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WOMANS' INTIMACY AT FIELDWORK -TECHNICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS-

Abstract: One of the aspects in discussions about standpoint epistemology is sex/gender as an important factor in fieldwork and in the full process of knowledge creation. This article explains how the assumption of sex/gender identity influencing fieldwork communication is implemented in practice, illustrated through several fieldwork experiences of the author.

Key words: standpoint epistemology, sex/gender, field research, women.

Introduction

Even though the title may arise many different associations, the text is actually about implementing in practice the assumption about sex/gender identity influencing fieldwork communication. Actual perspective of the standpoint epistemology highlights the creation of positioned knowledge, which of course counters positivistic assumptions, "The more we are self-reflective about the research social structure and our own position within that structure the less we are able to follow the false belief that we can be objective in our quest" (Naples 2004: 380). As Abu-Lughod says, ethnographic representations besides being "partial truths" in Clifford's manner (Clifford 1986: 6), they should also be acknowledged as "positioned truths" (Abu-Lughod 2006: 156). This means that it is necessary to take into account the identities and status of the people involved in field research, which inevitably assumes and creates certain differences. "Reflexivity enables us to make transparent the process of knowledge creation. In reflexive research differences are neither ignored nor simply given. Differences are analysed and understood as an important factor with significant influence on all the aspects of the research process from the beginning till the end. [...] We have to examine what a difference the differences make. Differences matter" (Hesse-Biber, Yaiser 2004: 117).

American anthropology started to pay attention to the researchers' different identities and status, and on subjectivity in anthropological work since the 1960s. Generally, for this "enlightenment" the credit goes to the so-called "feministic anthropology"¹. These kinds of reflexive articles – besides being interesting to read because they usually contain the intimate dimension of field work – they throw new light on the data and in some

¹ See Golde P. (ed.). 1986. *Woman in the Field, Anthropological Experiences*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. This publication contains very famous female authors from the world anthropology talking about their own fieldwork experiences.

awkward way described subjectivities help in creating a more objective picture for the author's analysis (see Harding 2004: 39 - 64).

One of the aspects of these very important discussions about the standpoint epistemology is sex/gender as a factor in ethnographic field research and in the process of knowledge creation in general. The researcher's sex makes a big difference in choosing subjects for discussion with interlocutors in field research. However, it cannot be easily concluded that topics of discussion are always determinate by this term because exceptions are occurring all the time. In the latest Macedonian ethnological and anthropological literature, Ilina Jakimovska is the first one who pointed out the influence of researcher's gender not only in choosing the subject matter of the research but also in general on the field research and on the interpretation of its results. She proposes the following,

"...equally interesting problem for future research would be not only male bodiness analysed by men but also by women researchers, but also the influence of researcher's sex in choosing the subject matter, on research results and in interpreting data which may vary according to their sex/gender prone perception of things (if there is such a connection). In that way we will get an overview of the influence of bodiness on defining gender identity in the folk culture and also a meta-view on the influence of researcher's bodiness in analysing the bodiness itself or some other related topic of interest" (Јакимовска 2009: 168).

Her ethno-anthropological study dedicated to the body and bodiness in Macedonian traditional culture refers to those aspects of bodiness that in the popular discourse of traditional culture are closed, tabooed and deeply intimate. What is interesting is that revealing and discussing those deeply intimate aspects of bodiness is again gender predetermined. For example, while aspects of female bodiness are presented in many texts and by many researchers, male bodiness in Macedonian traditional culture does not have the same treatment which may problematize the 'stereotypical' women's' obscurity in Macedonian folk culture". According to this it may be concluded that: "much more than women's voice, in Macedonian ethnology the male voice is silenced which probably inadvertently, but actually is discriminated" (Јакимовска 2009: 167). Therefore Jakimovska assumes that women are featured with bigger curiosity, even braveness in researching women's bodiness, as well as in talking about it as research subjects (Јакимовска 2009: 167).

