RESEARCH WITH OTHERS: REFLECTIONS ON REPRESENTATION, DIFFERENCE AND OTHERING

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Abstract: As a feminist qualitative researcher I have become increasingly concerned with doing research with Others. In particular whether we, as researchers, can or should represent members of groups we do not belong to. This article examines who we are in relation to the Others we do research with, who can represent whom, and the complex relationship between the researcher and the researched. The article also outlines some of the methodological, theoretical and ethical issues around representation, difference, and Othering, particularly those raised by feminist researchers. In discussing these issues I draw on fifteen yeas of experience in doing research with Others and speaking for and about Others in my research and writing.

Introduction

This article is written in the feminist tradition of critical self-reflective examination of one's own research practice. Although it is consciously self-revelatory my purpose in writing it is methodological, not confessional. I have been doing feminist ethnographic research for more than fifteen years. During that time I have become increasingly concerned with doing research with Others, that is, doing research with groups to whom I do not myself belong. I have, in particular, been concerned when the groups I have been working with are marginalized in ways that I am not. In doing this research I have struggled with questions

such as: Who can do research with whom? Whom should we include in our research? Whom should we leave out? In what ways will those we include be like us? In what ways different? Can we represent their views? How can we speak for them without making them Other? Who is the Other? Can our research disrupt Othering? Who can tell whose story? Can we only speak for ourselves? What about issues of power and powerlessness in the relationship between the researcher and the researched? How do we negotiate the relationship between Self and Others?

These questions have been particularly relevant during my current research project with three groups of marginalized

women in Icelandic society: women with disabilities, lesbians and immigrant women.[1] Working simultaneously with three groups of marginalized women, which I do not belong to myself, has raised intense and complex questions about doing research with Others, and about representation, difference and Othering.

In this article I reflect on some of these methodological challenges and discuss how I have thought about and negotiated the questions raised above in the context of my own research. I do not presume to have "solved" these issues or found answers that will work for everyone doing qualitative research with Others. Indeed, I do not believe there are any easy solutions or answers that will work for all of us all the time. Each of us must experiment within our research projects because different solutions will work in different projects and for different researchers. However, I do believe it is important that we, who make up the community of qualitative/ ethnographic researchers, share with each other the answers and solutions that seem to work for us. Writing about our struggles with complex, challenging and contested methodological issues is an important part of contributing to our collective experience as a research community. Learning from each other will make us better and more thoughtful researchers. Many members of this research community have written about doing research with Others (Carty, 1996; DeVault, 1999; Fine, 1998;

Gitlin, 1994; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996, Oliver, 2000; Richardson, 1997; Smith, 1999; Stone and Priestley, 1996; Wolf, 1996 and many more). I gratefully acknowledge the important contribution these researchers have made to my research practices. The aim of this article is to make a small contribution to our collective methodological discussion in the hope that it may assist others who struggle with similar issues in their work.

Who can do research with whom?

In recent years marginalized groups have challenged the way dominant groups have silenced them and spoken *for* and *about* them. Feminists led the way in protesting the marginalization of powerless groups in the production of knowledge. As early as in the 195Us feminists pointed out that those who were producing knowledge were white, middle-class, Western males which ignored issues of importance to women (Bowles and Klein, 1983; Harding, 1987; Roberts, 1981; Smith, 1987). More recently women of color, lesbians, disabled women, and third world women have criticized how white, Western, heterosexual, nondisabled women have portrayed them (Anderson and Collins, 1998; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990; Leck, 1994; Morris, 1991; Thomas, 1999). Disabled writers have also protested how nondisabled researchers have portrayed them as

weak, sick and tragic (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Finkelstein, 1996; Oliver, 1992). And indigenous peoples have made us aware of the way in which research has been linked to European imperialism and colonialism (Smith, 1999).

These challenges have forced social science researchers to critically examine whom they include in their research as well as the role of research in perpetuating Othering and re-creating Otherness. As a result many researchers have become uneasy and insecure in doing research with Others. As ethnographers we can no longer take for granted that Others will accept us and allow us access to their individual lives and communities. Or that they will accept the way we represent them and write about them. Some marginalized groups have created rules, codes of cuduct and ethical guidelines that restrict the access of researchers from outside the group and secure that all aspects of the research be carried out in cooperation with them. Examples of these are codes of conduct created by the Maori people in New Zealand (see Smith, 1999).

