

Carol A. B. Warren & Jennifer Kay Hackney: **Gender Issues in Ethnography**, 2. Ed. Sage University Papers Series on Qualitative Research Methods, volume 9. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Why is gender in ethnography an important subject? This book provides clues, if not direct answers to this question. Obviously, researchers cannot escape the fact that they are men or women. As far as that has consequences in life in general, it also has consequences for specific life activities, including research. One theme in this book is that men and women tend to get different kinds of information when doing research. The authors make a strong case for this, and it also appeals to common sense that the sexes may have different angles on things.

This book opened my eyes to the importance of gender in fieldwork. This was achieved without stating inflexible rules or general principles. It was done simply by discussing problems and conditions easily recognizable by fieldworkers. As a result, I started reflecting on how gender might possibly have affected the results of my own fieldwork. The basic quality of this book is that it is an eye-opener, it has important messages to men and women fieldworkers to be aware of how their gender might play an important role in their research. This message should be taken seriously, and the authors present several valid arguments to support their case. For example, the Mead-Freeman debate about sexuality and child-rearing practices in Samoa. Reading their comments about this debate is highly instructive.

I found it especially useful to read the chapter about the different kinds of information “found” by male and female researchers. As the Sage series editors point out in their introduction: “Gender matters in virtually all aspects of social research” but “how it matters is of course the critical question facing fieldworkers” (p. viii). I would state the question a bit differently: *Why* (and not *how*) *does gender matter in fieldwork?* Gender will in some way or another put its mark on the whole research project and its final outcome. This is of course a fundamental issue that has often been neglected. The classic positivist position is that “objective” science cannot or should not be affected by things like the gender of a researcher. This is of course a myth. Gender may to the contrary have a quite pervasive effect – almost be like an independent variable – a causal factor that cannot be escaped. For example, if we agree that men and women may often have different research interests, and that they are unequally suited to obtain certain kinds of social information, then it would not be a surprise that the final results of research may also be contingent on a researcher’s gender, and reflect that gender to a degree.

The book begins by a discussion about gender in social life in general and in social science in particular. The discussion then narrows down to gender and fieldwork relationships. There are sections about how gender may affect or be relevant to entrance into the field, finding and keeping a place, research relationships, dress and appearance, to name but a few important

topics. The chapter about sexual activities, i.e. possible sexual attraction and relationships between fieldworkers and informants or other persons in the field, provides a revealing discussion of a topic that has been taboo in the literature until quite recently. To the praise of the authors I want to say that they discuss this topic from a down-to-earth angle, without passing moral judgements. The issue of sexuality in fieldwork is far from being a simple one, as this chapter shows.

It is not a surprise that a book about gender and fieldwork is written by women. One main message of the authors is that gender matters in research as well as in writing about research. How would a book about this same topic have been written by male authors? Perhaps differently. Warren and Hackney write with much sincerity and their work appears honest and free of moral judgement. The authors approach the topic from a human angle and as a result the book will have great appeal to many readers. Many things presented here were a revelation to me, and without doubt it will be so to others too. It is also clear that many topics presented here need to be explored more fully, as little is known about them at the present.

One basic problem discussed here is how gender may enter into a research project as a causal factor. One must start from the premise that males and females may think, work and affect others differently in some more or less systematic way. Acknowledging this, one must also realize that a person is in some way trapped by his or her gender. But simply by being aware of this may help researchers to avoid the common pitfalls associated with gender. The series editors state the problem bluntly in the introduction: "This is not a book about how to minimize the role gender plays in social research or how to use gender to further certain research agendas. It is first and foremost a book about how gender operates everywhere and always, but in particular and peculiar ways" (p. viii).

It is problematic to estimate precisely how gender, sex and culture interact to affect research results, and in some instances Warren and Hackney propose cultural analysis that may be questioned. For example, on page 62 they write about the offensiveness of informants in some cultures that expect women to be subservient and inferior to men. But is this really so, and should we appear as moral judges of behavior in foreign cultures? Clearly, we must adapt to the cultures where we conduct our research if we are to obtain useful information. In my opinion, it would be fundamentally wrong to attempt to change the culture where one is working, or try to affect their beliefs and attitudes, even if they may be labeled as sexist or oppressive to women by our Western standards. If a fieldworker feels such an urge, then he or she must realize that the researcher is a product of his or her own culture, and one culture cannot be judged as superior or inferior to others. The relativity of cultures, clearly described by well known writers such as Hofstede (1980: *Culture's Consequences*) must be taken into account. We must realize that cultural value-judgements about sexism and the oppression of females (or males) should be avoided. This is a well-known problem in cross-cultural psychology.

One basic problem with sex and gender is that males and females have a biological need to appear attractive to each other during much of life. It is clearly in the interest of survival value, in more than one sense, that this is so. At the same time, culture puts limits on many drives and

their satisfaction, especially on sexuality, as readers of Freud will know. It may be argued that women, more so than men, put a great weight on appearing physically attractive. At the same time, they expect males to respect their personal limits and freedom. In other words, women want to appear attractive, but at the same time they want to control how others react to this attractiveness. This may, of course, often be impossible. The conflict that this brings about in the case of female – and in some cases male - researchers is discussed to some extent in this book.

The limits of sexual control and prohibited sexual behavior is very different across cultures. Western researchers must realize this, and adapt to these conditions without passing value judgements. For example, in Thailand, I was surprised to find that mothers kept a strict control on the social behavior of their daughters, who were expected to remain indoors after eight o'clock in the evening. In the agricultural villages, it is not considered proper for an unmarried girl under eighteen or even twenty to go to a dance or to a cinema in the evening. In the case of teenage boys, things were totally different. Mothers did not say a single word, even if their fourteen-year-old son came home at three or four in the morning. The boys had almost unlimited freedom while the girls were expected to behave almost as if in a convent. When I pointed this contrast out to the local people they said that according to tradition the fathers monitored their sons, while the mothers took care of their daughters. And most of the fathers (except in case of Chinese families) felt that it was normal for boys to stay out during most of the night at weekends. On the other hand, if a girl broke the moral code, she would risk being stamped as “no good”. This was not felt to be oppression by the young females, it was just the normal state of things. Passing cultural value judgements on this practice by Western researchers would be both improper and useless.

In conclusion: this book is written in an open and appealing style. The main topic is well covered, and much practical advice is offered. As a guide for fieldworkers, the book is a “must” because it is insightful, useful and significant.

(Ban Nongpai, N.E. Thailand, February 2002).