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## GENDER, ETHICS AND EMPOWERMENT: DILEMMAS OF DEVELOPMENT FIELDWORK

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**Synopsis** — For students and academics involved with development studies, fieldwork is often a critical aspect of the research process. This process, however, can give rise to a plethora of ethical dilemmas relating to power gradients between the researcher and the researched. Combined with this are complex issues of knowledge generation, ownership and exploitation. The sensitivity of these issues may be intensified when involving women as research participants. Ethical issues regarding the validity and effectiveness of cross-cultural and cross-gendered fieldwork in Third World contexts are explored in this article, with examples drawn from recent research practice. Following this review is a critical discussion concerning whether there is potential for the fieldwork process to be empowering for research participants. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Ethical issues abound in the area of development studies fieldwork. England (1994) warns us that “. . . fieldwork might actually expose the researched to greater risk and might be more intrusive and potentially more exploitative than more traditional methods”, further emphasising that “. . . exploitation and possibly betrayal are endemic to fieldwork” (p. 85). These statements raise the question of whether or not it is appropriate for privileged Western researchers to carry out research outside of their own cultures, a question which we delve into in the course of this article. Madge (1993) also argues that we, as academics, “. . . have not yet adequately explored the power relations, inequalities and injustices” upon which differences between ourselves and those we research is based (p. 297). In addition to considering these ethical issues of cross-cultural research, this article also explores a perhaps more controversial issue, cross-gendered research, and will specifically consider whether men should conduct research with Third World women.<sup>1</sup> Interesting ethical issues which arise in relation to other areas of difference, such as erotic subjectivity in the field

(see e.g. Kulick & Wilson, 1995) are beyond the focus of this article.

Implicit in the following analysis is an assumption that the sensitivity of ethical issues is often intensified when carrying out research involving women in the Third World as key participants. Many researchers are aware of the need to consult women, especially because past research efforts so often ignored women or misrepresented them, and such misinformation was often used to inform development policy and practice (Rogers, 1978; Tomm, 1989). While we, the authors, hold completely with the importance of consulting women, we also acknowledge the difficulties that are often associated with this consultative process. It may, for instance, be very difficult for the researcher to gain access to women, partly because women are extremely busy, and time to sit and talk may be restricted to the late evenings when it may not be appropriate, or practical, for a researcher to visit women's homes. In addition, women are rarely given roles as official spokespersons for a community thus they are not the first people outsiders are likely to encounter. Women's freedom in pub-

lic domains may also be constrained, meaning it is unlikely that they will attend community meetings, or, if they do, they will sit quietly at the back rather than expressing their opinions or asking questions. The notion that only certain individuals are qualified to speak out in public exists in many Third World contexts. Because women have been consulted so little in the past, there may be genuine surprise and suspicion in the minds of community leaders if a researcher asks to speak to women.

Even when means are found of talking to women, many may be reluctant to express themselves in front of an outsider due to low self-esteem. As noted by Keesing (1985), a sense of inadequacy can certainly influence what women will tell a researcher about themselves:

Reflexive autobiography is possible only when subjects believe that their own lives are important enough to deserve recounting, and when social support is provided. . . . If a people's dominant ideologies, expressions of male political hegemony, define what women know and do as secondary and unimportant, then creating a context where women can and will talk about themselves and their partly separate realms of life and expertise may indeed be difficult. . . . (p. 37)

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that a researcher working with women in a traditional society in Papua New Guinea found that most women preferred interview sessions at night, in contexts where they could ensure the lighting was dim. Some women admitted to the researcher that they felt more relaxed under these circumstances than they would during the day as they did not want him to look at their faces or to identify who was talking (Lagisa, 1997).

Lastly, development research with women can also be sensitive if it reveals aspects of women's disadvantage. Critical research examining issues such as gender inequities in household decision-making or the impacts of an agricultural extension programme on men and women, for example, can inherently challenge the status quo. If the purpose of such research is made public, it may upset power brokers within a society and others who benefit from women's disadvantaged position.