I have followed these discussions since the mid 1980s when I began my career as a feminist ethnographic researcher. These debates have influenced my work in various ways, including whom to do research with. Especially at the outset of my research career, these debates made me reluctant to do research with

groups that had experiences I considered different from my own. I did not want to do research with people who saw me as an outsider, even intruder, and resisted me working with them. Many of my early research projects were deliberately chosen with this in mind. For example, I did research with families of children with disabilities and families where the parents had a disability (I grew up in a family where there was a member with a disability and chronic illness) (Traustadóttir, 1991; 1995; Sigurjónsdóttir and Traustadóttir, 2000; 2001). Some of my research has focused on female human service workers working with people with disabilities (I was a human service worker for many years prior to my academic career) (Traustadóttir and Taylor, 1998). In other projects I have considered gender and friendships between people with and without disabilities (I have a number of disabled friends) (Traustadóttir, 1993; 2000). My research has also focused on the role of women in the current disability reform from institutionalization to community inclusion (I have participated in disability activism since the late 1960s) (Traustadóttir, 1992).

It is widely accepted that sharing experiences with the people who participate in our research gives us credibility in doing this research (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). Although I shared some experiences with the people who participated in the above mentioned projects I became

more and more aware of how superficial this "shared experience" could be. For example, my experience of disability and family life was growing up with a father who was physically disabled. This experience gave me insights and understandings about disability and family life. However, the families I conducted research with had experiences that were different from mine. These were families with disabled children and families where the mothers had intellectual disabilities, both of which created different experiences than those I grew up with.

Another example is my research with women who worked with people with disabilities. Again, my experiences in working with people with disabilities were valuable. At the same time, I found it problematic to draw direct parallels between my experiences and theirs. Many of them had professional training different from mine or they had no professional training. Some also worked in different "parts" of the service system than I had. Further, at the time of the research I was no longer a human service worker, but a researcher at an academic institution. This has led me to conclude that I could hardly claim to "share" experiences with my research informants. Instead, I have had "similar" experiences that have helped me relating to them and understanding their lives.

Thinking about myself as an insider or an outsider in relation to these research

projects has made me realize that who can claim an insider status with regard to their research is very complicated. For example, can I claim to be an insider researching my "own" community when I no longer belong to the community of human service workers? This also raises the question of which experiences count as "shared experiences" and which are "similar experiences."

Despite my reluctance in doing research with groups of women who can be seen as having different experiences from mine, a few projects have been concerned with the lives of marginalized women. My current research, which started in 1997, centers around three groups of marginalized women: women with intellectual disabilities, lesbians, and Asian immigrant women. In doing this research I have acknowledged their differences from me but I have also examined which of my own experiences could be helpful in understanding their lives. In particular I have examined what "similar experiences" we might have. I have found a number of such experiences. For example, I do not have a disability but my experiences of being seriously ill for a number of years have given me insights about the restrictions accompanied by an impaired body. Also, I am not an immigrant woman in Iceland but I have lived for extended periods of time in other countries, which has given me the experiences of being a foreigner in a different culture. Further, through my research with marginalized women I

have come to understand that no one is marginalized all the time or in all aspects of their lives. Many of the women in the study are central in their communities as powerful leaders or because they have specific talents, characteristics or strengths that are valued by their peers. At the same time they are devalued and marginalized by the larger society. When I think about how I am alike or different from these women, I acknowledge that I, too, have held some marginalized positions at different times and in different ways in my life. For example, as a teenage single mother I was devalued and marginalized by the larger society. And although I currently hold a valued academic position I am in some ways on the margins of the academy as a qualitative feminist researcher.

My conclusion is that it is quite complicated to use "shared experience" or "own community" as guidelines in deciding whom to do research with. In using these guidelines when deciding whom to include in my research projects I have selected informants who have in theory shared my experiences (e.g. of disability and family life). However, in practice their experience has, in significant ways, been different from mine. Further, when I have purposefully included people who are different from myself, I have found unexpected similarities. The line between Self and Other is not as clean cut as I had assumed.

Why Othering?

Social scientists have become increasingly aware of how our disciplines construct, legitimize and perpetuate Otherness (Andersen and Collins, 1998; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fine, 1998; Sampson, 1993). Both social scientists and different groups of Others have drawn attention to how the scientific discourses have constructed the Other in a way that reinscribes them as inferior. An important aspect of the various theoretical understandings of Othering is the view that our notion of who the Others are, what they are like, what they do, and so on, is closely related to our notion of who *we* are. As Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996: 9) point out, we create Others in order to define ourselves and do so in terms of who We are *not*. "Other is a construction, a set of discourses through which the dominant group defines itself."

