



Toward a More Fully Reciprocal Feminist Inquiry¹

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Abstract I argue in this paper for a more reciprocal research process that interrogates the discursive production of experience and identity. I suggest that it is necessary to problematize the role of “interviewees” in the research process by recognizing that their experiences and their narrations of those experiences are discursive formations, created out of contested and contingent circumstances. In this way, we gain a more critical and less essentializing understanding of “others.”

Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.

Joan Scott, “Experience” (1992)

As all of the essays in this issue point out, the position of the researcher is a complicated and problematic one. Not only must researchers be aware of the contextual nature of the knowledge they produce, based on their own experiences and situations (Nightingale, this issue) and of the particular forms of intimacy that connect their emotions and feelings with those of the people they research (Bondi, this issue), but they also need to be alert to the ethical implications of their knowledge-making in terms of personal and professional obligations to the people under scrutiny. In sum, we (the community of feminist geographers) have learned that the research process is filled with,

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in Gillian Rose's words, "uncertainties," "absences" and "fallibilities"(1997, 318-319), and that the "field" is not an objective place out there, but a site of reciprocal and contested relationships. What I want to suggest here, however, is that we have tended to emphasize only one side of that relationship – that of the researcher – and have left relatively unremarked the other side of that relationship – that of the researched.²

As a result, I think we are left vulnerable to Joan Scott's critique originally leveled at historians of difference: that is, in our search to understand others, we have essentialized their "otherness" by not questioning and thereby accepting as foundational, the experiences they relay to us in interviews. We have tended to base our explanations on these experiences, instead of seeing those experiences as discourses that need to be explained. By so doing, we deny our interviewees the subjectivity we have accorded ourselves (since, as I've suggested in the first sentence above, we realize and have acted upon the various ways that the subjectivity of the researcher is inevitably involved in the research process), and we deny ourselves a potentially more critical understanding of others. In this essay, I raise a general issue about feminist methodology that I hope will lead to ongoing discussion in the wider community of feminist geographers.

Let me just briefly summarize Scott's discussion, before turning to some suggestions for providing a more contextual understanding of experience. In effect what Joan Scott argues against is a form of human inquiry that accepts as foundational truths the experiences of its subjects, whether those experiences are relayed in diaries and letters (as is the case with historical subjects) or in personal interviews (as is the case with contemporary subjects). She contends that when we record and read those interviews and/or diaries, what we are "uncovering" are discursive formations, created out of contested and contingent circumstances. As post-structuralism has taught us, it is unrealistic to think we can locate and understand a unitary "self" that is revealed transparently through the words we read and hear; instead what we need to understand are, in Scott's words, the contingent "processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences" (Scott, 1992, 25).

In other words, Scott is arguing that what we commonly understand to be individual experiences – the things that happen to people – are always socially constructed out of particular ideological configurations. In this sense, experiences don't happen *to* individual selves, but are constructed *through* political/social systems that then become subjective as individuals narrate these events into stories of identity formation. To be a coal miner in late 20th century England, for example, is to participate in a series of encounters that are always social, always discursive and therefore always variable. For us to interpret or understand the experiences of coal miners, therefore, engages us in an interrogation of the social categories themselves, an interrogation of the contested economic, social and political systems in which coal miners now live -- categories that might include, for example, notions of masculinity, constructions of "Englishness," and ideals of the middle-class life. To interpret the words of coal miners is at the same time to interpret the social categories through which those miners have created their identities.

² I don't mean to suggest here that the role of the "interviewee" has been ignored in the feminist geographical literature concerning methodology, only that it has not been as fully problematized as that of the "interviewer." See, for example, Rose 1997; Nast 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Katz 1994; England 1994; Gilbert 1994.

Following Scott's argument, then, it is not possible to separate the two: "the social and the personal are imbricated in one another," and "both are historically variable" (1992, 35). If we choose to accept uncritically the narration of experience as a foundation for knowledge-making, we are separating the social from the personal. This serves to fix identity, thereby denying any politics.

Yet many feminist scholars feel strongly about, and have as their goal, making visible the experiences of their "subjects," particularly when those subjects are people generally not heard or seen in the academy. Scott is arguing, however, that attempts by feminists and other scholars of "difference" to make visible these marginalized experiences and world views have assumed a transparency of meaning. In other words, we have accepted the words of experience as transparent vehicles for relating truths about other peoples' lives, even though as researchers we subject our own knowledge claims (that is, as interviewers) to rigorous deconstruction. We have, using Scott's word, historicized ourselves by exploring how our own personal, emotional, political and cultural agendas and world views shape our methods, analysis and conclusions, but, as of yet, we have done very little to historicize our subjects. As a result, the differences that set our "subjects" apart are essentialized. Instead of examining the relational processes that create those differences, we have set up a situation that attributes those differences to individual experiences. In such a way, we tend to "lock" our subjects into a time and place and meaning. Not only is this unfair to our subjects in the sense of denying them the mutability of identity that we give to ourselves, but it also prevents us from understanding the discursive and contested nature of social reality – of the historical, economic and cultural conditions that create social differences and hierarchies. It's not that we shouldn't listen and look at "others," but that we need to do so more carefully and critically.

