

The Ethical Dilemmas of Representing Others in Empirical Research: Gender, Power and Accountability

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Abstract

This article contributes to the academic debate on the ethical difficulties of representing others in empirical research. While speaking for others, especially women, is essential for bringing the unheard voice, it is not an innocent process. Representing others involves the ethical dilemmas of marginality, victimhood and agency, gender, power and accountability, identification and difference, misrepresentation, under-representation and overrepresentation. With a focus on Feminist Research Methodology, the paper argues that the ethical problems can be dealt with through the understanding of reflexivity and acknowledging the contribution of others in the research process. While reflexivity might not resolve the ethical concerns completely, it helps the researchers be more critical and thoughtful of depicting others' lives in empirical research.

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Introduction

I chose to publish the chapter using a pseudonym for myself. My use of a pseudonym is, therefore, not to protect my own identity but, rather (and I hope that the weighty irony here is not lost on any body), to protect the identity of the rapist. (Moreno, 1995: 248)

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The quote stated above is taken from the last lines of Eva Moreno's paper on 'Rape in the Field: reflections from a survivor'. The author used a pseudonym for the rapist, her male research assistant, in the paper. It was an irony that the use of anonymity was not sufficient to hide the identity of the rapist. Therefore, the publishers requested the author to edit her writing and delete some information to make it impossible to identify the rapist. Using a pseudonym for the participant was not enough, so the author subsequently decided to go anonymous also for herself. The quote reflects the ethical dilemmas of representing others in a research process, one of the most central and debated issues in academic disciplines, Feminist school and anthropology, for example.

The primary aim behind the representation of others in research studies was to make the unheard heard and the unseen seen. However, ethical difficulties occur when conflict arises between the desire to 'benefit others' and 'to be benefited' through representation. Representing others is not an innocent process. It brings forth the question of who speaks and who is spoken for. It involves how gender, power, race, class and sexuality are entangled with each other. John Silk critically examined the representation of the Third World by mass media and pointed out that the representation, first, encouraged the notion of third world dependence upon the west, ignoring western dependence upon 'third world' for raw materials (Silk, 2000). Second, it represented people from the developing world as passive victims, which stripped them of their dignity in the interest of 'news values', rather than as active individuals who should be enabled to help themselves. Moreover, finally, there is an insoluble ethical dilemma for a relief agency, Oxfam, Christian Aid, for example. As Silk put it: 'However, NGOs' growth in profile and income is still dependent upon live and graphic television reports of suffering people in places like Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda and Kosovo' (Silk, 2000:9).

Representation is particularly problematic for marginal women (Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988). Spivak (2002) critically analysed the representation of Third World women in academia and refuted any noble and altruistic claims made by the academic scholars: 'Knowledge is always imbricated with power so that getting to know (or 'discursively framing') the Third World is also about getting to discipline and monitor it, to have a more manageable Other...' (Spivak, 2002:22 quoted in Kapoor, 2004: 632).

This paper aims to contribute to the academic debate on the ethical problems of representing others in empirical research. It raises several questions: What is ethics? What are the relations between ethics and others? What are the ethical concerns of representation? The rest of the paper is divided into two main sections. The first section defines three conceptual tools: Representation, Ethics

and Others. In the second and the last sections, I analyse how representing others is burdened with ethical problems related to marginality, victimhood and agency, gender, power, hierarchy and accountability, identification and difference, self-representation, misrepresentation, and under- and overrepresentation. I try to understand the ethical dilemmas of representation through my own research experience. With a focus on Feminist Research Methodology, the paper concludes by arguing that the ethical difficulties in empirical research must be dealt with through incorporating reflexivity and acknowledging the contribution of others in the research process.

