Ethical Dimensions in Trauma Research

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This article examines the methodological and ethical challenges in studying trauma caused by sexual abuse, poverty, homophobia, and racism. I propose that the challenges of studying trauma add nuance to perennial methodological questions about insider-outsider relations, research techniques, and the possible impact of research on social change. By drawing on a multiracial study I conducted that examined African American, Latina, and white women's methods of coping with trauma, I trace how issues of identification and overidentification, boundary maintenance, narrative structures, and transference raise new ethical and methodological issues for researchers. I suggest that the longstanding sociological concern with oppression and injustice, and the trauma they often cause, requires continued exploration about why and how questions of ethics and methods are intertwined in trauma research.

The last twenty-five years have witnessed a dramatic widening of debate about ethics in research.1 While attention to well-known ethical issues such as privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent remains, the emergence of Ethnic, Women's, and African American Studies has ushered in a range of new ethical concerns across the social sciences. For example, in anthropology there has been growing attention to ethical questions about the role of anthropologists in liberation struggles and the differences between colonialist anthropology and activist anthropology (Cole, 1988; Huizer and Mannheim, 1979; Mbilinyi, 1989). Methodologies developed by black social scientists have also contributed many new ethical questions, foremost of which have challenged and sought to undermine the false constructions of deviance and inferiority embedded in much research about black people and their communities (Thompson, 1993). Black scholars

(Ladner, 1973) have also asked whether objectivity is possible, or even ethical, when researchers study oppression. There has also been important discussion about the efficacy of remaining beholden to a professional code of ethics that makes little mention of social stratification, particularly since those groups of people with the least power are also often those whose rights are the least protected by these professional ethical standards (Galliher, 1983; Nader, 1969; Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Sieber, 1992).

The emergence of feminist methodologies have likewise continued to expand the parameters of what constitutes ethics in research, while they have questioned ethical equations that do not account for power (Bowles and Klein, 1983; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Nielsen, 1990; Roberts, 1981). Feminists, in concert with sociologists working within interpretive traditions, have criticized the positivist assumption that quality research rests upon implementing objective standards and maintaining distance between researchers and participants. These theorists have posited that researchers’ social and personal biographies influence their research designs, processes, and content. Given the futility of “objectivity,” the essential task is to carefully and self-consciously identify the influence of one’s subjectivity on the research process (Harding, 1987). Also, by exploring topics previously considered taboo, feminists have begun grappling with ethics related to privatized issues by asking, for example, what the ethical and methodological challenges are when studying sexual abuse and battery, and what ensures confidentiality and anonymity when research data also turns out to be legal evidence.

While this research has opened up the field of sociology in remarkable ways, these advances also raise a number of unprecedented ethical challenges. Since the methodology selected for conducting research is shaped by the topic in question, addressing new questions means that additional dilemmas about ethics inevitably emerge. However, theory about ethics frequently lags behind the use of the methods themselves. In this article I hope to partially bridge this gap by examining some of the ethical challenges involved in studying the effects of traumas—including poverty, sexual abuse, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism—on women’s psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being. The data I incorporate in this discussion come from an interview-based multiracial study I conducted that explored the traumatic origins of eating problems among African American, white, and Latina women (Thompson, 1994).

I propose that there are particular methodological challenges related to studying trauma that add nuance to perennial questions taken up by symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists, cross-cultural psychiatrists, and feminists—about insider-outsider relations, research designs and techniques, and the possible impact of research on social change. In particular, I discuss the challenges of identification or overidentification, boundary maintenance, narrative processes, and transference that emerge when studying trauma and how these issues affect research techniques. I also suggest that while questions of methods and ethics are not the same, they are necessarily related when studying trauma.