Difficulties in conducting fieldwork with

women should not provide an excuse, however, for researchers to avoid engaging in such research. It is possible to create contexts in which either socially repressed, introverted or less accessible women are willing to open up their private worlds to view (Keesing, 1985). As long as researchers are informed of and sensitive to local socio-cultural contexts, the difficulties discussed above can often be overcome, and women can become very willing participants:

For people who do not usually have the opportunity to voice their concerns, research can be very positive and enabling in itself because it can encourage such people to articulate their needs. (Pratt & Loizos, 1992, p. 17)

Next, this article examines why power gradients between the researcher and the researched have been the focus of much academic attention in recent times, and considers the soul-searching which has been required on the part of Western researchers planning to conduct fieldwork in Third World contexts.

### WHO SPEAKS FOR WHOM?

#### *Power gradients between the researcher and the researched*

Since the early 1980s, challenging questions have been directed at geographers, social anthropologists, sociologists and others who carry out social research in Third World contexts. Post-development commentators such as Escobar (1995), for example, criticise the way in which development discourse has been constructed so as to legitimate the voices of Western 'experts' while undermining those of local people. More specifically, England (1994) asks ". . . can we incorporate the voices of 'others' without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination?" (p. 81). While there are no simple answers to such questions, they have forced Western researchers to be more accountable, especially in the light of past experiences in which much research has been of no benefit at all for the country or communities concerned. According to Lather (1988, p. 570), in the worst cases, 'rape research' has occurred whereby exploitative methods of inquiry have been used exclusively

in the interests of the researcher's own career. As a consequence of this:

Leaders of Pacific states and Aboriginal movements are concerned to monitor and restrict foreign researchers and to ensure the research benefits more than the researchers themselves. There is a prevalent resentment of what is seen as a cultural imperialism persisting past decolonisation . . . [thus] Pacific scholars have been forced to re-examine both the relevance of their work and their right to do it. (Jolly & MacIntyre, 1989, p. 17)

It is still the case that local voices are seldom heard commenting on development policy or contributing to mainstream development planning in many Third World contexts. Debates which have consequently emerged over power relations between the researcher and the researched, and the dominance of Westerners as researchers of 'other' people's cultures, have thus been long overdue. Such debates have drawn attention to the voices of more marginalised people and "dislodged the smugness of much feminist and anti-racist scholarship" (Kobayashi, 1994, p. 74). Post-colonial feminist writers including Mohanty (1988) and Spivak (1987) have been particularly vigilant in drawing attention to issues concerning the politics of representation of women of the Third World in texts produced by Western researchers. Wolf (1996, p. 32), talks about the 'discomfort' that researchers have consequently felt during fieldwork and in the post-fieldwork context. A crisis of legitimacy has thus affected both male and female Western researchers who have been forced to reconsider their role in the research process in Third World contexts in recent years.

#### *Responses to the crisis of legitimacy facing Western researchers*

Perhaps the most dramatic way in which researchers have chosen to respond to the crisis of legitimacy is to simply abandon development research. As noted by Kobayashi (1994), debates over who has the right to research whom, and therefore who has the right to speak for whom, have:

. . . led some academic women—and men—to withdraw completely from research that

might place them in territory to which they have no social claim, or that might put in question their credentials for social representation. (p. 74)

A second response, often associated with the first, has been to adopt a relativist perspective which privileges the knowledge and understanding of those from Third World countries. This sometimes involves the sorts of claims identified by Wolf (1996), for example, that:

. . . only those who are of a particular race or ethnic group can study or understand others in a similar situation, or that only those who are women of color or lesbian can generate antiracist or antihomophobic insights. (p. 13)

This viewpoint has also been criticised, however, on the basis that it is excessively romantic to posit that only indigenous people are competent to speak on the social issues affecting their countries (Goodman, 1985), or that only a woman, a person of colour or a homosexual can carry out justice-inspiring research on, respectively, other women, people of colour or homosexuals:

To assume that 'insiders' automatically have a more sophisticated and appropriate approach to understanding social reality in 'their' society is to fall into the fallacy of Third Worldism, and a potentially reactionary relativism. (Sidaway, 1992, p. 406)

McDowell (1992) further warns researchers against adopting the postmodern position whereby "any viewpoint is as valid as another" (p. 413). As argued by Sayer and Storper (1997), this type of relativism ". . . licenses dogmatism while appearing to let a hundred flowers bloom, for it allows each to disqualify the criticism of others by claiming that there are no common grounds for argument" (p. 5).

