COMMENTARY

Feminist Ethnography in Education and the Challenges of Conducting Fieldwork: Critically Examining Reciprocity and Relationships between Academic and Public Interests[1]

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a critical analysis of ideas and formulations traditionally organized under the broad theoretical umbrella identified as feminist "critical ethnography." Various authors have proposed critical ethnography as a way to respond to the crisis of representation posed by post-structuralism. In particular, many authors have problematized the unequal relations established between researchers and research participants in the field. Many authors have also seen this problematization as a way to help "liberate" oppressed and minority people and as a path leading to "breaking" the pattern of unequal power relations favoring the researcher in relation to the research participant.

In line with Foucault's ideas, I argue that while the challenge to open up possibilities for less unequal relations between research and research participants requires action, the critical ethnographers offer rhetoric. I reflect on these issues by presenting cases of ethnographers—including myself—that seem to illustrate the challenges faced currently by ethnographic studies in education and by analyzing other key issues currently at play in the ethnography of education.

This paper has three main sections. In the first section, I will present and analyze briefly three cases of ethnographies that illustrate the tensions currently at play in the field. In the second section, I will introduce theoretical notions informed by Foucaultian propositions that illuminate problems and potential strategies to deal with the tensions indicated in the first section. In the third section, I will demonstrate how I dealt with these issues and the limitations of my own work as an ethnographer conducting fieldwork in Brazil.

THE PROBLEM

Patti Lather (1991) and others have indicated that critical ethnography has been too oriented towards the life of the academy and not enough towards the politics of the everyday, including schools. Weis and Fine (2000) have criticized it for reproducing a colonizing discourse of the "Other." Beverly Skeggs (1994) has cited Judith Stacey, who argues, "the involvement and intensity of ethnography make it the most exploitative method because ethnographic methods subject the researched to great risks of exploitation, betrayal and abandonment by the researcher" (p. 88).

Ethnographers have promoted a more balanced relationship with research participants, but they have faced various challenges given the complexity of the issues at play. While Ruth Behar, Sofia Villenas and others "broke their hearts" and became "vulnerable" (Behar, 1996) to create new representational spaces for the "Other" in their narratives, they have also been criticized for over-imposing their fingerprints on their subjects. And while scholars tend to agree that ethnographic fieldwork will contribute to the "critical project" (Quantz, 1992), they have also questioned trade-offs among researchers and participants and have pointed to the need for a long standing working relationship that would give voice to—and generate a meaningful learning experience for—all involved (LeCompte, 1995). The challenges to the enactment of less unequal relationships in the field seem to remain.

Following I will present three cases of ethnographic studies that seem to agglutinate many of the challenges—and problems—faced by these studies. I purposefully chose three cases that were conducted in contrasting historical and contextual moments as a way to demonstrate the enduring character of the issues they raise. Perry Golde wrote "Odyssey of Encounter" back in 1959 (the book was published in 1970). The piece is a self-reflexive account of her trajectory as a White, female American ethnographer in a small rural village in Mexico. Her main goal was to formulate an understanding about residents' artistic pieces of decorative ceramic. Golde (1970) quotes Rosalie Wax's article from 1952 to introduce the concept of "Reciprocity as a Field Technique." According to that concept, "an informant will talk because he and the field worker are making an exchange, are consciously or unconsciously giving each other something they both desire and need" (p. 83). Golde adds, "what was borne in on me repeatedly was that *all* transactions in this village ultimately had to be reciprocal" (p. 83). Since, according to her, she could not reciprocate by helping with hard manual work (e.g., harvest), she "repaid" with money for food, knives, books and medical care.

