Gender and the Ethnographer: A Multanan in the Field

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Abstract

This paper is based on my experiences of the field work that I carried out during my doctoral studies. I conducted my research on Siraiki language practices in rural and urban Multan. In this paper I will reflect on my field experiences and discuss if the influence of gender, especially the female gender, on research is a 'regrettable disturbance'. I will relate this issue with what I experienced and how I negotiated my identity in the field.

Introduction

'The myth of the ethnographer as any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who would objectively produce the same findings as any other person has been dispelled…In both Western and non Western culture, being a woman or man is at the core of our social lives and our inner selves' (Warren & Hackney, 2000: ix-1).

In all the cultures there is no escape from the influence of gender which is a key organizing device. Warren & Hackney (2000: vii) treat this device as both 'essential' and 'negotiated'. They believe that the researchers in the field must be continually aware of the gender impressions they are more or less giving off and taking in as the gender of the researcher shapes entry, trust, research roles, interactions and relationships in the field. Gender, in fact is built into the structure of western and non-western social orders, across time and space and permeates other hierarchies like those of status, race and religion.

Gender can provide and limit access to various topics and settings. In addition, gender serves to define appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. It is within this web of accessible and inaccessible, appropriate and inappropriate we have to set our behaviour and negotiate our identities.

My General Position in the Field

Before I discuss how my gender and, to some extent, social class affected my doctoral research (Asif, 2005) and field relations, I would like to discuss my general position in this research. I conducted this research on the Siraiki language in Multan. I am a Multani and belong to a Siraiki family. Thus I was researching my language in my own community. Now the question that arises is whether my being a Multani woman affected my research negatively or positively? But before that we have to see whether

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scientific objectivity is at all possible in social research. Burr (1995: 160) argues that it is impossible to achieve objectivity within a social constructionist framework, 'since each of us, of necessity, must encounter the world from some perspective or other'. Cameron et al., (1992: 5) succinctly state that 'researchers cannot help being socially located persons. We inevitably bring our biographies and our subjectivities to every stage of the research process'. Dorian (1994) disagrees with Edwards' (1984) argument that it is possible to maintain dispassionate positions on the issue of language and ethnicity. I do not make any claim of maintaining 'superior objectivity'. I am a Multani and although my first language was not Siraiki, it is the language I identify with. Therefore, at times, it becomes difficult to keep my Siraiki identity separate from my total identity, 'The ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head…The ethnographer also begins with biases and preconceived notions…as do researchers in every field. Indeed the choice of what problem, geographic area, or people to study are in itself biased' (Fetterman, 1998:1). However, 'subjectivity of the observer should not be seen as a regrettable disturbance but as one element in the human interactions that comprise our object of study' (Cameron et al., 1992: 5).

My image in the field was that of an educated, urban, upper-middle class, Muslim, Multani woman. With all these attributes there was a well-defined role model with a high positive value available to me. I was expected to conform to this model and in this very conformity lay my acceptance as a researcher both in rural and urban Multan, something which I needed from the participating families and the interviewees. Living up to this image was not very difficult for me as I was a part of that culture and was well aware of its demands and specifications. Now I will talk about these at some length.

Limitations Posed by my Gender in the Field

Gurney (1985: 45) believes that at times female researchers conceal fieldwork problems, 'to avoid having her work appear unsound' and to avoid 'the added embarrassment of acknowledging that one's status as a scholar overshadowed one's identity as a female'. Being a woman imposed some limits on interaction with male participants.

The main limitation that I faced in my fieldwork was that compared to females there was lesser adult male participation in conversations in home domain. Coming from the same culture I had already anticipated this 'problem'. In Multani culture women and men, who are not closely related to each other, do not interact freely even in the home environment. I knew that during my presence in the homes of the participating families, men would avoid coming to the room where I would be. This is their way of giving respect to their female family guests. I also knew that if I would insist on male participation then firstly there would be some raised eyebrows about my 'modesty' which might result in their mistrust in me and secondly the conversation in the room would not be natural as men would be self conscious in my presence and it would also affect the interaction of the other family members. Brewer (2000: 84) rightly remarks, 'the ethnographer's behaviour must cement relationships with the people whose natural

environment it is'. During my visits to three homes out of eight for my fieldwork, men came and joined us in the room but their position in relation to me was different and 'safe'. One family are my relatives and very good friends so it was natural for the father of that family to join us in their home. A twenty-two years old boy in another family had been my student in the University so he, unlike his elder brother, did not mind coming and talking to me on different occasions during the time I spent with that family. The grandfather of the third family also came and spent some time with us in his home. This was by virtue of his age which gave him the status to call me his daughter.

