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Dealing with Dissonance in the Research Process

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Abstract

A distinguishing feature of feminist research is the researcher's willingness to investigate power relationships she has uncovered. When conducting research in contexts where participants have traditionally lacked power, the feminist researcher privileges voices of the study participants, ensuring they are heard. This paper explores the dilemma faced by a researcher who interviewed women in highly technical computer programming careers. Participants recognized that individually they were victims of gender bias yet continued to champion the power norms of the dominant culture. As a feminist, the researcher was compelled to privilege the participants' point of view. As a former programmer, she wanted participants to rebel against the dominant paradigm that privileges males in system programming. This is how she addressed both issues.

Key words: Research process, women, feminist researcher

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Question to Cynthia: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? What does feminism mean to you?

Cynthia: Not really. I think feminists try to make waves, I don't do that. I like to keep the peace.

Introduction

In this paper I intend to explore the dissonance created when the philosophical perspective of a researcher differs from that of the participants in her study, as was the case with me and the participants in my dissertation study. The dilemma of a researcher who has a different perspective than her participants has been documented by those who do cross cultural research (see Basu, 2003; Combahee River Collective, 2003; Smith 1999). Researchers have been cautioned against viewing data from the position of the dominant culture, a situation which might occur when the experience of person of color or a woman is interpreted through white male hegemonic norms (Smith, 1996). Likewise, researchers have been encouraged to reflect upon their own positionality in order to avoid interjecting their personal interpretations in the analysis of a participant's story and thereby missing the participant's meaning (Kirsch, 1999). The researcher has an obligation to hear and report the voice of the participant.

However, during the process of doing analysis, the researcher should also be aware of, clear, and honest about the reasons the research is being conducted. The researcher may have a purpose beyond telling the stories of participants. The researcher, particularly the feminist researcher, may wish to apply the results of her analysis to a practice that would benefit participants and others who aspire to be in the position of the participants. Her purpose might be to shine a light on issues of oppression and marginality (hooks, 1984). In this case, the researcher also has the duty to surface issues of power and privilege where she sees them (Kirsch, 1999).

This was the essence of my dilemma. During the data analysis of my dissertation study, it became clear that study participants were demographically similar, but philosophically different from me. While study participants shared their stories as single threaded, personal, unique and unrelated to the stories of others, I made connections to the larger systemic cultural issues of power and privilege. This dissonance was most salient in two parts of my analysis. First, it was found in discussion of achievement. Participants labeled problems they encountered as personal rather than institutional, shouldering the complete responsibility for their own success. Second, it was clear in their responses about feminism. The responses of the participants made it clear that they did not identify with other women or with a larger movement of any sort. I wanted to honor my commitment to clearly report the thoughts of the participants and I also wanted to honor my obligation to report the larger picture as it evolved through analysis and synthesis of the participants' responses.

In this article I document how I honored the voices of study participants and reconciled their individualistic perspectives with my responsibility to surface power issues common to all

women who work in male-dominated environments. My intention is to explore those dissonant issues rather than present complete results of the study. These can be found elsewhere (Burger et al., 2007; Sosa, 2004). For this reason, I will briefly review the study and its results. Following that, I will discuss the responses that illuminate the dissonance between participants' responses and a more feminist approach. Finally, I will conclude with an explanation of the way that I addressed both issues. Although this paper tackles issues that surfaced during the analysis phase of a long dissertation study, the dilemma extends beyond the subject of this study. It is more universal as it addresses the researcher's responsibility in the research process.

Brief of Review of Study

As noted above, concerns about the dissonance between the researcher's perceptions and those of the participants surfaced in the analysis phase of a study of women with long tenure in very technical computer programming careers. Often called systems programmers, these types of programmers deal with modifying and manipulating computer operating systems rather than creating computer applications. While application programmers often deal with system users in other parts of a corporation, system programmers tend to work in isolation, solving problems within the computers.

Therefore, the study that forms the basis for this discussion focused on the experience of being a female systems programmer. Study participants had at least fourteen years of work experience in system programming, a very male-dominated type of computer programming. Categorized as computer control programmers and operators by the United States Department of Labor, as late as 2008 women represented only 6.7 percent of those employed in this job category (United States Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2008).

