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ARTICLE

Intersecting Feminist Theory and Ethnography in the Context of Social Work Research

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationships among social work, feminist theory and ethnography in the context of social work research. The discussion reflects my research in the southeastern Caribbean. There are similarities between clinical social work and ethnographic research: both actively observing the actions of individuals and talking with them to gain an understanding of their lives from their own perspective. Two constructs generated from postmodern and post-colonial feminist scholarship served as cornerstones for this research, *contextual diversity* and *reciprocity*. These elements are also embedded in the ethnographic tradition and in the core mandates for social work practice. This writing provides a deconstruction of these concepts, discusses their grounding in the three disciplines, and illustrates their application in the research study through specific examples. The intersection of the traditions of social work, ethnography, and feminism were found to create a valuable research method that is especially compatible with social work research.

KEY WORDS:

- African Caribbean ethnography
- female heads of household
- feminist theory
- women
- social work research

INTERSECTING FEMINIST THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

This article explores the relationships among social work, feminist theory, and ethnography in the context of social work research. The discussion reflects the planning and research for my dissertation, which took place in the south-eastern Caribbean with African Caribbean women heads of household (Archer, 2006). As a white western social worker entering an unfamiliar culture, I had to consider my feminist theoretical perspective and how it could fit within that culture and with the ethnographic approach I planned to use. That consideration was the beginning of the reflections discussed in this article, a process that continued throughout the study and afterwards.

These reflections are presented here in five sections. The first three provide a brief overview of the study; parallels and differences between social work and the ethnographic approach; and, a challenge from the extant literature to the viability of intersecting feminist theory and ethnography. The final two sections illuminate two feminist constructs I used as cornerstones in the study, *contextual diversity* and *reciprocity*. These important ideas influenced how I thought about and conducted my research. Based in postmodern and post-colonial feminist scholarship, they also serve to pull together the three disciplines of social work, feminist theory, and ethnography due to their common elements. I will deconstruct these concepts, discuss their grounding in the three disciplines, and illustrate how I applied them in my study through specific examples. Following these substantive sections, conclusions and implications for social work are addressed.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The goal of this ethnographic study was to gain a better understanding of the social and economic survival strategies of African Caribbean women heads of household. Fieldwork for the study was conducted in two different villages on the island of Tobago over a period of five and a half months in 2002. Participants included 23 women heads of household selected through a snowball sampling process; data was collected through archival review, participant observation, and unstructured and semi-structured interviews. These methods are briefly described to orient the reader to the research context.

Archival Review

Through an initial contact provided by a colleague, I was able to meet a series of 'gatekeepers' in Trinidad and Tobago who assisted me to gain formal permission from an individual in a high level government position to conduct research on the island. The study involved two phases, one month conducting archival review at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad,

and the field study in Tobago. The purpose of archival review was to access materials in the library's Special Collections department not available in any other location, or available on a limited basis, including speeches, meeting notes, census data, local newspapers and brochures. Some materials represent the only available copy, others fragile and timeworn, and, certain pieces in the department are handwritten originals.

Fieldwork

Participants

During the five and a half month period of fieldwork, I lived in one village for approximately half the study and then moved to the other village for the remainder. The 23 women heads of household who participated in the study were identified by local key informants representing grassroots service agencies, village councils, churches, schools, health clinics, the participants themselves, and others. Women heads of household were defined as women responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of their household on a long-term basis, whether or not a male partner is present. I explained my presence in the village to both informants and participants in a straightforward manner. I explained that I was doing research for my university and that I wished to learn more about the things women in charge of their households do and the resources they use to take care of their household and the members in it. I answered any questions they asked as genuinely as I could and, in a variety of ways, spoke to them about my need to learn from them, not to provide them with information. I also expressed the hope that the conversations we had could be used to help (empower) women, both in these villages and elsewhere.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the participants. Semi-structured interviews were approximately one and a half to two hours in length and comprised open-ended questions that were asked of each participant. Here are some examples of those questions: What is it like to be responsible for your household? What are your daily routines? Who is important to you? What, if anything, would you do to change your life? Unstructured interviews took the form of informal, but purposeful, conversations whose number, length, and topics varied among the participants. I also conducted numerous other interviews with non-participants, including educators, business owners, government representatives, fishermen, local villagers, police officers, and agency directors, to name a few.