Conceptual Framework: Representation, Ethics and Others

The term 'representation' connotes a dual meaning. It can be used both in representation as 'speaking for' as in politics and representation as 'representation' as in art or philosophy. According to Spivak, a theory of representation points, on the one hand, to the domain of ideology, meaning, and subjectivity, and, on the other hand, to the domain of politics, the state, and the law' (Spivak, 1988: 271),

The meaning of 'other' in representation often entails exclusion. 'The other is what I myself am not' (Levinas, 1987:83 quoted in Ahmed, 1998: 60). Jean Carabine (1996) argues that "a focus on Other is problematic because it tends to shift the debate back to a preoccupation with binary oppositions and runs the risk of locking difference... up in the oppositional categories of oppressor and oppressed" (Carabine, 1996:68 quoted in Padwell, 2002: 80). Padwell (2002) deconstructs the category of 'others' by exploring how self and others are mutually constituted and the researcher and subject might assume the position of others simultaneously during the research process.

The use of 'ethics' can be traced back to Aristotle, who defined ethics based on virtues and character. Ethics was also used in the Kantian theory, which defined morality as 'a rational matter'. For Michael Foucault, ethics is a modality of power that 'permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being' in order to transform themselves into the willing subjects of a particular moral discourse' (Foucault, 1997: 225 quoted in Mahmood, 2005: 28).

There is a connection between ethics and others. The term 'ethics', derived from the Greek word *ethos* meaning character and dwelling, indicates that ethics 'is about being positioned by, and taking a position in relation to, others', or about the 'study and practice of that which constitutes one's habitat' (Diprose, 1994: 18-19 quoted in Ahmed, 1998: 58). Similarly, Levinas in 'Time and its Other' points out that ethics is not understood in terms of the normative realm of morality, but

the primordial ethical experience embodied in the face-to-face encounter with the Other. One has an endless obligation to the other (Levinas, 1987 quoted in Ahmed, 1998).

Ethical Dilemmas in Empirical Research

In this section, I try to understand the connection between representation, ethics and others in research by deriving examples from my own empirical research. The research studies were part of the fieldwork I conducted for my Undergrad, Masters and PhD thesis paper.

Marginality, Victimhood and Agency in Representation

Representing the 'other' just as the victim or as an agent is problematic in either way. Mohanty problematised the monolithic and singular representation of Third World women as 'poor, uneducated, domestic, victimised, and marginalised which robs them of their historical and political agency' (Mohanty, 1991:56-72). In contrast to the portrayal of others as victims, celebrating the inherent strengths, voice, agency, and tradition of others often results in romanticising others and using our representation of them to delineate 'our' vision of good life (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996). This paradox is reflected in a better way in Mohanty's words: 'It is when "women of Africa" becomes a homogenous sociological grouping characterised by common dependencies or powerlessness (or even strengths) that problems arise-we say too little and too much at the same time' (Mohanty, 1991:59).

While doing fieldwork for my PhD thesis, I was perplexed by the thought of how to represent the research participants in my thesis. On the one hand, I aimed to learn more about the lives of women factory workers beyond their homogeneous images as producers and victims of capitalism in academia. I was interested in studying how women factory workers in Bangladesh practice agencies through their clothing consumption practices. On the other hand, I was disturbed by the ongoing news in the media about the harsh working conditions, building collapsing and the fire accident in the factory and the death of the factory workers at an alarming rate. Even though I recognised the existence of oppressive conditions in the lives of women factory workers, I was worried whether my thesis fell into the danger of romanticising agency by focusing on consumption, instead of production, as a critical lens to explore their lives.

Gender, Power and Hierarchy in Representation

Alcoff (1995) argued that the rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Reay (1996)

explained how the researcher could exercise power through the process of interpretation. She interviewed a middle-class woman called Alice who described her own schooling in this way: 'I quite enjoyed primary school ... Most of the children were from mining families, and so they were seen as dirty, smelly children...' (Ibid: 68). Being a coal miner's daughter herself, Reay found herself powerless when her research participants Alice criticised coal miner's children as dirty in her interview. Reay shared her anxieties while interpreting Alice's interview: 'How do I interpret a text in which I am so clearly positioned as a coal miner's daughter as 'the other'? However, now I have the power to decide both whether she should have a voice in my text and how that voice should be framed' (Reay, 1996:69).

