

Access Denied

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The problem of access is a vexing one for social science researchers. We can carefully plan out the minute details of an ethnographic project, but we always are at the mercy of key informants to provide us access to their lives. These articles address this classic conundrum, but with a twist by focusing on the barriers of men researching women. What if access is denied on the basis of gender? What impact does this have on our descriptions, theories, and analyses?

The question is especially apt today, as essentialist views of gender have been widely debunked in the social sciences. Stereotypical beliefs that “all women think alike” and have universal interests in common have been successfully challenged by feminists who embrace postmodernist, third wave, and queer theory perspectives. Those outmoded beliefs contributed to professional norms that only women could (and should) interview women. Today, equipped with concepts such as intersectionality and reflexivity, any topic should be open to any researcher, regardless of gender, or race, or sexuality, or any other group identification.

Despite the flexibility promised by the new postmodern approach to understanding gender, men in the social sciences who are interested in studying women continue to feel marginalized and excluded. Not only do men have to negotiate denial of access in the field, but also in professional venues as they attempt to disseminate their research to communities of gender scholars. Ironically, according to some of these authors, feminists are partly to blame. Berliner and Falen describe hostile reactions to their research on women, mostly coming from feminists at conferences who challenge their right, as men, to speak authoritatively about women.

In this commentary, we will reflect on the candid accounts of these authors who were denied or who denied themselves access to studying women, and add our own understanding of the problem based on our experiences doing field research. Christine has ample experience with “cross gender” research, having interviewed men for a number of studies on gender discrimination and sexual harassment. Kristen’s research focuses on *transmen*, individuals who are born female and transition later in life to become men. Neither of us “match” the gender of our respondents, and both of us have grappled with problems of access as a result.

We have divided our remarks into three themes. The first, “Access to the Field” addresses the barriers that men researchers face when trying to observe and interview women. We argue that these barriers are both externally and internally

imposed, and that reflexive ethnographers can work with them and through them to deepen their understandings of gender. The next section, "Access to the Truth," comments on the issue of validity, which is a major concern to these authors who worry that they do not gain accurate information about the "worlds of women." We challenge the notion that accounts are either right or wrong, arguing instead that all knowledge is situated, and that there is value to both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. Finally, in the section "Access to Audiences," we confront the topic of scholarly reception. The unfortunate hostility confronted by some of these scholars when reporting on their research raises important questions about the status of men who do women's studies, and also provides another opportunity to learn about the dynamics of gender inequality.

Access to the Field

Negotiating access to gender-specific spaces can be a challenge in ethnographic research. In some cases, the cultural norms of gender in the communities under study prohibit cross-gender interactions (Warren 2000; Wax 1979). The gender of the researcher also may limit access to certain same-gender spaces, such as men-only bathhouses or sorority houses (Warren 2000). In a less extreme example, researchers may discover that privately interviewing the "opposite sex" violates community gender norms (Bourgois 1995; Whyte [1943]1955). The authors in this symposium raise all three of these gender-related access issues. Baum is unable to gain entry to fertility rituals open only to Diola women who have already borne children. Falen is not invited to attend birthings with his midwife research assistant. Brandes attempts to befriend women in the Spanish village he studies, only to find that he has inadvertently insulted both them and their husbands. And, while Berliner is welcomed into the "world of women" in Guinea-Conakry, he quickly learns that paying attention to what women do offends the men in the community. Taken together, all of these situations effectively demonstrate that negotiating cross-gender access in the field can be complex, to say the least.

While raising these access dilemmas is an important part of reflexive ethnography, the sense of frustration and often fatalism that accompanies these descriptions is striking. Falen feels acutely aware of his "male status" when he is barred from birth recovery rooms. Baum laments that his gender "stops" him from gaining first-hand knowledge of certain fertility shrines. Brandes's unwitting violation of gender roles leaves him resigned to avoid future such embarrassing situations, effectively cutting off any further investigation of women's lives.

Any stumbling block to gaining rapport and access in ethnographic research can be deeply discomfoting. Yet, as Levinson (1998), a white man who studied young women in a Mexican town with conservative gender norms, points out, having to negotiate cross-gender access should not be viewed as fatal barrier in ethnographic research, but rather something that requires adaptability on the part of the researcher.

Instead of giving up in frustration, Kristen followed this adaptation strategy when she confronted obstacles to access in her ethnographic study of transmen (Schilt 2006). Being an “outsider” on two key levels, as a woman and as a non-transgender person, meant that she had to spend a great deal of time in the local transgender community getting to know community contacts who could introduce her and her project to possible participants. During this process, she was invited to attend a monthly support group meeting for transmen and their families. The leader of the meeting informed her at the onset, however, that every few months there were meetings about negotiating bathroom use and sexual practices that were only open to transmen. While she was interested in these topics, as they were a key to understanding transmen’s conceptualizations of gender and sexual identity, she recognized that pressing to gain entrance to these spaces would jeopardize her relationships in the field. Accepting and respecting the conditions of her participation, she worked to gain rapport with her respondents and ultimately learned about the content of these restricted meetings in one-on-one interviews. While, as Baum points out, this information is a second-hand description, it still allows for an understanding of how community members talk about these “private” parts of their lives to outsiders—an important goal of the ethnographic enterprise. Additionally, she was able to gain insight into what these gendered boundaries mean to transmen, which was perhaps more central to understanding their sexual and gender identities than the actual content of these men-only meetings.

