

Review:

*Nicole Westmarland*

**Carol A. B. Warren & Jennifer Kay Hackney (2000). Gender Issues in Ethnography** (Sage University Papers Series on Qualitative Research Methods – Vol. 9, 2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 76 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0 7619 1716 0) £18.99, Paper (ISBN 0 7619 1717 9) £9.99

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### **1. Content Overview**

This second edition of *Gender Issues in Ethnography* follows the earlier edition (titled "Gender Issues in Field Research", published in 1988) and provides a useful, well written introduction to the topic. This edition contains updated information published since the first edition, most notably postmodernism, the body, and interviewing. Both authors are based in the Department of Sociology at the University of Kansas, where Carol WARREN is Professor of Sociology and Jennifer HACKNEY is a PhD candidate. In this book they aim to provide an empirical, rather than theoretical, summary of the issues surrounding gender and fieldwork, and expand by drawing on their own experiences as female ethnographers. The book investigates issues such as the politics of research, research relationships and roles, and the effects of gender on gaining and maintaining access in fieldwork. A commitment to challenging the androcentricity of past ethnographers is visible throughout the book and it is clear that the authors challenge these norms within their own research. [1]

As a female researcher I felt a connection with the empirical examples WARREN and HACKNEY used and they helped me realise that others have had similar gendered experiences while carrying out fieldwork. They discuss issues facing female ethnographers that are seldom acknowledged in traditional "malestream" textbooks. Importantly, they highlight the threat of sexual assault and/or harassment while carrying out research and draw on examples from female researchers who have described their experiences. It is disappointing, however, that simple safety measures are not mentioned such as making sure someone always knows where you are and when you will next call. These seemingly simple measures are not always known by inexperienced researchers entering the field and often find out about this side of research through their own experiences. [2]

One of the most interesting parts of the book and an issue that is rarely approached is when they question what do we, as women, accept as part of fieldwork? How much of our personality and beliefs are silenced under the name of "good" research? These issues are discussed under the subheadings of "sex" and also "the politics of research" where they use examples to demonstrate that female researchers faced with abusive informants rarely challenge their behaviour preferring to use evasive rather than confrontational responses. They write that there is a widespread reluctance to write or talk publicly about such experiences, with stories communicated through oral folklore or "corridor talk". Several possible explanations are discussed for why this may be the case, such as a researchers fear about her career, a tendency for her to blame herself for her informants behaviour and a feelings of gratitude towards the respondent and a reluctance to discredit them. Another possible explanation for evasive responses not mentioned by WARREN and HACKNEY but certainly felt within my own research is a fear that a confrontational response may lead to an escalation of abuse. [3]

A further discussion under the subtitle "sex", and again rarely mentioned elsewhere, concerns sexual relationships that can, and indeed have, developed between researchers and informants. They highlight that it is more often male than female researchers who talk and write publicly about such relationships, and conclude that "when the discussion of sexuality illuminates little more than the researcher's personal odysseys, then we think it may become gratuitous" (p.61). They advise that "listening to decades of gossip among colleagues has convinced us that whatever it may do for an individuals sense of self, public confession rarely does much for careers" (p.61). [4]

## 2. Critical Review

At times the book feels unbalanced, for example an optimistic stance is taken when they write "... since those early days, women sociologists have appeared from coast to coast and in between as tenured professors and even department chairs" (p.3). Here they neglect to highlight the wide variance between male and female professors' salaries. Although women in sociology have undoubtedly made significant gains since the "early days" there are still major issues, such as childcare, working hours, and salary which remain problematic and which are important gender issues. In other parts, the book seems to err on the pessimistic side, for example being female is quite rightly highlighted as a barrier to some kinds of fieldwork, however in some cases being female can be advantageous, however this side of the equation is not mentioned. [5]

Personally, I would have liked a consideration of how feminist research perspectives have influenced ethnography. I felt that this was especially relevant when they discuss sexual relations within the field as a way to become "accepted" within a society. They describe the fieldwork of Colin TURNBULL (1986) and explain "... the temporary sexual and emotional arrangements he made during this stage with a woman", however they do not question the effect this may have had on the woman involved. Feminists are passionate that no women should be

oppressed any further than they already are in the name of "research", and as a feminist reading this unquestioned extract made me feel uncomfortable. [6]

### 3. Evaluation

Overall, this book is easy to read and is suitable for undergraduates or graduates interested in reading about issues rarely mentioned in traditional textbooks. The contents page sub-divides the chapters into headings which enables the reader to turn to a specific section of interest, hence the book can be read either as a whole or in individual sections. I would recommend this book for students wishing to learn more about gender issues in ethnography, and also to experienced researchers in order to reflect on their own gendered experiences of fieldwork. [7]

### Reference

Turnbull, Colin (1986). Sex and gender: The role of subjectivity in field research. In Tony Larry Whitehead & Mary Ellen Conaway (Eds.), *Self, sex and gender in cross-cultural fieldwork* (pp.17-27). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

### Author

*Nicole WESTMARLAND* is a feminist researcher at the Centre for Women's Studies, York. Her publications to date have investigated violence against female taxi drivers, different models of supervision for female offenders and the quantitative/qualitative debate in feminist research. Future research interests include the effect of Human Rights legislation on women who have been raped.

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