Embodying feminist research: learning from action research, political practices, diffractions and collective knowledge.

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Abstract

In the past three decades, feminists and critical theorists have discussed and argued the importance of deconstructing and problematizing social science research methodology in order to question normalized hierarchies concerning the production of knowledge and the status of truth claims. Nevertheless, often, these ideas have basically remained theoretical propositions not embodied in research practices. In fact there is very little published discussion about the difficulties and limits of their practical application. In this paper we introduce some interconnected reflections starting from two different but related experiences of embodying 'feminist activist research'. Our aim is to emphasise the importance of attending to process, making mistakes and learning during fieldwork, as well as experimenting with personalized forms of analysis, such as the construction of narratives and the story-telling process.

Introduction

Starting from the challenges we each encountered while trying to engage consistently in feminist activist practices during the process of doing research for our PhDs, we introduce some interconnected reflections starting from two different but related experiences of embodying 'feminist activist research'. Far from wishing to introduce yet another series of guidelines for research, our aim is to emphasise the importance of attending to process, making mistakes and learning during fieldwork, as well as experimenting with personalized forms of analysis, such as the construction of narratives and the story-telling process. We attempt to write *in* what usually gets left out of research accounts, namely the moments of tension, disagreement, conflict and sometimes also personal

and collective breakthrough. Drawing on a common theoretical background, we each outline and reflect on the methodological choices, contradictions and possibilities engendered in and through our respective research experiences. Using particular aspects and examples of the research processes we engaged in, we comment on each other's approach in relation to specific issues highlighted in the theoretical debate. We believe that through this exchange we can profit from each other's particular insights and challenges.

How is research constructed (legitimized, contested, represented) in different collectivities (antiracist groups, migrant communities, women's groups etc.), locations (different cities, countries), contexts (academy, social movements)? How is gender a constitutive relation in the conception and practice of research fieldwork and analysis? How do gender, class, sexual preference, political points of view and culture/ethnicity intersect in the construction of the researcher as a particular subject working in different contexts? These are some of the questions informing our shared preoccupation with the practice of feminist research.

Theoretical signposts

In the past three decades, feminists and critical theorists have discussed and argued the importance of deconstructing and problematizing social science research methodology in order to question normalized hierarchies concerning the production of knowledge and the status of truth claims. The pioneering work of Evelyn Fox Keller (1983, 1985) clearly shows how, what we call 'science' has been historically constructed on sexual and gendered metaphors and how Baconian analysis offered the language to justify the sexual domination of scientific metaphors. According to her, the sacralization of science has made it taboo for any attempts to analyze 'hard' science with the same categories that it has created to analyze realities.

Following Harding (1986) we briefly approach some feminist proposals to deal with the sexism of science. First of all, from an equality perspective, one of the major problems is the scarce presence of women in the spaces of science

production. It is believed that, in order to improve this situation , women scientist role models have to be shown to girls (Alemany, 1996; Colectivo Hipatia, 1998; Jhonson, 1997; Moreno,1993 Piussi, 1997; Woodward, 1998). However, the sole increase in the presence of 'women[1]' within an arena constructed on heteropatriarchal values has proven insufficient to subvert its discriminating patterns. In fact, without criticizing the alleged objectivity of science how would women's presence in science make a difference? Responding to these concerns, standpoint theorists (such as Harding, 1986), influenced by a Marxist analysis of social relations, argued that women's inclusion in science could make a difference because *minoritised* groups would bring to science a less ideological point of view. Yet, women, as any other marginalized people/ collective, don't necessarily produce more subversive knowledge. While the new point of view introduced in the arena of science by marginalized discourses is extremely enriching we must be careful not to idealise it. According to Haraway (1991) we must recognize that any analysis is always situated, impure, contestable and partial. For that reason, in consonance with the epistemological turn proposed by social constructionism, it is important to subvert power relations involved in any endeavour of knowledge production (Cabruja, 1998). Nevertheless, the fashionable aspect of postmodernist analysis has also brought about the institutionalization of some of its relativist claims into the academy as shown, for example, by Alexander and Mohanty (1997). Following Roman's analysis, these authors denounce how "The rapid institutionalization of a particular brand of postmodernist theorizing in the U.S. academy [...] 'relativist postmodernist' [...] has led to a certain kind of racial relativism or white defensiveness[2] in the classroom. [...] It is this sort of defensiveness that prevents teachers from taking critical antiracist pedagogical position". (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xviii). In order to avoid these pitfalls it is vital to emphasise the accountability involved in any research practice or knowledge production and to engage with what Haraway (1991) has called 'feminist objectivities'.

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[1] Much more space will be needed in order to debate on the essentialist and homogenizing conception of womanhood that sly behind that theory.

[2] By 'white defensiveness,' Roman means "the relativistic assertion that whites, like 'people of color,' are history's oppressed subjects of racism."

