G e s a   E .   K i r s c h

Friendship, Friendliness, and Feminist Fieldwork

For some time now it has been commonplace to note that feminist research sets out not only to describe women's lives and realities but also actively to improve them. This notion is often described as research *for* women, not just *on* women (Smith 1977; Harding 1987; Fonow and Cook 1991). It is perhaps ironic, then, that scholars are discovering that methodological changes intended to achieve feminist ends—increased collaboration, greater interaction, and more open communication with research participants—may have inadvertently reintroduced some of the ethical dilemmas feminist researchers had hoped to eliminate: participants' sense of disappointment, alienation, and potential exploitation (Addison and McGee 1999).

Pamela Cotterill warns of the "potentially damaging effects of a research technique which encourages friendship in order to focus on very private and personal aspects of people's lives" (1992, 597); Sherry Gorelick speaks of the "potential deceptiveness of egalitarian relationships" (1991, 469); and Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld caution, "Given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated, attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use" (1996, 141). A common thread runs through these warnings: researchers who strive for the benefits of close, interactive relations with participants must accept the concomitant risks. These risks include the potential for relationships to end abruptly and for participants to feel that they have been misunderstood or betrayed, especially in moments when participants' and researchers' priorities diverge, as many times they will. I wish to assert that we do not have the luxury of approaching this problem with anything less than the greatest urgency, because feminist fieldwork methods are now regularly integrated into undergraduate course work, as I discuss below.

One productive way of addressing the research difficulties I have named is through carefully examining—with the aim of altering—the dynamics of friendship and friendliness as understood in the context of feminist fieldwork. It was my own work with interviews that led me to figure friendship and friendliness as conceptual sites for revising how we interact with research participants. In a large interview study with academic women (Kirsch 1993), I learned how quickly seemingly abstract, impersonal questions could lead interviewees to reveal deeply personal, emotionally charged information—as if to a friend.[1] For instance, when I asked one scholar about her academic writing and publishing experiences, she began to compare herself to her husband (also an academic) and to reflect on their differing writing styles, work habits, and failing relationship. These reflections were sobering to this woman because she became more aware of the undercurrents of her deteriorating marriage, clearly a sensitive if not painful topic for her. I was left to wonder what my responsibilities were. Listen empathically to her personal relationship dilemma? Refer her to a counselor? Avoid the topic and redirect the conversation? This unexpected conversational turn (unexpected because neither the institutional setting nor the research topic had led me to expect soul-searching revelations) served as a powerful reminder for me that neither researchers nor participants can anticipate how they will respond to even the most seemingly innocuous questions.

What explains the intimate nature of some interviewees' responses? In part, I suggest, it is linked to the rapport researchers establish with participants. The more successful I was at forming close relationships with interviewees, the more likely they were to reveal personal thoughts or feelings. Appreciating the undivided attention, sincere interest, and warmth shown by skillful interviewers (an experience we sometimes miss in the rush of daily life), participants can easily reveal intimate details about their lives that they may later regret having shared.[2] Some participants may mistake a good interview for a therapeutic situation—hence their willingness to open up emotionally. Others may open up simply

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[1] I interviewed thirty women from five different disciplines and different ranks about their writing and research experiences, as well as their sense of authority and audience as scholars in their field. I interviewed each woman at least twice, conducting more than seventy interviews in a six-month period.

[2] For examples of feminist studies with serious and unexpected outcomes, see work by Sue Middleton (1993), who discovered that one of her interviewees was an incest victim; Judith Stacey (1991), who discovered the lesbian identity of a married, fundamentalist Christian woman; and the interchange between Stacey (1994) and Elizabeth Wheatley (1994) on how to best handle such sensitive, personal information.

because the interviewer seems interested and friendly. Participants may forget—or repress—the knowledge that what they are sharing is being recorded and will later be analyzed and published in some form or another.