As the researcher, I had deliberately chosen this sub-population of computer programmers because I had spent seventeen years doing the same type of work. I was interested in knowing more about how the participants had achieved such long tenure in their jobs. What experiences did participants have in the work, home or educational environment? What did they tell themselves when things got rough? How did they frame their challenges?

I was particularly interested in learning what made these women successful in such male-dominated spaces. In discovering why these women had such long, successful tenure in these technical jobs, I hoped to find a way to advocate on behalf of those women who had not achieved their goals in systems programming. I also hoped that analysis of the educational experiences of the research participants would provide information that would increase academic success rate of women programming students.

The framework for the study was explicitly identified as feminist and based on Kirsch's (1999) principles of feminist research. These principles include asking questions that acknowledge and validate women's experience - collaborating with participants, analyzing social, historical and cultural factors at the research site, analyzing the researcher's positionality, correcting androcentric norms, taking responsibility for the representation of others, and acknowledging the limitations and contradictions of research data.

Kirsh's (1999) principles make it clear that the feminist researcher has the duty to question not only the research data, but also the underlying assumptions about power and culture at the research site. She also has the obligation to define and understand her own positionality and the issues it brings to the study. Finally, she has the responsibility to privilege the voices of the study participants particularly in contexts where they were previously powerless and unheard (Kirsch, 1999).

If the point of feminist scholarship is, at least in part, to end the oppression of women (hooks, 1984; Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 2004), a thoughtfully crafted activist research agenda designed to enfranchise research participants and advocate on their behalf is required. This is true even if the research participant does not view her experience as the result of a marginal position in society (Kirsch, 1999). Because the researcher has a macro view of all of the data, she is able to discern patterns and commonalities in responses. When these data point to a pattern of oppression, the feminist research must surface it (see Acker, J., Barry, K., & Esseveld, J, 1996). Dealing with these dissonant realities is even more difficult when the researcher and the study participants have different perspectives while sharing a common background.

While the framework for this study was feminist, the method for the study was grounded theory as originally outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and as later developed by Glaser (1992). Grounded theory was used because its inductive approach is most appropriate when investigating areas that are both under researched and have participants who have traditionally been without voice (Brine, 1994). Glaser's version of grounded theory was used for analysis rather than more recently authored versions by Strauss and Corbin. This was primary because of the serious philosophical differences regarding emergence of themes that divided Glaser and Strauss in the early nineties (see Glaser, 1992). The starting point for research was an interest in knowing more about the world of the female technologist. Initially, interview questions were based on what the researcher knew intuitively, personally or by examination of literature (for example, Alper, 1993; Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Turner, Bernt, & Pecora 2002).

Study data were obtained through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with female programmers. As noted above initial questions were developed by a combination of literature review and the researcher's personal experience. The questions were further developed as interviews were conducted. Field notes, observation, and anecdotal information supplemented the interview findings. The data analysis method was constant comparison with physical coding into substantive themes. To do this, I reviewed each transcript and color coded transcriptions by themes as they emerged. Interviews were conducted and more data were gathered, until no new themes emerged. Data were analyzed both during collection and then again at the end of data collection.

After obtaining informed consent, eight women ranging in age from 40 to 57 years old were interviewed. At the time of the interview, one woman was 40, three women were 41, one woman was 45, one was 49, one was 50, and the last woman was 57. Seven of the eight women were mothers. The eighth woman was married and had no children. Of the mothers, three women identified themselves as "single mothers" and four women were married and had raised or were raising their children with their husband. Although no questions were asked about sexuality, all women identified as heterosexual during the course of the interviews. Seven of the women were

Caucasian and one was Asian. Seven participants identified as Christians; the Asian participant identified Buddhist. None of the women identified a disability of any sort.

Each woman was interviewed once in person. The interviews lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours. Follow-up interviews were conducted by email. In addition, all participants received transcripts of their interviews and were given the opportunity to correct any information that had been wrongly transcribed. In reporting, women were assigned pseudonyms. These pseudonyms, Cynthia, Sandra, Pamela, Sharon, Kathleen, Carol, Diane, and Brenda were the 11th – 18th most popular women's names in the decade of the 1950s according to the social security administration

Participant Responses

Put succinctly, participants in this study worked in male-dominated, male-defined spaces within male-dominated corporations within a male-dominated society (see United States Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2008). Many times, the participant was the only woman in her department. Even when there was more than one woman in her department, the participant was usually the only woman working on the project to which she was connected. Unlike some spaces where collegiality of other women might mitigate against the maleness of the environment, these women were literally surrounded by men.