Making Othering visible

The Marginalized Women project has involved an analysis of how dominant discourses and institutional practices marginalize and Other the women who participated in the study. This has helped make visible the processes of Othering. It has also clarified the importance of Othering in the social construction of the socially and culturally acceptable Icelandic female. An important aspect of this involves

how the three groups of women: lesbians, women with intellectual disabilities, and Asian immigrant women are Othered *as women,* but in different ways. An example of this is how they are constructed by the dominant discourses. The discourse about women with intellectual disabilities is that of a child-like asexual person. As a result, women with intellectual disabilities have difficulties being seen as sexual, adult women. A competing, but not as prominent, image constructs women with intellectual disabilities as having uncontrollable sexuality which may result in them having a large number of "defective" children. While the women with intellectual disabilities are constructed as child-like, the lesbians are constructed as male-like. Their sexuality is a threat to the heterosexual order of Icelandic society and they are frequently portrayed as not being like "real" (heterosexual) women. And finally is the dominant discourse about Asian immigrant women in Iceland, which presents them as mail-order brides. They are viewed as "loose" women available for sexual favors. They are not seen as meeting the moral standard of a "good" woman.

By presenting some women as immoral, male-like, child-like, asexual, dangerous, uncontrollable or abnormal sexual beings the dominant discourses in Icelandic society are constructing the culturally and social acceptable female. She is *not* like the Other women; she is white, of Icelandic origin, heterosexual and non-disabled. She is a "good" woman.

This analysis makes visible the important role Othering plays in the processes by which dominant groups define themselves. It also brings to view the social construction of gender and the difficulties marginalized and Othered women have in being accepted *as women.* This creates profound social exclusion on the most personal level which is difficult to combat as it is invisible and harder to detect than institutional discrimination which can be measured in terms of lack of education, unemployment rates, and so on. Analyzing the processes of Othering has made it clear that not all women are women in the same sense. Some women are constructed as defective and are rejected as acceptable "normal" women. They are the Other women.

But what do we do with this analysis of the role and processes of Othering? In the context of the Marginalized Women Project I have used this analysis in two ways. First, for the women who participate in the project. As a feminist researcher I want my research to be *for* the women and I believe this analysis is important for the women who participate in the project (and other marginalized women) in explaining how their world is "put together" (as Dorothy Smith (1987) would phrase it). I take seriously the responsibility of the researcher to analyze the larger picture and make visible the social relations and

discourses that are outside our immediate everyday experiences, but still influence our lives as women in powerful ways. This analysis is also important for privileged women, for it makes them aware that these are the same processes by which they are socially constructed as "proper" acceptable women. This also should make privileged women aware of how they may be contributing to the process of Othering.

Second, as a feminist who wants to make social change I also use this analysis to disrupt Othering. The next section describes some of the ways I have attempted to do this.

Disrupting Othering

Language is a powerful tool in the process of Othering. If Othering is done through language then it can also be undone through language. I have experimented with this when talking about the Marginalized Women project. When I speak of the research and the experiences of the women participating in the project I deliberately use language that disrupts the conventional way of constructing Others through language. Instead of the traditional "Us and Them" language I purposefully use inclusive language, thereby positioning myself within the groups, not Other to them.

I say, "Those of us who are disabled," or "Those of us who are immigrants to this country," or simply, "We." At the outset it was an effort to speak this way as it was not "natural" to me. Getting to know the women and participate in their lives has made this inclusive language feel "right" as I am more and more often talking about things I have been a part of and, thus, it is logical for me to say "we."

However, this is not as simple as it sounds. I am aware that the audience to this "inclusive talk" may feel I am trying to deceive them about who I am in relation to the research participants. The women who participate in the research, as well as people outside the research process, may see my way of talking as misleading. I have struggled with this issue, and about the right to use "we" in different contexts. I am also aware that my attempts to use language to disrupt Othering runs contrary to the common feminist practice of defining yourself in relation to the women you do research with. Instead of stating clearly who I am in relation to the women, I place myself within their groups through the language I use. Having struggled with these issues my conclusion is that they are not mutually exclusive. I believe I can use language to disrupt Othering *and* discuss the relations between the women and me (an issue I address later in this paper).