Participant Observation

Because I lived in the villages in which I conducted research, I found myself in the role of 'participant observer' wherever I went and whatever I did. Even

at home alone, in my own dwelling, I participated in the experiences that were unique to that particular part of the village. In the first village, for example, I had no hot water, as most of my neighbors did not. I found lizards, large spiders, flying insects unknown to me, and the occasional gecko in my apartment, just as others did. When the electricity or water was not operating, which happened quite regularly, I was in the same position as those in adjacent dwellings. And I, like the villagers, awakened each morning to the sound of people calling to one another on the road, goats bleating, and the cacophonous sounds of many different species of birds. Roosters and chickens with their baby chicks would parade by my back door as I typed at my kitchen table. Banana and mango trees grew just outside the bedroom window. And, like my neighbors, I often listened to an indescribably intense tropical rain on the tin roof of my house.

My participant observation outside my own dwelling included a myriad of experiences. In the ethnographic way, my intent was to immerse myself in the culture as fully as possible.

I went to work with participants at their jobs – in the rainforest, cleaning a house, processing fish, and as a volunteer food preparer in the local school. I rode in boats, buses, vans, route taxis, and, occasionally, a privately-owned car. I went to birthday parties and an engagement party; attended church services of different denominations and evening choir practice; I went to nightclubs a few times; participated in numerous festivals and holiday celebrations; and, ate lunch and dinner in my neighbors' homes and cooked for them in my home as well. I bought food at the tiny grocery parlors and vegetable booths; stood in line with neighbors to purchase fish from the fishermen just in from their day at sea; and, attended the funeral of a village elder. I walked participants' children to school, accompanied them to sports games and community meetings, sat with them during regular hair plaiting and braiding sessions on Sunday afternoons, and swam with them in the sea.

I had conversations with local people every day for those five and a half months. Each conversation and observation contributed to my understanding of this culture. The intent was that, through the triangulated methods described, an acutely iterative, as well as a credible, process of data collection would be achieved. I also took an inordinate number of photographs and shared them with villagers, a process that is described later in this writing. While this activity became an important part of the study process, it cannot be appropriately included as a 'method', as ethnographers delineate specific requirements of those using photography as a research method.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

I chose an ethnographic approach to this study for two major reasons. The first is my abiding respect for, and interest in, people of cultures other than my own;

and, ethnography is the study of cultures. The second is borne out of my numerous years of conducting clinical social work with clients. That work is similar to the ethnographic process in significant ways. This discussion begins with three similarities between the two disciplines, followed by two key differences. Similarities include the emphasis by both disciplines on the use of self as a key tool in the process, whether it be counseling or research; engagement with other cultures; and, the methods of participant observation and interviewing. Differences include ethnography's field orientation and the issue of gift giving.

Similarities

Use of Self

The first shared emphasis, using one's self as a key tool, needs little elaboration. Simply consider Creswell's (1998) contention that ethnography is intended to be interpretive, empathic, and to rely heavily on the researcher's intuition. This mandate might well be taken from the pages of clinical social work texts; for we, as social workers, are taught from our earliest training the importance of using our own intuition and empathy, and to assist clients to interpret their behaviors.