The Importance of Individual Achievement

Individual achievement emerged as the core concept in the analysis of interview data. As responses of each participant were analyzed, it became clear that all of these women who work in very technical male-dominated environments had the common characteristic of speaking about themselves in terms of achievement. Sometimes the achievement described came at great cost and involved many challenges. At other times, the achievement was effortless. Regardless of how much effort was required to achieve, the achievement orientation was part a reoccurring theme in each of the participants' lives. However, the measure of achievement was not always an external one. In fact, the central finding of the study was that when the external environment did not provide a framework for achievement, these women created their own internal measure. That measure was personal technical competence because other forms of reward such as promotion and company recognition were not available to them.

Brenda's definition of achievement at work was typical:

My achievement at this job is so local. It's just you finish something, you may get technical thrill. "Oh, this is not as difficult." The best thrill I can get is doing something that other people take years to do or cannot really address. I can finish quickly. Even sometimes my manager does not have the time to finish and I think that's maybe a difficult one. I can finish in a short period of time. I am proud of myself. That's the most I can get.

Likewise, Sharon spoke of a situation where she knew that the work had to be done and was driven by her own internally defined definition of achievement to complete it.

I just said “Look we have to spec this out. These are my specs. Shoot holes in it, but I gotta put a spec together. Because I am going to do what it takes to show that I meet the requirement to stay in this job.”

The participants in this study clearly explained the male-dominated nature of their work environments. They also knew that they were in environments that did not particularly value their experience. They understood that all the models of behavior were male and that men were rewarded more frequently than women were. However, while they described the challenges of a male-dominated environment they summarily dismissed the challenges as unimportant to their own picture of achievement. Moreover, study participants asserted confidence in their individual abilities and voiced the idea that they were personally responsible for what went wrong and what went right in their work environments.

Pamela noted:

[Being able to say to men] “Look at me I can accomplish what you can do.” You know what I mean, that feeling makes you feel like “Oh, see we are equal.” That kind of stuff. Early on, I had that, definitely. I can do this even though it is a man’s job kind of thing. The participants described themselves as standing alone and strong in cases where they needed to fight for themselves, but they also identified with men in many cases. They frequently labeled the ways they thought and acted “male”. They identified these traits as distinguishing them from other women.

For example, Brenda stated:

I am more like a man-type of a woman. I think logically. I don’t remember stories compared to other women. The older I get, the more I realize that I am more like a man in many ways. I don’t look like a man. It is not appearance. It is the way I think. I love Assembler programming. I love numbers. I don’t like high-level [programming] language. Most of the women, almost none of my women programming friends are in Assembler field.

The women not only recognized the male orientation of their work environments, they identified with the male orientation of the environment. In other words, they took for male oriented characteristics of system programming departments as a given. As Pamela’s quote above indicates they reported that system programming was “man’s job kind of thing.” Or as Sharon said “I think that it [system programming] is still a man’s world and it is going to continue to be a man’s world well into probably the next three decades.” However, in ways similar to others who are in marginalized situations they did not acknowledge the multiple ways they had been assimilated into the environment, the company and the society. They worked to perpetuate these environments, even when the environments oppressed them (Freire,1971). So while the women in this study sometimes complained about the male-dominated nature of their environments, they never expressed any desire to disrupt the existing power structure of the workplace.

Connection to Feminism

Listening to the study participants describe their lives led me to question them about their relationship to other women and to feminist activism in general. Women were almost absent

from their narratives. When asked directly, one woman briefly described a female mentor. Most women stated that they had had male mentors or no mentor at all. None of the women described helping other women or having protégés of any type. Additionally, none of the study participants described any social action work, political or charitable, on behalf of women.

As none of the women mentioned feminism, sisterhood, or social action spontaneously, I questioned them directly at the end of the interviews. I found that they had a very dated concept of feminism, loosely based on criticisms of 1960's feminists such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Germaine Greer. For example, Sandra discussed feminism in this way:

Radical Feminism in general has really puts me off a lot. I have found that I am like 90+% responsible for my life in general. I found very few external things that I could not deal with. I won't say control - but deal with. I think that as women we have, it is not like it was in 1950. I find my friends who are African American have way more to deal with than we do. I find Radical Feminists on the abortion issue so hypocritical. I don't know.