Using inclusive language in talking about marginalized women has also raised some unexpected challenges to

my identity and conceptions of who I am. In doing research with the three groups it is obvious I am not an immigrant Asian woman and that I do not have an intellectual disability. But my sexuality is not obvious. People cannot tell my sexuality by looking at me. This has made many people who listen to me talk about the project conclude that my inclusive language must reflect that I am lesbian. This ambiguity about my sexuality is strengthen by the fact that I feel most at ease speaking inclusively about the lesbians because, of the three groups, I have been most actively involved in activism and social change with the lesbian and gay community. This means that when I speak of lesbian issues and struggles it feels natural to say "we" because I have been part of discussing, planning or carrying out some of the issues I speak of.

At the same time I am aware that people from within and outside the lesbian and gay community could challenge me in my use of "we" in this context. So far no one has done so. On the contrary, many of the lesbians have said they like that I say "we" when I speak of them. They say it is a welcomed change from the negative and Othering language they often have been subject to by researchers. This way of talking has therefore influenced how the women participating in the research view who I am in relation to them (an issue I also return to later).

The longer I work on this project the more important I see the work of destabilizing the categories and disrupting the sharp boundaries drawn between homosexual and heterosexual people (and that goes for other groups as well). I have come to see Othering based on sexuality as false because I believe that most of us are a mixture of sexualities and if there were not so many taboos regarding same-sex relationships many more people, including myself, would fall in love with people of the same sex. Besides, I do not believe it is helpful to create these binary oppositions between us: man-woman, gay-straight, disabled-nondisabled, and so on. There are no fixed categories of Us and Them and my talk aims to make these blurred boundaries visible. What divides us and what we have in common is much more complex and our subjectivities multiple. Thus, by not identifying my sexuality and using inclusive language, I am disrupting the processes of Othering based on oversimplified binary categories.

In disrupting Othering I also want to convey that on a very profound level I believe that we are One with each other. Therefore it is important we do not discriminate or exclude, for our own sake. This talk is also a place of solidarity. I stand *with* the women instead of the traditional dis-stance between the researcher and the researched (Fine, 1994).

Finally, taking this stance has also given me valuable research experience I had not foreseen when I started this experiment of disrupting Othering through language. When I speak this way I am viewed as part of the Other by the audience, which treats me accordingly. This has created variety of experiences. For example "attacks" by fundamentalist Christians who see me as a sinful lesbian, immoral and in need of being saved and "cured." I have also experienced being embraced by groups of lesbians and gay men who have welcomed the solidarity reflected in the way I speak *for* and *about* them.

This last point brings me to the contested issue of *who can speak for whom* which I discuss in the next section.

Speaking only for ourselves?

The issue of who can do research with whom is closely related to the issue of who can speak for whom. Some feminists have suggested that we have no right to speak for anyone but ourselves and thus, should not represent Others at all. We should leave Others to speak for themselves "maintain a respectful silence, and work to create the social and political conditions which might enable Others to speak (and to be heard) on their own terms" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 10). Similarly, bell hooks (1990: 151) writes: I am waiting for them to stop

talking about the "Other," to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just what we speak about, but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the "Other" is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding the gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking. James Charlton (1998) also captures the importance of this issue in the title of a recent book on the history of the disability rights movement, *Nothing about us without us*. Some feminist authors have called this a "crisis of representation" which, among other things, has led some researchers to turn to their own experiences in their sociological writings. Some have referred to these as *narratives of the self* (Richardson, 1997) or *emotional sociology* (Ellis, 1991). Among ethnographers who have experimented with this genre are Ronai (1997) who has explored her experiences of growing up with a mother with an intellectual disability and Ellis (1995) who has written about her experiences of caring for a terminally ill partner.

A number of feminists (and non-feminists) have identified problems with the position of speaking only for oneself (Fine, 1998; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996; Oliver, 2000). Below I discuss some of these and argue that *speaking only for ourselves* will not solve problems of representation.

First, speaking only from and about our own experiences and positions would lead to a gross over-representation of the views of white middle-class, non-disabled, heterosexual feminists. As the hegemony of the white, middle-class feminist has, indeed, been one of the main problems with feminism it is hard to see how *speaking only for ourselves* could be a solution.