This certainly is neither an easy nor uncontested process. But let me explain briefly what I am not suggesting. My proposal here is not that we deny or question the truth claims of our interviewees – the people we interview are certainly expressing the truth about their feelings and thoughts at the moment. The villagers that talked with Andrea Nightingale, for example, are relaying their experiences presumably without deceit. If we accept Scott's argument, our intent is not to deny the validity of these experiences. What I am proposing is that our analysis begins with these truth statements, and then asks why. In what ways, for example, have societal power relationships come to be experienced as subjective truths? Staeheli and Lawson (1994, 100) propose a similar tactic in their discussion of feminist praxis, when they suggest that one strategy for dealing with the problems of speaking "for" others is "cooperative work between those experiencing place-based gender relations and those theorizing the connections to broader processes that combine to give rise to experience." But I would like to stress the ontological argument here instead of the methodological one – that is, experiences and the "broader processes" need to be understood as mutually constitutive. To think of experience otherwise is, in Scott's words, to "take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced"(27). When we work to connect people's experiences of oppression with the broader processes that gave rise to that oppression, we need to understand that the experiences themselves have no separate ontological status – no "authentic" claims to truth. Our role as the researcher, then, becomes one of understanding how and in what ways those experiences as expressed to us through interviews, diaries, etc. have been socially constructed. The act of "uncovering" or

making visible others' experiences, of locating fixed and autonomous selves, is in this view not possible. What we can learn from, for example, interviews with Yorkshire miners, is how the social and economic conditions of exploitative mining practices have shaped personal identities and have come to be experienced as subjective, and conversely, how those individual experiences have been constructed out of social and material practices.

Yet I don't want to suggest that we can ever fully understand these connections, nor ever be certain about our conclusions. If, as Gillian Rose (1997) argues, it is foolish of us to assume that "self and context are . . . transparently understandable" (318) then certainly it would be foolish of us to assume that the self and context of others is ever open to a "universalizing certainty" (318). But this is not to suggest that the process is futile. To the contrary, it leads to a better understanding of the ideological system in which experiences are produced. It also leads to a more reciprocal research relationship. Interrogating the foundational status of experience involves us in a connection to our interviewees that is more complex and ethically fraught, but ultimately I believe more responsible. We need to scrutinize the personal knowledges of our subjects just as we do our own: Under what conditions are these truths constructed? For what reasons? Who benefits? How can these inquiries lead to a more socially-just world? By affording to our interviewees the same subjectivity that we allow ourselves, we create a more fully reciprocal research relationship.

Exactly how we go about doing this – how we speak about and for others without valorizing their experiences -- is a question I can't answer. It would depend on the context, the researcher, and the "subject" under investigation; on whether and in what ways the "subject" can speak back; on the relationships between the "subject" and the researcher. It would also depend on the strategies that might be deployed by those we are interviewing.³ As a historian, Joan Scott was critiquing interpretations of words spoken by people unaware of those interpretations, and of the interpreters. However, the processes and politics of interviews suggest that people can speak back, and/or "use" the interview and the interviewer to express their own politics. Because the research process itself is part of the ideological configuration in which and through which people form their identities, as interviewers and/or researchers we must be aware that the processes and politics that are imbricated in identity formation are also at work in the interview. To not deny the agency of our subjects, therefore, means that we must be open to considering the interview a performance with scripted agendas by both sides, scripts that have been formulated out of and in turn can reshape particular historical/social conditions.

A particularly interesting example of a reciprocal research relationship is provided in the work conducted by Gibson-Graham (1994) on women in mining communities in Australia. Committed to social change, yet recognizing that change based on the "uncovering" of a unitary identity is impossible (as she states, "There is no prior reality or unified identity to gain access to or to be created by research from which we can launch a programme of change" (214)), she was able to involve her "subjects" in the research process itself: "As women engaged in the myriad conversations that formed part of the research, they actively displaced the existing discourses of 'mining town women' and 'miner's wife' that confined their subjectivity" (219). In other words, through the research

³ I want to thank Caroline Desbiens for raising this important issue.

process and the narration of their experiences, these women became active “deconstructors” of their essentialized identities, active that is in understanding the conditions of its production, and therefore active in creating “new discursive spaces in which new subjectivities can emerge” (220). While the circumstances that allowed such a relational research process without accepting “experiences” as foundational truths might be unusual, the results suggest the methodological possibilities. I look forward to hearing and seeing more possibilities and discussions.

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