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# Encountering One Another: Feminist Relationships in Organizational Research

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As a graduate student attempting to integrate feminist principles into my academic endeavors, I eagerly entered the research field to examine how women business owners who feel a conflict between feminism and capitalism enact their everyday lives. I chose participant observation, a common methodology in feminist research, with the aim of getting "inside" these women's lives to better understand their experiences. However, as the fieldwork proceeded, my focus shifted to examining the space in which the realities of the feminist organizational researcher and of the feminist business owner encounter one another. This paper reflects upon how we made sense of our practices through complex interactions that blurred the binary between subject/object and researcher/researched. By acknowledging the co-constitution of the research process, scholars of organizational studies can begin to rethink the relationship between the "researcher" and the "researched" and ask questions about the power dynamics inherent to fieldwork.

**Keywords**: Feminist Research; Feminist Methodology; Ethnography; Qualitative Research

As a graduate student who did not want to separate feminist principles from my academic endeavors, I was eager to enter the field for a doctoral seminar in organizational research and execute a "feminist" research project. Specifically, I developed a proposal to study women business owners from a woman-centered approach that placed the perspectives and experiences of women at the center of analysis (Smith, 1987). To accomplish this, I began with questions about the way women who themselves identify as feminists and own small businesses enact their everyday lives. Specifically, my research questions were: 1) How do women business owners who feel a conflict between feminism and capitalism enact their feminist values in a capitalist endeavor? 2) How do they make meaning of their everyday values and practices?

These are not the questions, however, that I answer in this paper. Instead, I focus on the methodological and epistemological issues that arose as I tried to engage in "feminist" qualitative research. In particular, I explore the role of the "researcher" and the role of the "researched" in *cocreating* the research process, resulting in the blurring of the subject/object binary. In this way, this paper is a reflexive account of the "doing" of feminist research. Fonow and Cook (1991) define reflexivity in feminist scholarship as "the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process" (p. 2).

Specifically, I explore three themes that emerged from the research encounter. In the first theme, *Cocreating the Research Process*, I examine the mutual shaping of the research process by both the researcher and the subjects. I show how research concepts such as "participation" and "access" are mutually negotiated in the research interaction. In the second theme, *Constituting "Research" and the "Researcher,"* I focus on how the participants understand the meaning of "research" and "researcher" and how these understandings mold the research experience for both of us. In the third theme, *Co-constructing Identity*, I explore the complex negotiation of definitions of self in the fieldwork. In particular, I show how one participant actively

constructed her own identity in relationship to the research process. However, before turning the analysis to these themes, I will explain how I initially framed and designed the research project in order to describe how my focus shifted from the original research questions to the personal relationships forged in the research encounter.

**Framing of Research**

Having just studied in another graduate seminar about Burrell and Morgan's (1979) typology of paradigms in sociological analysis, I originally framed this project in the interpretive paradigm. A basic tenet of the interpretive paradigm is that social worlds are ongoing processes created and re-created by the people in them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From this standpoint, social reality is understood as "a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 30). Researchers drawing from this perspective are concerned with *how* social reality is constructed, accomplished, and sustained. In particular, they are interested in how individuals actively define and make meaning of their experiences, which are informed culturally. In this study, I planned to describe the social phenomenon of women business owners who identified as feminists and the meanings that they made from their everyday life situations.

To understand the world of women business owners from their own perspectives, I knew methodologically that I needed to get "inside" the phenomenon under study. Interpretive research uses many different methods such as observation, participation, and interviewing. Each of these methods is interactive, meaning the researcher and the participants are involved face-to-face. For this study, I planned to use standard ethnographic techniques of fieldwork whereby I would observe and document activities and talk in the context in which they are happening.

To make this fieldwork experience feminist, however, I turned to Reinharz (1992) to guide the process. Reinharz (1992) suggests that feminist fieldwork is consistent with three goals: 1) to document women's lives and activities, 2) to understand women from their own perspective, and 3) to understand women in their social context. As I mentioned earlier, I was a graduate student learning to become an organizational studies scholar and hoping to incorporate my own feminist values into the process by setting out to achieve these three goals during this semester-long doctoral seminar project. What I learned was that negotiating fieldwork, in particular feminist fieldwork, was a complex web of interactions between myself and the participants that shaped how and what I would document and understand, and thus, the knowledge that would be produced.