Female topics

One of the important reasons for easiness of female self disclosure on the field research in Macedonian context, which sometimes surprises the researchers, is the usual practice of sharing their worries and thoughts with their surrounding which may contain very intimate information (see Ашталковска Гајтаноска 2014: 79-105). This kind of communication in the traditional village community is considered to be a typical female form of communication and according to that women are those who own the intimate information for others and of course they can manipulate them in gossiping sessions. There are counterpart assumptions surrounding this statement: women are more emotional, empathic, caring etc., and contrary they can be: mean, vengeful etc. Women's

symbolic capital must be seen in relation to the community's norms of conduct. Verifying and maintaining of those norms needs a regular monitoring and since historically women are those who must compete with those norms, then accordingly they are the ones who are most interested in the monitoring (Van Vleet 2003).

The division of male and female space in Macedonian traditional culture where they can exchange "male" and "female" information means that communication between people is strongly limited by sex/gender identity at least according to the ideal order of the community. Male and female talks simply cannot mix. As communication is limited according to the sex/gender identity in the wider community that is also the case within ones family where for example the grandmother can talk to her granddaughter about certain topic, but cannot do the same with her grandson. In traditional village communities people pay great attention on male-female contact even at the older age when the assumption for close male-female contact is not that relevant. For example, even old ladies are very careful when visiting their friends in the village because it is considered as inappropriate to meet their friend's husbands alone in the house. Except gender limitation in communication at the same time it can be limited according to statuses even within same sex. Delicate intimate female issues are shared within "one's own sex" and with women with the same or similar status or at least similar age. Except about the wedding night, those female issues may contain information about first menstruation etc. Especially in the traditional village community it is considered as shameful to share information about those aspects of femaleness with the mother. At the same time older ladies do not have problems while sharing them with young female researcher in a completely open manner and with quite explicit explanations. That is why it can be considered as inappropriate for a female researcher to talk with male interlocutors on certain topics such as their sex life. The topics that are sex/gender limited for discussion means cautions while opening them on a field research with an interlocutor of "inappropriate" sex. Simultaneously it is important to point to the danger of taking this ideal order of things very seriously. For example in the abovementioned study of Ilina Jakimovka she notices that there are researches conducted by male researchers that have succeeded in developing fruitful communication involving intimate topics with female interlocutors,

"this could point to one even more interesting phenomenon of interlocutors and researchers different approach towards their own bodiness which when it comes to women is more extrovert, more usual and even more natural compared with men's approach" (Јакимовска 2009: 168).

Those examples are contradicting the stereotypical inhibition when it comes to communication about intimate topics in the community which according to the stereotypes is determined by sex/gender because opposite situations are always possible besides the facts that they are probably more complicated².

² For a female researcher interviewing men on sensitive topics see Rios Sandoval 2009.

Fieldwork situations

In my fieldwork materials, which mainly are treating sensitive subjects of research, women are a significant majority as research subjects. In my personal research projects including the students' I counted 91 women and only 12 men. From this small number of men as interlocutors, only two or three of them had the honour to get the full researcher attention with a one-on-one interview, and the rest of them were there by accident or as companions to their wives who were actually the "target" of the interview session. The difference in numbers of men and women interlocutors is more than obvious from the above given illustration. This one-sidedness in research of intimate subjects was probably due to my personal stereotype about the topics that can be talked about with women, and the ones that can be talked about with men. It is simply clear that intimate conversations are typical when they are sex/gender limited and intimate topics can be discussed within one's own gender (women with women, and man with man). Mixed combinations are of course possible but much more complex and harder to handle. If there is a strong gender division then of course a male researcher will have difficulties accessing and fitting in women's spheres in a way that woman researcher will be able to do. For example, in some villages where traditional behavioural principals are still holding an important place in social life women are not allowed to walk alone, they are not allowed to visit village cafés, communication with the opposite sex is limited, even talking to a male relative can be risky. It is obvious that knowing this structure of thinking will not be encouraging for choosing male interlocutors who will talk to a female researcher about their first sexual experience. On the other hand the same can be reasonably expected from female interlocutors at field research regardless of their age. The assumption that women are responsible for intimate self-disclosure can be confirmed by fieldwork materials of several male colleagues who managed to establish intimate communication with female interlocutors mainly in rural communities in Macedonia.