However, understanding the power in the binary sense where power is vested only in the researcher's hand can be misleading. Although researchers control the research process and interpret the information, they can also be vulnerable, manipulation and betrayal (Kirsch, 1999). Moreno (1995) examined how women anthropologists themselves are gendered and prone to sexual violence in the research field. She illustrated her own experience of being raped by her male research assistant while working in Ethiopia to collect her dissertation data. She argues that rape is used as a tool by men to maintain gender order, to establish male domination and restrict women's movement. Being brought up in the homogenous Swedish culture, Moreno faced problems in conducting fieldwork in a complex, heterogeneous Ethiopian society. The conflict occurred when she did not conform to the male-dominant hierarchy and the existing gender order of the Ethiopian society. She appointed a male research assistant, Yunus, to support her in the fieldwork. The power and the authority she held as an independent, educated, foreign researcher and employer put Yunus's masculinity in question. Moreno is perceived more as a sex object and less as an anthropologist without any male guardian around. Yunus wanted her to be his lover. When she refused to accept his offer, Yunus took revenge by raping her. Moreno described her horrific experience in the research field as: 'The rape had reversed a hierarchy where I had the dominant position as researcher, professional, and foreigner until then. Now I was just a woman, looking to other women around me for guidance, safety, and advice' (Moreno, 1995:244).

I also experienced the feeling of powerlessness during my fieldwork for collecting data for my Masters Dissertation. One of my interviewees suddenly disagreed with talking at the last moment, although she consented initially. I tried to convince her by using our similar national and religious identities. I told her: "I thought that as a Bangladeshi Muslim woman, you would help me out". After I requested her, she finally agreed to sit for the interview. However, she replied: 'I

told you I have been very busy. And it has nothing to do with being Muslim, Does it? My address is... Come at 12 pm... Use a map. Don't be late'.

On the one hand, I might be exercising power and being manipulative as a researcher by using our similar identity. On the other hand, my interviewee refuted our similar identity and exercised power by continually changing her decision to participate in my research study. Therefore, it is problematic to believe that only researchers are entirely 'in power' and the participants are powerless (Mullassery, 2002). I found Grenz's (2005) definition of power very convincing. Grenz's (2005) focuses on different strands of power interwoven with one another rather than as a unified phenomenon owned either by the researcher or the researched.

Accountability and Responsibility

The ethical concerns bring the question of accountability and responsibility that looks at the effect of the research on the others and acknowledge the contribution of others in the research process. Alcoff (1995) argued that representations have real material effects. The practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for. It raises the question: 'can the researcher understand and represent the experiences of others without misrepresenting, misappropriating or distorting their reality?' (Kirsch, 1999: ix). The ethical concerns also bring a sense of responsibility of acknowledging what the researchers get from the others. How could ethnography survive 'if it stops assuming, appropriating, and representing the 'Other' and lets the Other be itself?' (Khare, 1992 quoted in Sullivan, 1996:98). About this quote, Sullivan said: 'If the other is the enabling condition of ethnographic research, I will argue, then an ethnography must be both an adequate account of the literate practices of others and accountable to those others' (Sullivan, 1996:98).

For writing my undergrad thesis paper, I carried out fieldwork in a slum area. I was, for the first time, studying and getting to know other cultures as a researcher. While interviewing the female slum dwellers, I encountered a few questions from them several times: 'What is our benefit by giving our time and providing information to you? Will we get money? Will it upgrade our status?' They told me that they were interviewed before, and their miseries were reported in the media. Their situation of poverty, nevertheless, remains the same. I had no accurate answers to their queries. I was more concerned with finishing my fieldwork, writing and submitting my thesis paper, getting good grades and publishing my work than helping these women. I could not but acknowledge that the less they gained from me, the more I learned and benefitted from them.

Difference and Identification

Representing 'other' entails the ambiguities of difference and identification. Should the researchers represent only the group they belong to, or should they celebrate the post-modern difference? The differences in location, social position and power between the researcher and the researched often affect the whole research process. Blackwood (1995) discussed how her sexual identity from the research subject impacted the research study. When she found her lesbian lover 'Dayan' in the research field, she confessed: 'Recognising that similarity between us, I was able to move into a space that was at once familiar and alien, to find security and compassion in something that was and was not 'lesbian'' (Ibid: 69). She expressed: 'The problem of feeling alien was intensified, however, because I was a lesbian in a heterosexual world' (Blackwood, 1995: 59).

