A Fieldwork Impression

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Publisher: Graduate Institute Publications
Year of publication: 1997
Published on OpenEdition Books: 8
novembre 2016
Série: Genre et développement. Rencontres

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 9 novembre 2016.
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1 My first experience with a “field-work” assignment seemed to me too good to be true. I was asked to interview a Pakistani woman who had come to the IUED (the Graduate Institute of Development Studies) conference on “Creativity, Women and Development” to give a talk on the role of painting as a vehicle for expression and liberation for Pukhtun women living in the north-west of Pakistan.

2 Being not only Pakistani, but also having the added bonus of being a woman, made me confident that my task would be an easy one and that during the course of the interview we would be able to discuss issues in a relatively free and easy manner. Plus, being painfully aware of the scarcity of material on women in Pakistan made this interview of crucial importance to me and I was eager to use it as a springboard for discussion and an exchange of ideas between me and my informant. Unfortunately I was quick to discover that my first impressions were correct: it was all too good to be true! During the course of the interview I was confronted with not only my informant but also her husband, a formidable presence in the room.

3 This means mental gymnastics in order to obtain information from the wife. My mind buzzed with confusion. Here I was in front of a woman whose every word was filtered through her husband (something I had already witnessed during the course of the conference). Knowing that both come from a strong patriarchal society, loyal to orthodox Islam and where a wife’s virtually every move is controlled by her husband made me realise that there were certain “rules” I could not transgress. The fact that I was younger in age, and a woman with no kinship ties to either of them, meant that I had no right (according to Pakistani codes of conduct) to ask him to leave the room and any effort to undermine his authority (especially in front of his wife) would be akin to committing a serious social sin, certainly one that I, as an outsider, had no right to do.

4 Thus the only way to conduct the interview in a fruitful manner would be treating both of them as equal participants. Despite my Pakistani identity I was still far more a stranger than I had counted on.
I was further handicapped by my lack of language skills. She spoke very little French and Urdu (Pakistan’s official language) whereas I spoke no Pashtou (the region’s local language). Consequently we both needed him (as he mastered both French and Pashtou) to facilitate the exchange and yet this only heightened my concern of how to reach beyond this male filter to find her own words.

Nonetheless by using a mixture of languages, especially Urdu (which he was luckily not familiar with) I was able to reach out to her, no matter how tenuous that link might have been. It was through this link that I understood that she was in no way consulted for her marriage and that she was in Geneva to give her children a better future although she personally yearned to go back home to her country. It was these personal issues that gave me a glimpse of her thoughts and personality whereas when we discussed her presentation at the conference she was hesitant with her words and often consulted her husband.

However I must point out that to reach the “personal” involved my initially speaking of the presentation and about art in the lives of Pukhtun women. It was only when I felt that they were comfortable with me that I was able to explore the deeper issues of how women in Pukhtun society live, as well as her own background.

Realising that researchers are often criticised for “manipulating” their informants made me fearful that I was committing the same crime (and when it wasn’t me doing it, it was her husband). He and I were clearly in positions of power. Having been married at age 14 and deprived, not only of education, but also of (physical and social) space to express and articulate her ideas put her at a clear disadvantage. I knew this before the interview but it still did not alleviate the malaise I felt during it.

Here we were miles away from her village in Pakistan, yet once again the same scenario was being enacted: the woman was relegated to the sidelines while others took centre stage. It made me think back to a quote I had read by André Gorz: “We have no words to speak about our oppression, our distress, our bitterness [...] because the ruling class has monopolised not only the power of decision-making and of material wealth: they have also monopolised culture and language” (Gorz in Young 1990, 192).

When the interview finished I had mixed emotions: happiness for having enough material to write the article for which I had been commissioned, yet failure at not having fully overcome the “barrier” that was her husband. True, the exchange of ideas did not yield the results I had hoped, nor was the conversation so free and easy, but then again weren’t these just my own biases and wishful thinking?

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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