Criticizing universalizing western academic narratives, postcolonial and critical feminists (e.g. Ong, 1988, Spivak, 1988, Mohanty, 1986) have argued that knowledge production is not a western (or white, or male) privilege. Different knowledges are produced in multiple locations and these need to be acknowledged and engaged with if we are to challenge existing relations of inequality. This is precisely what a situated, reflexive analysis can offer towards a 'politicization' of research. The specific position of a 'situated' researcher (e.g. 'greek'), with the privilege of transversing multiple, if unequal, intellectual and material spaces (e.g. Greece and the UK), can be both resource and challenge. In fact, in itself, this position articulates the tensions between the local and the global and, if attended to, reveals the - sometimes implicit and obscured - hierarchies of social scientific knowledge production. For example, developing a 'critical' analysis of migrants' positions in Greece necessitates attention to the intersections of gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity, as they manifest in their historical, geopolitical specificity but are also articulated in global economies of privilege, in the production of 'entitled insiders' and 'threatening outsiders', as well as a global migrant proletariat. However, such analysis simultaneously calls into question the usefulness, relevance and implications of these analytic categories and their ideological baggage. This points to the problem of transferring, imposing or adopting conceptual and linguistic categories, and their content, across intellectual, linguistic, relational and social spaces, which are not equal, similar or interchangeable, but rather hegemonically ordered in and through linear hierarchies of knowledge production, which reflect economic and political hierarchies, with Eurocentric and Anglo-Saxon social science at the apex (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). For this reason, rather than cosigning dominant legitimizations of what counts as knowledge and who produces it, as well as common sociological representations of Greece as a panting late arrival to dominant scientific and cultural trends, we are concerned to explore how to develop conceptual tools specific to this context, acknowledging the debts and influences of various other traditions, such as western and postcolonial feminism, as well as their incommensurability.

Some of these concerns have been expressed in recent debates on the meaning and uses of reflexivity (Lather, 2007, Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993, Wilkinson, 1988); the dynamics of diffraction (Haraway, 1997); the problems/possibilities of assuming insider/outsider positions (Watts, 2006), recognizing the situated production of knowledge (Haraway, 1991, Rose, 1997), and emphasising that knowledge is always collectively constructed (Sandoval, 2000). Nevertheless, often, these ideas have basically remained theoretical propositions not embodied in research practices. In fact there is very little published discussion about the difficulties and limits of their practical application. While 'criticality' has become a fashionable catchword, it seems that it usually implies using qualitative methods and/or specifying the gender/class/race of the researcher, as if that were more than enough in order to assume a political stand within the research project. Moreover, huge attention has been paid to describing in detail the methods of collecting information but this has not been accompanied by a similar sensitivity and rigor towards the technical aspects of engaging with the 'material' collected, that is, with the process of analysis.

In the account we present we will try to show how we have embodied in our practices a feminist epistemology and used it in order to deal with the tensions, conflicts and political doubts we faced in our research process. In other words, how feminist knowledge and debates have influenced our experiences of methodologies *on* and *in* practices.

Shared tensions in planning research

Alexandra Zavos' contribution begins with her *reflections on doing ethnographic fieldwork on gender and migration in the anti-racist movement in Athens,* where she positions herself as, simultaneously, researcher and activist, enabled (or hindered) in the assumption of different roles and political initiatives. She discusses the construction of migrants as 'others' to the nation, selectively visible and/or invisible in particular contexts, such as the antiracist movement, whose dominant political repertoires (discourses and practices) inadvertently

reproduce hierarchies of power and participation based on gendered and racialized assumptions regarding national identity and belonging.

Barbara Biglia draws on her work on *women activist narratives on gendered relations within social movements, politics, feminisms and transformation.* She particularly highlights how working on the borderline between 'insider' and 'outsider' made her realize that the responsibility for dealing with ethical issues involved in the research was basically in her own hands. This brought about a redefinition of the epistemology and methodology of the research project during the process of researching.

After an initial brief presentation of the research on which we are basing our reflections we proceed to organize our discussion around four issues that emerged as particularly critical and tense in the research process. Firstly, the selection of the topic of study, a point sometimes not explicitly considered as sensitive and contradictory. We reflect here on our experience of ambiguity and discomfort in defining our research topics as situated between personal and political engagements. Secondly we address the political contradictions that we faced in our 'politically committed' research. While negotiating the conflicting demands of our research, political engagements proved to be sometimes destabilizing, nevertheless it also became a useful resource for working on our personal, political, activist and academic prejudices. Thirdly we consider the dynamics of our overlapping positionalities: as academic researchers and political activists, as foreigners and natives, as feminists involved in a basically sexist social movement, as insiders and outsiders etc. Through some examples, we outline our reasoning for assuming a borderline position. Finally, we explain the way in which we addressed the need to reconfigure feminist theory, theoretically (Alexandra) and methodologically (Barbara), in relation to the specific challenges posed by our research practices.

1. **What was it about? Introductory notes**

Alexandra Zavos. **Moving 'between': research as activism, activism as research.**

My research on gender, migration and anti-racist activism in Athens developed after several adjustments into an ethnographic project documenting my involvement in anti-racist mobilizations on gender and migration issues. My study addressed the intersection of gendered and racialized dynamics that underlie activist discourses and practices drawing on my experience of setting up a campaign on women migrants' problems and demands in the context of the activities of a leftist anti-racist collectivity in Athens called 'Network for the Social Support of Refugees and Migrants' (henceforth called 'Network') which represents one of the oldest and most active political groups in the anti-racist and migration movement in Greece.

While feminist and/or gender-informed approaches to migration/activism are not part of the public and explicit profile of the group, or of any other anti-racist group for that matter, it was still, in my estimation, one of the more 'open' political spaces in which to introduce such an initiative, which I proceeded in doing over a period of eight months, and in collaboration with two other women members of the 'Network'. Feminist activists in Greece have tended to focus on trafficking and the sex industry, representing migrant women as helpless victims of (local, national and trans-national) networks of exploitation. Little or no political work has been done on the conditions of women migrants' participation in the labour market or with regards to the inadequacies and institutionalized discrimination of existing legal frameworks against women migrants. As part of our initiative we made personal contact with various migrant women and migrant women's organizations to discuss their problems and the possibilities of organizing common actions and campaigns. We facilitated an 'Open General Assembly on Women's Migration' and we organized a public discussion on 'Women Migrants and Domestic Labour' at the annual Anti-Racist Festival of Athens.