Romanticising or privileging Third World knowledge does not solve the ethical problems of cross-cultural research because it allows the Western researcher to ignore their own responsibilities. As Radcliffe (1994) explains:

. . . disclaiming the right to speak about/with Third World women acts . . . to justify an abdication of responsibility with regard to global relations of privilege and authority which

are granted, whether we like it or not, to First World women (and men). . . . (p. 28)

Another response to the crisis of legitimacy has been for researchers to continue with development fieldwork as always, while seeking to redress inequities in the post-fieldwork stage by, for example, sharing authorship with local people or giving them editorial power over final works (Staehele & Lawson, 1994; Wolf, 1996). The suggestion has also been made that Western researchers should support publication of the writing of marginalised groups within Third World countries by, for example, assisting them to obtain the necessary funding (Reinharz with Davidman, 1992).

While the last response does offer some positive suggestions, the other responses to the crisis of legitimacy facing Western researchers fail to consider the potential *value* of cross-cultural and cross-gendered research, instead focusing on potentially harmful aspects of such research. Two ethical dilemmas are examined below in an attempt to highlight explicitly how potentially contentious forms of research may in fact be valuable.

### **ETHICAL DILEMMA ONE: IS IT INAPPROPRIATE FOR MEN TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH THIRD WORLD WOMEN?**

The main question considered in this section is whether gender should determine if an individual should carry out research with Third World women. Oakley (1981) argues that shared gender encourages respondents to respond freely and openly to a female researcher. Similarly, Nancy Hartsock devised standpoint theory which proposed that “. . . due to women’s position within the sexual division of labor and sexist oppression, in general, women would have greater insights as researchers into the lives of other women” (Wolf, 1996, p. 13). Hartsock’s theory is based on the argument that our actions and understanding of the world are based on our social experiences (Hartsock, 1987). Both Hartsock’s and Oakley’s writing would thus suggest that it is more appropriate for women to conduct research with other women. This rests upon the assumption that because of something as basic as gender, one is either an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ with respect to the research process.

Supporters of such a thesis may assume that men cannot effectively study women, particularly in Third World contexts where strict sex-role stereotypes and clear divisions of men’s and women’s domains often prevail: “. . . in many developing countries the world of women is not open to men so that translating the needs and desires of women into research problems and vice versa can best be done by women” (Boesveld, 1986, p. 46). Sollis and Moser (1991), also suggest that in gender-segregated societies where there is sensitive information to collect about women it is best to use a female researcher.

In some ways research on women’s empowerment in the Solomon Islands by one of the authors of this article supports these findings:

If I had been a man arriving in a village to study women’s groups . . . it is most likely that I would have been treated with suspicion and it would have taken longer to build up the trust of participants in my research, and their husbands. Sexual jealousy appears to be common in parts of the Solomon Islands. . . . As a man it would have also been almost impossible for me to conduct interviews with individual women unless I remained well within the public eye and this would have precluded me from walking alone with a woman to her gardens or talking with her alone in her cookhouse or home. I was expected to eat with, bath with, sleep with and wash my clothes with the women of the village. Many such opportunities for informal research and insights into women’s lives would have been lost to men trying to do the same research. (Scheyvens, 1995, p. 111)

Similarly, Reinharz (1992) suggests that women interviewing women “. . . is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (p. 19). But do these authors suggest that there is no place for men in conducting research with Third World women? Indeed, if a man carries out interviews and then interprets the findings which are later published in a report, does this constitute ‘men speaking for women’? Is a man able to access women’s opinions and remain true to the meanings of their dialogue in his written work?

