. While in the field, I acted as ally with my respondents and collaborated with them. Instead of stubbornly being attached to my experiences as a researcher and prior knowledge of the phenomenon, I was open-minded in what Hogan (1973: 224) called the 'equivocal jellyfish' position. This is a useful yet complex process because we can only try to understand others' stand-points without necessarily believing everything we are told. Approaching the knowledge production process empathetically is time consuming, needs skills (not all humans are empathetic by nature) and strenuous. It is not simply about 'putting oneself in other's shoes'. A researcher is expected to leave behind his/her own context and understanding to imaginatively project themselves into the other's situation in an attempt to see the world through their eyes (Spielberg 1975). Davidson (2003: 121) explains that there are no short cuts for cultivating empathic, intuitive understanding; it requires practice, skill, talent and grace. Spelman (1988: 181) describes it as 'strenuousness of knowing other, even people very much like ourselves'. Geertz (1986: 122) writes:

Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his-own indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequential, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, work continuously to keep alive; it is not a con-natural capacity, like depth perception or the sense of balance, upon which we can complacently rely.

Placing empathy at the centre of analysis helps theorise how social life is constructed through gender relations and identity that have remained invisible because of research emphasis on objectivity and subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty (1968: 17) espouses that, for emphatic research to be successful, both the toucher and touched should be of the same material. While in the field, my identity as a woman ‘naturally’ aided me in developing sufficient flexibility that I merged empathetically with my respondents’ situations and was still able retain my sense of being a researcher. I was conscious of my identity as a researcher and throughout the process of fieldwork, I tried to understand the ways in which my respondents thought without thinking like them (Geertz 1986). Understanding

in the sense of comprehension, perception, and insights needs to be distinguished from ‘understanding’ in the sense of agreement of opinion, union of sentiment, or commonality of commitment .... we must learn to grasp what we cannot embrace (Geertz 1986: 122).

This particular aspect of my identity bears special relevance to the extent to which empathy influences fieldwork. Husserl (1959) cited in Zahavi (2001:159) remarked that ‘through experiencing another person’s world through empathy, I see the world from outside my own subjectivity’. This was a deliberate attempt on my part; very different from the epistemological stand-point of subjectivity; which is effortless and less demanding (Davidson 2003, Husserl 1989, Thompson 2001). To be empathetically engaging in fieldwork is not simply to understand a respondent’s subjective reasoning but placing ourselves into their worlds in what can be described as ‘a chameleon’s behaviour’. I had to be non-judgemental in order to empathise with my respondents. Rogers (1980: 152) writes: it is impossible to be accurately perceptive of another’s inner world if you have formed an evaluative opinion of that person.

Being a feminist researcher, I approached the field differently from men. I approach the field with the hypothesis that female respondents have experiences that needed to be show-cased and highlighted and as a result, place them at the centre of knowledge production. Thus as the data is collected, involves a shift from being simply about the data itself but also about the narcissistic extensions of the respondent. According to Burn (2003: 232), a researcher’s own ‘embodied subjectivity interacts with that of the respondent in the process of intercorporeality or intersubjectivity’. She calls for a critical embodied reflexivity that involves construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of embodied subjectivities, thus providing rich material

for analysis. Drawing myself as a researcher into imagining what it would be like to go through the experiences of my respondents, the respondent somehow exerts some kind of control over me and in the process my data becomes an exchange of experiences. The social reality produced under such circumstances becomes a mixture of the experiences of the respondent and how I as a researcher felt at the time of fieldwork. As I juggle between centering on the respondent's experiences and privileging her voice in the text, I often wondered how this would affect the ethnographies I write. In the process I ended up defining myself as I allowed my empathetic tendencies to infiltrate fieldwork. This was inevitable particularly because I share a similar identity with my respondents (we are all African migrants) which does create conditions for empathetic relations.