Biglia Barbara. **Shifting from researching gender relations to developing a feminist research process.**

My starting point was the idea of analyzing gender discrimination within *mixed social movements*[3] (SM) and the activist practices that deal with this. However as my research developed these initial topics began to lose some of their importance and were gradually replaced by others. As such the aims and objectives of my study became much more complex. The considerable amounts of tacit knowledge my participants shared with me went much further than the single topic of 'gender relation' and opened up spaces and possibilities for further exploration. Also, the methodological and political decisions I had to take in order to deal with the ethical tensions I faced during the research process needed to be addressed. With these issues in mind I took the decision that, rather than producing a closed piece of research, what I did was to restructure my study as an unfinished process of narrativecreation (on: politics, (im)possibilities of changes, Feminisms...).

My fieldwork was carried out by means of an on-line informative survey[4] and 31 in-depth interviews with women activists who live in Spain, Chile and Italy. For the purposes of this article I, I will utilise a diffractive analysis (Haraway, 1997) to focus on the ways in which the contradictions and difficulties I encountered influenced the epistemology and methodology of my work. Haraway writes

> "Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real. […] What we need is to make a difference in material-semiotic apparatuses, to diffract the rays of techno-science so that we get more promising interference patterns in the recording films of our lives and bodies." (Haraway 1997: 16)

With this tension in mind, I focus on the methodology *born out of* practice in order to complement the methodology *in* practice which Alexandra's account explores.

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[3] I use the term mixed social movement to describe social movements made up of women and men
[4] See www.ub.es/donesMS . At the time of design in 2001 the on-line research was at its beginning in Spain. For first accounts of the survey's results see Biglia, 2003a.

2. The topics of our studies

Alexandra Zavos. Engendering antiracist politics on migration.

From a social movements perspective the 'migrant' emerges and is claimed as a political subject and agent of/for social change (Μαρβάκης et al., 2005a, b, Mezzadra, 2004a, b, Moulier Boutang, 2003, Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2007). Yet I would argue that the construction of migrants as particular kinds of subjects capable (or incapable) of (certain kinds of) agency, is always situated, and, rather than reflecting actual potential, in some cases represents attempts to police the borders of (particular national) political imaginaries and activism, even within the anti-racist movement itself, so as not to destabilize established practices of political representation (Zavos 2007). In other words, migrants are recognized as political actors in so far as they accept and enter the field of politics as it is cast, where they are placed primarily in the polarized, yet commensurate, positions of 'victim' and/or (national) 'threat'. Mobilizing around gender and migration offers a vantage point from which to question and juxtapose both the politics of public political representation and of national sovereignty.

Barbara Biglia. When personal experience informs the selection of research topics.

My involvement in this research really started as a response to a tension I had been experiencing between being, at one and the same time an activist in mixed social movements (basically among autonomous and libertarian groups) and a feminist. Far from this being a personal feeling of queerness, my sensation was shared by the other members of the feminist collectives I was involved in. As feminists involved in mixed Social Movements (SM)[5], we have continuously experienced contradictions between our feminist political

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[5] As showed in the debate developed in August- September 2004 within the Social-Movement list (http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/sm.html), there isn't an agreement between theorist-researchers on the inclusion/exclusion of right movement within the category of SM. Nevertheless for the purposely of my work and in accordance with the definition of the activist I worked with, I will use in these essay (as in my thesis) the terms just to refer to the 'left' SM.

standpoint and the relations we developed in our day to day political practice. As a result gender relations within the groups and, more specifically, the reproduction of gender discrimination within them, were topics frequently discussed both within autonomous feminist collectives and in interaction with other activist groups[6].

The need for an in-depth analysis focusing on this normally unrecognized situation to stimulate/activate dynamics leading to the disarticulation of sexism became clear to me as a result of a number of factors: articles published in DIY collections or by non mainstream publishers [7]; from specialized web sites[8]; and through various practical activities[9] and debates in academic-activist feminist maling-lists[10]. Indeed, with the naïve energy of a young (and somewhat inexpert) researcher, I decided (in 2000) to embark on this investigative voyage without any formalised plan and with no reference models. This lack of a reference point forced me to redefine my own epistemological approach and techniques of analysis, as I will explain in the last section of this article.

3. Pitfalls of attempting explicitly political research
Alexandra Zavos. Migration as a force of social change?

To return to and problematize my initial proposition, one of the leading questions framing our understanding of migration is whether or not it really is, by default, a force of social change, whether or not it engenders processes of hybridization and multicultural diversity, whether or not it calls forth a redrawing of cultural, social, national boundaries that organize relationships of entitlement, privilege and sovereignty and the differential distribution of resources and legitimacy. I learned through my research practice that researching and

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[6] Even if social movements researcher frequently claim that they work with (or on) a specific Social Movement it is really difficult to achieve more then a portion of the SM due to its indefinites contours. That have been a reality within the so called 'new social movement' and is even much more clear in the actual conjunction of the so called 'movement of movements'.

[7] Animalhada, 2004; Anonyma, 1998; Blue, 2002; Manchester Women's Network, 2004; Modica, 2000; PGA, 2004; Raven, 1995; Subbuswamy, Patel, 2001; Thiers-Vidal, 1998.

[8] Between them: http://www.tmcrew.org/sessismo; http://www.antipatriarcat.org.