According to the fact that in the traditional village community behaviour is standardized according to the sex identity, those norms can be easily applied to the foreigners/researchers according to their sex/gender identity. In certain village communities, especially those inhabited by Muslims talking Macedonian as their first language, many aspects of my behaviour were probably very strange and unacceptable for them according to their norms that regulate the behaviour of female villagers. For example, when a female researcher is coming alone in the village, this act alone can be interpreted as a provocative behaviour, without her doing something scandalous. According to their female behaviour norms it is probably shocking that a single woman decided to work in the community as a fieldwork researcher, which is something that cannot be considered as a female mission, but on the contrary, this kind of behaviour would have been strongly forbidden. On the other hand, this situation may encourage certain men to think that this "independence" of the researcher, interpreted as free behaviour, could mean that her sexual behaviour will be free as well. Sexism or more accurately different reading of researcher's behaviour at her fieldwork may create different inconveniences for her. Because of her sex identity she may get a special treatment that again may cause different inconveniences for her. For example, Karen Lumsden did her research on a very "manly subject matter" (cars were in question) and according to that a dominant "male environment". Because of some

interlocutors sexist behaviour she felt appalled by some of the subjects and avoided them. This situation had its influence on her field research because according to these criteria she made her decisions about the events that she will attend, with whom she will talk, and with whom she won't. But it is not the field work alone that is endangered in this kind of situations, but the researcher wellbeing depends on them also, "while doing my field research I experienced a kind of emotional shock because my feelings were different from those described in textbooks and methods courses. I felt guilty because I didn't like the research participants and I didn't like to spend time with them. At certain moments I had to be quiet instead of giving explicit explanations of disagreement with masculine culture because I was afraid that my interlocutors may avoid me. Even more, I believed that at the same time I should be grateful to them for letting me in their social world" (Lumsden 2009: 507, 508).

It is clear that "strangers" attract a special attention in the community that is trying to place them in different categories that are available to them. Especially when we are coming back in the same community during certain period of time, as our identities, statuses and roles are changing, the interlocutors are placing us on the suitable place according to the changes. There are different expectations from student researcher, young woman and not that young woman as a researcher in fieldwork. All those identities become important in different life periods and the interlocutors at fieldwork will perceive us according to those identities. For example, if the researcher were a student, interlocutors would be satisfied if gaining little information about her; the most important thing for her is to have a mother and a father, and it is not bad to be able to count several closest relatives. The above-mentioned terms young and not that young woman are exceptionally relative and unclear. For clarification – those terms are the result of a more arbitrary periodization of lifespan in accordance of the periodization typical for research subjects and for which there is a certain tolerance when perceiving me in combination with other identities as education, profession, life in a big city, religion etc. So, a young female researcher would be 20-25 years old, and not that young is the one older than 25. When you belong to the first group, it is important for the interlocutors to know if there is a potential husband or at least a boyfriend. In certain village communities where traditional norms of behaviour are still typical, this may be perceived as a sign of accepting the differences since the category boyfriend does not exist for young women in the community that goes directly on fiancée or husband. It is good if your answer is affirmative, but it is not a big deal if the answer is negative because you still have time for this kind of fulfilment in life. When you belong to the second group of "adult" women, it is very important to say that you are married, and as the number of years goes up, the most important for you is to be able to say that you are a mother. In a research project where I worked as a research assistant, my age and my position as one of the main researchers were placing us in a category of not that young women. Although we had similar age status and some other characteristics such as education, similar professions, similar positions etc., and some other elements of our identity made the difference between us. My colleague was married, and I was not, but she didn't have children yet. So those questions coming from the participants provoked interesting situations because of the difficulties that were causing to me, and my colleague's easiness in handling them. However the participants' interests were not satisfied only by those aspects of researchers' fulfilment in life, because they continued asking different intimate questions especially after occurrence of certain