Engagement with Other Cultures

Second, both disciplines require one to engage with cultures that are different from one's own. The term 'culture' is intrinsic to the ethnographic method (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 1998). Culture refers to 'the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior' (Spradley and McCurdy, 2000: 4). Essentially, this definition speaks to the postmodern notion that knowledge, interpretation, and behavior are socially constructed. Individuals sharing membership in a culture share the context of that social construction. As a social worker engaging with ethnography, the concept that social conditions play a major role in an individual's thoughts, attitudes, and voice is not foreign. Rather, it coincides with the social work concept of 'person in environment' (PIE) in which social conditions are also seen to substantially influence the individual. And it does not play into the modernist idea that there are universal truths, which can be applied wholesale to cultures that may share certain social conditions. The idea that social conditions/context influence the making of a culture, and the fact that the individual is a member of that culture, speaks directly to the influence of the culture upon the individual – it does not detract, however, from individual differences, or voices, social work's 'person' within the PIE framework.

Ethnographies can include a relatively small number of representatives of a culture – sometimes only one – rather than the entire culture (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Reinharz, 1992). Social workers, like ethnographers,

enter a different 'culture' each time they interact with clients, who come from a wide array of backgrounds. During my own years as a clinical social worker, I have entered the cultures of groups, individuals, families, adolescents, traditional and alternative sexual orientations, clients diagnosed with chronic mental illness and addiction, those deemed to be predators, their victim-survivors, individuals representing a broad spectrum of ethnicities, survivors of war, societal elders, 'ex-cons', and those who remain imprisoned, among a whole host of others.

As to my research study in Tobago, the notion that there is a culture to be found among women heads of household is embedded in the definition that guided my study, i.e., women who are responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the household on a long-term basis. Although my goal was to pay utmost attention to the different voices, life situations, attitudes, and behaviors of the women I studied, I would have been remiss to ignore the 'culture of female headship' inherent within the responsibility for household that these women held in common in that place at that time. And while I sought to illuminate the differences among them, I also looked for themes and patterns that they may share. In short, I explored the culture of female headship as well as the invaluable individualities within that culture.

Participant Observation and Interviewing

The third similarity between clinical social work and ethnography is that both involve the methods of *participant observation* and *interviewing*. These two methods are hallmarks of the ethnographic approach to research (Agar, 1980; Spradley, 1979). As clinical social workers, we also consider participant observation (actively observing the actions of clients) and interviewing (talking with them to gain an understanding of their lives from their own perspectives) to be central to our work with clients.

The majority of my own social work experience has been conducted with women. In a large Midwestern city and its environs, I have observed and interviewed clients in hospital, community clinic, private practice, and wilderness therapy settings, individually and collectively, with their children, partners, parents, colleagues, and peers. A constant element in my work, borne out of the combination of empowerment-feminist and strengths-based approaches, is to explore with clients (help them to 'interpret' or deconstruct) how they cope with challenges. Much of my work has been with women dealing with horrific circumstances. A central question in these cases is, 'In the face of all that is apparent, how do those women survive, and, sometimes, thrive?'. That single question, in and of itself, makes the link between my clinical social work practice and my research study in Tobago. For, although I did not approach the study as a clinical social worker or view the participants as clients, that question served as the core of my research on women's survival strategies. And, as commonly happens when individuals encounter new situations, I also carried

the feminist-strengths hermeneutic I had developed over the course of 15 years of client work into the field with me in Tobago. That theoretical and interpretive base became both broader-based and more focused in my research work, as will be discussed later in this writing.

The central question regarding clients' inordinate ability to survive and thrive also guided my selection of study participants, African Caribbean women of limited income who are the heads of their households. Two dichotomous constructions of female headship among this population emerge in the extant literature. In the first, women household heads are perpetually cited as 'the poorest of the poor' (Heyzer, 1995; Massiah, 1983, World Bank, 2000), trapped in powerlessness, poverty, and lack of hope. However, in the second construction, African Caribbean women household heads are viewed as powerful matriarchs – poor, but strong and mighty, working long hours, making tremendous sacrifices for their children, and speaking out against injustice. Dichotomies invariably define the extremes of a given condition or context. In my study, I sought to better understand the experience of female headship by observing and listening to the participant heads of household themselves.