[9] For example the *itinerant workshops on sexism* (Italy, 2003)

[10] *NEXTgenderation* and *30something*.

mobilizing on migration issues does not automatically place us on the other side of dominant conceptualizations and practices, but reproduces them within our 'radical' contexts. In order to confront this contradiction we need to understand that what is at stake here are not only global relations of power conceived in the abstract, but also the material and ideological parameters of our own investments and locations. I too found myself being caught up in, suffering from *and* reproducing gendered and racialized dynamics of power, becoming on occasion a 'victim' of sexist discrimination and masculinist repression, a 'rebelling' subject, or a 'patronizing' and 'authoritarian' coordinator. In fact more often than not, I found myself feeling over-determined by these discourses and subject-positions, unable to produce new meanings, perspectives or interactions.

What became obvious to me during my fieldwork is that gender – so absent, so present - needs to be inscribed in our discourses and practices, not as a tribute to 'political correctness' as is usually done, but through a foundational re-conceptualization of the ways in which implicit gender assumptions and practices legitimize, naturalize and obscure dominant hierarchies of power, be they articulated in the greek anti-racist movement itself, or towards migrants. This, among other priorities, could perhaps effect a much needed re-evaluation of anti-racism, premised not only on what 'we' do for those 'others' who are marginalized, discriminated against, prosecuted, but primarily how we can question our own established identifications and investments towards a proliferation and blurring of subject-positions between 'us' and 'migrants'/'others' and the subsequent development of new kinds of relationships, mobilizations and objectives.

Barbara Biglia. Politics in what sense? For whom?

As an activist, approaching the studies of SMs in the academic literature and attending conferences, immediately made me feel very uncomfortable (Biglia, 2003b) about the way of working *on* such movements, as an object of study, instead of *with* them, as active subjects of knowledge production (Biglia, 2007a). So, when I was planning my research I initially thought in terms of

action research as a way of stimulating changes in the sexist dynamics of SMs. Nevertheless I soon began to reflect on the limits of action research for invitation as initiated by a researcher as opposed to stemming from an explicit demand from interested communities (Biglia, Bonet & Marti, 2006). Even if some feminist autonomous groups were formulating certain kinds of expectation about the kind of research I was planning I hadn't been explicitly asked to do the research by any collective or SM. Indeed, I needed to keep constantly in mind that the research was more of a personal project – one in which other activist women were being invited to participate - than a real piece of participative action research. For example, participants were not involved in the *design* of the research. Partly because the research began as an 'individualistic' academic project (for an analysis of the contradictions involved in this model see Noy, 2003); partly because the activists I contacted encouraged me to continue but didn't consider that becoming actively involved in all the steps of the research process was their priority. This caused me to slightly change my initial plan, and, instead of centering my attention on creating an active process of sexist disarticulation, I decided to produce encounters and narratives that could be used by activists and SMs.

4: Positioned on the borderline and living the tension
Alexandra Zavos. **The researcher as political subject.**

During the fieldwork which lasted approximately 8 months (Nov. 2005 - July 2006), I engaged in what I would call 'activist' research, by which I mean to indicate my direct involvement in and production of my topic/field of research, my placement not as an observing outsider but as a member of the group, whose practices – as well as my own - I wanted to study, contribute to and influence at the same time as I myself was influenced by them. Therefore I consider my work to both represent and exceed ethnographic research protocols, in the sense that the group's itinerary and identity, and therefore my object of study, was also partially shaped by my own presence there both as researcher and activist, a double status of which the group was informed and

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consenting, even if I did not always want to draw attention to it. Nevertheless, my double position as member and researcher of the group, while consciously chosen, proved to be quite challenging. On several occasions I experienced becoming the object of what I have come to name 'alignment processes'. In these instances, which ranged from informal talks to formal instructions and requirements, usually around issues relating to the group's practices vis-à-vis other leftist anti-racist groups and the group's positions on what constituted appropriate migration politics , I was guided to follow the 'correct' line and account to the group for my actions.

Additionally, my relationship to migrants' groups and individual migrants proved to be much less straightforward and easy than I expected, often ending in direct conflicts and/or compromises. My own position and the available or legitimized practices I could engage in, as well as the 'style' of engagement, as a researcher and activist, were delineated and determined by certain inescapable markers: first of all, being seen and seeing myself as 'greek', being a woman, being white, being educated, being middle class. These were a source of continuous internal and external tensions. Given these ongoing tensions, there were many points at which the only thing that bound me to the group and to my activist project was my personal commitment to my research. Seeing that my 'political' commitment was often a source of frustration and disappointment rather than a liberating or emancipating process, it seemed to me relevant to further question activist motivations more generally. I initiated a series of individual conversations with other members of the group, which I introduced as a part of my research and recorded, in order to create an opportunity for further and more intimate discussions regarding how we understand our practices and politics in the group and with migrants.

Barbara Biglia. How to cope with multiple positions without going mad?

The tension Alexandra brings out in relation to being situated on the borderline between activism and academia during the whole research process has

produced a great deal of debate between us for some time now (Biglia, Zavos, 2005) and these debates have constantly fed into my own research process.

At the start of my project I felt comfortable in assuming, both epistemologically and methodologically, the strategic position (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991) of an insider (Plows, 1998). I was aware that, somehow, the insider position is subject to criticism because it doesn't allow the researcher to adopt a neutral standpoint. Nevertheless I felt comfortable with the situation because, research neutrality is a utopia, and denies the inevitable influence of our own subjectivity as the researcher in the research process. It is also another way of assuming a power position in the process of constructing realities. Notwithstanding, I quickly realised that the position is not entirely free of limitation and tensions, as I briefly illustrate below.

Sometimes it is easier for participants to be '*more sincere*' with an outsider, for a number of reasons: because it seems that anonymity can be better preserved; because there may be less stress arising from being judged, and, finally because there isn't a direct conflict of interest. On the contrary, in a research relationship with a researcher who is involved in the same group, a participant can easily lean towards assuming the group identity without showing her personal opinions.