intimate preconditions for that kind of questioning. So a married researcher often had inconveniences with trying to answer the questions concerning the reasons why she is childless. The status of a married woman is particularly important for interlocutors from village communities as an indicator that they are talking to a “normal”, “average”, “realized” individual in a researchers’ position. This can be illustrated by a situation from a research conducted together with my grandmother in her village. Usually all the women that we have talked to were interested in my marriage status during our first contact. My negative answer was followed by their dismay because of my age in combination with non-fulfilment of this important requirement. My grandmother tried to ease this impression with the news of my employment, “she is not married, nether engaged, but she is employed”!³

Many female researchers are facing similar situations at fieldwork sites because there are no suitable social positions for unmarried women that have long exceeded the age limit for marrying. They can have only a marginal position if they were members of the studied community, which have that kind of standards. But in this situation another status may ease the impression – educated women that live in a big city and according to that they are following “modern” or simply some other and very different standards. In that way, the status of a stranger may be useful because it does not limit the communication as it would for unmarried woman, a member of the community who will be on the margins of the society because of the fact that she did not fulfil this term. In general the status of a stranger enables the anthropologist to disregard the limitations that are typical for other members of the community (see Хамерсли, Аткинсон 2009: 74). Fatima is 17 and I, in the period of research, am 27 but our statuses meet according to the fact that both of us were not engaged and that is why we are both “backlog” and obsolete: she at the age of 17 within her community, and me at the age of 27 according to every norm for realization in that sense. Weak justification arguments on my side were about different way of life for the orthodox Christians that live in the city. Those aspects of our identity were the reason for creating close and friendly relationship between us regardless of the age difference. On my last visit Fatima welcomed me with some good news: finally she got engaged to Selim. They were not in love before the engagement. His parents asked her to marry him. The two of them saw each other once before the engagement. He asked her “how is everybody at you house, are you good”, she answered and decided that she wants to marry him. Now every night Selim visits Fatima in her house “for talking” to her and sometimes she takes him in “Anjurkas’ bedroom” – her sister in law who lives in Switzerland. Selim usually stays for two hours. He studied high school in Struga, he is 20, and he had to “repeat” the second year of school. The wedding is supposed to happen in a year. She is afraid of the marriage and of the changes she is about to undergo although she knows that she is neither the first nor the last girl to marry. She says that she was the oldest of all her relatives that got married: she is now 18. She talks about the gifts that the groom’s relatives gave her for the engagement and for her birthday. She uses the suitable terms for every groom’s relative according to her new position. Then she decided to show me the presents, the gold and her new belongings that she was “hiding” and is about to wear after the wedding. First she is showing me the gifts - cheep make up and perfumes

³ For another interesting illustration on a similar topic see Биеленин-Ленчовска 2009: 92-108.

and the gold. Than in the guestroom where she keeps her new clothes she is showing me a large quantity of new socks, underwear, pyjamas, slippers etc. –she is going to wear all those things after the wedding. She has several pairs of thong panties, and now with her friend Shpresa they have made an order from Italy of 5 pairs of thong panties. They say that they usually do not wear thong panties but those kind of underwear will be needed “in the evenings” as married women when they will sleep with their husbands.

