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“Speaking Back” to the Self: A Call for “Voice Notes” as Reflexive Practice for Feminist Ethnographers

By Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani¹

Abstract

While what comprises “feminist research methods” is subject to debate, research with a feminist orientation is often characterised by heightened reflexivity and a recognition of the subjective nature of knowledge claims (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). By drawing upon ethnographic research conducted among young people in post-apartheid South Africa, this paper interrogates the potential value of audio recordings or “voice notes” during fieldwork, in conjunction with the more traditional form of the fieldwork diary. I argue that, by providing an additional means through which to articulate the inevitable messiness of fieldwork, the recording of “voice notes” enables the researcher to “speak back” to themselves, generating valuable material to reflect upon when analysing and writing up one’s data. By privileging voice, this companion method potentially elucidates the conscious, and unconscious, self-censorship we impose when relying solely upon a textual rendering of experience. As such, it helps to lessen the uncomfortable distance between what researchers feel in the “field” and what they express at the “desk.” Mobilizing the insights of post-structural feminist scholars, I consider the importance of acknowledging ethnographic “processes” as well as “products,” in order to develop more reflexive research practice and a feminist sensibility, which interrogates the representations that it makes.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Feminism, Ethnography

Introduction

Feminist research in general, and feminist ethnographic research in particular, are characterised by heightened reflexivity and the pursuit of ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988). While what constitutes feminist research methods is variable, at the heart of feminist social science lies a critique of the traditional positivist paradigm of research and a recognition of the subjective nature of knowledge claims. Feminist scholars have widely rejected the objectifying and seemingly “neutral” stance of the researcher as neither possible nor desirable, arguing that meaningful research relies instead on empathy and mutuality (Oakley, 1981). Although the desire for developing relationships with research participants has been presented as an ethical imperative and feminist antidote to the abstracted epistemologies that pervade traditional Western research accounts, deepened rapport brings its own ethical concerns.

In recognition of the “disturbing ethical naivety” to arise when researchers romanticize the process of “doing rapport,” (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002 p.6) this paper reinforces the need for a

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reflexive interrogation of the interactions that occur during fieldwork and the influence of these upon the research process and product. Drawing upon post-structural feminist scholars, I argue for a conception of reflexivity that takes heed of the personal, interpersonal, institutional, emotional, epistemological and ontological influences on our research (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002). As Ramazanoglu and Holland argue, “in connecting theory, experience and judgement, the knowing feminist should be accountable for the sense she makes of her own and other people’s accounts, and how her judgements are made” (1999 p.386). Exposing the political project we as researchers are engaged in illuminates our objectives, attempts to account for personal assumptions and ultimately offers the only justification we can for the representations we make (Gillies and Alldred, 2002 p.23). Although I accept this on a conceptual level, there have been few methodological explorations into how to cultivate reflexive research practice as best befits a feminist orientation.

The means by which feminist ethnographers acknowledge their positionality is variable, ranging from traditional practices of diary keeping during fieldwork to the creation of overtly introspective auto-ethnographies. This paper introduces a companion method to the practice of diarising – the recording of “voice notes” during fieldwork. Drawing on ethnographic data from my PhD fieldwork, I illustrate how a “voice” diary, which reflects an emotional response to fieldwork, can “speak back” and confront the researcher, “demanding self-reappraisal” (Hodder *in* Dunne et al, 2005 p.88). The PhD research that this paper draws on is concerned with the development of aspirations of young black² South Africans born post-apartheid. My fieldwork took place in a rural township in Mpumalanga province, on the border of the Kruger National Park, where I immersed myself in one secondary school and among its group of final year students in particular.

I entered my field site highly conscious of my positionality. I am a woman of mixed Middle Eastern/European extraction, raised in South Africa and with prior experience of working and volunteering within the area. While I approached my field with a degree of “insider” knowledge, my position as an outsider is more relevant in this context. This is because, despite the “rainbow nation” discourse that appears to pervade post-apartheid public consciousness, the majority of youth born into the new democracy remain largely unexposed to people outside of their proximal environments. My participants had seen non-black people before but had not had much opportunity to speak to outsiders, given the rural location where they live, a zone set aside for black people only as part of apartheid’s policy of separate development. I occupied and represented a privileged bubble, a world apart from my research participants’ daily realities.

