Can You Belly Dance?
Methodological Questions in the Era of Transnational Feminist Research

Faranak Miraftab
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, in particular with respect to Western (-trained) scholars researching among women in the Third World, have been the focus of feminist debate on field research methodology for over two decades. This research note present paper, drawing on an example of field research carried out among female heads of households in Mexico, stresses the significance of this debate in the context of the globalization of research. It highlights the need to revisit and extend the feminist methodological discussion of insider/ outsider to reflect the current transnationality of research and praxis as mobility among Third World feminist researchers increases.

Keywords: feminist methodology, field work, women, transnational research.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, methodological/ethical questions about field research relationships have been a significant concern of feminist scholarship. The traditional social science methods that disassociate the researcher from the researched and make distanced relationships a prerequisite for scientific "objectivity" have been criticized for their presumption of the universality of such male-dominated meta narratives (Oakley 1981; Harding 1987). Focusing on the politics of the field and the relationship between the researcher and the researched, feminist critiques have paid special attention to the power imbalances between the researcher and researched and the effects on the research outcome. Feminist scholars doing research among Third World women have questioned in particular whether narratives of Western (-trained), middle-class women researchers are superimposed on the women researched, and whether the process of their research participation objectifies them (Mohanty 1991). Researchers are challenged to recognize and understand such power imbalances as they arise, and to rectify them so that the research processes and outcomes are of benefit to both researched and researcher (Nagar 2002).

This research note aims to add to this ongoing feminist debate by contributing an example based on field research carried out by the author in Guadalajara, Mexico. This example sheds light, in particular, on the increased transnationality of research, as Third World, Western-trained researchers such as the author select research sites in countries other than those of their

origins. The discussion of the field research presented here points out the further complexity of the insider/ outsider relationship between the researcher and the researched, and stresses the usefulness of the metaphor of "betweenness," (Nast 1994). It calls attention to how the transnational flow not only of labor and capital, but also of researchers, further complicates the dynamics of field research and stresses the importance of taking that phenomenon into account when considering field politics in this era of globalization.

Power Relations and Feminist Research Methodology

The feminist concern with field methods arises both from its critique of positivism and of the latter's belief in the researcher's value-free and conquering gaze from nowhere (Haraway 1988), and from its commitment to social change, transformative action, and emancipatory research praxis (Mies 1983). Insisting that the knowledge researchers gain is embedded in their locations (historical, national, generational) and positionality (gender, class, race), feminist research methodology has overthrown the notion of a "transcendental subject" and the claims of objectivity in traditional social science research (Smith 1990). It unpacks the relationship between the researcher and the researched, seeking a methodology that is transparent and which ensures that the research process itself is not oppressive.[1] In summary: feminist methodology seeks an emancipatory research practice that is socially responsible and politically and ethically imperative.[2]

Feminist methodology has also questioned the validity of white women's "master story," by which their experience of gender is presumed to transcend the gendered experience of women who are differently racialized (Farrell 1992; Greiger 1990; Mohanty 1991). Feminist methodological literature has also identified sources of the power differences between Western researchers and Third World women: positionality (i.e. race, class, life chances, urban/rural background) (Patai 1991; Lal 1996; Wolf 1996; Carty 1996; Olson and Shopes 1991; Salazar 1991); the unequal gains of researcher and of researched from a research process — described as "pillage of raw data for export" akin to colonial powers' exploitation of the Third World's material resources (Hondagneau-Sotelo 1996:109); and the researcher's control over reporting and representing the researched (Gottfried 1996; Stephen 1994; Behar 1993).

Those critiques strike home among Third World, Western-trained researchers who return to their own countries to do research, in that these critiques question assumptions of their insider position on the basis of common gender and nationality while their privilege persists vis-à-vis local women in many other ways (for example, in class, race, cast, education and status) (Lal 1996; Carty 1996). Stressing the researcher's privileged position in the research process, feminist scholars have warned of the impermeability of power relations even for such researchers. Although research participants can influence the research outcome by refusing to participate or by altering the story they present[3] (Patai 1988), it is after all the researcher who decides to continue or end the research, and who also invariably controls the presentation of the researched (Wolf 1996).