However, a similar identity can often be disadvantageous for the research. Identifying oneself with the researched 'can result in a denial of the power feminist researchers exercise in selecting and interpreting data' (Reay, 1996: 57). Reay argued: 'there is a thin diving line between the understandings that similar experiences of respondents bring to the research process and the element of exploitation implicit in mixing up one's own personal history with very different working-class experience' (Reay, 1996:65). While similar identity provides more accessible access to the research field and allows for subjective involvement and closeness with the participants, it enhances the risk of manipulation and misrepresentation of data in ethnographic research. Being an insider also involves the possibility of bias that Bourdieu (1998:123-132) called 'scholastic biases' refer to the risks involved in the ethnographic research that permeates the researchers' personal experiences. I had to negotiate between the similar identity and difference and the power relationship between myself and the participants in my PhD research. While studying the clothing consumption practices of women factory workers, I found similarities between myself and the women workers in our nationality, religion and language. However, my social class and education had given me a privileged position that created a power relationship between myself and the female garment workers. There were also class distinctions and the interplay of power in what we wear. Even though we both wear salwar kameez and cover our head with a scarf, there were clear differences in our clothing choices in terms of the colour, design, and style of the salwar kameez we wear. Despite my attempt to wear minimal clothing and downplay my appearance, I could not deny the several occasions where the participants noticed my salwar kameez and indicated my affordability to buy more and better clothing than themselves.

Being an insider, I considered myself a feminist researcher whom Abu-Lughod (1991) termed as 'halfies'immigrant researchers, researching western academia in their native country. The dangers of being halfies are extreme as I was accountable both to the western academic scholars for the possible bias in the data on the one hand and responsible to my own community while presenting them to a western audience on the other hand. I was concerned about how I would represent women's clothing practices that have cultural and religious values. For example, I had to negotiate between becoming defensive about the veil as an insider and analysing the practice as an academic scholar.

Misrepresentation, Underrepresentation and Overrepresentation

Representing others often leads to misrepresentation, underrepresentation and overrepresentation of them. Spivak (1988:301) referred to the colonial representation of subaltern women as 'epistemic violence'. By using the term, 'White men saving brown women from brown men' she illustrated how there was a contrasting position between the dominant Hindu who encouraged the practice of 'Widow-sacrifice (sati) in the name of reward and the British ruler who attempted to abolish the practice of sati in the name of 'civilising mission' (Ibid: 294-301). According to Spivak (1988), the representation of Subaltern Hindu women, both by the Dominant Hindu and British ruler, is problematic as the widows' own voices remain unheard.

About the underrepresentation of Black women in mainstream art, Walker (1980) described her experience of going to an art exhibition of women painters. Walker asked a woman at the Brooklyn Museum: 'Are there no black women painters represented here?' A white woman simply replied: 'it is a women's exhibit!' (Walker, 1980:136 quoted in Min-ha, 1989:99-100). Walker argued that by excluding black women and continuing to speak on their behalf, white women were subjecting black women to the same kind of chauvinism they decried in patriarchal structures (Walker, 1980 quoted in Nako, 2001).

One of the examples of the overrepresentation of women was depicted by the micro-credit model of Bangladesh, which provided a loan to poor women. The model represented poor women as change agents who were best at repaying the loan. It further increased the burden on women's side to pay off the debt (Karim, 2008). The desire for the other as a heroine or hero gives an illusion by undermining subjective sovereignty (Spivak, 1988; Kapoor, 2004). It is, ultimately, another form of silencing of the subaltern (Kapoor, 2004).