Still the tolerance for the researchers’ way of life does not represent a rule. For example another interlocutor took the role of a matchmaker in order to merge me with a men from her community with similar status to mine (educated but “out-dated” bachelor who works in the public institution in the nearby town) and according to that he is considered as a good chance for me. Karim’s situation was even more delicate, “...I was in an impossible situation to choose a partner during my field work and even after it if negotiations are successful” (Karim 1999: 84). Certainly this kind of negotiations can be hard to handle in field research conditions. However the research subject asks for the explanations in order for them to be able to place the researchers in the categories available to them. These negotiations as we have seen this time are engaged around the researcher’s intimate life and on a very practical level. If there is a positive outcome for the researcher status or if she is not placed in the group of weird, unfulfilled etc. then at the same time those negotiations contribute to establishing a grater intimacy between researcher and her engaged interlocutors although at the same time can be inconvenient for her. As Golde says, on the other hand these questions contain important information because they reveal the implicit expectations, worries and specific nature of differences between people and the ethnographer. The stranger is not only seen as a threat, but at the same time as an object of curiosity and attention; this curiosity is directed towards learning about different ways of life and in determining how human is the researcher and how many characteristics she is able to share with the local people. Those questions give the opportunity for an exchange of many kinds of information, which enables them to elaborate their image to the researcher and to make the background of the researcher more real, reducing psychological distance between them (Golde 1986: 10). Interlocutors may ask the female researcher (and a male researcher too) to respect and comply with the community’s behaviour norms according to the sex/gender criteria especially in the long-lasting ethnographic researches in foreign cultures. In certain situations instead of tolerance, the unusual and strange behaviour of female researcher (as of male researcher too) may cause them to be rejected from the community’s social circle (for example the researcher identified as prostitute). In order to keep the trust, a female researcher may need to respect the same bans that are typical for other women in the community or at least those bans for which tolerance cannot be applied (it is forbidden to smoke, to drink, to walk, to have boys at her home, to ask certain questions...) (Хамерсли, Аткинсон 2009: 73, 74).

Otherness and sameness...

Western anthropology has a long tradition of researching Otherness - in order for the research to be competent it is necessary for its focus to be on the other, strange, foreign culture. This necessity in anthropological research was turned into its opposite

by the post modernistic paradigms. For example in context of sex/gender standpoint the radical suggestions say that only the research that is conducted within the gender sameness may be considered as competent. The radical position according to which for example only a woman is able to a research on women is complicated when other female identities are taken into consideration. This division of competences on the side of the researcher in context of her identities and those of her interlocutors can go even further, if for example the radical position recommends that only a lesbian researcher can do a research about lesbians, and not any other female researcher (see Hesse-Biber, Leavy 2004: 420). Doing so we can go on to infinity and trivialize the research. In this case the question is not only about choosing the participants with certain identities and statuses determined by the research problem as for example particular class of people, race, ethnic identity, age, occupation or education, but when those choices are made in order to be suitable to the researchers' identity because only then the research can be competent. Some researchers follow this principle – during the research the best solution would be if the researcher and the interlocutors have the same sex even when the research problem does not have intimate background because different sex may prevent the communication in free expressions of certain experiences, and approaching towards people with the same sex is easier. De Munck recommends this because

“you may be ashamed to ask certain personal questions, you may not understand the signs the way a woman can and you may not be able to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding with someone from the opposite sex” (De Munck 2008: 138, 139).⁴

That is way he establishes a rule in interviewing: whenever is possible the interviewer and the interviewee should be of a same sex. The reasons for this are: his colleagues' interpretation about his motives while interviewing a woman, because it was considered as unsuitable, because he felt uncomfortable to do a research on certain topics with female informants and because he realized that there is always a sort of a sexual tension,

“I realized this when once a female informant, broker came for a second interview wearing a mini skirt. I didn't asked her why she dressed like that and maybe it had nothing to do with the situation, but after that I decided to hire a female assistant who will interview women” (De Munck 2008: 127).

There are lots of interesting interpretations of the gender predisposition of knowledge created throughout field research. Going from there, to be a female researcher makes a big difference than being a male researcher. Some interpretations of this problem may sound a bit stereotypical, highlighting the popular sex differences in the style “men are from Mars and women from Venus”. For example, some authors are considering the alternative forms of knowledge like emotionality and intuition as an exclusively female qualities through which a female researcher holds a privileged position compared to a male researcher:

⁴ I use the manuscript of De Munks' work and not the published book, so the page numbers are those of the manuscript.

“If alternative ways of knowing are accepted as valid information source, women should be treated as privileged observers partially because of their developed skills to understand the phenomenon by intuition and emotionality” (Cook, Fonow 1986, cited in Spargue, Zimmerman 2004: 42, 43).