(Can you just define what you mean by Radical Feminist?)

(Pause) I think I still hear a lot of the old Gloria Steinem, Diane Feinstein, people particularly in election years on TV and on the radio and I think we have really passed the need to tell women how they should think and what they should do. I think women really have the power to change their lives on their own.

Diane, too, was identifying with the 1960's understandings of feminism:

That was all really coming down when I was just getting out of college. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and all them....I would not call myself a feminist, really. Because I really do think that men and woman have different strengths and they compliment each other. But, the good thing about feminism is that it has gotten a lot better as far as job opportunities and salaries for women but it's still not, it's still not an equal basis. But it might never be because women do stop working. Women have babies. That's the reality, a lot of them do. In a career like this where everything changes so radically from today 'til tomorrow, those kinds of gaps in your experience and your exposure to the technology make a difference...., they really do. I mean it's a good ... feminism is a good thing because it has opened people's eyes to the disparities, but the disparities are real between men and woman as well as the disparities between their pay scale and their job opportunities. They still say that the glass ceilings is there for sure, but I guess it will get better with time and it's really is an individual thing. If a woman chooses to want to have a career and to focus her life on that, then I think she should be able to go as high as she can go. I don't know how girls manage it today, having a full-time job and having families. I really don't know. I don't think I could do it.

Both Sandra and Diane described feminism as a movement in which the goal of women is to be equal to men. This is not surprising, given that most were raised in a time (late 1950s to early 1970s) when liberal feminism was popular (Tong, 1998). Liberal feminism is a variety of feminism that is primarily concerned with equality of opportunity and equality of rights. Specifically, liberal feminists believe that women should have the same rights as men and that, if

these rights are not available, they should be secured by the state through legislative channels (see Tong, 1998).

Liberal feminist understandings tend to rely on the self-efficacy of individual women once legislative remedies have been put in place. Given this understanding of feminism, it is easy to see why participants expressed the idea that barriers to the success of women had been removed.

In their answers to the questions “Are you a feminist?” and “What is feminism?” Carol and Brenda continued to echo the individualist positions of the interviewees. Brenda answered:

I don't think I have the good definition. Because, the one I have seen probably through TV, those very aggressive ones. I know by seeing them, I don't like them. But I don't think those are the real ones. Because I always understand in this world only the aggressive, very aggressive type get to speak. There are good ones which I appreciate more; those people will never be the people on stage. So I think I personally never attend those activities so I don't have chance to explore the others. I really don't know. The only one I see is through the media and they usually ... say very loud and make me think they overdone. To me I think everyone is different, I am from a different background so I think woman and men are different just like every person is different and just because of the natural chemistry difference, they are meant to be different. But I think men and woman are equal. Just like people born with different IQ and EQ, but we try to be fair to everybody. But I don't like to shout loud or whatever, that is my personal philosophy.

Like Brenda, Carol did not answer directly. She also concentrated on equal opportunity and individual talent and ability: But basically, I think that people are people regardless of what they are. I'm not looking to have someone stop opening my car door for me or hold the door. I think that people should hold the door for each other because it is polite, I don't think that they should look at me and say oh my God is she a feminist should I hold the door or should I not. I think that people who do equal work should be treated equally. I don't believe that you should ever lower the standards of a profession to accommodate a woman. For example if you are a fire woman and you are big enough and strong enough to carry that 180 pound guy down out of the burning building well then damn, you should be a fireperson, if that is what you want to be. But if they have to lower the standards of any profession to accommodate a woman or a man that's too small or a particular race or anything like that if you have a standard the standard should be the standard. It should be the same for a man or a woman if you are a woman and you can do the job then you should have the job but no one should ever lower the standards of a particular job to accommodate a woman. I don't think putting a 5'2" woman out on a police beat in the middle of some lousy part of Brooklyn is where she should be. They take guns away from girls like her. Now you've created a dangerous situation. So to change a profession, any profession to

accommodate a woman I think that's really wrong. But if you can do the job and you pass the test. If you can do it just on the same level as a man then there is no reason why you should be treated any differently in that profession.