Golde also acknowledges the existence of less material trade-offs in the field:

For a few individuals, the nature of the return was more psychological than material: the prestige of friendship with me; knowledge of

the world they might gain ... and in a few cases, the freedom some felt to say things without censure or criticism, expecting an understanding and sympathetic listener. If intense sharing was rare, I believe it was because the people were not inclined to introspection or accustomed to verbalizing feelings. (p. 83)

Sofia Villenas' piece titled "The colonizer/colonized chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginalization, and co-optation in the field" contrasts with Golde's, as Villenas presents herself as the daughter of South American parents born and raised in the U.S. Villenas speaks as a chicana Ph.D. student struggling to conduct her ethnographic dissertation fieldwork among Latino immigrant women in North Carolina to reconstitute their experiences and their views about education. While Villenas struggled to find her identity (main stream American, Chicana, woman) and realized she should "benefit" from multiple identities for multiple situations, she volunteered to work as language broker to Latinos (mostly women) who were not yet fluent in English (Villenas, 1996).

One of Villenas' (1996) main motivations to write the piece seemed to be her understanding that "researchers [in the qualitative tradition] are also recognizing that they are and have been implicated in imperialist agendas... and in the exploitation and domination of their research subjects" (p. 713). She argues, "while we continue to push the border of the multiple, decentered, and politicized self as researcher, we continue to analyze and write about *ourselves* in a unidirectional manner as imperialist researchers" (p. 714).

Villenas (1996) claims that she

did not want only to take their [research participants] stories and leave. I also wanted to become involved in some way with their Latino community, either through bilingual tutoring for children with their mothers or through English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. (p. 719)

She cites other authors to indicate her endorsement of an "ethnography of empowerment" that drew on Freire's philosophy to propose knowledge construction as a result of the interaction between researcher and the researched. The fundamental purpose of this dynamic, according to her, is to improve the living of the community being researched.

Lubna Chaudhry (2000) wrote her piece "Researching 'my people,' researching myself: Fragments of a reflexive tale" almost 50 years after Golde's work (in fact, her research was conducted in 1959 and first published in 1970). In her piece, Chaudhry defines herself as a "critical feminist ethnographer with ... post-colonial, post-structuralist" sensibilities (p. 99) studying Pakistani Muslim immigrant young women. Her narrative evolves around her relationship with Fariha, who was one of her students and also a research participant. Chaudhry demonstrates how, as an ethnographer, she blurred the traditional boundaries of objectivity and the roles of researchers and participants in order to achieve a more "trustworthy" account of the participants' lives, and she elaborates on how this choice also benefited the research participant.

Chaudhry (2000) describes how she answered Fariha's phone calls to her home late at night to talk with Fariha about her troubled love affair with a Muslim young man. At this point, Chaudhry's relation to the young woman expanded beyond the "tradition" of helping her with her papers over the phone (which was more closely related to the research project's main goals), and those conversations then became more personal. According to Chaudhry, on that occasion Fariha "suddenly ask[ed] me what she should do, adding that she counts on me to help her since I know so much about the real world" (p. 101). Chaudhry reveals her discomfort as she switched from confidant to adviser. At one point during the research, Fariha disappeared for a week and got married, ultimately deciding to void the religious union. Prior to officially ending her marriage, Fariha stayed at Chaudhry's apartment, during which time Chaudhry reflected: "Fariha is very quiet and lost in a world of her own. We barely communicate. I see her crying on and off" (p. 103).

Chaudhry (2000) elaborates on her experience with Fariha from the perspective of a feminist, critical ethnographer:

In my attempt to have access to data, I dexterously mobilized my multiple identities. For instance, I got into the older sister mode...when it came to define empowerment for Fariha, however, I set myself apart for the cultural bridge that connects me to her family. Choosing to ally myself with my Western modes of thought, I became the so-called objective 'feminist' detaching myself from my subjectivity as a Pakistani Muslim and from my familial relationship with Fariha. (p. 104)

The three cases presented contain many of the issues that challenge ethnographers' claims of establishing a "new," "less exploitative," more "dialogical" relationship with research participants. The problematic narrative by Golde (1970) seems to speak for itself. At a certain point the author becomes very confessional by admitting that

permeating this first encounter [with the Mexicans in the village] was the anxiety about my future as an anthropologist, which would be measured by my ability to successfully establish rapport... I conceived field work as a trial by fire that would determine whether I deserved acceptance into the professional world. (p. 92)

While the author tried to initiate a critical tradition about the problematics of reciprocity in the field, the practical demands of her role as an anthropologist spoke louder than the desire to enact such critical understandings or to benefit the villagers in meaningful – instead of remedial – ways. As such, the establishment of reciprocity was, primarily, a means to achieve pre-established goals related to the fieldwork development. To achieve such goals, she had to build empathy with the participants by constructing prescribed relationships between herself and the Mexicans to gather the needed information for her

ethnographic study (Golde, 1970).