Differences

Along with the intentions and goals that ethnography and clinical social work hold in common, there are two key differences between them. These include *ethnography's field orientation* and the issue of *gift giving*. Ethnographic research is intended to be naturalistic and field oriented (Stake, 1995). In this way, it is dissimilar to most practices of clinical social work. While some arenas of social work practice, such as community development, require understandings and action within local contexts, such is not the case for clinical social work. The vast majority of clinical social work is carried out in private or agency offices, hospitals, and clinics. The ethnographic researcher carries the process a step further by conducting that process in the day-to-day environment of the culture being researched. Using the ethnographic method was a logical step in my career in that it took me to the 'lived experience' of the individuals with whom I interacted in the study. My interest in women's survival in the face of great odds, combined with a desire to learn about another culture from the voices of people within that culture, took me to live among the inhabitants of the small Caribbean island of Tobago.

Social workers and ethnographers also differ regarding the issue of *gift giving*. Many social work agencies find it inappropriate for social workers to accept gifts from, and give gifts to, clients. Ethnographers, on the other hand, endorse reasonable gift giving as a means of promoting reciprocity between researcher and researched. Gift giving in this study is explored in detail later in the discussion of reciprocity.

FEMINIST THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY: VIABLE INTERSECTION OR 'DOUBLE BURDEN'?

My goal was to conduct this ethnographic study through a feminist lens. There is not one feminist theory, but many feminist perspectives and definitions gathered under the umbrella of feminist theory. Reinharz (1992) reminds us that, just as there are many 'feminisms', there are also many feminist perspectives on social research methods. She describes the feminist researcher as one who grounds herself in two worlds. One is the world of the disciplines, which supplies the method; the other world is that of feminist scholarship, which supplies the perspective. Reinharz (1992: 243) theorizes that the intersection of the two might be viewed as either problematic or beneficial, the latter generated by the tension between the two elements. As for the former, the researcher might consider the intersection of ethnography and the feminist perspective a 'double burden'. Feminist scholarship is expected to be creative in all aspects of the process, focus on women, emphasize multiplicity, and value inclusiveness, while demonstrating reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Apparently, the double burden to which Reinharz refers is that the feminist researcher must also learn and adhere to the strict conventional procedures of the ethnographic (or other) scientific research method utilized.

My own stance at the intersection of feminism and ethnography is not problematic in that sense. I consider it to be a viable intersection, both theoretically and practically. Moreover, I propose to extend Reinharz's suggestion that the benefit results from tension between the two, for there are a few key areas of convergence that produce a dynamic juncture of perspective and method. From feminist scholarship, I used two elements as cornerstones of this study, *contextual diversity* and *reciprocity*. In the following section I deconstruct these elements and demonstrate, through specific study examples, the manner in which they are woven into the fabric of ethnographic and social work traditions.

KEY FEMINIST CONSTRUCTS

Contextual Diversity

'Contextual diversity' is a term I constructed that served as a link among the three distinct lenses of social work, feminist theory, and ethnography. Contextual diversity incorporates two key elements, the postmodern emphasis on 'multiple voices' and the post-colonialist and Third World feminist concerns for 'context' (Chowdry, 1995; Naples, 2003; Terborg-Penn, 1995). These elements serve as cornerstones in social work and ethnography as well.

Multiple Voices

The idea of multiple voices is borne out of the concept of 'multiple truths', which is central to postmodern theory. In effect, it challenges the modernist

notion of 'universal truths' (truths that are constant and exist outside the individual), and proposes instead that there are only individual truths. These individual truths are also explained as multiple realities that are constructed by individuals out of their particular experience of history and life circumstance. From this context, feminist research methodology requires the inclusion of multiple women's realities expressed through the voices of those women (compiled from Abramowitz, 1996; Chowdry, 1995; Mohanty, 1991; Naples, 2000; Wasserfall, 1997).