However, 'being an insider' gave me access (physically) to a collective not generally open to in-depth interviewing by researchers. It also gave me the option of having a more direct dialogue. In fact, as I have analyzed elsewhere (Biglia, 2003a), in order to protect the Social Movement from external criticism there is a tendency on the part of activists to conceal internal contradictions from outsiders[11]. The fact that the participants I interviewed were friends of friends opened the door to me, as Marina (a Mapuche interviewed in Chile) clearly stated:[12]

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[11] The so called movement of movement (MoMO) have a less protective attitude both with journalists and researchers. However the field work of the Phd was completed before the 'explosion of MoMo'.

[12] The **Mapuche** are the indigenous inhabitants of Central and Southern Chile and Southern Argentina. The women interviewed are involved in the Mapuche Movement.

" I'm never going to discriminate against you if you come from where you have come from and you want to converse with me... ... well, perhaps I would have felt a little reluctant towards you if you had come to me in another way [...] my whole life they have lied to my people, so perhaps I would feel a little anxious if I didn't know where you were coming from, but knowing in advance where you come from means I have no problems and, by the way it may be useful to someone to know a little bit more about my people, I have absolutely no problems, I am grateful anyway"

So my status as a insider gave me a kind of privileged status and required of me a reciprocal attitude in terms of caring. For example, while women were aware that I was taping the interview, they didn't cut their narrative and frequently mentioned names of people and more or less intimate 'secrets' about personal relationships between activists in order to exemplify their points. However, none of them asked me to stop taping, nor did they accept my offers of giving them back the tape in case they felt unsure about the use which might be made of the recorded material. Although most activists told me that they didn't want that their personal stories to be made public outside of our direct interaction, and, in particular, they didn't want people or groups to be identifiable, they seemed to feel safe and secure in the feeling that I was understanding and completely respecting their wishes. Obviously, this trust was in the first instance a great gift these women gave me, but, on the other hand, it made me feel particularly conscious of the responsibility I have in managing with care the confidence they placed in me.

Additionally, the interconnections between my own personal tension and my PhD topic, implied the risk that I would project my own ideas, expectations, knowledge and interpretative frameworks onto the analysis of the interchange. But, interpretation and translation are always present in research. Any research output is the result of the interaction between all the participants (including the researcher), in this sense it is always a collective knowledge production. So such connectedness is endemic to the researcher location/position and is no more compromised/ impure than any other possible location/position . The important point is to accept and recognise such impurity and its political

contextualisation rather than trying to 'market' our result as neutral and objective, and to open up the narrative product to be re-elaborated or re-presented using other perspectives and/or spatial and temporal locations.

Anyway, with the passage of time, I realized that my position was not entirely, or not simply, that of an insider. In the first place, because I was doing my work, in part, for non-activist purposes and thus needed to deal with the special characteristics of my situation. Secondly, because the research was not (as I was expecting at the beginning) a participative action research. It made me feel rather more comfortable to recognize, in relation to my research, that I was in a complex borderline position rather than an insider one. I continued to be involved in academia and/or in activism as an insider, but I'd always made my contextual role explicit. So, for example, when I went to an activist meeting I was there as an activist and didn't directly use the material or knowledge acquired for my own research work. For this reason, even if my personal involvement in an ongoing activist practice influenced my analysis of the field and, the knowledge produced in informal conversations was crucial for the understanding of most of the interviewed experience, I wasn't doing ethnography. In the same way, I chose to interview women activists with whom I'd never had any previous contact in order not to use for the research personal information I had from any prior activist involvement. These were on the one hand, epistemological choices I made in order to respect the participants and, on the other hand, political options that made me feel more free to act as insider in other, non-research contexts. In essence, this borderline dynamic made me feel more comfortable within each of the different roles I was assuming.

5. Reconsidering theoretical and methodological approaches.

Alexandra Zavos. **Using intersectionality theory as a resource for reflexive accounting.**

In my political work I observed two separate yet related practices where gender and migration combined to regulate the production of political discourses and

subjectivities. On the one hand I encountered the *marginalization of gender in the migration and anti-racist movement* by greek and migrant activists alike. Anti-racist migration activism in Greece has largely revolved around issues of legalization, refugee and asylum rights and the militarization of border regimes. Within this range of issues, women migrants have been invisible. Anti-racist discourses mirror official migration policies where the invoked agent of migration is male. Women migrants appear either as family 'appendages' (as wives or mothers) or as victims of trafficking networks and sexual abuse. As one migrant woman noted: *"because usually when we talk about migrants in general we mean only men... And I want to tell you that we migrant women have particular problems indeed"*.

On the other hand I noted *the 'minoritization' of migration in the greek leftist feminist movement*, which exhibits a similarly circumscribed understanding of female migration highlighting only negative aspects of women migrants' experiences, and reproducing dominant representations of women migrants as victims. Discourses of victimization effectively pathologize migrant women, as backward, traditional, underdeveloped, disempowered, imprisoned in the family or as objects of male desire, and place them in positions of dependency and subordination, in need of help and patronage. Implicit in these discourses are normative Western, middle class assumptions about the independent and self-directed individual as a political agent of progress and emancipation (Batsleer, Burman et al., 2005). Positions of advocacy and moral superiority are thus secured for Greek feminists, including researchers, leaving classed, racialized and ethnocentric relations of power between women unquestioned.