Golde (1970) provided a good account of the huge differences and therefore the difficulties posed in this arena when she admitted that "if at times, I felt smug because of my education and training, habitual analytic reasoning, and ability to control my emotions, I also learned to accept an irrationality I shared with the people, to recognize my own susceptibility to social pressures and the need for the people's good will and affection to maintain my own feeling of security" (p. 93). Golde's acceptance of the other's "irrationality," then, configured another strategy to guarantee their sympathy. It became clear that, above all, her analytical training endured, culminating in a tenured professor position at a Western institution where irrationality has not been constituted as a positive value.

Villenas' (1996) claim of her desire to become involved with the Latino communities she studies and to further "ethnography of empowerment" (p. 721) contrasts with her most recent professional biography. Since she received her Ph.D. from North Carolina University, the author has moved to three other universities (Harvard University, The University of Utah and The University of Texas). Villenas' need to relocate, probably to find her professional space and secure an academic career, seems to challenge her aim to establish a "powerful relationship" with local Latino communities given her transitional presence in these sites. These difficulties pose tensions between her need to build and secure a professional career and the way she negotiated her relationship with research participants.

By following a rhetorical construction similar to Golde's, Chaudhry's (2000) piece uses various nomenclature and ideas from feminist critical ethnography that hide instead of reveal the author's perspectives. Here it seems important to inquire into the various choices ethnographers have to frame the content of an article or a book chapter describing a research experience. Given the vast array of possibilities as to how to portray research participants, it seems appropriate to ask why a feminist concerned with ethical is-

sues decides, then, to expose traumatic and private issues of a young woman to construct a narrative about reciprocity in the field. It seems important to ask in which theoretical and ethical bases has the author made a decision to write and publish the deeply personal experience of a participant in her research. How does the rhetorical depiction of that sad episode in a young woman's life meets the critical perspective against essentializing and exploiting the women's issues about which Chaudhry claims to speak? These questions remain to be answered in the article. The piece does not seem to further the reflection towards less unequal reciprocity in ethnographic fieldwork.

LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF "CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY"
Economic Frames

Many researchers in feminist ethnography have assumed that the "reciprocity" they enact with participants while in the field constitutes a "good enough" trade-off (for instance, Golde gave food and prestige to the Mexicans in exchange for insights into their lives; Chaudhry offered love counseling and a home in exchange for an "exotic" biography). However, it is not possible to know if research participants agree with these "good-enough" (Luttrell, 2000) trade-offs because they rarely speak about these particular issues. In this case, participants have silenced themselves at the risk of being seen as ungrateful to the "generous" researchers who present themselves as able to provide them with needed benefits. In this sense, researchers seem to be operating in line with a capitalist tradition of trade-offs.

It is important to note that these are not new issues posed to social scientists operating as ethnographers. Golde (1970) herself provided important theoretical roots for the current feminist movement of critical ethnography. According to her, while the ethnographer asks " 'How can I repay these people who give me so much?' ... the issue for the community is, 'What does she give that makes up for the trouble she causes, for the fact that she is not like

us and cannot contribute what we are accustomed to expect?'" (p. 10). Therefore, Golde already indicated a gap between researchers and research participants' epistemologies, goals, understandings and lives back there in the late 1950s.

The will to empower

Skeggs (1994) points out other ways in which reciprocity can take place. She explains that participants can increase their sense of self-worth as they become "objects" of observation. According to her, this "challenges the idea that the researched are *just* objects of a voyeuristic bourgeois gaze" (p. 81). She further elaborates by saying, "I was able to reciprocate in a more positive way by providing support and a mouthpiece against injustices" (p. 81). The author argues that participants' confessions can give the researcher a form of control but this can also constitute a space for support. She adds, "rarely were these women given much listening space or taken seriously" (p. 81).