**Shifting Focus**

Perhaps naively, I had envisioned the participants and myself coming together as feminists, in the present time, all trying to critique the social condition and resist the mainstream, whether it be of business or academia. I was overcome, however, with the minute details of negotiating the research process as well as navigating my own understanding of feminist research. For example, am I treating them as merely objects of research? Is their understanding of "participation" different than mine? Is my presence too much of a disturbance?

I may have entered the field naively, but I did not enter it innocently. I was informed by writings that I had read in other graduate seminars such as "Issues in Feminist Research" and "Feminist Anthropology." For example, Ann Oakley (1981), in her article, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," describes her experience interviewing women on childbirth. She found that what she was taught in graduate school—being a distanced, objective interviewer—didn't work in the field because her "informants" constantly asked her for counsel and guidance. In the androcentric model in which she was schooled, she was supposed to dodge such interactions. She felt uncomfortable with this approach, not because it contradicted the "rapport" she was supposed to be building with her informants, but as a feminist, she wondered how she could not share such important information.

Other writers have also looked at issues inherent in feminist fieldwork research. Judith Stacey (1988) pointedly asks, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" She argues that an ethnographic methodology exposes "research subjects to a greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researchers than does much positivist research" (p. 21). Daphne Patai (1991) also critiques the idea that the interview process "empowers" women in that it "gives a voice." She asks, "When is the purported empowerment or affirmation just another psychological surrogate, a 'feel good' measure, a means by which researchers console themselves for the real imbalances in power that they know—despite the talk of sisterhood—exist?" (p. 147). Picking up on the critique of feminist ethnography and responding to postcolonial critiques of Western feminism, Ruth Behar (1993) focuses on the ethical issues in representing other women in scholarly writing. She observes that:

> feminist ethnographers have found themselves caught inside webs of betrayal they themselves have spun…they realize that they are seeking out intimacy and friendship with subjects on whose backs, ultimately, the books will be written upon which their productivity as scholars in the academic marketplace will be assessed." (p. 297)

Thus, I was aware of issues of ethics and power in feminist fieldwork. What I was not prepared for, however, was how they would manifest themselves through the interaction of the researcher and the researched and the meanings created for each in the fieldwork encounter. I entered the field with my own material condition (i.e., the expectation that I publish a written text) and intellectual history (i.e., years of studying business principles, as well as feminist and critical theories). The women business owners entered the field with their own material condition (i.e., the need to keep their business viable) and intellectual history (i.e., both practical and theoretical knowledge of what it means to be a good businesswoman). I enacted "the doing of research" just as women business owners enacted "the doing of business."

Traditionally, the researcher speaks in an authoritative manner, describing what is "out there" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 77). The interaction between the researcher and the researched, the knower and the soon-to-be known is frequently taken for granted. The co-constructing of the research process itself is often absent from the text. As the fieldwork unfolded, my research focus began to shift to the encounter of our two realities, both as feminist business owner and feminist researcher, and what follows is my representation of encountering one another.

## Introducing Four Feminists

As the project was executed in the confines of a graduate seminar, I needed to gain access as quickly as possible to several women business owners who self-identified as feminists. For the purposes of the seminar requirements, my goal was to secure access to three feminist business owners. After asking friends and colleagues for candidates, I compiled a list of potential women who might fit my criteria. To gain access, I spoke with the first three women on the phone, explaining my interest in understanding women who own businesses, identify as feminists, and think about or have thought about their relationship with capitalism. I verified that each woman, in fact, fit these criteria. Each agreed that I could come to their places of business for several hours at a time and observe their activities and interview them over a three-week period. I spent a total of 15 hours observing their behavior and talking with them.