Staying in the domain of theory, I will briefly consider some of the key issues highlighted by feminist and critical ethnographers, in relation to my own research and my attempts at representing both my own and others' experiences during the period of our collective engagement with anti-racist migration mobilizations. One of the points which feminist ethnographers consistently draw attention to is the unequal power relations engendered in and through the research process between researcher and research participants, who are necessarily marked and positioned along multiple lines of difference (e.g. race,

class, culture, institutional position) (Stacey, 1988, Visweswaran 1988, Williams, 1993). As Stacey originally pointed out, reciprocity during the research process, while a guiding and explicit feminist priority, cannot be truly and consistently maintained throughout the engagement. A successful ethnography involves gaining the confidence of participants and securing their cooperation, openness and willingness to include the researcher as a quasi-insider into the more intimate aspects of their experience. However, this trust cannot but be betrayed, as the analysis and writing of others' experiences necessarily involves on the one hand their objectification and on the other the exposure of their vulnerability. It is precisely the generation of increased vulnerability of participants that is the paradox of feminist research, whose attempts at making visible the subjects' 'inside' points of view constructs them as transparent objects. One of the ways in which feminist ethnographers have tried to address this contradiction is by exploring their own and their subjects' practices of meaning construction within a continuum of commonality and difference (Abu-Lughod, 1990). That is, through an attempt to understand and represent differences not as inherent qualities of participants' subjectivities but as specific and performative negotiations of their particular social circumstances. In fact, as Ian Parker (2005) points out, introducing conflict, both during fieldwork and in its analysis should be one of the goals of critical ethnographic research. Rather than assuming commonality of interests and a seamless fabric of mutual social exchange among group members, the researcher is encouraged to attend to underlying tensions, contradictions and dissonant perspectives present in groups or communities, which help highlight the ongoing struggles of/for power that shape the group's identity. Finally, feminist (Lather, 2001, Skeggs, 2003) and critical ethnographers (Marcus, 1986, Clifford, 1986, Foley, 2002) have addressed the problems of representation, e.g. speaking about, for or with others (Alcoff, 1991-92), through a critique and deconstruction of common academic textual practices. Experimenting with different narrative constructions, such as dialogic and multi-voiced texts, and producing different accounts for different audiences are some of the ways in which they have tried to decenter and problematize univocal narrative authority and positivist truth claims and introduce heterogeneity and complexity in the analysis of social reality.

And yet, at the same time, considering these issues in my own research with migrant women antiracist activists, I would argue that until and unless migrant women take the unmediated space to research and 'voice' their own issues and – even more to the point - to claim these as knowledges of the politics of (their) oppression, the power dynamics between indigenous 'Greek' and foreign 'migrant' women will not be significantly changed, even though all of us might have the best intentions. In this sense, for me, positioned as a 'Greek' feminist researcher the focus needs to be turned around from who 'they' are, to who 'we' construct 'them' to be, and, at the same time, who 'we' imagine ourselves to be; holding up the mirror to question and unfold our own identifications, priorities, assumptions, hierarchies and entitlements. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues:

> Legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards. It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play. When these structures are defined as 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' and women are placed within them, an implicit image of the 'average Third World woman' is produced. This is the transformation of the (implicitly Western) 'oppressed woman' into the 'oppressed Third World woman'. While the category of 'oppressed woman' is generated through an exclusive focus on gender difference, 'the oppressed Third World woman' category has an additional attribute – the 'Third World difference'. The Third World difference includes a paternalistic attitude towards women in the Third World. (Mohanty 2004, p. 40).

Following Mohanty's critique of western feminist constructions of universal hierarchies of oppression and representation, I would argue that migrant women in Greece are discursively constructed as 'Third World women', regardless of whether or not they actually do come from countries located in the (so-called) Third World, or even whether or not they actually do – individually – fall within the boundaries of this categorical representation (e.g. poor, illiterate, traditional, powerless etc.). In other words, migrant women are 'Third Worlded' by virtue of being positioned as 'migrants'. This establishes and justifies a relation of

paternalistic political representation between Greek and migrant women/feminists. It is this relationship of superiority/inferiority, established alongside overlapping relationships of privilege/marginalization that needs to be deconstructed and transformed. In this sense, if the regimes of power that determine the relationship between native and foreign women are to be addressed and dismantled, intersectionality, that is an exploration of the multiple and shifting relational positionalities through which women are constructed as subjects, needs to be considered not only with respect to those 'other' women but also as regards Greek women as well.

Nevertheless, as noted in our introduction, this is easier said than done. While these debates have offered me valuable ideas to reflect on and grapple with, putting them to work in my own research project and the analysis of my fieldwork, has proven to be more of a challenge than I anticipated. While negotiating different priorities and positions was an ongoing and vital part of my political work and hence also part of my fieldwork and of the data collected from it, my accounts and analysis of it does not render participants' and co-activists' voices present and articulate in their own right; rather they seem to have disappeared into the background of my inductive interpretations. More often than not I have felt myself incapable of balancing the needs of objectifying my experience and allowing participants' agency in the text itself. Most importantly, I have not managed to articulate my reflective analysis to my political priorities, as described earlier. For this, it is not only academic protocol that has hindered me but also the problem of not establishing a new field of political engagement within academic and social scientific practices themselves. It is, in my understanding, this cross-fertilization that is most needed.

Barbara Biglia. Rethinking epistemology and methods.

Having the participants trust me, as I mention in section 3, made me feel extremely responsible for the entire research process and led me to think about the way in which different perspectives - feminist epistemology, critical psychology, action research, etc - try to handle this responsibility. At the same time I had an interesting encounter with a group of other 'younger' researchers

asking similar questions whom I met with the aim of organizing an international conference on what we decided to call activist research (Investigaccio, 2005).