Skeggs also reveals her dilemma in the writing phase of her dissertation:

> My initial concerns to give space and validity to the voices of young working-class women meant that I was writing against all the academic work in which they had been silenced in the past. I realized that I was not just writing for them but about them... I was writing for an entry ticket into academia. (p. 86)

The authors quoted at length on this topic seem to offer a very complex rhetorical discourse about the problems, the mechanics and the limits of reciprocity in ethnographic research. These ideas have been presented in scholarly meetings and have been published in peer-reviewed journals. Authors often use complex reasoning to make their points and frequently their narratives are hard to penetrate, created a self-perpetuating practice within academia. As such, more and more books have been published about the enduring difficulties of finding a solution for the unequal relations between researchers and research participants in the field.

The Obscurantism of Problematization

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1990) exposes how society never talks about sexuality by talking about it all the time. He not only analyzes such discourses but also analyzes the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them. Foucault concludes that

> rather than a massive censorship... what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse... [W]hat is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret. (p. 34)

It is in this way, he claims, that the "illicit discourse" about sex became "normalized."

I propose a parallel between the mechanics behind the discourse about sexuality revealed by Foucault and the practice of formulating a rhetorical discourse furthered by critical ethnographers as quoted along this paper. While the challenge to open up possibilities for less unequal relations between researcher and research participants requires actions, critical ethnographers offer rhetoric. However, this rhetoric has been ideologically defined as action. Scholars talk *ad infinitum* about the complexities of the unequal relationship between researchers and participants while it endures. This practice has become praised and has acquired a trade-value not in the research site but in the world of academic careers. The more one problematizes and the more complexity one brings to the discussion, the more one is likely to publish articles and advance in academia.

This practice is also problematic for other reasons. Most accounts of reciprocity in the field have been presented through the lens of the researcher. Where are the voices of the participants? How can the authors know the participants' perspectives on this issue if they do not examine their own accounts of unequal relationships with the close help and assistance of these participants?

Another problem refers to the fact that to speak of "ethical" research in terms of "trade-offs" and "good-enough" methods is to impose a capitalistic/economic frame on this relationship, a frame that in itself is neither ethical nor equitable. When scholars visit communities where they have a potential interest to conduct fieldwork and they offer more or less obvious "rewards," the reciprocal relationship has already been compromised no matter how welcome the bits and pieces would be to the "locals."

From an educational perspective

While the practice of social sciences' theorization plays an important role to feed critical ethnographers' rhetoric, the problem becomes more salient in the field of education, where the traditional quest for applied knowledge asks for another level of scrutiny on the scholarly production about critical ethnography. A meaningful question in such a context inquires into the ways in which educators as ethnographers can transform the fieldwork in an educational experience for both the researcher and the research participants. Or, as was elaborated in a personal communication by Lynn Fendler (2005), "research methods are pedagogical techniques... ethically sound research in education should have pedagogical value. The research should be designed in such a way that everybody involved has a chance to learn something valuable."

Some important questions, then, are: Can the idea of dialogue between ethnographer and participants inspire us? Can this "dialogue" constitute a political project, even if tentative, that generates social legitimacy from participants' recognition and benefit of such a pedagogical experience? I will reflect upon these important questions in a discussion of my own fieldwork in the next section of this article.

LOOKING FOR A COMMON GROUND

In 2006, I conducted extensive fieldwork at a public school in the outskirts of a large city in the northeast of Brazil. At the time, the school was involved in the enactment of a technology-infused

learning project. One of my main goals as I entered and as I participated in the field was to indicate to teachers and students that while I expected them to let me "look over their shoulders" I was also available, whatever that meant to them – I was not positioning myself as the one who could offer help, neither was I proposing a "pay back." I thought that assuming such behavior would already position participants in essentialized ways that my ethnographic study was trying to deconstruct. In line with Weis' and Fine's (2000) claims, I was trying not to reproduce the colonizing discourse of the "Other" as the one in need of something that I had to give.