The three women who agreed to participate owned very different types of businesses. The first business owner, Katie, has owned a publishing service that specializes in personal histories for the past eight years. Now in her 50s, she has worked in publishing, editing, and radio commentary. The week I arrived to begin observing, Katie had just hired her first full-time employee, Kristy. The second business owner, Emma, owns a local retail store, employing approximately eight full-time and eight part-time workers and carrying a diverse product line ranging from office and school supplies to college memorabilia. Emma, now in her 40s, has been running the business since 1997, after she inherited it from her husband who had owned and run it since the early 1980s. The third business owner, Susie, is a good friend of mine. She is an energetic woman in her 40s who has created businesses arising from her various passions throughout her adult life. She currently owns a company that provides workshops on wellness in organizations ranging from women's Ivy League colleges to large investment firms. I should mention that the fourth woman in this research is myself, a graduate student in her 30s, studying organization studies with a strong interest in gender.

While what I learned about how they reconcile their feminist values and capitalist practices was very interesting, it was in encountering each other in the research process that I learned the most from what was "just" a mini-project for a required graduate course. Below I describe this space that we created together.

## Describing the Space Between Us

To illustrate the complex interaction of "researcher" and "researched" in the research encounter, I will offer stories made from both their words and mine. These stories will center around three themes that I developed from the rich material that our time together provided: 1) the mutual negotiation of participation in the research process, 2) the constitution of the researcher as a human and a friend, not a researcher, and 3) the question of defining one's self in the research encounter. I acknowledge that these stories are not fixed and are just a small part of our experience together. Further, I have focused here on the interactions between the women

business owners and myself, but our encounters took place among others such as employees, salespeople, and customers.

## Co-creating the Research Process

In the following two stories, I will show how the research process was actively shaped by the interaction between the women business owners and myself. Our behaviors were formed in relationship to one another and we made meaning of the process together.

***What "Participating" Means.*** I chose participant observation, a common methodology for qualitative research, especially for feminists. As mentioned earlier, the goal of participant observation is to "get inside" the lives of people. In this case, I set out to participate in the women's everyday activities of the business in order to gain a better understanding of their lives. As I soon found out during my field experience with Emma, it is not as straightforward as it might seem. I learned that both the participant and the researcher shape the experience of this methodology, and thus the knowledge gained.

I had been perhaps twice to the variety store to buy local hiking maps before it became my research site. It was 7:15 a.m. on the first day of my field research and a bit of nervousness began to rise up as I walked toward the store. What would she be like? Would I be interrupting her work? How would I blend in? As I reached for the door handle, a sign taped to the window caught my eye that said, "We stand together against bigotry and racism," which must have been a response to racist acts against a store down the street, incidences I read about in the local paper. I approached the tall woman standing behind the counter, wearing an Irish sweater, jeans, and a multicolored scarf tied around her neck. My anxiety began to melt away when I introduced myself because her smile made me feel welcome, as did her gentle handshake. For the first hour, we were the only two people in the store except for the stream of customers buying their morning paper. Her dog, Cody, a golden retriever who was leashed near the counter, was our opening topic of conversation. With the local public radio station playing in the background, Emma and I engaged in getting-to-know-you conversation. Our topics ranged from our dogs to my program at the university to raising her sons after her husband had died. Our conversation flowed easily, interrupted only when she rang up customers' purchases. As the other employees appeared and the store began to get busier, I spent the next hour wandering around the isles looking at the endless products on display. Earlier, Emma had pointed to a chair by the open office area near the cash register where I could put my coat and bag. It became my personal space while I was at the store.

My goal for the first visit was to get familiar with the store, the people, and their rhythms. The first day, when I wasn't walking around the store jotting notes about the merchandise, talking with employees, or observing their activities, I sat in the chair. The next visit, I asked Emma if there was anything I could do while I was at the store. Having chosen participant observation as my method, I wanted to take part in her everyday activities. She couldn't think of anything and told me to "just relax" while I was there and motioned with her hand to what she referred to earlier as "your chair." Feeling obligated to do as she wished, I sat in the chair. Was I being disruptive? Did she not want me to follow her and watch her actions? With nothing to do but sit in the chair, I became extremely interested in the dog and the bathroom.

As this was my first experience with participant observation, I felt deflated that I couldn't participate and wondered if the quality of my data was going to be jeopardized. I asked her later about her response to my request to help out. Emma responded, "Initially, I thought you don't have to do that because we have everything covered." She went on to talk about what it would mean if I were "working." "From a legal standpoint," she wondered, "would I have to pay you?"