Post-colonialist and Third World feminists also value the diversity inherent in the concept of multiple voices. They go beyond the category of gender, however, and propose that feminist researchers must include more voices that speak to issues of class, ethnicity, locality, and constructed identities as well. Post-colonialist and Third World feminists decry what they view as the essentializing by western feminists of all developing world women as powerless victims of oppression, with inadequate distinctions made according to class, ethnicity, or context. Mohanty (1991: 53), for example, is adamant that the construction of a 'composite, singular "third world woman"' by western feminists masks the diversity of these women: the diversity of their identities, life situations, and even their levels of ability to resist oppression.

Social work, too, is concerned with contextual diversity and the concept that within any social, political, cultural, and economic location, there are multiple interpretations of that location. The single social work mandate of 'meeting the clients where they are' is inextricably a part of the term 'contextual diversity'. It speaks to the heart of acknowledging the client's own social condition, as experienced by the client rather than assumed by the social worker or by others. In family therapy, for example, the social worker seeks to learn about the family's context, including roles, rules, and expectations. Equally as important, then, is to understand each family member's understandings of those constructs. Often we hear from family members that they 'had no idea' another member interpreted a particular rule or tradition in the way that member explains in the session. By encouraging members to allow more than one voice to be heard, the social worker helps them begin to renegotiate more inclusive and beneficial relationships within the family structure.

Context

Through a different discourse, ethnographic research has, since its inception, also emphasized the importance of disavowing the construct of universal truths, even among those who share a common context. This is demonstrated clearly and simply by a statement made by Bronislaw Malinowski (1950: 25), who wrote that the very goal of ethnography is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his [*sic*] relation to life, to realize his vision of his world'.

By focusing on the concept of contextual diversity, as it is reflected in social work, feminist theory, and ethnography, I was able to be vigilant in seeking

out cultural essences as well as individual realities in this study. A few specific examples may be helpful to illustrate this application. For example, one finding in the study involved a paradox: while women in Tobago are expected to maintain the central role of matriarch in the culture, the study participants appeared to be living on the fringes of the society they are expected to nurture. The *context* of their existence on the social, economic, and political periphery of power was evidenced by their poverty; society's gendered roles, rules, and expectations; lack of governmental assistance to meet the basic needs of their households; their own professed reluctance to ask for help due to cultural mandates; exclusion of women in development planning; and significant absence of linking activities with banking, education, government, and other groups that might generate potential resources.

A further paradox illuminates the *individual voices* within this context. For, contrary to the portrait of standing on the periphery of power, and despite their explicit verbal examples of the injustices noted earlier, the participants expressed perceptions of their own power in a variety of ways. The following are specific examples of these perceptions as voiced by the participants themselves (with names changed to protect their identities). Many expressed a perception of power through a particular dream or focus.

Inez said:

If you don't have a focus in your life, you can get caught up in some of their [men's] needs and wants. If you don't know *you*, you can need people to be with you at a big cost. No one can know that for you. They can guide, *but you choose*. [emphasis added]

Nadene's dream is for her teenage daughter, to whom she says:

You want to open the door of your own car when you are a woman, wear your suit or dress and your bag on your shoulder and go to work, not cut cloth in a shop or serve food to white people.

And Iris, one of the poorest of the participants, speaks eloquently of dreams:

You must have a dream, something to hold onto. Tickets will come from somewhere. I have always been nice to people. I live by God's word that he will grant me my heart's desire. If you don't have a dream of coming out of a situation, you will live it all the days of your life.

Being vigilant in this study to recognize individual voices as well as context enabled me to become aware of actions that spoke to perceptions of power, as well as the participants' words that described them. Here are some examples of dreams and focus in action: Nancy built her house brick by brick over 14 years,

as did Inez; Trina focuses on teaching her boys how to take care of themselves through housework and cooking; Janet is focused on getting her children not only fed but through school, even though their father contributes almost nothing, and despite times of having to keep a child home from school for lack of shoes to wear; and, Barbara is fulfilling her dream of putting her boys through high school and college by working six days a week at two different jobs.