This was illustrated in the case of Bridget a Ugandan woman who came to South Africa in 1987. While in Uganda, she had obtained a degree in computer sciences at the University of Makerere. She had also married an Anglican priest much to the consternation of her family and friends who felt that she was now consigned to a life of poverty. Her coming to South Africa was so as to escape the stigma associated with marrying a 'poor' man and also to embark on a venture to raise the quality of life of her family. At the time of the interview, the respondent expressed that the status of her life had not improved since coming to South Africa. Her husband who later joined her in South Africa continued with his priestly vocation in one of the Anglican dioceses and did not join her in any entrepreneurial activity to supplement their salaries. They were consequently living in one of the church parish houses and could not afford a house of their own. Bridget felt frustrated by her husband's priestly vocation whose remuneration could not provide the family with the quality of life she desired. On her own, she could not be able to afford a house. This frustration was given voice during the interview and as a researcher I found myself being empathetic towards her and adopting a different role from that of a researcher. I ended up taking the role of a counsellor by empathising with her and frequently urging her to focus on her career and her children in order to build her self esteem

Thus in the field under conditions of empathy, I shifted perspectives many times and my sense of immersion in the lives of my respondents and separation became a continuous process. By so doing both the researcher and the respondent are able to relate to the experiences as though it were one person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathetically or from



whom one might be separated and individuated. As Bondi (2002) advances empathy provides a way of understanding other people's experiences in the context of both similarities and differences between researchers and research subjects. Through this sort of relationship, the data collected is rich and carries a lot of depth. Upon exploring the reasons why women of African origin migrate independently, I was empathetically drawn into representing the women in a more positive light rather than on the reality of their reasons for migration which were located in:- escaping from unsuccessful marriages, running away from controlling boyfriends or concealing a pregnancy gotten out of wed-luck from family and friends. I oscillated between transient empathetic experiences of my informants and defences against them, defining myself sometimes through them in the process. This was in concurrence with Bondi's argument that empathy entails oscillating between participating in processes of identification and remaining aware of (observing) some distinction (however fragile) between one's own and the other person's inner realities.

Empathy was also enacted in my research methods such as participant observation. The participant observation method draws on behavioural skills and already established social skills such as empathy and 'fitting in' among others. This requires that the researcher takes part in the activities that the respondents are engaged in. Social relations are however imbued with gendered meanings with men and women being assigned different tasks. This was exemplified in an instance when I attended a fundraising function of the Cameroonian Association in Durban (CAMCOD) for purposes of participant observation. On the day of the function, I arrived early at two of my female respondents' residence. I found their male cousin lying on the couch while Irene was in the kitchen and Jessica was at the hair salon. Concerning this male cousin, Jessica, one of the Cameroonian respondents in an in-depth interview had said:

My cousin is so traditional and there is no way he can compromise even though he is aware that here in South Africa we have some cultural differences. My cousin wants to be served food and even if I am sleeping, I have to wake up and serve him. He can only serve himself if I am not there.

As a feminist I was incensed by the gender dynamics of my women respon-

dents being in the kitchen and their male cousin lying on the couch. I however joined in the food preparation sessions in the kitchen as a result of empathising with their situation as a fellow woman as well as being obligated to do so by the participant observation method. Fitting in then required me to immerse myself in a gendered context and in so doing I ended up taking up a gendered role. The performance of gender roles was to be repeated in a participant observation session when a Kenyan respondent, had to be accompanied to meet his wife at the airport while on a visit to South Africa from Kenya. On reaching his house the respondent asked that his food be warmed while he called his wife's father making the observation that he had at least taken the trouble to cook.

As a feminist researcher, I would have been able to side-step gender roles in the research process but on a number of occasions I found myself performing traditional gender roles. This was in contradiction with my identity as a feminist but as a researcher, I was constrained by the method which I had chosen. Being a feminist researcher and teasing out the role of empathy in fieldwork provided critical insights concerning the gendered nature of research methodologies.

## **Conclusion**

The relational space between the researcher and the respondents is very important because it impacts on the kinds of knowledge that is produced. This study has shown that research that focuses only on respondents words is very limiting and narrows our scope for research. Thus the article has advanced that the gender identity of the researcher and gender relations in the field are an important dynamic in shaping the kind of data that is obtained. Gender relations are also implicated in data collection methods such as the in-depth interview and participant observation leading to enactment of gender on the part of the researcher and the researched.