Such challenging questions have led to reluctance on the part of many male researchers

to directly engage in research with Third World women. Some have changed their research topics accordingly, while others have employed female research assistants to conduct the necessary research with women. When Philip Hewitt, a New Zealander, conducted research for his Master's dissertation on the socio-economic effects on women, their families and community, of the women's formal employment in a fish canning factory in Fiji, he found that he was able to gather information more easily when accompanied by his wife. This, he stated:

... proved to be an excellent way of being accepted by both men and women in the village. Local people could relate to my "family" which was a very important part of their lives. It also established a conversation point about important parts of the data I was trying to gather in terms of their families and lifestyles (personal communication, Hewitt, 1998).

In other cases, however, males have effectively carried out research with Third World women on their own. One example is research for a Masters thesis which was carried out in Lihir, Papua New Guinea (PNG), by a male PNG student from a New Zealand university. While the student, Leonard Lagisa, was not from Lihir and thus did not speak the local language or understand all of the people's cultural traditions, he was from the broader New Guinea Islands region in which Lihir is located, and both his society and Lihirian society are matrilineal.

In Lihir, Lagisa examined women's involvement in decision-making regarding a major mining project which was in its construction phase, and considered the initial impacts of the mining development on women's lives. Most of Lagisa's research with women consisted of group interviews, as it would have aroused suspicion had he attempted to talk alone with village women with whom he was not formally acquainted. Many of the women were quite shy and were not used to talking with those from outside their village area; however, they participated actively in these interview sessions, somewhat to the surprise of Lagisa. As he later reflected, this may have been due to the fact that they felt he could help them to overcome some of the disadvantages they were facing:

In hindsight, it appears that the women responded a lot more openly to me than I had thought they would because they saw me as an authority figure, as someone with access to authorities, who could help to alleviate the problems they faced. In this way, being a man may have actually assisted in gathering information. (Lagisa, 1997, p. 104)

It appears that the female participants felt Lagisa could influence Lihir Management Corporation (LMC) mining officials:

The thing that struck me most during my interview sessions with them [Lihirian women] was their interest in wanting to know what I would do with the information I was collecting from them. I tried my best to make them understand that my research was strictly educational but I promised them that I would write a special report which I would send to LMC in the hope that they would act upon it. Lihir women were clearly interested in changing their disadvantaged position and they hoped that my research would, in some way, help to achieve this. (Lagisa, 1997, p. 106)

In addition, Lagisa's position as a man helped him to gain insights into local gender relations and male perceptions of females, especially through participant observation. When staying with one family, for example, he witnessed an argument between a woman and her husband, which occurred when the wife, an employee of LMC, came home late. The husband was upset that food was not ready; thus he scolded his wife, saying:

What sort of work do you people do that you come home this late? Do you remember that we have children to look after? Tell whoever your boss is to remember that some of you are mothers and should come home early to cook for the family . . . if you come home late again I will come and physically abuse you and your boss (cited in Lagisa, 1997, pp. 158–159).

This provided a poignant reminder to Lagisa of the burden of the double day, which female employees of the mining company faced, and the ways in which men's attitudes impeded women's development. Lagisa felt that it was unlikely that the man quoted above would

have spoken to his wife in this way, however, had the researcher staying with them been female or from a foreign country. This assertion is supported by the experiences of Scheyvens (1995), who, during three months fieldwork in the Solomon Islands involving stays in the homes of a number of families in different villages, never witnessed a domestic dispute. For another male researcher, Allen Abramson (1993), a European who conducted ethnographic research in a chiefdom in eastern Fiji, insights into women's worlds were only gained when an illness confined him to the house, thus subverting local efforts to limit the focus of his fieldwork to his gender.

Hence, while it has been drawn to our attention that "Male and female interviewers will not necessarily see or be allowed to see the same social worlds" (Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers, 1984, p. 135), this should not necessarily be interpreted as meaning that men will not be able to conduct effective research with women (Harding, 1987, p. 11). Neither should it be assumed that women researchers will be able to build better rapport than men with female participants, or that they will be likely to gather more meaningful data. Restricted access to certain domains should certainly not deter men from engaging in sensitive research projects in which consulting women on their ideas, knowledge and experiences is vital. Not only is it possible for male researchers to talk to women in many circumstances, there may actually be advantages in having male researchers working with Third World women, listening to their ideas and exposing information on gender roles and relations.