One could argue that participants are cognizant of their actions and intentions; they can choose what and how much to reveal—or to conceal—about their experiences during interviews. Such decisions appear to be similar to sharing personal information with friends, relatives, coworkers, or fellow travelers. However, I contend that gathering personal information during research studies is quite different from learning about it in other settings. When a participant and interviewer agree to hold an interview, there is an implicit social contract: participants agree to answer questions truthfully and to the best of their knowledge. (Indeed, sometimes this expectation of truthfulness is made explicit in consent documents.) Of course, participants can refuse to answer particular questions at any time or walk away from an interview altogether, but they rarely exercise these rights because they may empathize with or want to "help" the researcher, they may enjoy the process of reflecting on and sharing their life experiences, or they may be intrigued by an interview topic. All of these reasons suggest that interviewees are likely to cooperate with researchers, regardless of the fact that consent forms must explicitly spell out participants' rights.[3]

It is also worth remembering that interviews are a distinct social phenomenon that only simulate the context of relationships in which people get to know one another. Unlike friendships, which develop over time and are built on reciprocal trust and shared information and activities, interviews are likely to be asymmetrical interactions, with one party—the party generally with the most institutional power—asking the questions and the other answering.[4] While feminists have worked hard to make these interactions mutually beneficial, to encourage the exchange of information, and even to propose the possibility of a friendship between researcher and participant, such relationships are still based in large part on an interview process whereby the flow of information is one-sided. Moreover, many researchers leave relationships abruptly after collecting the information they need. Cotterill reminds us that "close friends do not usually

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[3] Participants' rights include, among others, the right to refuse to answer any question and the right to discontinue participation in a study at any time.

[4] Of course there are exceptions. Some friendships are one-sided, some people choose to share intimate details of their lives with strangers (as seen in the recent trend of confessional and reality television shows), and some interviews lead to genuine friendship (usually after the formal interview process is concluded). Still, friendships are generally self-selected and based on shared interests and activities, and they are not one-sided, hierarchical, or preselected (as researcher-participant relations tend to be).

arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear" (1992, 559). I propose that feminist scholars may want to consider carefully which roles they wish to play (and which to avoid) by delineating clear boundaries between researchers and participants so that neither party unwittingly compromises expectations of friendship, confidentiality, and trust.

There is particular urgency to attend to these kinds of ethical dilemmas because experientially oriented approaches to teaching, such as we see in service-learning and fieldwork-based courses, have emerged in recent years in great numbers and with a lot of fanfare at colleges and universities across the United States.[5] Such courses often introduce undergraduate students to fieldwork and ask them to conduct interviews and observations, analyze their findings, and write about them in relation to academic readings. For instance, Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2002) have authored a textbook, *FieldWorking*, which introduces first-year students to the study of local cultures, with ethnographic observation and detailed interviews as central methods.[6]

These innovative approaches to teaching typically involve students working closely with volunteer participants and community agencies. That is, the service learning and fieldwork that many professors now require place undergraduate students (often first-year students) into community settings with all the potential for ethical dilemmas—as well as opportunities for learning and growth—that trained qualitative researchers encounter.[7] Unlike similar research projects at the doctoral student or faculty level, however, undergraduate projects are neither planned with the same care as those conducted by trained scholars nor supervised with the same scrutiny as projects reviewed by doctoral committees, institutional review boards (IRBs), and peer reviewers. Rather, the observational, interview, and field

[5] A recent survey by the Campus Compact (2004) reports that "across member campuses, an average of 36% of students participate in service activities, a record high level of engagement."

[6] Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2002) do discuss general ethical guidelines and the role of IRBs in their textbook, but they offer little guidance for students on how to respond to interviewees who might feel disappointed or betrayed or who unintentionally reveal highly personal information.

[7] Peter Mortensen observes that "interestingly, the IRBs at some institutions, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for example, want to oversee research done by undergraduates in service-learning venues. Such work (unless it involves minors) is likely to get exempted or at least expedited, but it is not something that can go on without IRB supervision. This irks some faculty; see the electronic discussions on this issue at http://www.law.uiuc.edu/conferences/humansubject/papers.asp, especially those by Norman Denzin and Cary Nelson" (personal correspondence, January 19, 2004).

research that are now frequently being taught across the undergraduate curriculum throw students into the uncharted and potentially troubled waters of community research where participants and student researchers can easily confuse friendliness with friendship and where the potential dangers of misunderstandings, betrayed trust, and alienation loom large.