A final example of an individual's unique interpretation of her life, which defies the 'reality' of her life's condition is that of Elaine. In answer to the question of what it is like to be a woman in Tobago, Elaine responded that, as a woman, 'I will always have to give to the poor, help those who need it'. Elaine's words indicate that she was speaking of individuals in a different income category than her own – contextually, Elaine's household income is not only far below the poverty line, but falls into the category of being food-poor, which is less than 50 percent of the poverty line. The house in which they live reflects this low income status in the sense of its material composition, overall physical condition, and ratio of size to number of residents.

A researcher who is not mindful of contextual diversity might challenge this participant regarding the 'reality' of her life, consider the participant to be disingenuous, or, in the face of all that seems apparent, simply disregard her voice. For, it can be said that western thought correlates social, political, and economic power with personal power. Inherent in modern thinking is the tendency to apply such a tenet to people of all societies. As discussed earlier, Caribbean scholars have long noted this essentialist approach by western white feminists in their early discourse on women in developing communities as well (Mohanty, 1991). I have made the conscious choice to locate myself within the evolving feminist discourse that embraces multiple voices, including those of individuals who share a common context. In this study, the intentional use of the contextual diversity lens prompted me to be open to Elaine's own understandings of her life. From that location of acknowledgement and greater understanding, I could then move on to questions such as what might account for this perception of power in the face of such circumstances, the type of questions that form the basis of any sound iterative study.

Reciprocity

Leveling the Playing Field

Power relations between researcher and researched are of primary concern to feminist methodologists. England (1994: 86) states that the research relationship is 'inherently hierarchical'. This mirrors an often-voiced concern in the social work profession about the hierarchy that is inherent in client-worker relationships. Social workers strive, through a number of skills, avenues and resources, to empower clients; that goal entails continual efforts on the part of the social

worker to equalize the power relations between worker and client, in micro as well as community-based practice, locally and globally (Mishna and Rasmussen, 2001; Sewpaul, 2006; Smale et al., 2000).

Feminist views about how an inherent imbalance of power in a research study might be diminished can be explained within the broader concept of 'reciprocity' proposed by current scholars (England, 1994; Higginbottom and Serrant-Green, 2005; Lawless, 1992, Naples, 2003). Reciprocal relationships between the researcher and informant include at least the following: (1) The research effort is viewed as a collaborative effort between the two; (2) the relationship is based on empathy and mutual respect; and (3) it is explicitly acknowledged by the researcher that both people have knowledge and skills to contribute – and that, in fact, the informant has more knowledge related to the specific research questions.

Ethnographers also embrace these elements of reciprocity (Hoffman, 2007; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002; Vigouroux, 2007). Spradley (1979: 3–4) states that the essence of ethnography is not to 'study' people or to collect 'data' about them; rather, 'the ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them'. Spradley's characterization of research participant as teacher and researcher as student parallels a major tenet of social work – that of viewing clients as experts in their own lives and social workers as having specific skills to contribute to the relationship. Through these characterizations, both ethnography and social work echo the feminist mandates for reciprocal relationships noted earlier, each speaking to the importance of a relationship built on collaboration, empathy, respect, and recognition of each individual's knowledge and experience.

Study Examples of Reciprocity

Shared Transcript Review

In my study, a tangible example of collaboration and respect between the participant and me involved participant review of my interview notes. Although participants did not wish to be audiotaped, they allowed me to take notes. Prior to interviews, I explained that I would type out the interviews from my written notes and return to review the typed version with the participant. She would have the opportunity to make corrections and/or additions to the material. Thus, we could both be sure I had recorded her words and intentions accurately, and that the material reflected her true voice. When the participant had corrections or additions, I repeated the process, returning to her for review of the corrected material. Although this was a time-consuming process, it was an important part of the collaborative effort between the participant and me. All but two participants expressed the desire to review the original transcript; all the remainder with the exception of one kept a copy of the revised version.