Although I was aware that I needed to situate any knowledge that I produced through reference to my personal biography, I initially felt adamant that this research was to be as little about “me” as possible. This paper reflects my journey into reconciling with the versions of “me” that pervade every part of the research process and product. As such, it responds to Rosalind Gill’s lament that contemporary academic writing frequently starts with an incantation of the identities occupied by the author, but makes little attempt to reflect on the significance of these positions for the research (1998). By recognising that the mere acknowledgement of one’s positionality is not enough to eradicate its effects, I explore how the recording of “voice notes” can provide an additional means of self-expression. This can potentially generate valuable material to draw upon when analysing and writing up one’s data. The paper will begin with an overview of the relationship between feminism and post-structural ethnographies, before exploring particular

² Throughout this chapter, I will use the socially constructed categories of “black” and “white” to refer to particular population groups. These are the terms my participants used to describe themselves. When referring to “youth”, I draw upon the South Africa’s National Youth Policy that refers to young people as aged 14-35.

methods used to promote reflexivity. I shall then move on to illustrate the function of “voice notes” within my own work, the ethical contentions such recordings have evoked and my observations regarding the strengths, and the limitations of this methodological tool.

Feminism and Post-Structuralism – Learning to “Speak Nearby”

Sharing Elizabeth St Pierre’s “certain exhaustion” with attempting to fix meanings to particular terminologies (2000 p.477), this paper is by no means a comprehensive account of the different shapes that feminist research can take. There are numerous approaches deemed to best resonate with the values inherent to feminism. In this paper, I am particularly concerned with ethnography, a methodology that, due to its contextual and experiential approach to knowledge, many feminist scholars have regarded as ideally suited to feminist research.

Yet despite the seeming match between ethnography and a feminist position, there are debates as to whether ethnographic methods are suited to feminist research. Judith Stacey’s timelessly provocative probe expresses this sentiment well: “Does the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach mask a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation?” (1988 p.22). While this question is highly contestable, the chief response from scholars has been to develop Stacey’s call for dialogue between feminism and post-structuralism. Although “post-structuralism”, like feminism, defies any rigid definition, its basic premise requires a recognition of the partiality of knowledge and “giving up on finding out ‘exactly’ what is going on” (St Pierre, 2000 p.477).

Over the last few decades, ethnographers have been engaging with feminist post-structural theory in order to challenge assumptions about authenticity and objectivity in their work (Cairns, 2009; Britzman, 1995; Davies, 2004). As Shauna Pomerantz argues, “To do post-structural research is to foreground the impossibility of unmediated representation by reflexively analyzing the discursive forces in which researcher, researched, and research process are entwined” (2008 p.25). Feminist scholars, in recognising that there is no “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” (Haraway, 1988 p.581) share post-structural ethnographer’s concern for the politics of location. Given post-structural ethnographies’ acknowledgement of the inherently fragmentary nature of ethnographic “truths” (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), this is an appropriate approach for feminist ethnographers concerned with dismantling romantic assumptions regarding the relationships that develop in the field, and foregrounding the role that they have played in the construction of the research account.

While feminists opposed to post-structural approaches have critiqued such theories for being apolitical and lacking in moral conviction (see Benhabib et al, 1995), I consider such theoretical developments helpful as they reinforce the situated, partial nature of all forms of representation and knowledge. Although it remains contestable as to whether there is a political necessity for feminist research to establish what power relations are inflicted upon people’s lives (Ramazanaglou and Holland, 1999), researchers influenced by post-structural theories acknowledge the difficulties which arise when we treat accounts of experience as anything more than discursive constructions in specific locations. Despite attention to “discourse” being accused of “co-opting the subject into ideology” and killing off “any concern for the concrete joys and suffering of active, breathing, bodily human beings” (Plummer, 2001 p.5), Judith Butler has usefully noted that deconstructing feminist assumptions is not the same as abandoning them. She writes: “To deconstruct is not to negate or dismiss, but to call into question and perhaps more

importantly, to open up a term like the subject, to a reusage or deployment that previously has not been authorized” (1992 p.5).