The second problem with taking this position lies in defining who "we" are and what constitutes "our communities." In early feminist work "we" were "women." Still today much feminist work is based on doing research with women. Only focusing on gender, however, as unifying for women, disregards class, sexuality, ethnicity and other distinctions and diversities. But, attempts to define "us" more precisely can become reductionist and the complex and multiple group identification can result in "communities" of single individuals as Alcoff (1994) has pointed out. Similarly, writing about insider perspective in disability research Oliver (2000: 14) argues against the position that "only those with direct experience are entitled to speak about it" because "it reduces experience entirely to the individual ... only blind, elderly, black, gay men can speak for blind, elderly, black, gay men, and so on."

The third problem with *speaking only for ourselves* is the continued silencing and exclusion of the group in question. Clearly, speaking for Others can silence them and reinforce their Othering. However, *speaking only for ourselves* can serve the same purpose. Not speaking for Others silences them and erases their experiences. This can become an excuse for not addressing the lives of marginalized women, a way out of dealing with the complexity and diversity of women's experiences which allows privileged women to forget about Other women. Thus, *speaking only for ourselves* can be used to justify ignoring the majority of women in the world altogether.

We seem to be in a no-win situation. Feminists who represent women who are different from themselves can be accused of silencing and co-opting the stories of these women and feminists who only speak for themselves and from their own experience can be accused of ignoring marginalized and oppressed women. Damn you if you do and damn you if you don't.

My conclusion is similar to that of Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996: 12) who write, "whatever the intentions, the *effects* of speaking only for ourselves are often the silencing of Others, the erasure of their experience, and the reinscription of power relations" (emphasis in original). And I agree with Michelle Fine (1998: 151) who writes she "would not argue that only those 'in the experience' can tell a story of injustice. " Fine also points out that "it is surely essentialist to presume that only women can/should 'do' gender;

only people of color can/should do race work; only lesbians and gays can should 'do' sexuality; only women in violence can tell the stories of violence" (Fine, 1998:152).

Obviously, I have taken the position to speak *for* and *about* the women who have participated in the Marginalized Women project. This has sometimes been at their request, usually when there is a need for an "expert" to speak out on their behalf. In my respectable position as a (heterosexual) university professor I have credibility and am recognized as an authority on lesbian and gay issues. I am heard in a way they themselves are not.

Although I have provided strong arguments against *speaking only for ourselves*, I also acknowledge that *speaking for Others* is problematic. I continue to struggle with this in my work. I realize that the very act of representing the other people, even when done in co-operation with them, is an expression of our power relations. Speaking for them can serve to legitimize and recreate the patterns of privilege, which created their Othering in the first place. Thus, the problems of representing and speaking for Others must continually be juggled against the costs of silence.

Conflicting commitments

I have made two commitments in doing research with marginalized women.

First, a commitment to enable the women to be heard. I want to create a space for the women to speak of what life is like inside the marginalized place society has delegated them to. Second a commitment to create social change in cooperation with the women.

An ongoing puzzle for me in the Marginalized Women project is how to carry out the research so that the women who teach me about their lives are honored and empowered, even when they and I see things differently. Representing Others involves various dilemmas and I was confronted with a serious dilemma when my two commitments in this project came into conflict.

The commitment to enable the women participating in the project to be heard has taken many forms. Mostly their voices have been heard directly through the stories they tell of their lives and experiences. An example of this is an international collection by and about women with intellectual disabilities (Traustadóttir and Johnson, 2000) and a collection of stories and research accounts by and about lesbians, gay men and their family members (Traustadóttir, forthcoming). Both of these books have been created in cooperation between individuals from the marginalized groups and the researcher. Many of the stories are told in first person and either written independently by the person or with the assistance of a researcher. Other ways

to create space for the women's voices has been through joint presentation at scholarly conferences (Slattery and Traustadóttir, 2000).

My commitment to supporting marginalized women to be heard came into conflict with the commitment to create social change when a few of the women criticized the way the project was organized. The goal of the project was to understand similarities and differences in the lives of women who were marginalized due to different social factors such as "race,"[2] sexuality and disability. Some of the lesbians and the Asian immigrant women were skeptical about the approach to look at the similarities across different groups. They did not like being lumped together with other devalued groups. They did not see themselves as having much in common with the other groups and resisted being juxtaposed to groups that were even more devalued than they themselves, or devalued in different ways.

