A Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography

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Abstract

It is a very casual and relaxed environment. There is still heat in the traditional Guatemalan open fire cooker, so Alicia makes us atol [a traditional Guatemalan corn-based hot drink] ... it feels like I’m sitting in a friend’s kitchen having a chat. ... I ask Alicia if she would be happy to have me visit her and the group again if I was to come back to Guatemala [for further research]. She says the women would be more than happy to have me and it would be better if I never left ... Alicia tells me that the women [of the Chuacruz co-operative group] have spoken very positively about me. They’ve said I’m a good person to be around and I’m a good worker; I help the women in their homes and I make them feel very comfortable. (Jennifer Manning, fieldnotes abstract, meeting with Alicia Guareax Panjoj, Chuacruz co-operative group).

In this paper, I will discuss my experience of being a reflexive ethnographer, while guided by the postcolonial feminist concerns of representation and positionality, during my fieldwork with indigenous Maya women in the highland region of Sololá, Guatemala. My research engages with the organising practices of indigenous Maya women to highlight the organisational and personal realities of marginalised indigenous women working in co-operative groups, in a developing country context.
Following Imas and Weston (2012), there is a need to give a voice to the marginalised so they can establish their existence in organisation studies discourse. Much of organisation theory, no matter how global, only represents the ways of thinking of certain people and not others (Calás and Smircich, 2003, 2006). Organisation studies and practices, in the context of an ontology of modernity, do not acknowledge non-Western experience, hence, there are no recognised modes of organising in these regions (Ibarra-Colado, 2006). Moreover, Spivak (1988) highlights the problem of the muted subaltern subject, such as the indigenous woman, who inhabits the margins of Western feminist theories, as the epistemological assumptions of such theories are based on positions of power and privilege in the West. Following Mohanty (1988), my research seeks to understand indigenous women organising from within the local language, knowledge and cultural experiences of Maya women in rural Guatemala, thereby providing a platform from which marginalised indigenous Maya women can voice how they organise their co-operative groups.

The postcolonial feminist approach requires me to adopt a reflexive stance during the three month period of conducting fieldwork, while also being reflexive in producing theory following my fieldwork. While in the field, this approach necessitates that I acknowledge how differences in position and privilege impact my research, as well as my relationship with the women participants. Further, the postcolonial feminist position critiques Western representations of Third World subjects, particularly marginalised women (Mohanty, 1988; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012).

The value of reflexivity is “in its potential to examine the impact of position, perspective, and presence of the researcher” (Finlay, 2002: 532), thereby aiding in my negotiation of complex power relations in the field and helping me address the issue of positionality. Guided by reflexivity, the postcolonial feminist approach addresses the limits of ethnographic approaches “by (re)conceptualising the ethnographer’s positionality in the field through intersections of epistemological concerns, ethical practices, and political commitments in relation to Third World subjects” (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012: 579). Approaching this research ethically and having a genuine concern for, and interest in, the women and their work were the first steps in addressing positionality. Further to this, I undertook a self-reflexive styled research approach and I was able to recognise the intersections of my voice, place and privilege when engaging with participants (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012), thereby facilitating different identities and multiple selves throughout the course of the fieldwork. While in the field, my position and identity were fluid and ever-shifting as they were experienced and expressed differently by different participants at different stages of the research. As such, I was continuously negotiating and renegotiating my position and relationship with the women in every interaction.

Postcolonial feminist research also calls for ethnographers to address the issue of representation, that is, epistemological concerns addressing representations of Third World women in Western research and discourse (Mahonty, 1988; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). ‘Voice’ is a struggle to figure out how to present the self while simultaneously writing and representing the participants’ accounts (Hertz, 1996); ensuring that the women’s voices are at the centre of the research is crucial. Self-reflexive accounts in the field allowed me to question my assumptions (e.g., political and ideological agendas) and authority (e.g., the ‘superiority’ of my Western knowledge), thereby identifying potential conditions of inequality, and even a desire to speak ‘for’ others (Hertz, 1996; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Rather than offering an authoritative ethnographic account of marginalised subjects, my research will contribute to the conversation and critical discourse of organisation in producing accounts from the perspectives of indigenous Maya women.

In this paper I will reflect on my position as a postcolonial feminist ethnographer in the field, how this approach contributed to my relationship with the women from the co-operative groups, and discuss how I struggled with the issue of representation.
Dominga and Yolonda thank me for getting to know the realities of their lives, and not just stopping by to take their picture and hear their stories. “The lives we lead and the stories we tell are different”. (Jennifer Manning, fieldnotes abstract, Chuacruz co-operative group meeting).

References