Shared Events, Conversation, and Services

Many other avenues of reciprocity with the participants presented themselves in this study. For example, participants took me to their jobs in the rainforest and on adjoining islands, taught me how to find the best bargains at market, and had their teenage children accompany me to a variety of village meetings and gatherings. In turn, I helped them to set up food booths at fetes, assisted in their preparations for family birthday gatherings, and walked their children to school. Activities such as these occurred throughout my study and are integral to my ongoing process of participant observation. As such, they were duly recorded in my field notes. Some contributed to my final analysis and interpretation. For example, assisting in preparation for and attending social gatherings allowed me to observe family and cultural roles. In several gatherings, for example, I observed that women (regardless of marital status) appeared first with their children in tow, fed the children, and oversaw their socializing with one another. After an hour or two, the men then began to arrive – individually, in small groups, or with a partner – but always without children. Women with children then took their children home, and men, women, and teenagers stayed until the wee hours of the morning, socializing and dancing. This pattern was one of many that served to highlight women's central role in the care of children as well as a general 'cultural permission' for men to take significantly less responsibility in that role.

As valuable as the data gathering these activities provided was the opportunity they provided for me to 'level the playing field' by connecting with the women in their own arenas. In social work, we call this 'meeting the clients where they are', rather than where we assume they are or wish them to be. From both lenses, the goals are to demonstrate a desire for collaboration and to show respect for the other human being.

Reciprocity through Gift Giving

Ethnographers also acknowledge the value of reciprocity through the more tangible method of gift giving. Several authors have written about the different values and meanings attached to a specific object by various cultures (e.g. Cronk, 2000). They caution neophytes to be aware of the object's meaning before proffering it as a gift out of respect for the participants and appropriateness to the project. Numerous opportunities for reciprocity through gift giving emerged in my study in the Caribbean. In keeping with the importance of respect and appropriateness discussed above, I took my cues from the villagers themselves. For example, after I had lived among them for a while, neighbors in the village often brought gifts of food to me, such as plants gathered in the rainforest with instructions on how to make 'bush tea', fresh 'bakes', such as coconut bread, or containers of homemade fish stew. It became a natural, and reciprocal, occurrence to return their containers with food I had made for them.

Another type of gift giving was initiated by neighboring children. Observing me photographing village scenes, the children invited me to take photographs of them. Agreeing to do so – on the condition of their parents' permission – I then had the opportunity to provide them with copies of the photographs. Within a short time, children were calling to me from the top of a banana tree, during a walk to school with friends, or swimming in the sea, requesting that I photograph the event. I took many photographs that involved more than one child, such as those of their daily informal soccer games in front of my house. Once the photographs were developed, we invariably stood in the middle of the road together, the children in the photographs and I, and we decided who would get which particular photo. These decisions moved quickly and fairly, based on such things as who was the clearest in the photo, who made the funniest gesture, or who had not yet received a photo. Adult villagers occasionally asked for a photograph as well. One participant requested that I capture a picture of her and her young daughter in their traditional costumes for a church holiday affair. In another instance, a few days after dropping off a photograph to the family of a middle-aged man and his elderly father taken at a fete, a large bag of mangoes was dropped off at my door.

Deconstructing Reciprocity

Both the tangible and intangible experiences of reciprocity that occurred among the participants, villagers, and me were a vibrant and integral part of this research study. Not only did they generate a social construction of cooperation and camaraderie between researcher and researched, they were also pivotal in negotiating a more equal balance of power among these 'inherently hierarchical' relationships. In reflecting upon how experiences such as these might help to level out the power differential in similar research studies, I find it helpful to deconstruct the processes involved. Consider the example of the photographs. Had I not provided copies to the subjects in the photos, perhaps I would have set myself up as one who was there to 'study' them or 'collect data' about them, which, as Spradley (1979: 3–4) notes, goes against the very essence of a collaborative and respectful study approach.