This study has shown that interviewing is not just a gathering of information by the researcher but that both the researcher and the researched are engaged in a co-operative act. Part of this act during the data collection process was the performance of gender. In the course of the interviews, this performance led to tutelage with most men adopting the role of an educator and enlightener in the research process and in so doing reinforcing their

masculine gendered identity around expert knowledge while I adopted the feminine role of respective listener in order to glean as much information as I could as required by my research method. Tutelage was however not just the preserve of men as older women also adopted the role of an educator by giving me advice on real life experiences showing that gender relations do not just exist between men and women but are also to be found amongst women, and in this case, with regard to age difference.

While my identity as a woman granted men and older women the opportunity to exercise tutelage over me, the same identity and that of feminist researcher enabled me to empathise with the situations of female respondents. In some of these cases, I ended up taking different roles from those of a researcher such as those of a counsellor and encourager. Thus the subjectivities of the research respondents and my subjectivity intersected to produce knowledge. Empathy was also highlighted in data collection methods such as participant observation due to its emphasis on the use of social skills such as empathy and 'fitting in' with the researched in order to obtain data leading to an enactment of gender on my part as a researcher.

Practicing reflexivity therefore to observe my own role as a researcher in either enabling or constraining the production of gender performances in the data gathering process is crucial to knowledge production.

## References

- Aanstoos, CM 1991. Embodiment as Ecstatic Intertwining. In Aanstoos, CM (ed): *Studies in Humanistic Psychology*. Carrollton, GA: West Georgia College.
- Bondi, L 2002. Empathy and Identification: Conceptual Resources for Feminist Fieldwork. Paper presented at the RGS-IBG Conference in Belfast in January 2002.
- Burns, M 2003. Interviewing: Embodied Communication. *Feminism and Psychology* 13,2: 229 - 236.
- Connell, RW 2002. *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Finlay, L 2003a. Through the Looking Glass: Intersubjectivity and Hermeneutic Reflection. In Finlay, L and B Gough (eds): *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*. Oxford: Blackwell Science.

- Fontana, A & JH Frey 1994. Interviewing: The Art of Science. In Denzin, NK & YS Lincoln (eds): *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Geertz, C 1986. The Uses of Diversity. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25,1: 105-123.
- Graves, LM & GN Powell 1996. Sex Similarity, Quality of the Employment Interview and Recruiter's Evaluation of Actual Applicants. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 69,3: 243 - 261.
- Henning, E 2004. *Finding your Way in Qualitative Research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Hogan, R 1973. Moral Conduct and Moral Character: A Psychological Perspective. *Psychological Bulletin* 70: 217 - 232.
- Husserl, E. 1989. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenological Philosophy*. Second Books: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution. Rojcewicz, R & A Schuwer (trans). Boston: Kluwer.
- Merleau-Ponty, M 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Lingis, A (trans). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Reay, D 1996. Insider Perspectives or Stealing the Words out of Women's Mouths: Interpretation in the Research Process. *Feminist Review* 53: 59 - 60.
- Rogers, CR 1980. Empathy: An Unappreciated Way of Being. In *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rossmann, GB & SF Rallis 1998. *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications Inc.
- Spiegelberg, H 1975. *Doing Phenomenology: Essays on and in Phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Spelman, E. V. 1988. *Inessential woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Tannen, D 1990. *You Just do not Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Thompson, E 2001. Empathy and Consciousness. In Thompson, E (ed): *Between Ourselves: Second-person Issues in the Study of Consciousness*. Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic.
- William, CL & EJ Heikes 1993. The Importance of a Researcher's Gender in the In-depth Interview: Evidence from two Case Studies of Male Nurses. *Gender and Society* 7,2: 280 - 291.
- Winchester, HPM 1996. Ethical Issues in Interviewing as a Research Method

*Vivian Besem Ojong*

in Human Geography. *Australian Geographer* 2,1: 117- 131.

Zahavi, D 2001. Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity. In Thompson, E (ed): *Between Ourselves: Second-person Issues in the Study of Consciousness*. Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic.

Vivian Besem Ojong  
School of Social Sciences  
University of KwaZulu Natal  
Email: [ojong@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ojong@ukzn.ac.za)