Not One of the Guys: The Female Researcher in a Male-Dominated Setting

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ABSTRACT: An important, but frequently overlooked, issue in qualitative research is how the status characteristics of the researcher affect the process of gaining access to, establishing, and maintaining rapport with respondents or informants in a setting. Some researchers may never succeed in achieving more than superficial acceptance from their respondents because of the status each researcher occupies. Female researchers studying male-dominated groups frequently find themselves in just such a position or do not attempt to gain entry in certain male-dominated settings. Sex-role expectations may hamper women's work in the field. Until recently, little attention was given to these issues.

This paper discusses the dilemmas faced by female researchers in male-dominated settings. It begins by examining how the instructional fieldwork literature addresses this issue and finds that it generally does not. In addition, the literature's advice to novice fieldworkers, while perhaps appropriate for males, may be inappropriate for females, given stereotypical sex-role expectations. Novice female researchers must turn to accounts of experienced female researchers for discussions of problems they may encounter in field settings. The paper then turns to my study of a prosecutor's office. Similarities between my experiences and those of other female researchers are noted, and suggestions are made about how women in the field can manage and even overcome these problems.

Fieldwork Instruction for "Anyman"

Despite increasing evidence that fieldwork is not the same for women as it is for men, the instructional literature on qualitative research continues to overlook gender differences in fieldwork. The literature assumes that the fieldworker is "Anyman" and that his [sic] personal characteristics, such as gender, have no bearing upon the development of trust in the setting (Johnson, 1975: 91).

The instructional literature I reviewed contains little or no discussion of how the researcher's status characteristics affect the development and maintenance of rapport (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Douglas, 1976; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Patton, 1980; Georges and Jones, 1980; Feldman, 1981; Lofland

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and Lofland, 1984). Some sources give advice which might be helpful if the researcher is Anyman but not Anywoman. For example, a frequent suggestion is that the beginning fieldworker adopt a passive, submissive, nonexpert, incompetent, nonthreatening, or nonassertive role vis-à-vis setting members (Scott, 1963; Lofland, 1971; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Douglas, 1976; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). However, this advice is accompanied by the admonition not to cultivate an image as incompetent or nonthreatening to the point of being seen as a bumbling idiot who is not to be taken seriously.

Once accepted and trusted by setting members, the researcher is advised to discard the naive incompetent role in favor of the competent, somewhat knowledgeable, professional role (Olesen and Whittaker, 1970). Failure to accomplish this transition can preclude observation of anything setting members consider too complex for the naive observer to understand, even with their expert assistance. While stereotypical attitudes toward females generally assure their acceptance in the naive incompetent role in a male-dominated setting (Lofland, 1971), those same attitudes hamper females’ efforts to make the transition to the professional role. Female researchers must work especially hard to achieve an impression combining the attribute of being nonthreatening with that of being a credible, competent professional. By failing to acknowledge this problem, the fieldwork instructional literature does not offer realistic guidance to novice female researchers.

A similar set of issues arises in connection with the role of reciprocity in field relations. A number of experienced researchers of both genders suggest that rapport with respondents is maintained through exchange relationships (Wax, 1952; Golde, 1970; Lofland, 1971; Johnson, 1975; Danziger, 1979; Gray, 1980; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). Novice researchers are advised not to expect something for nothing. They may be asked to perform tasks or do favors for setting members in exchange for being allowed to conduct research. Many favors are small, such as running errands, babysitting, or providing rides, and pose no significant problems. However, the novice fieldworker is warned that some setting members may ask favors which involve illegal or immoral acts. For female fieldworkers reciprocity also may be problematic if powerful males in the setting expect sexual favors in return for research access. The fieldwork instructional literature does not provide any guidance about how one negotiates access and maintains rapport when reciprocity involves sex.

In addition, female researchers may be forced to tolerate, or at least