This is important when recognising that a central concern for feminist research is whether individuals should attempt to represent groups that they do not belong to, especially those with less power and influence. As bell hooks (1990) has argued, efforts by dominant groups to represent the “oppressed” can amount to a form of colonization, reinterpreting and thereby erasing the “voice” of the speaking subject (in Gillies and Alldred, 2002 p.41). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of many to have challenged western intellectuals’ claims to represent “third world” others when she asked “with what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (1988 p.285). Mimi Orner similarly poses the questions:

Why must the ‘oppressed’ speak? How is the speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined, stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? (1992 p.76)

Such questions indicate, for both feminists and ethnographers alike, that we cannot simply take accounts of experience - our own or others’ - as reality. Many feminists are understandably uneasy about “over-attributing the concept of gender as a universal experience across “race,” class and other social distinctions” (Gillies and Alldred, 2002 p.11). Yet while feminism does not have one hook upon which to hang its hat, the argument that researchers should avoid representing individuals or groups who inhabit less powerful social positions is problematic. As Christine Griffin (1996) notes, when we speak for others we are not becoming them, we are only telling our version of a story about their lives. However, it is imperative that we make explicit our intentions for telling this story. By elucidating the importance, in Minh-ha’s terms, of “speaking nearby” rather than “speaking for” the other (Chen, 1992 p.87), post-structural ethnographic methods can provide useful tools for reflexive research practice, the chief concern of this paper.

Methodological Attempts to Promote Reflexivity

When someone writes a biography (or arguably, an ethnography), it is now widely accepted that he or she writes him or herself into the life of the subject/s being written about (Denzin, 1989). The term “auto/biography” draws attention to the inter-relationship between the constructions of one’s own life through autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography (Merrill and West, 2009). While this term typically links with developments in biographical sociology, within anthropology there has been an increasing move towards “auto-ethnographic” accounts, within which the author similarly brings their own positionality into their analysis. Marilyn Strathern’s (1987) conception of “auto-ethnography” enables researchers to “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al, 2011 p.3). Social scientists who are wary of such highly introspective approaches have expressed concerns regarding the risk of overly introspective accounts promoting “an unhealthy dose of self-regard” (Mills and Morton, 2013 p.151).

This begs the question of how the researcher can meaningfully reflect upon their role in the research without speaking only of themselves and risking a form of solipsism. One way for the researcher to maintain a reflexive practice without allowing self-conscious reflections to dominate the research product, is to keep a research diary, particularly during fieldwork. This diary is distinct

from academic writing in that it does not attempt to present the process of research in a linear fashion (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Instead, a diary can capture something of “the real inner drama” of research “with its intuitive base, its halting time-line, and its extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives” (Marshall and Rossman 1995 p.15). The purpose of such diarising is not primarily about the communication of the research to others. Instead, it facilitates the research process through recording observations, emotional responses, thoughts and questions as they happen.

If, as Kirsten Hastrup notes, “fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology,” (1992 p.117) the research diary can provide a form through which the interaction of subjective and objective aspects of doing research can enter into a productive relationship. The keeping of such a diary is hardly a novel affair, as anthropology’s forefathers, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, kept such personal reflections, although in his case these were infamously kept distinct from his final published accounts (1989). To date, the weaving of such deeply personal material into the “ethnographic product” is a delicate balance and ultimately requires the discernment of the researcher. Yet if we regard such instruments as meaningful tools to promote reflexivity throughout the process of the research, their value lies in enabling ongoing, productive internal dialogue for the researcher.

While both diarising and writing auto-ethnographically could enable a more reflexive research practice, one of their limitations relates to the form within which they are forged – the written word. Given that the research output is a textual enterprise, the processes of writing itself textualizes experiences in the field. As such, there is often an uncomfortable distance between what we feel in the “field” and what the researcher expresses at the “desk”. In order to illustrate this point, I will reflect upon my experiences of conducting fieldwork among previously disadvantaged young people in South Africa, where I found that written reflections and diarising were insufficient instruments to promote reflexivity.

The Use of “Voice Notes”

My first few months of fieldwork involved compulsive diarising at the end of a day’s observations and interviews. Such reflections are crucial practices for any ethnographer, yet I found that the moment I put pen to paper, my experiences took a more “orderly” form than the flurry of thoughts that had come to me. When considering the authority of language and the seeming stability of meaning from which it derives, I found myself taking heed of Trinh Minh-ha’s warning that “words are always equipped with a second-hand memory” (1989 p.79). Ethnographic processes are widely regarded as chaotic, yet in attempting to render experience, we still conform to particular narrative structures that echo a modernist desire for coherence. Although the recording of voice notes cannot rid the researcher from a desire for narrative structure, I discovered that they could reflect more of the rawness of experience and the ineloquent ways in which emotions overcome us during fieldwork.