Some researchers go even further in recommending young female assistants because of their “power” in recruiting research participants because people are not afraid of “weakness” but contrary are trying to help (see De Munck 2008: 41). A female researcher is needed for potential participants to feel less threatened or more accurately said, to feel safer.

Our (Macedonian) ethnological and anthropological disciplines have long been targeted towards studying rural/traditional village communities, and that of course is an example of researching some kind of otherness within our sameness. But not only in this case, because otherness can be apparent on individual level – when a student is interviewing an adult man, when a women is interviewing a man, even when a woman is interviewing another woman otherness can be apparent in different age for example, their different social status etc. which again confirms the assumption that otherness can be found everywhere around us. The combination of identities and statuses – combination on the researchers’ side, the one typical for the interlocutors and finally the combination between those two – influences our potentials for creating the knowledge. The researchers as well as the research subjects are fighting in everyday basis with the limitations imposed by different identities. According to that, the only safe postulation in this sense is - establishing rapports with our interlocutors having in mind the identity and status limitations are a very complex matter for which certain skills are necessary (see Esterberg 2002: 90). To be a woman is not enough to understand other women’s’ interpretations. It is important to take into account the differences between women in the research process. To be an insider and a woman at the same time is not enough to gain an understanding neither to get more complete data (Spargue, Zimmerman 2004: 51). So depending on the standpoint in this context the researchers may get lots of different answers (see Hesse-Biber, Yaiser 2004: 101-120). It is certain that there are differences between “male” and “female” field research, but still I agree with those who think that this gender division is a myth associated with different explanations about why that is so, some of them pretty shaky and unsuitable for argumentation. For example, the thesis that women are much more sensitive and much more empathic than men is questionable (see Barret 1997: 199). However, the question if women or men are better field researchers continues to provoke. On women’s side goes the following:

“it is considered that women have some advantages when it comes to field work than men; they have better communication skills, are more sensitive and more empathic, they are more suitable for subjective questions, they are less visible in the field, they do not represent a threat, have bigger flexibility in taking different roles” (Barret 1997: 197).

Still the stereotypes about women in different societies may turn into an advantage when a woman is in a position of a researcher. There are lots of different and opposite examples for using the “womanhood” or “femininity” in getting information. Women are often treated as gentler, unprotected, sensitive, good listeners, emphatic etc. So all those assumptions can be useful for the research. In that sense Mead suggests that the older

the woman looks, the field research becomes easier because the old age contributes to androgenizing and for avoiding uncomfortable sexist moments. “Much more than men, women on field work should guard their reputation” (Barret 1997: 199). The attitude of an old age that androgenizes woman is not applicable in Macedonian context. Prof. Aneta Svetieva according to her rich fieldwork experience notices that older women are especially weird appearance in the village community throughout Macedonia because staying at home is something that is appropriate for old ladies. Besides her trying to defend her situation with pointing to the professor status, the image of a “crazy old lady” that walks around the village continues to prevail especially among older villagers (personal communication).

Conclusion

Considering the fact that the field work essence is the interaction between the researcher and interlocutors, the field work relations cannot be predicted which means that the process’ control is minimal. It is simply the nature of the ethnographic field research. This article points to the need of rethinking the differences appointed by the sex/gender identities in the field research context because of its influence on the whole research process. When it comes to certain rules that are about regulating the effects of “male” and “female” research I want to conclude with the point of prof. Aneta Svetieva (personal communication) that of course counters the regulation concept in general: besides serious differences made by different identities, statuses, affiliations... It usually happens to establish a rapport with an interlocutor who otherwise “satisfies” all the criteria of unavailability, in very strange and unexpected way, dependable on similarities or overlaps of interlocutors’ sensitive and thought capacities (in this case those on the side of the researcher, and interlocutor) because it certainly “isn’t that clear and direct the path between one’s own or somebody else’s, known and unknown, intimate and distant” (Coffey 1999: 22).

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