I wanted to signal to the members of the school community that I was available. I walked around the school whenever possible, I never locked myself in any room in the school, and I tried to smile at people. When I had to interrupt and leave conversations, I either gave the other person my email address or told her/him that we could talk more at her/his convenience. I considered that these were reasonable strategies to indicate that anyone was welcome to approach me.

As time passed in the field, student participants started turning to me for "help" with specific school related tasks, either in the classroom or in the computer lab. On those occasions, I tried to engage them in some sort of exchange, instead of simply giving them the answers. Students seemed puzzled about my perspective, and they wondered why I made it so "difficult" for them.

In one situation, I was observing a group of male students at the back of the classroom when they asked me how to write the word *conscientizacão* (consciousness). I waited for one or two seconds hoping that someone else in their group would come up with the answer. They said nothing, so I told them to write it down and Wilson[2] did it without the *s* (*concientização*). Writing this word without an *s* makes a lot of sense, since the *c* makes for the sound of the missing *s*. I did not answer them with a yes or no but I asked them what they thought. They responded with silence. Then, Edison also decided to try, replacing the *c* with an *s* (*consientização*). They were exploring the pos-

sibilities of the language, exchanging similar letters with similar sounds to try to get it "right." Again, I asked what they thought. Another student wrote it with both *s* and *c*, and a silence followed. I asked what they thought about it, and someone said that it looked okay. I asked them to read it aloud and they did, but they were still in doubt, so I said it was correct and they laughed loudly. I then told them to notice how they knew to write the word and to understand that it was just a matter of trying it for a little while. I told them to say it aloud and to pay attention to how they pronounce both the *s* and the *c* when they say it slowly, indicating that they need both letters to match the pronunciation. Wilson looked and pointed at me as he said: "What a great teacher". At that moment, it was clear to me that they had learned something and that students themselves played an important role in the learning experience in which I was also a participant.

In other situations in the field, I felt that I had to be more explicit in my tutoring to achieve some learning. This happened when I perceived that a student was struggling repeatedly to achieve something and that by proposing further questions I was only going to make him or her more confused and distressed. This was the case with one particular computer lab activity involving a web interface learning project. The teacher was not in the room at that moment, and Alex was struggling to transfer files using a floppy disk from another computer to the one with which he was working.

> Alex: How [can I] pass it to here?
> Researcher: Do you know how to do that?
> Alex: No.
> Researcher: There are other ways [to do this]. Go to my computer, click on floppy disk and then (inaudible). Then you push it.
> Alex: (inaudible)
> Researcher: See, to put the title you need to insert it, otherwise you will not find it.

In other situations, I tried a blend of the two approaches, both helping students with some straight answers and formulating some questions to encourage them to further their own reasoning. The following event took place in the computer lab.

> Researcher: Now, Julia, how do you insert a picture [in the web interface]?
> Julia: Add material.
> Researcher: But today you will insert a new picture, right?
> Julia: Right.
> Researcher: So insert the picture in the [virtual] backpack.
> Julia: (Laughs) Backpack, right?
> Researcher: Why is that?
> Julia: [Because it is] picture.
> Researcher: Which area of the web interface is this? What do you need to do?
> Julia: We want to get a picture to put here. We did not do like this. Go (she inserts it).

I usually approached these interactions that I had with participants in the field as very complex events. According to Eisenhart (2001),

> Researchers working in the tradition of critical theory have also complained about conventional ethnography. The processes and products of ethnography, they claim, should do more than account for the actions of others; they should empower participants to take greater charge of their own lives… [R]esearchers can contribute to empowerment in several ways: by exposing the power inequities that shape a situation, including the research itself; by actively participating in consciousness-raising about power inequities in one's own and others' lives; and by actively taking steps to change unequal power relations. (p. 219)

Eisenhart's claims followed me through the fieldwork process. I felt guilt for not intervening in some situations to preserve my own interests as I let the participants' actions evolve "as is" so that I could record my data. I knew this was important for my project, but I also knew that there were other ways to do more than "account[ing] for the actions

of others" as the author states.