**ETHICAL DILEMMA TWO:  
IS RESEARCH BY OUTSIDE WOMEN  
ON THIRD WORLD WOMEN  
NECESSARILY EXPLOITATIVE?**

While Hartsock's standpoint theory, described above, suggests that women are in a better position than men to conduct research with other women, this idea has been heavily criticised in recent times. If we reject essentialist notions about the 'natural' inferiority of women, then we must also reject essentialist notions that it is 'naturally' more appropriate for women to study women's situation. Standpoint theory has been criticised, in particular, for failing to recognise

arenas of difference other than gender, including ethnicity, class, age and sexual preference.

In a similar vein, Western feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were criticised for making arrogant assumptions that their concerns were the concerns of all women around the globe (Reinharz, 1992). Consequently, the notion of a global sisterhood has been seriously challenged:

The non-patriarchal question feminists need to ask is of course 'who is my sister?'. Is there genuinely a sisterhood within which an ultimate empathy resides. . . . Quite simply class, ethnic, age and sexual orientation factors fundamentally undermine such a cosy epistemologically essentialist and politically liberal standpoint. (Powell, 1996, p. 7)

Subsequently, some feminist women of colour have challenged "... the authority of white, middle-class women to represent them, designating as racist the claims of feminists with more power to speak for those who remain on the margins" (Kobayashi, 1994, p. 74). This leads us to our second ethical dilemma: Is it appropriate for Western women to conduct research with Third World women as participants?

In 1997, one of the authors of this article, Helen Leslie, went from New Zealand to El Salvador to conduct research on women's experiences of the recent civil war and the work of a local feminist organisation for political action in assisting women to reconstruct their identities through the memories of such experiences. She had expected that her presence would be more of a hindrance than of any assistance to both individual women and the organisation itself. Her main activities included participation in self-help groups facilitated by the organisation and conducting in-depth interviews with individual women participants of the self-help groups. Often her experiences participating in the groups and conducting interviews were very emotional, as many of the women spoke of their experiences of extreme hardship. Many carried the guilt of the loss of family members and their inability to care for their children during war-time crises, such as *guindas* or flights, where they were forced to hide out in the mountains in an attempt to save their own and their families' lives. During one such *guinda* a woman interviewed had lost her small baby due to starvation.

While some commentators would warn of the inappropriateness of cross-cultural research which intrudes on women's personal lives, the reactions Leslie (1999) received from her research participants would not suggest that they had negative feelings about her research:

Before leaving for El Salvador I had read a great deal of literature on feminist research methods which often led me to doubt both the appropriateness of my proposed research and my own ability to offer something worthwhile to participants in the research process. Such was my angst, that at times, I felt that perhaps it would be a better idea to call the whole thing off!—I was extremely surprised and I must admit delighted to find that once I reached El Salvador that most of my worries dissipated. Without exception, all the women I had contact with during the course of my fieldwork were extremely welcoming and happy to help me with my research. When I first introduced the idea of conducting in-depth interviews with the women of one self-help group I had been observing over a period of 3 months, I could not believe the reaction. A party atmosphere prevailed as the group participants worked out the logistics of my visits to their homes. They all commented during the course of the subsequent interviews that they found it very special that I had come from so far away to listen to the stories of their lives. One participant felt that I was giving her the opportunity to portray the reality of life in El Salvador. The Salvadoran government, she stated, "tells so many lies."