This fact became especially clear to me recently when I integrated a service-learning component into a course on women's autobiography, memoir, and oral history. In addition to asking students to read about different women's life stories, I also asked them to write an oral history based on multiple interviews with a woman of a different background, race, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, or other characteristic from them.[8] Having used this assignment successfully before, that term I decided to integrate a service-learning component into my course by asking students to interview women residing at a senior citizen home. This decision, I reasoned, would allow students to provide service to residents and offer those students a valuable learning experience. In order to make the service-learning experience successful, I visited the site during the summer months, worked closely with the director of recreational therapy (who was enthusiastic about students' visits), coordinated logistics with the service-learning center on my campus, and prepared students for visits and interviews by having them practice interview skills—listening carefully, asking questions with sensitivity and respect, being patient and nonjudgmental, and anticipating the setting and any special circumstances under which interviews would take place.[9]

Despite these promising conditions for service learning, some unpredictable challenges arose during the interviews students conducted with senior residents. Interviewees occasionally reacted with pain, anger, and even hostility when students asked them about aspects of their lives; students in turn were baffled when one interview went well but the next one

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[8] In previous courses, I asked students to interview women they knew through their extended family, circle of friends, business associates, church, school, or neighborhood communities. The resulting oral histories crafted by my students have convinced me of the power of experience-based learning; students discovered such topics as women's history, politics, poverty, gender roles, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, educational and career tracking, courtship rituals, marriage, divorce, motherhood, child rearing, and dreams and goals unfulfilled.

[9] The service-learning center at Bentley College is nationally recognized for its excellence; it handles all logistical issues, including making contact with external agencies, working with site supervisors, conducting in-depth service-learning orientations for students, and solving transportation logistics and any other challenges students and faculty members might encounter.

took an unexpected wrong turn. One woman, for example, talked at length about her husband and their loving relationship. When the student asked a follow-up question (as good interviewers do), this woman was reminded of her recent loss (her husband had died several months prior) and stopped the interview abruptly, asking the student to leave and not return. This student could not have predicted which questions were too personal, too direct, and perhaps asked too soon, and she was disappointed and startled by the resident's response.

Like many other scholars, I find service-learning and experientially based courses promising, and I recognize the many benefits that these innovative approaches to teaching offer: they can create conditions for serious learning, help students reexamine their values, increase retention rates among students, and build lasting connections between the campus and the community. However, I do want to bring to the profession's attention the potential ethical dilemmas that students may encounter and the resulting responsibilities their instructors assume when they assign service learning or interviews as part of their courses. That is not to say that I want to discourage innovative, socially responsible forms of teaching or research—quite the opposite.

I believe that we need to develop more realistic—and perhaps more limited—expectations about relationships with participants in both service-learning and research projects. We may want to remind participants—at regular intervals—of the fine line that separates "friendship from friendliness" (Cotterill 1992, 595) and point out that their experiences, told in the comfort of the moment, will eventually make their way into reports or publications. We may want to consider introducing such important concepts as "confirming consent," a notion proposed by Paul V. Anderson (1998, 75), who suggests that when participants find themselves in particularly vulnerable positions, such as students in a teacher-researcher study, they ought to be given the opportunity to renegotiate consent after the fieldwork is completed (a potentially threatening notion for scholars, who may lose valuable data or whole case studies, but an empowering notion for those with the least institutional clout). We may also want to introduce the "right to co-interpretation" (Newkirk 1996, 13), a concept advanced by Thomas Newkirk, who proposes that we should offer our emerging interpretations of research data to participants for their review and comments. This feedback loop, while difficult to achieve, can level the playing field to some extent, allow different points of view and disagreements to be aired, and give the researcher yet another perspective on research findings.