One of the ways the misrepresentation, underrepresentation and overrepresentation could occur in the research study was through translation (Spivak, 1993). While interviewing the research participants for my Masters

dissertation, I found that all interviewees spoke Sylheti, a local dialect of the Sylhet division of Bangladesh and were quite different from the official Bengali language. Although I could speak Bengali, I was not very familiar with the local Sylheti accent. My research aim was to understand how two generations of Bangladeshi immigrant women practised agency in their lives. However, it was very challenging for me to translate the word 'agency' from English to Bengali and then Bengali to Sylheti to make the participants understand the word's meaning. It was also complicated to translate their understanding of agency from Sylheti to Bengali and then Bengali to the English language. Spivak (1993) stated the difficulties and lack of intimacy of translating non-European women's text into English text. She argued: 'We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical. To surrender in translation is more erotic than ethical. In that situation, the good-willing attitude "she is just like me" is not very helpful' (Spivak, 1993:183). The exact translation of agency from English to Bengali was 'institution', which I was not looking for in my research. Therefore, I translated the word 'agency' as 'decision-making capacity' and 'Empowerment' to get the meaning that I wanted in my study. To a greater extent, the translation was informed by my social position and my academic background. The process of translation, the restrictive nature of language, and my lack of expertise in the local colloquial certainly influenced how the women participants and their voices were represented in my research study.

Conclusion

The ethical problem of representing others lies in gender, power, marginality, difference and accountability. The scholars who consider speaking for others as unethical often search for the solution in speaking only for themselves. However, the strategy of speaking only for oneself is not only implausible but likely to lead to the reinscription of dominant relations of power (Padwell, 2002). It also means avoiding 'responsibility and accountability for my effects on others' (Alcoff, 1995:108). Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) argued that speaking for ourselves entails the problems of defining who exactly 'we' are, and second, of false universalising and imperialising tendencies and third, of continued silencing and exclusion of others. Research scholars also opined for collaboration with the participants who can design the interview questions, interpret data, and write the process. Collaborative research provides the space to break the boundary between the researcher and the research participants, between us and the others, to resolve the ethical dilemmas in research studies.

In contrast to the traditional social science research methods that value objectivity in the research process, Feminist Research Methodology signifies the

subjective experience, emotional attachment, and bias on the researcher's part as an integral part of the research (Letherby, 2003). Feminist knowledge is contextual and situated (Harding ed. 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1990). Feminist research raises the question of the positionality and biases of the researcher that can influence the data collection process and research outcome.

Feminist research has an emancipator goal that requires a scholar to speak on behalf of other women. Feminist scholars have developed a new research agenda to study women, for women and by women. They focused on women's experiences that have been misrepresented or omitted in the past. They talked about a topic that has previously been tabooed and silenced, such as sexual harassment. One way feminist researchers attempted to solve the ethical problems of research is through attaining reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity connotes what knowledge would be produced and for whom. Reflexivity provides the space for negotiating the power relations over knowledge claim between the researcher and participants (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). It elucidates the researcher's social position and location, recognises his or her subjective bias, and acknowledges the contribution of others in the research process.

Feminist researchers' objective is not only to describe the experience of women's oppression and gender inequalities but to challenge it and take political action to change the condition of women and empower them. Therefore, they focus on reflexivity, which helps to keep the research project focused on the emancipator goal and allows the researchers to engage in political action to change policy and ends gender inequality. Reflexivity, however, might not solve the ethical dilemmas completely. It, an action concentration and an affective component, nevertheless, provides the opportunity to be more reflective, critical and thoughtful of the consequences of the research on the participants and the depiction of others' lives in the research process (Kirsch, 1999). By focusing on the emotional dimension of the research, reflexivity helps bring essential perspectives of the participants' lives that might go unheard of otherwise.

The ethical dilemmas of speaking for others should not make us pessimistic about doing empirical and qualitative research, which are still essential tools for understanding the complexities of other cultures, communities and lived experiences. Instead, it is crucial to learn and unlearn from the ethical dilemmas and the research experiences and use that knowledge for future research projects. Finally, the task of representing others should be justified through its practical interventions. According to Sullivan (1996:98), "As we seek to understand and render the lived experiences of others, our research should ultimately aim to benefit those whose voices, texts, and circumstances make such understanding possible".

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