Another reason that I found diarising to be an insufficient avenue through which to convey fieldwork experiences comes across as a guilty admission: fieldwork is tiring and writing is work. There are often times when we come home from our respective field sites and are exhausted, both emotionally and physically, from a day of closely observing others in addition to observing ourselves. In an effort not to forget the experiences of the day, I found myself changing the direction of my voice recorder onto myself. These conversations with myself allowed for a spontaneous spillage of thoughts that exceeded the entries of my research diary in their fearlessness

against form. I often recorded these voice notes immediately after leaving the field, but before sitting at my desk at home. My ramblings occupied a transitional zone, spoken within my car driving out of my field site, or on a walk at the end of a long day.

I found the recording of voice notes useful, not only as a means to decompress the day, but also to provide specific responses to conversations or interviews on the day in which they took place. Inspired by the approach taken by Julie McLeod and Lyn Yates (2006) when they chose to undertake video interviews with their research participants, I realised that my own commentaries have helped to record the immediacy of interactions in such a way that gives embodiment to a method generally ruled by text. For example, when I listen to my responses to a particular interview, I return to the scene far more viscerally than the scrawls in my notebook could enable. This is important given that interview transcriptions alone tend to affirm a particular theoretical position about the relationship between language and meaning. When researchers focus purely on the mechanics of coding, they can fail to recognise the multifaceted ambiguities of language, communication and interpretation (Mishler, 1991).

While these voice recordings are discursive constructions in themselves, they carry something that no written entry can fully achieve – tone. When listening to voice notes at a later stage, it is intriguing to notice the tone used to express certain observations. Some of my voice notes are ripe with enthusiasm, others are full of frustration, and some sound downright depressed. Each reaction reveals something of my response to whatever took place, and while an analysis of such may not necessarily enter into my final research product, it is imperative that I acknowledge these responses and asks such questions as, “*Why was I disappointed in that interview? What were my expectations?*” It is often the case that “the author’s intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are not only inaccessible to readers; they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself” (Grosz, 1995 p.13). I found that the recording of my emotional responses to research activities, shortly after they took place, provided a means for me to play devil’s advocate to my own findings (Kvale, 1996).

In order to illustrate this point, I will share three different episodes that have had a profound impact upon me during my fieldwork. The first took place over a milkshake with Missy³, one of my key research participants. It is relevant to note that this conversation occurred several months into my fieldwork, at a stage where I felt considerable “rapport” had developed between Missy and myself and I occupied that precarious position of simultaneously being confidant, friend and researcher (Wheatley, 1994 p.406). The conversation entered into the realm of “boys” and Missy confessed to me one of her deepest desires.

M: Okay, so I want to tell you something but you promise you can’t laugh...

F: I promise.

M: So....yeah well the thing is, you asked me my greatest dream right? Well, it’s actually to have a whitey.

F: A whitey?

M: A white guy! I want a white guy.

F: Okay. I’m not gonna laugh. But why do you want a white guy?

M: Because they are soooooo great. They know how to treat their woman hey? And white people, they care so much more about each other. Unlike us blacks, we will just stab each other in the back.

³ All names in this study are pseudonyms.

While Missy's admission should not have particularly surprised me, given that many of the young women I spent time with had shared similar desires to have a relationship with a "white" man, our conversation evoked a strong response within me. My voice recording that evening expressed as much:

So, like, I know that it makes sense, the desire for the other or whatnot but just, I dunno, I kinda expected more from Missy. Ummm...I really liked that one poem she wrote and showed me whereby she was criticising how young people around her don't care about their lives or don't care about the pasts but then she wants to go and be with a white guy and she's never even met one before? She doesn't know anyone...does she get her ideas from TV? I dunno, maybe there was a little part of me that wanted her to be more revolutionary? And then, umm, yah today she kept on saying how beautiful my hair was and how much she didn't like her own hair and I kind of felt weird. I felt like, a part of us being together was as friends, and I wanted to share stuff with her, I wanted to lend her a copy of Adiche's 'Americanah'⁴ and get her to think about, interrogate kind of, why African women want white hair because I felt that...she has that potential. She has so much potential and then here she is just going on about how she wants this white guy and it kinda reminded me that we're not actually friends because I didn't say anything. And then I felt upset with myself that I didn't say anything. But what could I say? I'm not supposed to want my research participants to think like me.