In hindsight, I realised that I did have something to offer my research participants and that one should not necessarily assume that feminist treatises on the exploitative nature of cross cultural research will apply in all contexts and with differing research projects. I realised that the factors most important to my research participants in as far as my being there was concerned, had little or nothing to do with my 'positionality' but more with my ability to engage with and participate in the 'family' they had formed through their self-help experiences. (Leslie, 1997)

When conducting research on women's em-

powerment in the Solomon Islands, Scheyvens faced a similar dilemma as to whether she had anything of value to offer the research participants. The following passage describes the discomfort Scheyvens felt at first when staying in villages with members of women's groups who expected her to be able to teach them practical handicraft skills:

During my first village stay I almost wished I had learned some form of craft to share with the women. I soon realised, however, how important it was to tell the women that I was not there to teach them anything and neither was I going to offer them any money for projects; clearly I did not fit into the mould set by European women who had come before me. Rather, I was there to learn from them because their knowledge and experiences were of interest to me. (Scheyvens, 1995, p. 104)

In this case, the women had rarely, if ever, been consulted by outsiders and they also felt self-doubt, worrying that they had nothing worthwhile to tell the foreign woman sitting before them. It was hoped, by reiterating that they did have knowledge to share (skills in agriculture, raising children, collecting shellfish, administering traditional medicines, holding feasts, and so forth), that the women's importance as active and vital members of their society would be affirmed.

The examples from El Salvador and the Solomon Islands show that fieldwork conducted by Western women need not be a negative experience for Third World women participants, a notion also supported by Martha Macintyre's work with the Tubetube island people in Papua New Guinea. During her fieldwork, Macintyre (1993) found that the differences that existed between herself and the women with whom she lived, created a bond between them whereby ". . . [her] interest in their culture and work was matched by their interest in [hers]" (p. 59). Macintyre thus argues against the kind of moral relativism inherent in the current debates on feminist cross-cultural research, stressing that they are ". . . potentially reactionary, as they preclude the definition of either oppression or liberation" (p. 61).

Another problem with the idea that research between Western and Third World women is always exploitative is that this incor-

rectly assumes Third World women have no power. The reality is that researchers rarely hold all of the power in the research process. Respondents can, for example, exercise control by withholding information from the researcher, failing to cooperate or refusing to answer questions (Cotterill, 1992). In addition, they may use language as a means of controlling the responses they give to the researcher. For example, in the Solomon Islands, where there are approximately 70 local languages, Scheyvens (1995) typically used the lingua franca, *pigin*, to ask questions of groups of women. Women would then discuss their response in their own language, often for several minutes, before delivering back their 'official', often one line, answer in *pigin*. In such cases, it may be that the women actually felt some comfort that Scheyvens did not speak their language, as this allowed them to express themselves freely without their views being officially recorded. Then, if they wished, they could deliver a sanitised, or otherwise altered, version of their actual opinions.

In light of these interesting turns on ethical dilemmas discussed above, we consider below the potential of research which crosses the bounds of one's own identity before examining the question, can participation in research projects be an empowering experience for Third World women?

### THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF RESEARCH WHICH CROSSES THE BOUNDS OF ONE'S OWN IDENTITY

The above discussion has argued that cross-cultural and cross-gendered research with Third World women need not be ethically inappropriate. Thus we concur with Kobayashi (1994), who argues that:

... the question of "who speaks for whom?" cannot be answered upon the slippery slope of what personal attributes—what color, what gender, what sexuality—legitimize our existence, but on the basis of our history of involvement, and on the basis of understanding how difference is constructed and used as a political tool. (p. 78)

Issues such as how well informed, how politically aware and how sensitive the researcher is, to the topic in question and to the local con-

text, would therefore seem a more pertinent means of judging suitability to conduct research with women of the Third World than an essentialising characteristic, such as sex or nationality. Unfortunately, however, efforts to highlight the need for "... greater consideration of the role of the (multiple) 'self', showing how a researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the 'data'..." (Madge, 1993, p. 294), have served to make the researcher wary, rather than drawing attention to the potential value of research which crosses the bounds of the researcher's own identity.

