

# Encyclopedia of Gender and Society

## Feminist Ethnography

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Feminist ethnography is a research methodology, a theory about how research should proceed. Its principal method is observational research conducted over time and motivated by a commitment to women. Social scientists use feminist ethnography to uncover how gender operates within different societies.

Beyond this common pursuit and commitment, a wide range of interpretations of feminist ethnography exists. To understand this, one must look at the historical development of ethnography in general and of feminist ethnography in particular and trace the debates about whether a feminist ethnography is possible. Broadly, since the 1970s a shift has occurred from seeing feminist ethnography as on-the-ground research by, about, and for women to understanding it as diverse written constructions of gendered experiences. What emerges is not a single feminist ethnography but many different versions, as described in this entry.

## Defining Ethnography

The ethnographic method originated in anthropology in the mid-19th century and developed into its most characteristic form during the 20th century, when sociologists joined anthropologists in adopting it. Essentially, ethnography involves immersion in a social context with the purpose of collecting, and then recounting in an intelligible way, descriptive data concerning the world of the people being studied. Ethnography is a relational experience, and fieldworkers aim to understand the social setting from the perspective of those with whom they spend time. The method of data collection is often called “participant observation”: The researcher observes the life of the group under investigation by participating in it. In the process, the researcher comes to understand the group's underlying beliefs and assumptions and must negotiate a position as both outsider and insider. The term *ethnography* refers to both *process* (the act of doing research) and *product* (the written account of the research that is produced when fieldwork is complete). Anthropologists have generally carried out ethnographic research in non-Western settings, and sociologists have adopted the method for use in the West. Subsequently, other subject areas including nursing studies, geography, communication studies, and religious studies have embraced ethnographic methods. Ethnography has also diversified, with contemporary forms

including cyber-ethnography, photographic ethnography, and the autobiographical form autoethnography.

[p. 309 ↓ ]

## Overview

Notwithstanding some antecedents, feminist ethnographic research originates principally from the contributions of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In anthropology, feminist ethnography operates both as a new area of research and as a critique of the discipline's tendency to exclude women from field analyses or to present them in reductive ways. Feminist ethnography is part of the larger challenge that feminism posed to positivist social research, in which researchers approach the setting logically, objectively, and with predetermined criteria for measurement. Feminists instead tended to advocate analyses that were detailed, flexible, and subjective, arguing that they would be more conducive to representing women's experiences in a patriarchal society.

In its earlier days, feminist ethnography was chiefly concerned with women. Like other feminist research, feminist ethnography was about, by, and for women. It involved giving voice to marginalized women whose experiences had rarely been represented or understood. In this way, feminist academic ethnographers saw themselves as giving a voice to the voiceless. The critical focus on gender that most feminist ethnographers took involved questioning common-sense assumptions about men and women, masculinity and femininity. If, as social science contended, gender was socially constructed, the task of ethnography was to discover exactly how this construction took place in different social contexts. With this critical focus, a more general concern with gender rather than just women arose: The construction of gender identities and relations in the field became important questions. As the interdisciplinary field of men's studies developed during the 1980s and 1990s, feminist ethnographers began to study men and masculinity. Often these investigations were attentive to issues of gendered power: By "studying up"—the term for research on more powerful men—researchers could find out how power dynamics operated. More recently, the postmodern turn in the field of feminist ethnography has resulted in the questioning of many earlier

assumptions. The focus of ethnographies has turned to narrative, deconstruction, and representation. The earlier interest in discovering the authentic gendered experiences of men and women as they are materially and economically structured has been replaced by attention to diversity, representation, and the symbolic realm.

## Early Feminist Ethnography

The behavior of a group under investigation toward the researcher reveals much about that group's approach to gender. Many ethnographers, predominantly feminists, have written about how the researcher's gender informs the way they participate in and analyze the field they are studying. Several key themes emerge in the literature. First, women researchers are more able to form fruitful relations with women group members (particularly in gender-segregated settings) and develop fuller understandings of women's experiences. Second, women researchers are less likely to be seen as authoritative academics; they may thus face less opposition because their research does not appear particularly threatening. Third, group members often assign women researchers "fictive kin" roles, for example as honorary daughters (notably in family-centered cultures). Fourth, married and unmarried female researchers may have different research experiences. Marriage often signifies adulthood, affording the researcher respect and her husband's help in reporting details of male-only settings. Conversely, being unmarried signifies immaturity (though less often in Western cultures), attracting fascination and attempts to find the researcher a male partner. Single female researchers may also be treated as honorary males.