In this interaction, Emma actively shaped my behaviors as a researcher. Although I chose what to look at and how much time I spent in the bathroom, she limited my activities by rejecting my offer to participate. For her, my role was embedded in the larger social and legal context of "work," rather than research. In this way, as a researcher, I did not have a place in the business. Although she welcomed me into her world, she shaped how I was going to experience it, thus shaping the knowledge I would gain.

***What "Access" Means.*** Gaining access to women that "fit" my original criteria was a long, drawn out process that took several weeks. I had left several messages on Katie's answering machine, asking her to participate in my study, none of which she returned. When I finally reached her, I introduced myself and the project, being sure to mention that I got her name from a mutual friend of ours. When asked if she identifies as a feminist, she responded, "Yes, absolutely!" Would she be interested in participating in my study? "Yes, you can observe my business as long as I don't have to spend 15 minutes with introduction talk," she said. "No problem," I replied, relieved to have another participant.

The "fifteen minutes" phrase kept running through my head as I walked up the stairs for the first time to her office above the shops along the main street of downtown. There was a woman at the top of the stairs wearing a floral scarf and holding fresh-cut daffodils. When she saw me, she said without excitement or aversion in her voice, "Oh, you're the student." I followed Katie into her office, which consisted of two rooms with a large rectangle cut out of the separating wall, making the two rooms almost one. She introduced me to her new employee, Kristy. I sat on the corduroy couch, dwarfed by the large flower print in a dizzying array of blue, turquoise, orange, and deep purple. The space felt small and I felt out of place. Through the cut out in the wall, they talked about their weekends and then plans for the day's work, while I listened and looked at the books on the bookshelves. During the first visit, I spent most of my time looking through their books and listening to conversations. I was cognizant of not wanting to talk too much, ask too many questions, nor make Katie feel she must spend "15 minutes with introduction talk."

Again, wanting to do "real" participant observation, it was during the second visit that I asked if I could do any work while I was there. While we stuffed and addressed envelopes for a mailing, Katie and I had an engaging conversation. She talked about Kristy, her first full-time employee, and detailed the ins and outs of the printing business. We talked about the curtains she made from her mother's old curtains. Our conversation eventually led us to women business owners and her experiences. We talked about how most conferences that target women business owners are about "inspiration." I asked why. She said, "Look at who they are. They have access to money, husbands with deep pockets. Look at class. They can afford to talk about inspiration, rather than practical business strategies." In the middle of this discussion, the phone rang. It was a man taking a survey of women business owners and she told me to listen in on the other phone.

During that visit, Katie was quite open to sharing her thoughts and experiences, yet I was still trying not to disrupt her work too much. In a later conversation, I asked her what she meant when she used the phrase, "15 minute introduction talk." She explained, "I was feeling protective of my time." She said she felt conflicted on whether to agree to participate because on the one hand, I had mentioned our mutual friend whom she respects, but, on the other hand, she had "no idea what this woman wants from me" and felt "put upon." She didn't know what she was being asked for and didn't want to have two more conversations to figure it out.

This story is another example of how we, the researcher and the researched, shape the research process together. Katie did not only respond to my request to enter her business, but also actively shaped what entering her business would look like. As a business owner, she was "protective" of her time, but allowed me in, a primary step in the research process. She took the lead, however, in how much to engage with me, setting the boundaries of the research up front. In turn, her sensitivity about time shaped my behavior (e.g., my sensitivity to not talk too much). Thus, the research unfolded in relation to the space in which our realities as a business owner with limited time and a researcher needing access to data came together.

## Constituting "Research" and the "Researcher"

While the above stories demonstrate the co-construction of the research process through different definitions of "participation," the complexities of participation were also evident in the women's views of me and my research project. Through our interactions, it became clear that they saw me as a human being, rather than as a unidimensional researcher that treats people as objects. My actions and words, as well as their behaviors and ideas, contributed to our construction of me as a human, in what is traditionally an inhumane, reductionist process.