In the very beginning of my work, a girl from the class I observed asked me if "this [research] project would help [her] getting a job." One of the main challenges for teenagers and young adults in Brazil is to enter the job market. This is a difficult task not only because of the weak economy that does not generate enough jobs, but also because many recent high school graduates are not perceived as being "prepared" for the demands of the job positions. In addition to students' concerns about job readiness, teachers told me that parents were extremely concerned about how the school would help their children to secure job positions once they graduate. Although I considered the enactment of the technology-infused learning project very positive at this school, I also knew that many students would need extended periods in the lab and more direct, explicit instruction to help them develop a better sense of some digital technologies used in the project. Hopefully, I thought, this would allow them to apply these experiences in other aspects of their lives, including in future jobs. On those lines, I decided to offer a workshop for select student participants that would qualify them as project assistants for the following year at their own school. In exchange, they would receive certificates of participation and a recommendation letter written by me once they finished their work. I was not very happy with the fact that they would not be paid, but I thought that I would make that point clear and that they would be able to decline the invitation if this did not accommodate their needs.

As I provided them this workshop on the uses of digital technologies, I thought back to Villenas' (1996) claim that we may be implicated in imperialist agendas. I wondered if teaching new digital technology skills was the best thing to do for those students situated in such a context. At that point, it was late in the semester and I would be concluding the fieldwork in two weeks. However, I thought that I could make clear to the participants that I was open to interact with them via email or other media if they felt the desire to contact me for any reasons in the future. I also

told students that if they ever felt the need to talk to me they could write me messages—any messages would be fine. Unfortunately, their initial interest in exchanging brief messages with me decreased after some time. The fieldwork ended in 2006, and I returned to work at this same school in 2007. The students with whom I had worked graduated in December of 2007, and I told them that they could contact me if they had any issues or problems that they wanted to discuss with me. After they left with their training certificates, I continued working at this school in 2008 with a new class.

During my fieldwork, I strived to promote a less unequal and more educational experience with participants, and it was extremely challenging to deal with the real difficulties revealed to me by them in the field (e.g., the extreme scarcity of resources at the school and at students' homes, students' lack of hope about their futures). Like Lareau (1996), I experienced the "tiring anxiety" (p. 219) of intensive fieldwork. I wanted to "help," but most of the time that meant that I had to do things for the participants at their own persistent requests. It was difficult to find time and space to give them various resources and help them find the answers for which they were searching. This was an exhausting process, since I could not skip producing my field observations and field notes and conducting interviews—this data collection was my main reason to be at that school at that period. Also, I encountered many of the participants' problems, problems I knew I was not able to solve, such as their complaints about a lack of prospects in the local job market. These challenges were extremely frustrating for me, and they constituted an extra element of tension in my relationship with teachers and students. These experiences indicated both the immense limits and the few possibilities of establishing a less unequal relationship between researcher and participants.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The analysis presented in this paper indicates that the issue of reciprocity between the researcher and the research participants is still an open wound. This problem is a result of the tension between academic and public interests and the practice of fieldwork, as illustrated more explicitly by vignettes of my own fieldwork experience. In line with this work, Foucault's (1990) concepts of "normalization" and "illicit discourse" provide new dimensions of complexity around this issue.

What seems to make this such a complex issue are the various interests at stake during fieldwork and both the researcher's need to keep these relationships under control (to assure the completion of her tasks) and her fear of losing the difficult to acquire social status as the "knowledgeable" one. These aspects of the experience are closely related to power issues that have long been problematized. It is important that feminist critical ethnographers decide to make a decisive move towards resolving this problem.

First, it is important to acknowledge the paralysis produced by normalizing discourse and to identify who (besides ourselves) our work benefits in the larger society. Then social scientists should engage in a more critical perspective to reposition themselves with regards to their fieldwork. Such acts can contribute to recreating critical ethnography as a pedagogical enterprise where all involved have a chance to engage in dialogue and learn something beyond the already pre-packaged agenda of some ethnographers.

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ENDNOTES

1. This article is a reworked version of presentations conducted at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum and at the Conferência Internacional Educação, Globalização e Cidadania, Novas Perspectivas da Sociologia da Educação.

2. All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

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