In addition to externally imposed barriers to access, some of the authors describe their internal barriers to studying women. Brandes confesses that women frequently approached him about being interviewed but that he did not follow up on these requests, leaving his understanding of women’s lives “shallow.” Falen, the only author who enters the field with the set purpose of studying women, finds himself once in Benin “looking for ways to get around having to conduct direct research with women.” Berliner, who is welcomed into the “world of women,” has difficulty grappling with the censure of men who question his interest in women. The descriptions, while brave and confessional, unfortunately do not analyze this ambivalence, thereby missing an excellent opportunity to further unpack the meaning of gender. As Reay (1996, 44) points out, “articulation is only the beginning of reflexivity. It is important to differentiate between stating something and exploring its consequences for our research.” While these descriptions are a starting point, these authors could go further in exploring what is at stake internally for men who study women’s lives.

In contrast to the internal and external obstacles to studying the “world of women,” some of these articles describe remarkably open access to the “world of men.” But we wonder just how easily they obtained this entrée. We note several instances of the men actively “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in the field to negotiate access with other men. Baum, for instance, recounts a slew of gendered strategies that allow him to “get in” with men, such as wrestling, going to dances, and engaging in heterosexual “dating” rituals. Falen also “does” masculinity

and heterosexuality as he engages in sexualized group banter that occurs between Benin women and men. By failing to interrogate the actual work that goes into “being one of the guys,” these authors unwittingly reproduce essentialist logic: The implication is that men have an intuitive understanding of other men, which smoothes their access to men in the field. This reflects the same reductive notions of the “naturalness” of masculinity and femininity that some writers accuse feminists of endorsing (more on that below).

Sharing the same gender does not guarantee access to respondents. “Getting in” always requires negotiation, rapport, and persistence. Documenting and analyzing these strategies present another opportunity to deepen our understanding of gender.

Access to the Truth

In addition to issues of gender-based exclusion, the authors in this symposium grapple with the validity question. They wonder whether, as men, they were able to get “the truth” about women’s lives. Falen encapsulates this concern when he writes: “Understanding other people’s cultural worlds is an amazing accomplishment, when successful. But how do we know when we are successful?” He worries that, “Even when we think we have achieved a thorough level of understanding, someone can always doubt the accuracy of our knowledge by putting into question our positionality.”

Underlying this focus on success and accuracy is the insider/outsider issue in social science research (Collins 1986; Merton 1972). The question the authors seem to be struggling with the most is whether men can get “true” information about women—particularly when they have to rely on second-hand accounts of women-only events, as Baum and Falen do. When Falen’s findings are challenged in an academic presentation, for example, he is thrilled that an African woman in the audience tells him after the talk that she agrees with him—an interaction in which he is “confirmed” by an insider. While struggling with being gender outsiders in their studies of women, the authors again do not question whether they gained accurate information from men, possibly because shared gender status means they can gather first-hand accounts of men’s behavior which they accept as “truth.” With the exception of Brandes, there is also little discussion of how firsthand accounts of men and women’s behaviors are filtered through the personal experiences and identities of the researcher, rather than “true” accounts of “real” events. And, while Berliner comes to feel that, at times, his gender gave him a “privileged view” of gender relations, the authors do not explore how being an outsider in terms of gender might provide a different (though not necessarily better or worse) view of women’s lives. As Thorne (1993) notes in her study of children, while she felt closer to the girls because of shared gender, she often could see boys’ interactions and activities more clearly as a gender outsider. Again, the authors miss the opportunity to reflect on how being a gender outsider impacts the actual process of field research, choosing instead to worry about how to “overcome” the “problem” of gender in the field.

Many ethnographers who have validity concerns rely on assistants or collaborators to verify their information and test their interpretations. Falen, for instance, hires a woman research assistant to address the gender barriers he faces, but then worries that she is providing him only with secondhand accounts of women's lives. In contrast, Kulick (1998) is able to work with his *travesti* assistant in a way that strengthens and "checks" his individual research findings. Kristen compared her findings on transmen's feelings about genital surgery with the experiences of a transgender sociologist who studied a similar topic (Schilt and Windsor n.d.). As these examples suggest, team research and collaborative research can address validity concerns that stem from being either an insider or an outsider, and strengthen research through reflexive dialogues about researchers' positionality.