I intentionally did not make this comparatively lesser adult male participation in my research a big issue because my intention was to observe and record naturally occurring speech in the home domain and for this I did not want to stage an artificial scene. Nor did I want to compromise the quality of the data by conducting the whole of the research among my relatives or close friends which would have ensured sufficient male participation. The result is that there is lesser participation by adult males in home conversations but I know that this is a real reflection of the family life in Multan.

Embodiment

Fieldwork, like all other experiences, is an embodied one and this embodiment has consequences for our research. Relationships in the field apart from behaviour also depend on monitoring and perhaps modification of the researcher's body and its uses (Warren & Hackney: 2000). Dress is one way in which the researcher signals status and place. It is this feature of appearance which is most amenable to modification. Negotiation of roles and relationships if often conducted through modifications. In the field I had to keep up with the external propriety. I had to wrap a big *chaddar*[1] around me and cover my face outside homes in the village. In some of the village houses I kept my head covered even while only women and children were present in the house, following the practice of the women of those families, '…a woman with a traditional profile puts people at ease' (Ganesh, 1993: 136)

As in ethnography, gender is implicated in interviewing. It is generally held that an interview constitutes a social interaction between two individuals but what I discovered was that if the interaction is between the members of opposite sex then social norms and propriety become very significant. It is argued that 'sensitivity to the appropriate protocol can enhance the interviewer's effectiveness' (Fetterman, 1998: 44). I never sat alone in the room to interview male participants. While interviewing the village school head I kept my eyes downcast just as he had his gaze low most of the time even while we were talking to each other. In conservative setups in Pakistan when the members of the opposite sex who are *na mehrum*[2] communicate, they keep their gazes low. This is in keeping with the teachings of Islam. In cases where power relations are involved then sometimes during communication, even among the members of the

1 A piece of cloth used to cover the body.

2 with whom one is allowed by religion to marry.

same sex, the person in the subordinate position keeps their gaze low. This is a social norm. In the city neither my interviewees nor I had done so but here the situation was completely different. Here I was the landlord's guest and his wife's friend. I had to follow the norms which the women of the landlord's family follow, for different reasons. I did not want to embarrass my friend's family by my 'misbehaviour' leading others to think that I was not a 'modest' woman. It would not only have jeopardized my reputation in the village but it might have negative repercussions for my relationship with my friend. I have discussed this interview in detail because in ethnographic interviewing there is much less information on gender than on ethnographic fieldwork. What I experienced in the field was that even in interviewing I could not escape the 'implications of my gender' nor achieve the position of 'genderless neutrality' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983: 84).

The difference in my gender and that of my interviewee also played a role in where this interview was conducted. Instead of my going to the school head, my friend's husband invited him to their home for the interview. Because this school head was going to meet a woman from the landlord's 'family', we sat in the women's quarters; not in any room, rather in the open courtyard because it was not appropriate for a strange man to enter the rooms in the women's quarters. My friend's husband 'chaperoned' me through the interview. Being a part of Multani culture I fully understand why he did so; I do not call it an instance of Eastern male chauvinism. This was his way of extending respect to me which he would have accorded to his sister, wife or daughter. My father, brother or husband would have done the same under these circumstances.

I want to make one thing clear here; there was no external pressure on me to conform to the local norms nor did this limit my findings because being a part of Multani culture I fully understand and respect the social norms. Besides, this kind of behaviour came naturally to me because I am used to practising it in certain situations. In my everyday life I conform to some and deviate from others but during the research I had to win the trust in the field as an 'insider-outsider' (Jorgenson, 1984) so I felt that conformity was an easy solution. Phillips (2000) rightly observes that during the research process in the field we have to play up or play down aspects of our identity to maintain the flow of good quality information.

Conclusion: Is the Influence of Female Gender on Research a 'Regrettable Disturbance?

Being a woman imposed some limits on interaction with male participants, but I feel that the rewards of being a female researcher were far higher. It is because of my gender I could access different families in Multan and spend endless hours in their homes. So far no study has analysed the speech practices of Multani Siraiki women in home domain (see e.g. Shackle, 1976). Even though I was an 'outsider' (Jorgenson, 1984) I was treated with warmth and respect extended to a female guest in Multani homes. I have already discussed the devices that I used to negotiate my identity in the field but in no way did the demands of my research pressurise me to compromise my

values and my beliefs. Nor did it have any negative repercussions over my data. Gender therefore, be it male or female, can be equally intrusive or conducive for research depending on the circumstances under which one is conducting it.

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