The interactions between the theoretical material I was studying, the questions and the ethical problems I encountered in the research process, the unfinished definition of what we were calling *activist research* and ongoing debates with friends and colleagues made it possible for me to define what I've come to call a "Feminist Activist Research" methodology. Far for being a closed set of research recipies, this methodology constitutes one example of how to deal with the ethical and political decisions facing researchers in given situations. I identify eleven basic points that characterize the way in which I have developed my research. None of these points are exactly "breaking news", they are largely a reformulation of proposals I've encountered here and there in the literature or in activist discourses. The 'innovation' here is the special way in which I have organized the ideas as a totality in the context of my research. Elsewhere (Biglia, 2007b) I have described how I arrived at the specification of these points, and the differences and similarity they have with other proposals put forward in the context of feminist action research. I would like to detail the embodiment of such practice; nevertheless, due to space limitations, here I will just list its basic points. However, I invite you all e to devise yourselves possible ways of embodying it in your own research practice.

1. Doing research with a committment to social change

2. An attempt to break, in the research dynamic, with the dichotomy between public and private

3. Recognising the interdependence between theory and practice, stressing the embodiment process and the ongoing constitutive dynamic between these two representations of reality.

4. Being aware of our contextualised perspective and making this explicit in order to be more understandable and accountable for the analysis produced.

5. Assuming responsibility for my research both in the construction and in the dissemination of knowledge, respecting ethical criteria as appropriate for

any specific process of research and choosing which of the results to disseminate, where and how.

6. Tacking into account the agency of all the subjectivities involved in research and being mindful of and respectful towards each of them

7. Recognising the power relations involved in a research process and working on these instead of hiding them.

8. Being open to redefinition, interpellation and transformation through the research process.

9. Maintaining a continuous reflexive self-criticism and producing diffractions of the research process.

10. Recognising that knowledge is not patentable because it is a collective process and pushing for non-proprietary, commons solutions.

11. Working for the redefinition of the process of collective knowledge validation in order to reduce academic power.

Nevertheless, this 'Feminist Action Research embodiment' was not enough for me to deal with the complexity I had encountered. It failed to define any practical methodology which would help me work with the information I had gathered. It was easy for me to find literature with clear proposals on how to go about respectfully collecting qualitative data; however, the methodology described for data analysis tends to be extremely vague, often quantitativising (therefore very reductive of the complexities of the discourses), and either deconstructive or inductive. The deconstructive approaches (e.g. discourse analysis) offer a powerful tool with which to reveal the implicit meaning of discourses and in this sense they have great potential for analyzing official discourses and meta-narratives. Nevertheless, they also imply a critique of the discourses analyzed that is not especially respectful towards the participant point of view when applied to accounts by minoritized subjects. Finally, the interest in identifying the social agents behind discourses in the case of inductive methodologies (e.g. qualitative content analysis), is often inadequate in showing the politically active opinion of the women interviewed.

As a result of all these experiences I was looking for an alternative way of working with the accounts I had collected, and this search finally came to fruition through my interaction with another researcher working on a very different topic yet facing the same problems I was. Our proposal (Biglia & Bonet, 2009) is to consider the construction of personal and collective narratives as a methodology *and* a process for analysis. These narratives don't have to be a representation of reality, and they don't have to corroborate the accounts provided by the subjects (in the way that historiographical methodologies do) but they do represent the outcome of a specific dialogic encounter between subjectivities. This allows for the recognition of the agency of all participants and gives readers the opportunity to actively recreate the accounts of the narratives presented.

This methodology was in fact applied not just to participants' accounts but to my whole PhD report which was intended as an exercise in story telling, as "*a research methodology, a way to discover things about ourself and our topics*" (Richardson, 1994: 516). In this sense it is also not a completed but rather an open-ended process, because each time someone reads some part of the account presented, or uses any of the 'results', and any time they diffract on it, it becomes a new product.

Finally, in line with all that is said above it is important to emphasise that the account produced here is the result of my own interpretation of the research process and not an objective account of it. This means that some of the decisions taken in the research were not so evident and/or justified at the time that I took them. In fact, in my opinion, it is impossible during a research process to take any decision with complete political, epistemological and ethical awareness. So, probably, in the re-reading and re-writing of my PhD process I'm adding values that were not explicit or perhaps were not even implicit when I carried out the research.

Commentary

AZ: The questions Barbara raises offer valuable insights by which to interrogate further my own research. Here, I would like to consider three points that caught my immediate attention. Reading Barbara's account of her research project, I could not but think that her work starts where mine ends. In other words, my 'realization' of the importance and influence of gender in the development of social movements, in which I also include the anti-racist mobilizations I engaged with, which I arrived at through my fieldwork/activism and have tried to document and analyze, is precisely the starting point of her enquiry and attempted intervention. In this sense, my 'analysis and interpretation' of the politics of mobilizing around gender and migration, generated in part by my own activist experience, and in fulfillment of academic requirements, is what potentially constitutes some of the 'data' of her research. This illustrates that the boundary between what constitutes 'knowledge' and what 'data' is not clearly marked and predetermined by social scientific methodology but is rather an aspect of the standpoint of the researcher and can be seen as an example of feminist epistemological critiques of the multiplicity, situatedness and partiality of knowledge production.