To be sure, we must recognize that collaborative efforts do not always

work out as planned; many factors, such as time constraints, diverging interests, conflicting values, and different commitment levels, can all inhibit or restrict the collaborative ideal we hope to achieve. We must respect those participants who lack time or interest, who change their minds, and who fall silent when we hope they will engage in dialogue. Brenda J. Brueggemann reminds us that "we cannot make [participants] speak if they only want to remain anonymous or silent. Those positions are ones we need to consider and respect as well. Those positions represent something meaningful (if not painful)" (1996, 33). Brueggemann's caution is valuable: it reminds us that while we can try to establish an ongoing exchange with interviewees, we should only do so to the degree to which they wish to interact with us. We need to learn to respect—and expect—participants' silence, distance, and withdrawal. In the case of the senior home, residents were not shy about changing their minds about being interviewed, redirecting the process, or telling students when they should leave. This ability by participants to set boundaries is important, and the senior home's statement of beliefs (see the appendix) reinforces this notion. In fact, because it sets out to create a "resident-directed" instead of an "institution-directed" culture (Misiorski 2003, 26), it might serve as a working model for setting up participant-centered research and service-learning projects.[10]

In many ways our role as experienced teachers can guide the relations we develop with participants. As teachers, we treat our students respectfully, show concern and empathy, acknowledge their experiences, and try to appreciate their points of view even when we may not share their values. (Or at least we attempt to do all of the above.) Experienced instructors also realize that they may never "like" all their students or reach them in ways they hope to, yet teachers still show respect to all students, listen to them, and interact with them in a professional, dignified manner. Finally, teachers recognize that only some, often very few, of their relations with students will continue once a course ends. The role of teacher can give us a glimpse of what is reasonable to expect in relations with participants. Obviously, there are important differences between the roles of researcher and teacher, most notably in terms of authority, time, and commitment.[11]

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[10] The senior home's statement of beliefs has been cited online in a recent issue of *Nursing Homes* magazine as a positive example for promoting culture change (Misiorski 2003).

[11] Students sign up for courses, pay tuition, commit themselves to completing course work, and expect to be graded, while participants usually volunteer their time, participate without expecting remuneration, and are not necessarily committed to seeing a project through to its end.

Still, drawing on our broad, varied, and continuous experiences as teachers can provide us with important insights as we strive to form ethical and productive relations with participants.

As feminist scholars, then, we need to understand that our interactions with participants are most often based on friendliness, not genuine friendship, and we need to convey this fact to student researchers entering the community. As researchers, we need to develop realistic expectations about our interactions with participants, recognizing that they are shaped, like all human interactions, by dynamics of power, gender, generation, education, race, class, and many other factors that can contribute to feelings of misunderstanding, disappointment, and broken trust. We need to come to terms with the fact that we will not establish meaningful relations with all participants (although that should not keep us from trying) and that, despite our every effort, we will occasionally cause our participants discomfort or emotional pain when we interview them. Yet the potential for unsatisfactory relations with participants is not reason to despair. It is, instead, reason to be as respectful, supportive, and empathetic as possible—to be as friendly as possible—as we forge ahead in relationships with those whose generosity toward us enables the advancement of knowledge in our various fields of feminist inquiry.

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Appendix
What Does the Recreational Therapy Department of Neville Manor Skilled Nursing Facility Believe?[12]

We believe in the freedom of choice.
We believe in a variety of interactions.
We believe in a diverse environment.
We believe in working as a team.
We believe in treating every person as an individual.
We believe in making no assumptions.
We believe in allowing as much independence as possible.
We believe in asking a person what they want.
We believe in doing things with a person, not to a person.
We believe in having a good time.
We believe in listening.

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[12] Information provided by Kate Waldo, director of recreational therapy, Neville Manor, Cambridge, MA (personal correspondence, September 9, 2004).

We believe in sharing.
We believe in keeping our promises.
We believe in treating everybody with understanding.
We believe in being open to suggestions.
We believe in being open to criticism.
We believe in being open to compliments.
We believe in the freedom to express one's self.
We believe everyone's self-expression is unique.
We believe in experimentation.
We believe in trying.
We believe in asking permission.
We believe in each other.
We believe in ourselves.

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