An analysis of answers given by study participants indicated that they believed that women should have the opportunity to be whatever they wanted, but had no understanding of the social and cultural paradigms that continue to work against achieving those goals. An understanding of the ways that feminism has moved beyond the search for a woman's individual equality with men to an understanding of power relations in society (Tong, 1998) might have served them in this respect because it provides a more macro view of the situation of women in very male dominated spaces. It would also provide an introduction to the notion that systems of oppression work together to reinforce male privilege.

Addressing both Perspectives

I believed that the narratives of study participants showed that they been greatly disadvantaged by the dominant cultural paradigm, particularly with reference to society's definition of the types of roles they could play at work. My own experience coupled with my advantage in viewing the similarities in the participants' stories reinforced this belief. However, because I was engaged in a reflective analysis that identified my own beliefs, I was able to see that study participants did not interpret their lived experience in the same way. They did not indicate that their stories were connected to any larger societal issues. They were not able to see commonalities between their stories and the stories of other women. These women focused on their own individual achievements.

The women in this study totally bought into the prevailing cultural paradigm with reference to both their careers and their home life. In addition to working long hours in jobs that did not demonstrate an appreciation for their work, most study participants then came home to work a full domestic shift with little or no assistance. This saddened me and actually caused me to question the reasons for my research. I found it unfair that participants in my study did not receive external validation for incredibly difficult work. Likewise, I was disheartened by the fact that many participants were given jobs that the male programmers did not want. So while their stories led me to believe that the norms of the dominant culture had robbed the participants of their voice and prevented them from being truly visible in the work (and home) environment, participants unquestioningly and unconsciously accepted existing power norms.

As the researcher, I understood my responsibility to privilege the reality of the study participants. That these participants disconnected their personal challenges from those of others in the same situation was clear. However, the result of my analysis as well as the lens of my own experience as a woman in a male-dominated field, led me to the conclusion that both the participants and I had been disadvantaged based on gender. Further, I understood this disadvantage to be related to women (as a class) being excluded from the power equation in systems programming. For me, the inequity was not personal, it was systemic and cultural. This difference of viewpoint caused me to delve more deeply into the two dissonant realities.

I was able to add insight to the participants' experience by understanding the marginal social location of both the participants and myself. Using standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), I understood that "outsider" status during my years of system programming allowed me to see the workings of male-dominance in a way that both men (and women who did not differentiate themselves from their male counterparts) could not see. While the voices of the study participants were clearly heard and recorded, my awareness of "our" social location informed analysis of their experiences. I carried the understanding of my own system programming experience into my research rather than suppressing it in the name of (a false) research objectivity. In my opinion, it would have been irresponsible not to do so.

In addition, because I believe that giving voice is not the end goal of feminist research, additional work was necessary. Hearing the voice of the participant, adding a macro view, and framing the analysis in larger terms were all part of my research agenda. As Gottfried(1996) stated:

An emancipatory social science, then, should provide women with understanding of how their everyday world, their trials and troubles, were and are generated by the larger social structure (p.6).

So the additional analysis was necessary to surface the larger issues of oppression. Although it added dissonance, it also added depth.

In the final analysis, women in this study indicated an increased sense of achievement and personal worth in having triumphed over long hours and difficult work. I not only reported the words of the study participants without editing, but also valued and rejoiced in these victories. In the end, I resolved my dilemma and fulfilled my responsibility to privilege each voice by carefully considering and documenting both the experience and the perspective of each study participant.

In addition, explicitly acknowledging my own positionality and valuing my own perspective and voice, and understanding my responsibility as a feminist researcher, I also added my more power-centered activist analysis to the discussion of the participants' experience. The dissertation research report contained both the faithful recording of the participants' point of view and my own feminist/activist synthesis of the data.

Conclusion

All researchers want to produce the best, most insightful, useful research they can. For me as a feminist researcher, this means producing research that can be used to end the oppression of women and others who currently lack power. However, in the case of this study and others like it, research participants may not see themselves as disenfranchised in any way.

If researchers do not learn how to accommodate the dissonance caused by differences in her position and that of the research participants, they will find themselves with a very limited pool of potential research topics. This is particularly true in today's research climate where

addressing power relationships and questioning the dominant paradigm may not be viewed as *real research*.

Because feminist research principles allow researchers to honor multiple views of reality, one solution to the problem of dissonance is to present all discernable views, explicating each and initiating a discussion of social issues. In so doing, researchers may lay the groundwork for activism while recognizing the perspectives of those who do not yet see the reason for it.

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