I aim to contribute to this dialogue among feminist scholars on the politicization of field relations by presenting a challenge to the researcher's preconceived notions of her privileges in the field vis-à-vis the research participants. In particular, by demonstrating how research participants and researchers alike may redefine the insider/outsider relationship in the field, I offer a counter balance to the literature's overwhelming attention to researchers' sources of power and privilege. Such an emphasis risks presenting the women researched as merely

passive: objectified, mute, and lacking any source of power vis-à-vis the researcher. Furthermore, as Pattai's critique (1994:69) has stressed it risks researchers' "new methodological self-absorption" and egocentrism emerging from constant self-appraisal and self-reflexivity. Attention to the possibility of such an imbalance in methodological assumptions is called for particularly in the context of increasing transnational research, in which the paths of researchers are no longer predictable. The complex movements of "footloose researchers" in this era of globalization requires close attention to how those novel configurations may influence the field dynamic and the relationships between researcher and researched (Nagar 2002).

Transnational Feminist Research and Footloose Researchers

Methodological discussions about the insider/ outsider relationship between the researcher and the researched traditionally have assumed a certain paradigm: researchers in the West going to the South and/or Western-trained Third World researchers returning to their countries of origin. This assumption is challenged by the current diversity and range of configurations for researcher and researched. The paths of an elite class of researchers, like those of low-skilled laborers, have become increasingly diversified. While in the 1970s the international flow of women researching Third World women came mostly from the countries of the North (referred to here as the West) to the South, in the 1980s there also appeared an emerging group of Western-trained, Third World women scholars researching in their countries of origin. Now, in the new millennium, the research situation has altered further, in that these paths of women researchers can no longer be taken for granted. Researchers have not been immune from the increased transnationality of the movements of labor and capital; they too are more widely mobile with their expertise.

Several conditions, both individual and institutional, have contributed to the trend of Third World, women scholars researching elsewhere than in their countries of origin. Changes in societies and in social relations of gender have given some women more spatial mobility locally, nationally and transnationally, so that they travel along unpredictable routes. With their social emancipation, more Third World women have participated in politics. One consequence has been the political displacement and exile of many educated Third World women, to the North and the South. The interaction of the above phenomena as well as the structural and institutional transformation of research in the international area, has to some extent resulted in displaced Third World women scholars researching in countries other than their own. For example, the Women's World Conferences organized by the United Nations in every decade since 1975, have promoted a significant level of transnational exchanges among women scholars and activists across countries, with South-South as well as North-South linkages (see Tinker 1990). Moreover, the United Nations' and other international agencies' sectoral focus on women in developing countries has significantly promoted consultancies and commissioned studies, making worldwide research increasingly possible for women in the North and in Third World countries.

Although further discussion of these conditions is beyond the scope of this research note, it is important for future research that feminist academics consider how the emerging transnational research and activism on women's issues may affect the methodological preoccupations of feminist research. The following account of a specific experience from my field research teases out some of the complexities of the field relationships in the context of emerging transnational field work.

The Field Example: *La Irani en Mexico!*

From 1992 to 1994 I spent over a year studying housing problems among low-income communities in Guadalajara, the second largest city of Mexico. I was a thirty-five-year-old Iranian woman in exile for whom "going home" would be fatally risky. I had studied for my doctorate in the United States, was single, had no children, and traveled alone. I spoke Spanish with a Persian accent, which despite my deceptively Hispanic look revealed that I was a foreigner. My field research among female householders in Guadalajara, Mexico began imbued with the caution counseled by the methodology literature of the time — namely, apprehension about the position of power inherent in my socio-economic status, educational level and affiliation with a Western institution. The field experience indeed confirmed these notions; but at the same time it revealed other factors that problematized aspects of that viewpoint, most importantly through the implications of my transnational position of "betweenness" for the research relationship that emerged.