***Becoming a "Useful" Human.*** As mentioned earlier, it was during my second visit with Katie that I asked to participate. She immediately said yes and handed me a stack of papers, envelopes, stamps, an address stamp, and a list of regional newspapers. My task was to stuff a piece of paper announcing her upcoming writing workshop into envelopes and then address them. Since Kristy was not there at the time, I sat at her desk, taking excruciating care to fold the announcements straight and write in my best handwriting. I was happy to be able to participate not only because participant observation was the methodology I had chosen, but also more immediately, because it gave me something to do so that I didn't feel so out of place.

In this case, I thought my participation was a neutral act, but after talking with Katie a few weeks later, I realized that it had a significant impact on my experience with her. During an earlier conversation with Kristy, she made a critical comment about an oral history book written by a colleague of hers, describing it as "so anthropological and academic." When I heard those words through the open space in the adjoining wall, I began to feel like an interloper. Was the remark intended for me to hear? Was she making a statement about my work? Instantly, I began to wonder if I was "too academic." I asked her a few weeks later what she meant when she used those adjectives in such a way. She explained the difference between her work, writing personal histories, and academics' work. "Academics draw conclusions in order to write papers and read them. It is not helpful to people, but it helps [academics] themselves," she said. She indicated that academics are welcome in her world, but they have to "prove" themselves as wanting to help

others. I asked her, how then did she feel about me as an academic in her world? "As a student," she said, I was "fine," noting that I wasn't a consultant. She said that she believed my work about women business owners was important, that more work needed to be done, and that this kind of work would help others. This conversation about academics and the value of their work flowed into her talking about how "nice" it was that I wanted to be "helpful" when I offered to participate. She said, "I appreciated that you are pursuing serious inquiry, not just fulfilling an assignment. I had a strong feeling of you wanting to be useful in the world."

In making sense of our interactions, it seems to me that my work as an academic and Katie's opinion of it was tied to what I did while I was in the field, my actions and behaviors. She accepted me as not "so academic" because of her experience with me. Although I was required to participate in order to "get inside," it constituted me in her eyes as a person—a person who wanted to be "useful" in the world. The importance of my help was also shaped by Katie's material situation. She really could use the help getting the mailing out since Kristy was gone that day. My "usefulness" had different meanings for each of us as we both experienced it from our own realities.

***Blurring the Boundaries of Research.*** The third participant in my study was Susie, a friend of mine whom I had met at a local women business owner's conference four years previously. She had participated in another project of mine the previous semester, which explored women's identities as women business owners. When I asked Susie, a self-identified feminist, if she identifies as a woman business owner, she focused on the word "business" when she responded,

> I still think that business is dirty. And I can't get past that, so I don't embrace it. I'm actually embarrassed to say that I am a woman business owner because to be in business feels synonymous with being dirty…I think the whole business model as it has existed in a white male construct is not particularly fitting for women.

This conversation was the catalyst for my interest in the conflict and tension between owning a business while at the same time having values of noncapitalism. She, therefore, immediately came to mind for this semester's project. We hadn't seen each other in a couple of months, so we were both looking forward to my attending her next wellness "gig" at the local veteran's hospital. I walked up to the building at 2:45 p.m., our arranged meeting time, and Susie wasn't there. I sat down in a slightly rusty wire patio chair to wait. A man came out of the building, saw me, and walked near, but not directly toward, me and commented on the nice day without looking at me. I agreed and we talked a bit more about the weather. It was exactly 3:00 p.m. and I was getting nervous that I had misunderstood Susie's directions. When I told the man that I was to meet her, he said with a laugh, "Oh, if she said 3:00, then you can set your clock to 3:05. Her red truck will came flying around the corner and she will run by saying, "I'm running late." He was right.

When she arrived, she came rushing up the sidewalk with a big black duffel bag filled with her props and was just about to say something to the man when she saw me sitting in the chair. She seemed pleasantly surprised to see me, indicating that she forgot we were to meet at 2:45 p.m. Just as she was introducing me to the man, two other men and a woman came out of the brick building to tell her that the group was only two today. Her face went limp. Two wasn't enough

to run a session. As we walked to the parking lot together, Susie apologized repeatedly for it being cancelled. I responded with "It's okay, that is what research is all about."