Listening to this voice note has helped me interrogate not only my relationship with Missy, but the particular expectations I harboured for her without even realising it. Each researcher enters the field site with hopes for our participants, whether we are aware of it or not. A feminist researcher may have particular expectations of another woman. Avishai et al. (2013 p.395) term this "the feminist ethnographer's dilemma" and ask "what do you do when your feminist politics clash with your empirical findings?" These voice recordings helped me reflect upon my own "closet" hopes, which, in relation to Missy, involved desiring her to pursue some kind of romanticized future as a strong, black woman with Africanist ideals. I did not want her to desire a "white man" and yet the fact that I felt so strongly about this perhaps says more about my own position as a white female researching the aspirations of young black women than it does about her. As Susan Bordo points out, "we always see from points of view that are invested with our social, political, and personal interests" (1990 p.140). Another voice note, recorded a month later, illuminates further expectations I did not initially realise I had for my participants:

Today someone mentioned Steve Biko⁵ for the first time and I got so excited! I dunno what I'd been thinking...had a part of me wanted to come here and have a little 'I write what I like'⁶ book club? Anyway, the teacher, Ma'am Morenga, mentioned him because she was telling a student off because his hair was too long. She said 'Do you think you are Steve Biko?' It wasn't exactly a political commentary. And the student didn't even know who he was. It's like no one cares

⁴ This is a reference to the novel *Americanah* (2013) written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

⁵ Steve Biko is a renowned anti-apartheid activist and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement.

⁶ *I write what I like* (1979) is a compilation of Biko's political writing.

about politics at all here and I know that is important data in itself and everything but I still am so surprised and if I'm honest, I'm a bit disappointed. Like, everyone is upset about the student university protests⁷, but not because they are upset about police brutality or unaffordable education. They say they are upset because they think the students are being uncivilised or something. They don't seem to get it. Or maybe they are just telling me that? Do they think that's what I'd want to hear? They told me today that they think Zuma⁸ should stay in power because if he doesn't there will be fighting in parliament. Wasn't South Africa built upon fighting in parliament?

The stark honesty of my voice notes contrasts considerably with my field notes, which prioritise recording “what happened” rather than “how I felt” about what happened. Before I spoke my thoughts aloud, I was not aware of them beyond a “fuzzy kind of knowing, that uneasiness that doesn't quite surface as attention” (Ahmed, 2010 p.xvii). While the same can be said about the process of writing, the temptation towards self-censorship is greater with the latter. The voice notes allowed me to express aspects of what I had been feeling that, as a novice researcher, I was uncomfortable to cement through a written articulation, given how “improper” it felt. While my epistemological orientation would imply that I have moved beyond the pursuit of seemingly objective and “professional” forms of knowledge production, years of traditional academic conditioning still unintentionally creep into my writing, causing me to alienate myself from myself in the pursuit of academic legitimacy.

My voice notes, many of which are erratic ramblings, are poignant reminders of a highly subjective response to a particular time, place and people. Their conversational tone, while cringe-worthy at times, is comforting in its lack of pretention, a literary posturing that often unexpectedly creeps into my diarising. By listening to these voice notes at a later stage of analysis, I have asked myself, what is it that I feel the students do not seem to “get?” What had I been looking for before I arrived, or perhaps more importantly, why had I been looking for it? Why was I disappointed that students were not politically engaged and not familiar with the figure of Steve Biko? How are my own political leanings shaping the questions I ask and my analysis of the answers I receive?

The Ethics of Intervention

As noted by Donna Luff, “listening to views, nodding or saying simple “umms” or “I see” to things that you strongly disagree with or, ordinarily, would strive to challenge... can feel personally very difficult and lead to questioning of the whole research agenda’ (in Duncombe and Jessop, 2002 p.11). Luff stresses that feminist researchers should reflect on both what is going on but also how they feel about such moments, as evidence of how aspects of women researchers’ “fractured” subjectivities and identities may sometimes mirror those of interviewees but, equally importantly, sometimes clash (Harding, 1987 p.8). In this way, listening to audio recordings that reflect my emotional responses to my research enabled me to engage in an epistemologically productive relationship with the different “selves” I demonstrated at varying stages during fieldwork. I can use these responses to reveal my own expectations of the research and to generate an understanding of how they might differ from the expectations of my participants. Feelings of

⁷ At the time of the research, there were widespread student protests in South Africa calling for the end of university fees.