It is important that social science students and academics conducting research in the Third World realise the potential value of research which crosses the bounds of one's own culture, sex, class, age and other categories of social positioning. One reason for this, as noted by Shaw (1995), is that "... there is much to be gained through cross-cultural exchange, in that structural problems between North and South cannot be solved by the South alone" (p. 96). Potter (1993) takes this point further:

The value of Third World research should be clear for all to see in an interdependent world in which rich and poor, rural and urban, formal and informal are the opposite sides of the same coin. . . . there is vast potential for enlightened outsider research. . . . (p. 294)

Reinharz (1992) comments on the way that a lack of cross-cultural research impedes our understanding of complex development issues. She feels that the limited vision presented in past accounts by Western feminists should not mean that only Third World women should study their own society, as this would "... legitimize Western feminist ethnocentrism by stating that women should study their own society only rather than learn about other societies" (p. 121). Similarly, Sidaway (1992) claims that, "Research in/of 'other' cultures and societies . . . offers a counter to universalistic and ethnocentric views. It is the enemy of parochialism . . . [and it] may pose challenges to frameworks and assumptions developed in the core" (pp. 406–407).

Other commentators have noted there may



be value in presenting a diversity of perspectives on a particular problem (Amadiume, 1993). Tixier y Vigil and Elsasser, for example, proved that when interviewing Chicana subjects, a Chicana woman had access to certain information not available to an outside woman, but that the reverse was also true (cited in Wolf, 1996, p. 15). 'Native' researchers, Back (1993) and Amadiume (1993), noted similarly that, when studying their cultures of origin, their shared backgrounds did not prevent them from often feeling emotionally and politically set apart from the people they studied. In addition, Pratt and Loizos (1992) have rejected the argument that only lower class people can research issues impacting on the poor.

If we support the logic that a multiplicity of perspectives can be valuable in developing a detailed understanding of complex development issues, we should also attempt to even up the imbalance which has seen Third World peoples positioned as guinea pigs to be examined in Western research projects, with little interaction occurring in the opposite direction. Thus, according to McDowell (1992, p. 407), it is not sufficient that researchers are 'reflexive', acknowledging their situatedness in relation to the research project and how, for example, their relative privilege may influence the research process and outcomes. Rather, researchers should actively promote opportunities for the less privileged to undertake research with the privileged. Supporting such a stance is Sidaway (1992), who argues that the vitality of geography as a discipline would be, "... enhanced in a world where Third World geographers came in large numbers to conduct research of 'exotic' and 'different' European and North American societies" (p. 407). Doubtless his comments could be extended to include social anthropology, sociology, economics and other disciplines concerned with development studies.

### **CAN RESEARCH BE AN EMPOWERING PROCESS FOR THIRD WORLD WOMEN PARTICIPANTS?**

Some commentators are now starting to suggest that participation in the research process can actually be an empowering experience for research participants, especially those who face significant social disadvantage. Cotterill (1992), for example, suggests research can be

therapeutic, and Opie (1992) claims that this is especially true if interviewers encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and to understand how the system which disadvantages them can be challenged. England (1994) also supports this viewpoint with the acknowledgment that, "... many of the women whom I have interviewed told me that they found the exercise quite cathartic and that it enabled them to reflect on and re-evaluate their life experiences" (p. 85).

Opie (1992) also argues that feminist research can empower through seeking the opinions of the socially marginalised, because this assumes they can contribute to the description and analysis of a social issue. Gluck suggests that interviews can increase women's self-esteem by affirming their self-worth (cited in Wolf, 1996, p. 25), while Acker, Barry, and Essesveld (1991) posit that interviews can raise some women's consciousness, leading to their emancipation. Thus, where research projects seek to elicit and project previously silenced voices, and provide information with which participants can change their own lives, they can also facilitate empowerment of women:

Sensitive research can help give the voiceless a voice. Participatory research can sometimes lead to actions which break with tradition, and in doing so it may be empowering for groups involved. (Pratt & Loizos, 1992, p. 17)

Scheyvens (1995) found that the most effective way of facilitating the empowerment of the women in groups which she interviewed in the Solomon Islands was to share ideas of other women's groups, and women's activities around the Pacific, with them. This was perhaps particularly pertinent because in the Solomon Islands around 80% of the population is rural, living in small, scattered villages with poor communication links:

I shared with them the experience of other women's groups throughout the country and also some overseas groups known for their innovative development work with women. For example, I described a group in Malaita where a woman with Standard Five education was holding literacy classes for thirty women in her village. I also informed women of training opportunities, for example, a six week Women and Agriculture course which

required only a basic level of English literacy. Women were also interested to hear of initiatives from neighbouring Pacific Island countries, for example, the establishment of a Women's Crisis Centre in Suva which provided a refuge for battered women and their children. I found that sharing stories about sensitive issues such as wife-beating gave the women an opportunity to open up and talk about their own situation, even when the discussion was only among themselves. Thus conscientisation became part of many discussions and meetings. . . . (Schevvens, 1995, p. 117)

Leslie also sought to empower women in her research project by using the interview process as a way of giving participants the opportunity for further reflection on, and thus redefinition of, their gendered experiences of the war:

I hadn't really considered the therapeutic value of my in-depth interviews with participants, but as I began to conduct my interviews it became apparent that they were, in fact, constructed as having therapeutic value to the women. Many experiences which were considerably traumatic for participants were recounted in the course of the interview process and these would induce much emotion on the part of the participants, my research assistant and myself. Some time for reflection on gender issues raised in the self-help groups was also part of the interview should the participant desire it and these opportunities, along with the process of expressing emotion, often resulted in women feeling that a great burden had been lifted off their shoulders in terms, for example, of the guilt they felt for transgressing society's notions of the role of a 'good' mother during the conflict. The therapeutic nature of my in-depth interviews was highlighted to me when the facilitator returned, after a break of three weeks and apologised for her absence and thus the lack of opportunity for the women to work through pressing issues. She was met with this statement by some of the women: 'That's no problem because we talked to Helen and Natalia [my research assistant] about it all'. (Leslie, 1997)

Can the giving of knowledge to another, or the providing of space for reflection make a difference, however, in a word where power

relations are most often given in favour of the researcher? In recent years, this unproblematised view of empowerment as the 'giving of power' has begun to be questioned. It has been suggested for example, that the notion of 'giving power' reinforces neo-colonial discourse of the powerless Third World woman (Mohanty, 1988; Rahnema, 1992). The giving of power to another 'individual' also ignores the social and political contexts in which power relations are rooted. Thus, while a person may feel a sense of empowerment, this does not always equate with an actual increase in power (Riger, 1993).

The aforementioned examples of empowerment have not been made, therefore, in an attempt to deny the potential for exploitation in the research process: empowering methodologies alone will not dissolve the power relations which exist between researcher and participants. However, the examples should show that it is simplistic to see cross-cultural and cross-gendered research as being an inherently uni-directional, exploitative process.

### **CONCLUSION: CAN ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN CROSS-GENDERED AND CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH BE RESOLVED?**

Ethical issues which arise in relation to cross-cultural and cross-gendered fieldwork situations deserve to be pondered and questioned seriously by all scholars of development studies. Criticisms from postmodern discourse have played an important role in alerting researchers to potentially exploitative relationships that can develop with their research participants. These warnings should not, however, necessarily deter male or female researchers from Western countries from engaging in development fieldwork in the Third World as this could seriously undermine the potential for research to broaden our understanding of complex development issues.

As Sayer and Storper (1997) argue, criticism of 'others' is only a bad thing if the criticism is based on a lack of understanding of the 'other' (p. 5). External criticism can be both relevant and helpful. What is essential is that those studied should not merely be seen as a source of data through which a researcher can further his or her career; the researcher should be accountable, reflexive, and research should

be a two-way process of interaction (Elson, 1991).

Finally, it should be acknowledged that in general: "Locals remember researchers and 'learn' from them through their personal relationships—not their monographs" (Wilson, 1992, p. 189). Genuine respect for local people and customs, flexibility in the research design, a sense of humour, and a willingness to share one's own experiences and knowledge with research participants, are all critical if cross-cultural and cross-gendered understanding is to be enhanced through the research process.

### ENDNOTE

1. The term 'Third World' is used, as intended by Alfred Sauvy who coined the term, to suggest a world which is "excluded from its proper role in the world by two other worlds", not to imply that it is in any way inferior (Hadjor, 1992, p. 10). The term 'Third World women' is used here reluctantly, however, and as little as possible, because it suggests a false homogeneity (Mohanty, 1988, p. 77).

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