While I was writing up my field notes later, I realized that she might have been apologizing because she genuinely wanted me to see what she does with the vets. My response indicated that I saw the experience as "just" research. It dismissed her work, treating it as only an object of my research. I began to wonder if I was abusing our friendship. I asked her a few weeks later in a telephone conversation if she ever felt like I was using her for my work since I called her every time I had a feminist project. "Never, ever, ever do I feel used," she said adamantly. "I'm so supportive of you as a human. We excite each other in our professions because we spark each other's thoughts. We energize each other," she continued. She summarized our interactions, "We are two humans coming together with high, palpable, insane energy."

Her prior knowledge of me allowed her to see me as her friend and a researcher, both at the same time. The boundaries around what research is, what friendship is, what work is and how our roles interact in the field become blurred in this situation. I should note that the process of constructing each other goes both ways. I see her as a friend, not just as a business owner. Our friendship weaves in and out of our professional lives, impossible to separate.

## Co-constructing Identity

***Who Defines Whom?*** In the previous examples, I focused on how the participants were involved in constituting the research process and the researcher. In this section, I would like to address how one participant actively constituted her own identity in relationship to me, the researcher.

A friend of mine at the university had given me the phone number of her neighbor, Emma, believing she might be a good candidate for my study. I left a message on her machine explaining my project. When I finally reached her by phone, I reiterated my need for women who own businesses, identify as feminists, and struggle with the tenets of capitalism. She said she was not sure whether she wanted to participate and wanted to think about it. A few days later, Emma left a message on my machine stating that I was welcome to observe her and her business. She said she wanted to explain, however, how she came about being a business owner because she thought she might not be the "right" person for the project. Her neighbor, who gave me her name, had already told me that she inherited it when her husband passed away.

Later in a conversation, I asked her what she thought about over the weekend before agreeing to have me come observer her. "I said no at first," she announced. She indicated that she reacted to the word "feminist" in my message. Although she said she identifies as a feminist, at this point in her life, trying to raise a teenage son, she does not feel like a "strong" woman, which is the image the word brings to her mind. She also had an immediate reaction to the words "woman business owner." She explained that she did not feel that these words truly described her situation. "It's by chance. I don't know the ins and outs of the business. Other people have been here much longer and it is not my place to take away their power," she said. "I didn't fit the bill," she continued, "I thought about other women in town who are *really* women business owners." She agreed to participate she said when she listened to my message that said how she came about owning the business was not an issue. Her curiosity about who I was, what I was

doing, and my “take” in light of being a feminist, motivated her to say yes, but only after much thought, she recalled.

Emma and I both brought different histories and different understandings of the word “feminist” and “woman business owner” to our interactions. Although I was interested in how these words get enacted in the women’s lives, I was treating them as straightforward categories one either fits into or not. Because Emma lives these categories every day, she saw them as more complex. They were emotionally loaded for her. She made meaning for herself in relation to me by resisting being predefined by the researcher. Thus, she constructed her own identity, but did so in relationship to the research process.

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Marshall (1992) suggests, "people study topics that are relevant to them and do so through inquiry methods which are significant in some way" (p. 281). Indeed, as a graduate student trying to weave feminist principles into my scholarly endeavors, I chose to study, using a feminist fieldwork methodology, women business owners who are trying to incorporate their feminist beliefs into their capitalist activities. Marshall (1992) also puts forth that "self-reflection" is "essential to fully engaging with the research and the learning it offers" (p. 282).

I chose to position myself as a feminist researcher, so I had to inscribe meaning onto this position. Epistemologically, I framed the project in the notion that knowledge cannot be obtained from an objective observer, but rather must be understood from those who experience it. As mentioned earlier, feminists have used participant observation to open a space for researchers to speak from a position "inside," rather than from "outside." From other graduate seminars, I was aware of the many dilemmas of engaging in feminist qualitative research. Indeed, after I entered the field, my mind was flooded with questions. Am I using women for my own academic purposes? Am I really open to understanding women from their own perspective? Am I disrupting women's everyday lives? In essence, what does it really mean to be a feminist researcher?

When I confessed my struggles of being a "good" feminist researcher to my professor, she noted, "It's not just about you." Thus, I began to move beyond examining only the researcher, or only the participants, to the personal relationships forged in the fieldwork process. In order to make sense of my experience in the field, I returned to the feminist research literature, this time soaking in the words of feminists who have come before me through the window of my own experiences, pushing my understanding much deeper.