On the other hand, certain questions posed in Barbara's research, were the primary material of my own work, since working together and campaigning with migrant women activists brought issues of differences and inequalities between us directly to the foreground. In my own case, acknowledging differences and finding a common ground was key to both understanding the dynamics of anti-racist activism and to developing a gendered intervention in migration politics. As I have tried to highlight, the construction of migrant and activist subjectivities, is premised on adopting and/or challenging assumptions of entitlement and rights of representation, articulated to racialized, classed, nationalized and minoritized positions. In this sense, managing difference(s) is crucial to both the reproduction and transformation of anti-racist politics and social movements practices. Feminist informed research/theory, therefore, presents us with a critical *political* resource that can be used to redefine methodology, to interrogate the constructions and contestations of subjectivities-collectivities and the naturalized positionings of entitlement both within and outside (national)

socio-political contexts, research and activists agendas. From a feminist perspective, the possibility of forming alliances, not *in spite of*, but precisely by acknowledging and using differences between women has been discussed in terms of 'affinity politics' (Haraway 1991) and 'transversal politics' (Yuval-Davis 1997b). Key to both these feminist calls are understandings of difference as an ethical standpoint that forces but also enables us to move beyond identity politics, which on epistemological and political levels have proven to not only essentialize collective identities, group membership and personal experience, but also, inadvertently, reproduce the nation conceptually as a significant category of organization and identification (e.g. 'gay nation' etc.). In this sense, moving beyond identity politics can also signify moving into new spaces, scales and methodologies of political mobilization.

The final issue I would like to comment on is the question of insider/outsider positioning. As Barbara has noted, bringing a research agenda into social movements is a challenging goal and could sometimes emerge as antagonistic to or conflicting with activist agendas and practices. However, what became obvious to me during my activist research is that these positions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In other words, it was my insider experience as an anti-racist activist which shaped to a certain extent the focus and scope of my research, as well as provided the necessary motivation for carrying out a more disciplined piece of work. On the other hand, the outsider outlook that I gained from assuming the role and practice of researcher, that is, of someone who not only engages with political mobilizations but also reflects on them and on one's involvement in them, in a systematic fashion, allowed me to actually gain more insight into the naturalized relations of power and entitlement and hierarchies of political participation underlying anti-racist activism. For me, using and at the same time questioning 'our' discourses and practices, offered a vantage point of simultaneous investment in and detachment from the object of my engagement and the community of activists I chose to work with, thus allowing me to legitimize and justify my study and critique as part of my activist concerns, and at the same time offer my insights to the group as one, but not the only, possible interpretation of our actions.

BB: My reading of Alexandra's account was really suggestive and emotional in fact, despite our differences, I've re-lived in the account of her interests and tension my own fieldwork. This is probably not only because we are both borderline, activist, feminist researchers, engaged with the topic of gender relations within SM. We both identify these spaces as an interesting arena in which to analyze on the one hand gender discrimination and on the other women's agency in trying to deal with it. Finally we were both faced with contradictions in relation to our field of analysis (i.e. Social Movements) and in relation to our practice as researchers and activists.

Nevertheless, what really seduces me in her text is the fact that while assuming a very similar political and ethical commitment within what could be termed a critical psychological feminist research, we sometimes implemented very different solutions in order to deal with the political tensions we faced. In this sense her choices, and especially the analysis she presents of them, are a great stimulus to rethinking mine.

I was really struck by how Alexandra highlights the conflict/ compromise dilema that we all face in our research processes. Working with other people and being aware of the impossibility of our neutrality, assuming a specific political point of view, trying to be respectful of other participants' agency and highlighting the power dynamics implicit in the research cannot be done without being open to and facing up to conflict. Both in the SM internal dynamic and in that between the 'researchers' (whether in an insider or outsider position) and the research community, we have to learn how to deal with the pain these conflicts produce and how to introduce and/or accept the negotiations we need to engage in with other research participants and come to a compromise that shows the impureness of all research dynamics and political choices.

I'm also glad that Alexandra reflected upon the "*proliferation and blurring of subject positions*" related to the difficulty we sometimes faced in trying to deal with the fragmentation of our subjectivities. We both faced contradictions as feminists involved in SM that reproduce gender discrimination and are not actively working on these internal problems (as analyzed in Biglia, 2005), and in

relation to our borderline position between activism and research (Biglia & Zavos, 2005).

Another point that unites our work is the importance of recognizing the political knowledge produced by marginalized/minoritized subjectivities that can be achieved only through a problematization of the politics of representation, a task that goes beyond the current scope of our research but which needs to be developed further in the future.

Finally I am fascinated by the description of feminist anthropological critiques of narrative constructions . This work seems to have a lot of potential as a theoretical tool for redefining and rethinking methodological issues in relation to the proposals I presented in my text.

Conclusions

In this reflexive/difractive account and discussion of our research experiences we have tried to engage with the topic of the special issue on "the 'practice of research' and critical psychology" from the double perspective of methodology *in* and *on* practice: we have tried to elaborate how the research process can bring out the need to redefine one's methodology and how the methodology has been embodied in our analytical practices. While we obviously have showed only part of the tensions we encountered and our reflections could be continued ad infinitum, nevertheless there are two points that we hope to have drawn attention to: The first of them is that methodologies are not good or bad in principle and that there is no single best method with which to analyze a particular topic. Our different choices highlight this, as no one is able to solve all the tensions and contradictions involved in the political process of doing research and anything can become a trigger for interesting reflections if these are situated and ethically positioned. Our proposal is that any methodology could be useful if its application is epistemologically and ethically situated. In this sense, in our opinion, considering by default qualitative methods more useful than quantitative, is a mistake. Similarly, the use of qualitative methods is no guarantee for critical analysis and the strong relativism that can be

associated with these methodologies is contrary to the political position of trying to achieve a feminist objectivity (Haraway, 1991).

The last point we hope to have clearly shown is the usefulness of a feminist analysis in order to rethink methodology in and on practices and the work that has been done by feminists in this respect. We hope that these explicit illustrations prove that critical analysis cannot be absent from feminist proposals. So we hope that critical theorists will assume the political risk of reducing the tokenist attitudes frequently showed in relation to feminist theories.

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