The field research examined how housing decisions by low-income households, i.e., to rent or own, and to live in central areas or in the city outskirts, are influenced by the gender of the household head.[4] It was carried out in three types of low-income neighborhoods, embracing renters and owners in different urban locations. The first area included the city center tenements, where many rooms, sometimes up to forty, each occupied by one household, encircle a communal yard and share wet services. The second was a central, consolidated working-class neighborhood having the main urban amenities. The third area was a recent, informal settlement at the city outskirts, struggling to access basic amenities. In each area I carried out in-depth interviews in one or more sessions with low-income women in households that an initial survey across the neighborhood had identified as female-headed.[5]

The thirty women householders interviewed were diverse, ranging from a 17-year-old single mother to a 62-year-old woman in charge of a large household. Some of the female householders had by choice left abusive conjugal relationships. The husbands of some others had left in search of jobs and gradually lost interest and contact, or had left for extramarital relationships; others were young single mothers whose boyfriends did not welcome their child born out of wedlock. The women often had no more than basic reading and writing skills from three or four years of elementary school. They worked in the informal sector as street vendors, or as domestic workers or in other low-skilled and poorly paid jobs. Seldom were they employed in the formal sector, in jobs with fringe benefits and/or a predictable income. Those living in the inner city tenements lived in rooms of, on average, 3x5 meters, and those in the other two areas lived in dwellings double the average size of the inner-city rental units. Television and radio were indispensable components of each household, whatever its income level.

A noteworthy diversity was apparent in how the research participants related to the world around them, and thus in how they conducted themselves in the interview sessions. Young single mothers scarcely diverged from my questions and rarely took any initiative in the interviews, whereas older women, in later phases of life, engaged in mutual questioning and exchanges. The difference may be explained partly by the fact that very young single mothers, still coming to terms with their single motherhood and often having to prove their social and moral worth to their families and the community, lacked the self-confidence that the older household heads enjoyed from having stable households and identities. However, the

participants handling of the interviews was also, I argue, influenced by their perceptions of my social situatedness.

Research Participants Redefining Privilege

Two aspects of this field experience are pertinent to the discussion here: first, in the interview process, the research participants' engagement in questioning/ interviewing the researcher; second, the value-laden nature of their questions and comments.

In the research process, the research participants' curiosity about my own background although unforeseen, was making me the object of their curiosity and effectively turning the interview table: the research participants interviewed me before I interviewed them. There is nothing unique in this example. Feminists have demonstrated the fallacy of assuming that the research relationship is a one-way road determined only by the researcher and her/his questions. Rather, they emphasize its nature as a two-way exchange constructed by the actors on both sides (Oakely 1981). As indeed in most other cases, the participants in this field research case had a chain of questions for me, often personal and intrusive ones: was I married? Why had I no children? Was I veiled? Were the stories about Iran that they had heard or seen on TV about Iran right? Could I belly dance?

Through such questions the participants assessed my position vis-à-vis theirs. By virtue of being foreign to their country, I was perceived as an outsider. But by being from another "poor" country, as opposed to being a Western *gringa*, I also was perceived as an insider or "one of them"; our common identity was clearly signaled by the participants' use of "our" or "us" in comments such as "in our countries there is a lot of poverty …" or "in our countries the poor are …". My Third World origin helped to diminish the nationality-based hierarchy common in research. At the same time, my being a non-Mexican encouraged participants' trust in the confidentiality of their stories, which they felt would be carried far away from and not circulated in their communities. Other researchers have also commented on how being an outsider increased trust (see, for example, Tixier y Vigil, and Elsasser 1976). In the present example, a non-Mexican, Third World person had the advantage of a borderland position, simultaneously insider and outsider to the community being studied.