Yet, while triangulating research findings is always a worthwhile enterprise, it does not address the authors' concerns about whether men can ever gain a "real" understanding of women's lives. These fears, which the authors attribute to feminist critiques of their own—and men as a group's—cross-gender research, are not born out by scholarship that engages with these issues. In her study of puberty and sexual development among high school students, Martin (1996) acknowledges that at the onset of her study, she had concerns that as a woman interviewing boys about sexuality, she would get "false" information. After comparing her interviews with interviews conducted by a man, she acknowledges that while the wording differed by the gender of the interviewer, the information was largely the same—a point also found by Williams and Heikes (1993). These concerns about validity and success for men studying women, then, problematically assume a "truth" is out there for men who are able to "overcome" their gender handicap.

Access to Audiences

Like respondents who wish to exclude men from women-only rituals, feminists are characterized in this collection of articles as denying men access to women's studies. Berliner compares Bulongic men's threats of violence against women who perform rituals, to radical feminists' hostility toward men who study women. The author's point is to underscore the persistence and perhaps ubiquity of gender-based exclusion, but this is not a fitting analogy, as even radical feminists abjure the use or threat of violence. Moreover, this analogy ignores historical context and the asymmetry of gender: The meanings and consequences of "crossing over" are different for men and women, owing to the social organization of gender.

Why might some feminist academics be hostile to men who do "women's studies"? The authors suggest that this behavior is mean-spirited and ultimately based on an essentialist logic, viz., only a woman can truly understand another woman. Indeed, an "anthropology of women" does suggest a unitary and coherent "woman-ness" exists that can be documented (e.g., Reiter 1975). But this project is a legacy of second wave feminism, and should be put into an historical context, a point that

is emphasized by the editorial introduction. It seems odd to accuse feminists today of essentialism, when the most popular theory of gender views it as a performance (Butler 1990; West & Zimmerman 1987), and the sex/gender system as a hegemonic ideology, an organization of desire, and a set of practices that benefit powerful groups in society (Connell 1995).

If not essentialism, then what? Why might some feminists be hostile to men who cross over to study women? Alas, our authors apparently have not inquired. One possibility: When men do women's work, they tend to be unduly rewarded and recognized. Christine found that men reap many benefits when they cross over to fields like nursing and social work (Williams 1995). In contrast to the "glass ceiling" experience of many women who integrate men's fields, men may encounter a "glass escalator" that propels them into better paying and more prestigious specialties. These advantages may not accrue to all men (gay men, racial/ethnic minority men, and others who represent alternative masculinities may be kept off the glass escalator). But feminists' hostility to men encroaching on "their" territory may be motivated by the legitimate fear that men will displace equally deserving women for coveted positions, which were originally crafted for women and by women.

There is a second possibility, but this is more speculative. Some feminists may be wary of men in women's studies because they question their motives. Women's interests in women's studies seem obvious: as feminists, our goal is to expose how power operates in the sex/gender system to disrupt and ultimately dismantle that system. I suspect that men scholars who share this feminist goal would be welcome, while those who advocate an apolitical approach to "gender studies" may be eyed with more suspicion, and even hostility. Unless the study of gender is placed in a political context of power and domination, it can easily be appropriated to defend and consolidate the sexist status quo. (In fact, this approach characterized the limited sociological research on women prior to second wave feminism, under the rubric of so-called "sex role" theory.) Consequently, to gain entrée into the field of women's studies, men may have to prove their feminist credentials. (Women scholars, in contrast, are typically assumed to be feminist unless proven otherwise.)

As we see it, our goal as researchers is to figure out why people do what they do, from their points of view. We try to understand their world views, to make sense of them, to place them in social and historical context. That some women feel uncomfortable and even hostile around men—whether at conferences or in the field—should be analyzed, not dismissed as unwarranted and irrational discrimination.

Granted, some people (including some feminists) are just mean. But if the resistance to men crossing over is coming from more than just a few misanthropes, then it should be subjected to research, criticism, and analysis. The response should not be to shut down and feel shut out. Instead, reflexive researchers could use the opportunity to investigate what they represent to their various audiences. In the current sex/gender system, men who embody hegemonic masculinity represent power over women, even in academic disciplines where women are in the majority. Consequently, feminists

may avoid, exclude, or rebuke men at academic conferences. This may feel like discrimination to men who intend no harm. But this does not mean that men lack power and privilege in our society. It does mean that gender is political, and that there is no escaping its influence.

Conclusion

Sociologists often focus on the marginalized—such as men who do women’s studies—to reveal how gender is negotiated, reproduced, and occasionally resisted. By “crossing over,” these authors prove that men can make empirical and theoretical contributions to scholarship on women. But they are also challenging the gender order, demonstrating its social construction, and questioning the boundaries and the binaries that organize our world.

The authors should not be shocked by the social and cultural reaction they have encountered while researching women: it is to be expected that norm violation will be met with social opprobrium. But this is also a source of social change, and an opportunity to learn more about how gender operates, and how it affects us all.

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