This created a difficult dilemma for me. I had made a commitment to support these women in being heard and I could not silence them just because I did not like the things they were saying. My reason for the "three group approach" derived from my other commitment; that of creating social change. Thus, I was caught in a conflict between my two commitments to the women. To make things worse, their criticism was a fundamental one. If I took their

criticism to heart I would have to fundamentally change the project.

The women and I addressed this dilemma by talking about it and we had long discussions about the issues involved. I could easily see their point and, on some level, I agreed with them. It can be "contaminating" to lump devalued groups together. The combined effect can reinforce stereotypes about devalued groups as being alike and increase their devaluation. However, I argued for the continuation of the "three group approach" and explained my reasons for studying the common experiences of different marginalized groups. I agreed that the three groups of women who participated in the study were very different. They did, however, share being marginalized and the major goal of the study was to trace how social processes of exclusion created similar experiences and life situations for different groups of women. From the outset of the study it became apparent that the three groups had even more in common than I initially anticipated. We discussed the benefits of identifying common social processes of exclusion and how tracing and identifying how these processes work across different groups would unmask the larger social relations, thereby creating a better understanding of the forces that shape people lives; what I called the social organization of marginalization and exclusion. I pointed out that by understanding how social exclusion, marginalization and

Othering work in similar ways across different groups provided an alternative view to the one that points to individual characteristics and defects as the cause of social marginalization. My main argument was that looking at common issues in the experiences of exclusion would make it clear that it was not the disability, sexuality or ethnicity that was the "problem," but how society reacts to these. Another important issue, from my point of view, was that understanding the common experiences of exclusion would give marginalized groups the possibilities of learning from each other, and, I hoped, could create a basis for joining forces in working against discrimination. Currently, however, most marginalized groups are isolated from one another and seem to know little about each other's experiences of marginalization and even less about each other's political struggle for equality and justice.

Our discussions about the "three group approach" were most intense early on in the project. We never really "solved" this issue. The women who criticized the "three group approach" have continued their involvement in the project. They agree with my social change arguments as an ideal although they are not convinced that the project will ever create the kinds of social change I am hoping for. Thus, this continues to be a source of tension. Our discussions on this issue have become a part of the project. When I write and speak about the project I make a point

of presenting this conflict thereby attempting to be true to my commitment to letting the women's concerns be heard although I do not agree with them.

Who can represent whom?

I would like to return to the issue of whom we should include in our research. In what ways will those we include be like us and in what days different? Can we represent their views? During the Marginalized Women Project I was confronted with this issue in an unexpected way. The project as a whole is large and complicated; it centers around the lives of three groups of marginalized women, about 30 women from each group, in all about 90 women. The focus has been on the following areas of the women's lives: motherhood, family life, education, employment, and health. To make the project more manageable I have broken it into smaller projects and graduate students at the University of Iceland have worked with me on different parts of it.[3] One of these sub-projects focused on lesbians and family life.

About a year into the lesbian family study, the minister of justice decided to review the adoption bill in order to make it easier for Icelandic families to adopt children from abroad. Representatives from the lesbian and gay community went to the minister and asked her to include adoption rights for lesbians and gay men in the new bill. The minister

did not want to do so. Her arguments were that there was no research about these families and, thus, no knowledge to base such changes on. The lesbian and gay community decided that the minister and the parliamentary committee working on the new bill needed to be informed about the research in this area. They came to me and asked me to work with them on this. Things happened very fast and suddenly the lesbian family study became the center for information gathering and activism for lesbian and gay adoption rights. This involved some very dramatic changes in the study. Changes that were initiated by the lesbian and gay community.

First, the focus of the study changed from being about lesbians and family life to also include gay fathers as well as daughters and sons (teenagers and young adults) of lesbians and gay men. The gay men, some of whom were fathers, had strong wishes to be included in the study. They refused to be left out and argued that they needed to be represented in the information that would be collected and presented.

Second, the study changed from being a fairly traditional qualitative research study based on participant observations and interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) to becoming a very collaborate project were lesbians and gay men took the initiative to be included and write their stories, either by themselves or in collaboration with me. The information

collected through this work included reviews of international research literature on lesbian and gay parenting and information from the Icelandic project. This was presented to the parliamentary committee working on the adoption bill. This material and additional information we have continued to collect will be published as a book of stories and research information about lesbian and gay families.