I found that the participants' initial assessment of my positionality as "between" eased the field dynamics. It fostered mutual interest in the interview process and allowed its personal and intrusive aspects to be reciprocal. Moreover, that common interest led us to engage in a larger discussion about women's experiences and how forms of patriarchy vary across cultures. Such dialogues, which often began with curiosity about what oppression I had known as a woman in a Moslem society, had significant potential for enhancing their responsiveness to the questions that I posed to them about their views on their resources, aspirations, and challenges, and the constraints they faced sheltering themselves and their families.

The value-laden nature of the questions and comments offered during the interview sessions, however, deserve close attention. They signal these Mexican women's perceived position of privilege vis-à-vis my particular culture and society of origin — a perception little noted in the existing literature. In the particular time period when the field work took place, my identity as a woman from a Moslem country strongly influenced the responses of the women interviewed. The movie *Not Without My Daughter,* which sensationalizes the oppression of women in Iran, had recently been shown on prime time Mexican television and been viewed by most of the research participants. This movie, reflecting the Western media's political agenda,

presents Moslem societies as savage, harsh and oppressive of women. Consequently an underprivileged and oppressed image of Moslem women, had been recently etched in the minds of most Mexicans, including those participating in my research.

Having underestimated the power of the Western media's consistent imaging of women in Middle East and Moslem countries, I was taken by surprise by how this image interacted with my privileged educational and socio-economic status to influence the interview process. It was through the story of that movie that the participants tried to understand me. It was in terms of the media's image of Middle Eastern women as miserably oppressed by the harsh domination of their men that the research participants formed their view of my position of privilege — or underprivilege — vis-à-vis their own.

Certain frequently made comments by the participants illustrate their perception of how Moslem women's situation was worse than theirs. For example, after their questions about the status of women and their legal rights in Iran, I frequently heard comments such as: *"you must be very happy to be here [in Mexico where you do not have to submit to the Islamic laws]"* (*"debes estar muy contenta de estar aqui."*); "you girls have a tough time there" (*"oye…. ustedes le tienen mal por allá …"*); or "things are very hard for women there, isn't that so?" (*"es muy duro para la mujer allá, no es verdad?"*). The stereotypes expressed about the treatment of women in Iran reveal the participants' sense of their position, their nationality and their culture as privileged to mine because their society was (in their eyes) not as harsh towards women. That construction of the researcher as a woman from a society more oppressive of women than theirs reversed the nationality-based power position often described in the literature.

Other questions I was frequently asked almost always appearing as a pair, were: "Do you wear the veil?" and then, with a grin and a twist of the waist, "Can you belly dance?". Participants' questions of interviewers generally indicate their active role in constructing the field dynamics, but these questions indicate, specifically, research participants' efforts to work out the contradictory images of an oppressed Muslim woman from Iran and/or an educated woman living in the US and traveling throughout the world.

Beyond this complexity lay another, also experienced by other researchers: childless woman researching a population group that highly values motherhood encounter a further complication of her position of privilege. The low-income, single mothers interviewed in this field research took great pride in motherhood. Despite single motherhood often not having been a deliberate choice, they all expressed a sense of social status, security about the future against all odds, and general completeness. "Without a child a woman is like a feature in the air," one interviewee asserted. The cultural norms and social values of this context clearly placed the researcher in a socially underprivileged position among the researched population. To them it seemed, after all, so natural to have children and such a loss for a woman of my age to have missed out on what they considered perhaps a woman's only true asset: bearing a child.

The questions and comments cited here, disclosing the stereotypes the research participants held about Middle Eastern women and their pity for me not only as a childless woman but also as a woman from Iran, a country associated most significantly with its brutal icon, Khomeini, demonstrate that research participants do not necessarily always view the researcher in the terms we expect, as being in a position of power or privilege. Female householders of the three communities in Guadalajara who participated in this study redefined my sources of (dis)advantage in surprising ways, which were much influenced by current events

and the women's exposure to them in their environment — in this case the media coverage of Iran.