⁸ At the time of the research, Jacob Zuma was the President of South Africa.

disappointment, as were experienced in my case, can reveal our own assumptions behind why we entered a particular environment, and our aspirations regarding what we hope to achieve by being there.

The literature on “doing rapport” often conveys the curious notion that interviewers are being trained to do what most women supposedly do “naturally” and “spontaneously” as a consequence of their gendered subordination and socialisation (Hey, 2000). Yet we often forget the multiple ways in which someone can be a “woman”, a realisation I made when I found my own ideals clashing considerably with those of my female participants. Whether the will to make a difference and enact “change” is a desirable consequence of feminist ethnography, and feminist research in general, is subject to debate. It is questionable as to whether feminist researchers have either the capacity or the right to attempt to transform their subjects’ lives.

Gillies and Alldred argue that at a fundamental level, a feminist researcher brings to the research her judgement or assumption that there is a need for social change – a principle that lies at the root of feminism (2002). This sentiment reflects a key strand of feminist research that aligns itself to “action research”, focusing on initiating a more direct form of change through a politicization of those taking part in the researching. This approach shares a similar rationale to the “conscious raising” associated with the late 1960s and 1970s women’s liberation movement in the West and seeks to breed insight, confidence and mutual support for research participants. Action research today has a precedent in Paulo Freire’s (1972) concept of “conscientization” – a process by which people “deepen awareness of their own sociocultural identity and their capacity to transform their lives” (Taylor, 1994 p.109). Where the aim is to raise consciousness, many feminists have agonized over whether politicizing participants is helpful to them, when it makes apparent the limitations on their autonomy or resources without actually challenging these limitations themselves (Birch, 1998).

While the notion of empowering women through research is appealing to many feminists, the associated ethical dimensions are complex. Simplistic ideas of participation and empowerment can be naively optimistic, obscuring aspects of the researcher’s power and responsibility (Gillies and Alldred, 2002). In addition, there is a risk that participants may feel further disempowered by the research due to their perceived inability to live up to raised expectations to forge meaningful change in their lives. It is also significant to note that participants living within contexts of adversity are likely to have construed particular defence and coping mechanisms. Approaching a research project with the aim of encouraging participants to “enlighten” themselves, may be simplistic and patronising, particularly given the volume of feminist research that is conducted by middle class academics on or for “working class” women (Gilles and Alldred, 2002). As Valerie Walkerdine asks: “What if a working class person sees and yet has myriad conscious and unconscious ways of dealing with or defending against the pains and contradictions produced out of her/his social and historical location?” (1996 p.149). For example, Acker et al. (1991) found in their study of women’s entry and re-entry into the labour force that female participants do not always share researchers’ desires for their emancipation. Certain interpretations or strategies regarded as counterproductive by the researcher may in fact make perfect sense from the participant’s point of view.

It is not difficult to accept this on a theoretical level, but there remains inevitable contradictions between what we “know” and what we “feel” during the process of research. In order to illustrate further my internal grappling with desires to “transform” the views of my female participants, I will provide an extract of a conversation with two of my research participants, as well as the voice note I recorded following this exchange. This conversation took place with two

young women in their final year of schooling, Lungi and Promise. It occurred towards the end of my eight months of fieldwork, over some chips shared at the local KFC⁹ in my field site.

- L: Fizz, is it true that some white people go to university when they are eighteen?*
F: Um... I suppose it's true...yah.
L: Wow! You guys are clever huh? We just get pregnant and stay in school forever!
(laughter)
P: I'm finishing this year! Even if it kills me. I can't be 22 and still in school.
L: It's so embarrassing hey. Have you ever seen a white person in school so late?
F: I'm sure some are...
P: No, you guys are so smart.
F: Um... Why do you think white people finish school earlier than black people you know?
P: I dunno.
L: I dunno.
P: Maybe because they have money?
F: Okay...so why do you think they have money?
P: Because they are brave. And they work hard.
L: Yah! And smart. And then when you guys get together, you stay together.
F: What makes you think that?
L: She watches too much television! (laughter)
P: No man, (wallops L playfully with her hand) you see it when you go to the mall. You can see the white people sitting together nicely and like, talking to each other and stuff. And they are so happy.
L: Because they have money!
P: Yah, they always have money.
F: Does it ever make you angry that they have money?
L: No, why would it?
P: They work hard!