Researchers' bodies and physical appearance can shape their field experiences, and ethnographers have been alert to the need to dress in a manner that is acceptable to informants. Researchers less often discuss how such variables as ethnicity, class, sexuality, and religion also contribute to ethnographers' gendered experiences. In the case of sexuality, for example, female embodiment may mark the researcher as sexually available, and she may be subject to sexual advances from informants. Dealing with sexuality (how to present themselves, how to negotiate others' interpretations, and how to negotiate sexual relationships) is a challenging issue for ethnographers.

The issue of power has been central to feminist ethnography. Such ethnographers analyze the way structures of power routinely position participants as subordinate or more primitive than the all-knowing Western expert. The early history of ethnography was linked to a colonial project concerned with knowing, and thus being better able to control, the “other.” Feminist ethnographers pointed out that this division between researcher and subject is often gendered, [p. 310 ↓ ] with the male researcher associated with knowledge and rationality and the non-Western or non-male subject associated instead with emotion and the body. Establishing equality between participants and researchers was a fundamental strategy of feminist ethnographers, who tried to work toward intimacy, dialogue, and mutual self-disclosure in their relationships with research participants. Reciprocity became a vital element of feminist ethnography and was considered valuable in itself, not simply as a means to elicit information from informants.

Feminists also seized on the political potential of ethnography. They hoped that their research could expose women's oppression and highlight the need for political changes in particular areas. Indeed, feminist ethnographers, especially in developing countries, have often worked alongside those promoting policy and development initiatives, for example with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

## Challenges to Early Feminist Ethnography

Feminist ethnography's claims have been challenged, especially since the 1980s. One strand of this critique came from women of color who began asking whether the ethnographic methods propagated primarily by privileged white women could really uncover and represent adequately the voices of non-white women without falling back on racist assumptions. Further skepticism came from the sociologist Judith Stacey, who in 1988 published the essay “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” Drawing on critiques by post-structuralist ethnographers, Stacey argues that mutuality and friendship between participants and researchers may increase the harm experienced by participants who open their lives to the researcher more than in less relational research. Participants may reveal personal information they later regret sharing. The researcher, rather than her informants, controls how participants' lives are represented. Participants

may feel exploited, betrayed, and abandoned when the researcher, always freer to leave than the researched, departs.

A parallel crisis in the wider field of ethnography also occurred in the 1980s. A group of (mainly male) theorists influenced by postmodernism began questioning the realist assumptions of earlier ethnographers. Ethnography, they argued, is always a construction. Ethnographic accounts are written documents, textual constructions; as such, they construct, rather than represent, the social world. The ethnographer chooses from multiple possibilities how to observe the social setting and how to write the ethnographic account, and readers then construct their own readings of the work that is produced. Because ethnographic writing cannot claim to reveal truth, it may be more ethical to be polyphonic, allowing many different voices to speak, and rejecting attempts at unifying explanations. Such postmodern critiques advocate innovative styles of writing, including poetry, photography, diary entries and letters; linear narratives are eschewed.

Although feminist ethnography predates this “new” or postmodern ethnography, some of the contributions it offers are similar, notably the call for ethical scrutiny of the ethnographic enterprise and researcher reflexivity. Yet the feminist response to postmodern ethnography is mixed. Some consider feminism and postmodernism mutually necessary to developing an ethical ethnography that attends to differences (for example, of class, geography, ethnicity, or religion) among women and men. Postmodern feminist ethnography can deconstruct dominant discourses, revealing hidden assumptions. Participants and researcher can collaboratively produce analyses, allowing the multiple perspectives encountered in the field to be presented. But others are wary that postmodern ethnographic accounts are less accessible to readers. Also, rejecting an earlier focus on women's authentic voices can deny the women featured in the texts the agency they would have gained by being represented in more conventional feminist ethnographic writing.

The feminist and postmodern turns in ethnography are connected to differences and developments in epistemology (theories of knowledge). Feminist discussions about epistemology have paralleled the debates on ethnography. As such, they should be considered in tandem because the process and product of ethnography will inevitably be affected by the epistemology of those in the field, especially the researcher.

## Conclusion

Today, feminist ethnographers benefit from this developing history. Many attempt to combine the best of these approaches, trying to do ethnography that is reflexive, alert to power differences between researchers and informants, and recognizes diversity among and between men and women. In representing and constructing the lives of their participants, feminist ethnographers try to move beyond the [p. 311 ↓] dichotomies of victimhood or agency, recognizing that choice and constraint are intertwined in women's lives. They try also to incorporate the material and the symbolic realms and to acknowledge accounts as partial, yet valuable in uncovering the complex ways in which women—and men—make sense of their gendered lives.

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See also

- [Feminist Methodology](#)
- [Postcolonial/Subaltern Feminism](#)
- [Postmodern Feminism](#)
- [Standpoint Theory](#)

### Further Readings

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