Acknowledging that research participants' social values may define the notion of privilege and identify sources of their privilege over the researcher, in no way ignores the fact that my socio-economic status as an educated woman able to travel widely placed me in a position of privilege vis-à-vis my respondents, nor does it gainsay my control over the writing and publication of the study. Nevertheless it remains noteworthy that the kinds of privilege that I presumed before doing fieldwork, which rested on Western-influenced values, were not necessarily those most important to my research participants. Rather, childlessness and coming from the country of the Ayatollah where, as the movie had shown, a man could take away a woman's children, loomed far larger in defining my identity vis-à-vis theirs. This example points to how the relationship between the researcher and the researched can emerge beyond the researcher's predictable notions about the sources of power and privilege. The example calls attention to the complexity of the field dynamics between the researcher and the researched, in what Peake and Trotz (1999:19) call the "shifting matrix of power relations" in the field.

Conclusion

The example discussed highlights the need, in methodological debates, to re-examine assumptions in the context of increasingly globalized research whereby the mobility of academics and researchers parallels patterns of transnational flows of labor and capital. In the context of current transnational mobility, "position" of transnational academics/researchers is understudied. The paths of a mobile elite class of researchers, just as those of low-skilled laborers, are now increasingly diversified and the categorization of researchers as Western, or as Western-trained women is inadequate. This misses a large group of transnational academics and research participants who cut across cultural and national boundaries and in doing so add to the complexity of field politics. Feminist thought should consider the implications of this increased transnationalism of researchers, hence revisit and extend its methodological debate about insider/ outsider positioning to include an "explicit focus on transnational/transborder feminist praxis" (Staeheli and Nagar 2002:167; also see Silvey 2002; and Nagar 2002).

The field example also highlights the multiple sources of perceived privilege and the multiple positioning of research participants vis-à-vis the researcher. It underscores the role of research participants in assessing their privileged position vis-à-vis the researcher and in constructing the dynamics of research relationship. In examining the researcher/researched tensions in the new transnational era, this research note highlights three points. First, the almost exclusive focus in the literature on the privileged world of the researcher (often assumed to be Western or Western-trained) erases the influence of the researched in the relationship that emerges in the field. Secondly, a dichotomous interpretation of the relationship between the researched and the researcher that presumes the researcher to be the privileged member of a polar relationship risks victimizing the research participants as subjects of the researcher's privilege and power. Thirdly, taking a uniform position of the researchers for granted presumes that research participants are incapable of defining privilege or of distinguishing among aspects of the researcher's privilege and underprivilege according to their own social values. Those aspects of the dominant discourse within feminist methodology risk going full circle to re-objectify the subject.

Acknowledgements:

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[1] The recognition of such inequities between the researcher and the researched troubles some feminist scholars' emancipatory ideals. Researchers committed to social change, propose certain strategies to ameliorate the situation. These include reciprocating the participants technical information, networks and resources to which researchers have access (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1996); raising consciousness and awareness among participants (Acker et al. 1996; Mies 1983; Reinharz 1983); incorporating reflexivity in the research process (Lather 1991; Fonow and Cook 1991); making the research process itself empowering (Miraftab 1996).

[2] But feminists are not alone in this. Others within social sciences, in particular among geographers working in the Third World, have raised similar issues on methodological pedagogy. For example see Robson and Willis, 1994.

[3] Oral historian Michael Frisch (1990) has also stressed this over-calculation of researchers' power during interview sessions and anguish about their own role. The comments that interviewees will often tell the story they want to tell you, despite the interventions the researchers might inadvertently make.

[4] For more on the content of the research, see Miraftab, 1997 and 1998.

[5] A total of ninety households were randomly surveyed. Thirty women householders were interviewed in depth—ten in each area.