Offering copies of the photos seemed to open the door for collaboration in a number of ways. The offering itself was a reciprocal act in the sense of acknowledging their gift to me of agreeing to pose for the photo with my gift of a copy in return. The group photos generated *connection* between the children and me, providing me with the opportunity to have a number of discussions with them. These discussions about who should receive a particular photo enabled me to learn more about their interactions with one another, with an adult, and with someone who was not a permanent resident in their village. They honored me with their very presence in these exchanges, a 'gift' I continually treasured, as it generated within me a feeling of being a part of

the everyday life of the community. In reflection, I begin to understand that perhaps I honored them with my presence as well – not in the sense of being an honored guest, but as someone who was interested in them and their daily lives, and wished to ‘learn from them’.

This discussion on reciprocity began by laying out the minimal requirements by feminist scholars for reciprocal relationships between researcher and researched if they are to truly level out the inherent power differential. They include the collaborative nature of the relationship, a base of empathy and mutual respect, and the researcher’s explicit acknowledgement that both people have skills and knowledge to contribute, with the participants’ knowledge of research questions being greater. The reciprocity that emerged in this fieldwork, in all its forms – from shared transcript reviews to the continual exchange of conversation, food, and services, and on to the photograph activities described above – meets those requirements and goes an important step further. For, throughout the study, I held a strong sense of mutual *acceptance*, my acceptance of the villagers and their acceptance of me. Many individuals have inquired how this ethnographic experience may have changed my life and, of all those shifts of perception and self-view, this is the most dramatic. The acceptance I experienced in these relationships expanded my attenuated socio-political location of a white western woman to that of a ‘citizen of the world’, and all the meanings associated with connection to the larger circle of human beings that can be interpreted from that singular phrase.

I take that new location and those ever-deepening meanings with me into my social work with clients and into the classroom with my students. They have added a richness to my work and a renewed vigilance about interpersonal power relations, respect, and acceptance of others. In my current research study, these elements are woven into every aspect of the process, as reflected in the participation of local members of the community in the initial project design, adaptation of the research questions, ongoing project assessment, and the actual conducting of interviews; when the data analysis stage is underway, they will be an integral part of that process as well.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this writing, I have attempted to demonstrate the relationships among social work, feminist theory, and ethnography through essential constructs the three disciplines hold in common, the deconstruction of those concepts, and their applications in my research study in Tobago. Two elements that are generated from feminist scholarship and served as cornerstones of my study of women heads of household in the Caribbean, contextual diversity and reciprocity, were also shown to be embedded in both the ethnographic and social work traditions. I illustrated through study examples how I employed each of these concerns as

I conducted my study. I attempted to show how they not only generate a viable intersection of social work, feminist theory and ethnography, but one that is especially compatible with social work research. Finally, I also noted a change in my own perceptions and worldview as a result of the reciprocal relationships I experienced in the process of conducting fieldwork for the study.

This writing provides a new construct to the social work discourse, that of contextual diversity. The term embraces multiple voices across gender, class, culture, ethnicity, life circumstance, history, and locality. It signals a reminder to us of the pitfalls of essentialist thinking and behaviors regarding any person or culture with whom we may practice social work.

In the study in Tobago, my own attention to contextual diversity helped me to refine and amend existing paradigms of matrifocality based on detailed information obtained from the voices of the participants themselves.

More and more, social workers in this country conduct their practice with individuals who represent a broad array of cultures and ethnicities. Cross-cultural research such as this study in Tobago is needed to inform social work practice with clients from multiple cultures, whether in this country or abroad. While the issues discussed are pertinent regarding colonization and contexts of indigenous nations, they are also relevant to research that crosses cultures in a number of directions. For, in the current age of global transition and mobility, an increasing number of social workers are conducting international practice and research outside their country of origin. International research is needed to expand social workers' knowledge and awareness of both global issues and those that are contextually based in a culture other than one's own. It is hoped that the feminist theoretical lens used in this study, with its vigilant stance against essentialism and the assumed pre-knowing of any individual or culture, combined with a focus on reciprocity in social work relationships, will stand as a model to social workers conducting social work practice and research across cultures and internationally.

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