### On Encountering One Another

Limerick and O'Leary (2006, p. 100) suggest that feminist researchers question the "artificial separation" of the researcher and the researched by making transparent both of their subjectivities. Reflecting on my project, I realized that identity, both of the researcher and the participants, in the research encounter is not fixed—it moves in relation to the research interactions. Participant observation assumes you become "one" with your participants, an "insider." By spending time at the businesses, I was supposedly in a better position to understand and interpret the lives of the women business owners. However, I realized that as the researcher I do not only enter the participant's world. Rather, we participate in one another's lives, trying to make sense of each other. We each hold culturally meaningful positions. I move in and out of the roles of researcher, feminist, student, friend, and woman, among others. They move between the roles of business owner, businesswoman, boss, mother, feminist, and research participant, among others. It is the *interaction* of these subject positions that creates the research encounter.

As Wolf (1996) points out, however, the fieldwork process produces power differences in terms of who defines the research project. The researcher usually chooses the topic and creates the questions. Lal (1999) contends, however, "…that our research subjects are often not just

'responding' to our agendas and to our questions, but they are also engaged in actively shaping their presentations to suit their own agendas of how they wish to be represented" (p. 122).

In reflecting on my experience, obviously, the women business owners and I are different. We both have different agendas and different stakes when we encounter each other. Through the stories of our encounter, I am acknowledging that the women are actively engaged in the research process. The women resist the research by limiting my involvement, by not answering certain questions. The women respond to the research by answering questions I have not asked, by presenting themselves as they wish to be represented. They act in relation to me and I act in relation to them. Together we define what constitutes "research" through our mutual, and often unequal, interactions and conversations as we encounter one another.

While I had been taught theoretically to be mindful of the power dynamics underlying fieldwork, it was not until I experienced them in the field that I began to understand the dilemmas of negotiating feminist fieldwork. It was in those moments where I questioned myself as a "feminist" researcher that I learned the most about how the co-construction of research occurs and the power processes underlying it. Of course, research does not end with the encounter in the field, my focus above. I could have also examined the problems and contradictions of analysis and writing the text. For example, I chose to focus on the moments in the research encounter that I felt were meaningful. Perhaps the women found other aspects of our interactions to be worthy of further reflection. I also could have focused on the challenges of (re)presenting the experience of our encounter as a text. Have I, as the researcher, really gone beyond merely "giving voice" to the women so their agency is present in the written account? In short, my work as a feminist researcher has only just begun.

## CONCLUSION

Qualitative research is inherently intersubjective, but the space in which intersubjectivity is created is often absent in the text (Harding, 1987). My experiences highlight the fluid and ambiguous nature of research. I moved from trying to understand women business owners' experiences from their perspectives to trying to understand the space in which we encounter each other in the research field. The stories of our encounter unsettle the notion that the "researched" are passive objects. In fact, the stories show how the researcher is not always more powerful than the participant. The women very much decided how and when to let me into their lives and how they wanted to be represented. The stories of our encounter also unsettle the notion of an academic. I was not just a researcher, but also a whole person entering into the research situation. I brought in multiple roles and multiple identities—researcher, student, friend, feminist—that shift and change, as do the roles and identities of the participants, in response to the intersubjective research relationship.

In reflecting on the research encounter, I have learned how important it is that organization scholars make transparent the values that they bring to their research projects and then to recognize the complexity inherent in trying to live those values. As Bloom (1997) aptly admits, "During the 18 months of fieldwork, I found that the feminist praxis I envisioned was easier to write about than to live" (p. 112).

I believe that by acknowledging the co-creation of research through feminist epistemology and methodology, organization studies scholars will be able to rethink the relationship between researcher and participant, challenge the power issues inherent in the research process, and learn about themselves and the knowledge they create. What kind of knowledge defines our field? Who defines it? What responsibility do researchers have to participants? These are not easy questions to answer. Nor should they be. However, feminist methodology "does support the possibility of a radically different and transformational research methodology if we do not idealize or unproblematically accept it or our practices of it" (Bloom, 1997, p. 116).

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