This account is one of many that illustrate the particular perceptions my participants had concerning a “white” and “black” existence in post-apartheid South Africa. It also shows a lack of socio-historical understanding regarding the inequality that pervades the country, despite its two decades of democracy. While the conversation speaks volumes in itself, it was listening to the personal recording that I made later that same day which has caused me to reflect critically upon the scene:

Ah no one seems to have any understanding of apartheid history! It freaks me out that they have these ingrained notions of white superiority and black inferiority! It's like all of Fanon's¹⁰ predictions playing out before me. And then I don't know how I'm supposed to respond. Like the other day when Indie said she had never heard the word “apartheid.” If I explain it, what am I doing? It's like I'm getting too involved...and then shaping the data even more than I already am. But it's so difficult to just listen to the girls speak like this. I keep trying to ask them

⁹ Reference to popular fast food chain – Kentucky Fried Chicken.

¹⁰ Reference to revolutionary post-colonial philosopher, Frantz Fanon.

questions that make them question what they are saying but maybe that's even too much.

It is significant to mention here that my research is not “action oriented” and yet, despite making that decision when framing the study, I could not prevent my personal desires for “transformation” inform how I approached each interaction and how I subsequently analysed what I saw and was told. As Kvale notes, there is an important distinction between “qualitative research” interviews whose aim is to gather knowledge and “therapeutic interviews” that attempt to change subjects’ lives (in Duncombe and Jessop, 2002 p.7). “Close personal rapport may lead to the research interview moving into a quasi-therapeutic interview” and indeed “some individuals may (deliberately) turn the interview into therapy” (Kvale, 1992 pp.149, 155). While in this case Kvale is referring to the matter by which research participants may hijack the interview and turn it into a therapy session, when I listened to the aforementioned voice note I recognised how in fact it was me who was desiring to turn my interactions into a therapy session, not my participants. While it is arguable that I could have recorded such musings through a written diary, experience has told me that the laborious process of writing about one’s response to the day meant the omission of potentially valuable perceptions, as well as imposed structural boundaries on the spontaneity of my expression. A solely written reflection would have also meant the exclusion of tone, which was pertinent in conveying the extent of my frustration and opening up the space for me to reflect upon why I was responding in such a way.

Conclusion

While this paper has argued that listening to voice notes can increase researcher’s self-awareness, critical reflection is in itself limited given that “we cannot free ourselves from the social constraints on our knowing and a high level of self-awareness might not be possible” (Scharff, 2010 p.91). Even the greatest degree of self-scrutiny cannot rid the research context of power relations; yet researchers should not wish away such tensions, but rather acknowledge their limitations as a feature of research itself (Cairns, 2009). As noted in the introduction to this paper, feminist social science has been instrumental in arguing for such situated research, acknowledging that it is impossible to keep interpretations free from our own projections (Walkerdine et al, 2002). When feminist ethnographers draw upon post-structural approaches to ethnography, they can take solace from recognising, in Davies’ words, that “data” does not stand as transparent evidence of what is real and that any tale told is merely one of many possible depictions (2004 p. 5).

In this paper, I have argued that the recording of voice notes conveys the experiences of fieldwork with greater immediacy than the fieldwork diary can allow. Underlying this is the difference between voice, which reflects the raw emotionality of tone and spontaneity of unstructured speech, and written words, which may be unintentionally subject to the writer’s desire for narrative coherence. However given that not all researchers may feel comfortable or able to utilise this method in a reflective and productive manner, it should be seen as an additional method to promote reflexivity, rather than as a replacement of the more traditional fieldwork diary.

Drawing upon my own experiences of recording voice notes, I have demonstrated how the re-playing and reflecting on such voice notes can provide the researcher with greater insight into how they are composing their “tales” from the field. In recognition of ethnography as comprising both process and a product, I have taken seriously a regard for post-structural ethnographic research practice that attends to the “archaeology of construction” and “sedimentary grounds of

ethnographic authority” (Britzman, 1995 p. 231). If the value of a feminist imagination lies in part in its ability to elucidate the “messy and bumpy textures of the terrains we traverse in ethnography,” (Wheatley, 1994 p. 413) the recording of voice notes provides an additional means for feminist ethnographers to confront the messiness of conducting research. This can help researchers “speak back” to themselves in order to produce meaningful and reflexive work.

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