As a feminist researcher, most of my research has been with women. In my struggles with representation and difference, I have not assumed I could, or would, represent men. In doing work with women, however different, at least I assumed we had some common experiences we shared as women. I was unprepared for the request to include men in the project and represent them. The changes in the lesbian family study have been an interesting challenge for me in how to think about working with Others.

I share the feminist emphasis on collaboration, commonality, empathy and sisterhood. I want to do research that is *for* and *with* women, not merely *by* and *about* them. Research that is inclusive, interactive and empowering, and makes a difference in women's lives. The lesbian family project has turned into all of this, except it includes both women and men. Through this project I have been forced to adjust my view about whom to include in my research. The collaboration in the

lesbian and gay family project (as it is now called) has been very successful. There is a large number of people (women and men) involved and a lot of energy behind this work. We managed to create changes in the new adoption bill, which now has been passed. Icelandic lesbians and gay men do now have the legal right to what we call "step adoption" which means that people in registered partnerships can adopt their partner's child. This is the most common form of adoption in Iceland so this is an important step. We have plans to continue lobbying till lesbians and gay men have the same rights to family life (adoption, access to reproductive technology and so on) as heterosexual people. The Lesbian and Gay Family Project will play an important role in this work.

This experience with the Lesbian and Gay Family Project has made me rethink whom to include in research. It has also raised interesting questions about who can represent whom. I have come to think that it is not whom we include but how we work together that is the most important issue.

The relations between us

Michelle Fine (1998) encourages us to "work the hyphen." By that she means that we need to examine the relations between the researcher-researchersed, Self-Other. Fine urges us to understand who we are in relation to our informants and the contexts we study. Attempting to create a space where Others can be heard requires a particular kind of listening. It involves both of us in specific ways and the knowledge that is created in our talk comes from both of us, not just the Other. That is why it is so important that we, as researchers, are seen and heard in our projects. That we not just write about Others but also about ourselves and the relations between us.

Listening and talking with the women in the study often raises difficult questions, contested issues and a range of emotions. Also for me. For example, Helga, a young woman with an intellectual disability talks of being physically and sexually abused. She has difficulties finding words to describe her experiences. As she speaks I am reminded of my own experiences of abuse as a young woman. Helga's words evoke in me feelings of guilt, fear, shame and anger. Like Helga, I find it hard to talk about these experiences. Sharing our experience and the difficult emotions makes it easier for me to relate to Helga's feelings. Although Helga finds it difficult to articulate, I understand her and our shared experience of being abused as women creates a bond between us and I am reminded, once again, how many experiences women have in common across lines of differences.

We are also different and other issues and experiences divide us. For example,

I find it hard to relate to Helga's longing for a traditional woman's roles which, among other things, entails being a full time mother and a housewife. However, in trying to understand her I can see that because she has never been fully accepted into the role of a lover, mother, wife and other traditional women's roles, it becomes important to gain access and acceptance in such roles. Privileged women, like myself, have had access to these roles and the possibility of rejecting them. Maybe, if I were in Helga's shoes, I would also romanticize traditional women's roles.

Thus, who we are in relation to each other is complex. We, informants and researchers alike, are multiple in these relations. I believe that being conscious of these relations, critically reflecting upon them and using them in our work as researchers will make our research better and more meaningful for both of us. In learning about Others, we learn about ourselves. Focusing on our similarities as well as our differences will allow for a better understanding and interpretation of Them, as well as Ourselves. However, I also believe this closeness to our informants may limit what we feel comfortable telling, for both our sakes.

The Other gazes back

As researchers we are usually occupied with our views and understandings of our informants. But fieldwork is a two-way process. The Others are constantly looking back at us, the researchers, wondering who we are in relation to them. When the women who participate in the Marginalized Women study look at me it is obvious to the Asian immigrant women and the women with intellectual disabilities that I am not a member of their communities. This is not as clear to the lesbians. They turn their eyes back at me and raise questions about my likeness or difference from them. They reverse the discourse of power and I have become the subject of their gaze.

As a part of the project I have spent time with individual women and also taken part where the women come together as a group. When I first started attending meetings and other social gatherings of lesbians, some of them treated me with suspicion and distrust. As they have come to know me and particularly after they have heard my way of speaking about them in relation to the Marginalized Women project, they have become more and more accepting of me and have found different ways of defining who I am in relation to themselves. They do not have a unified way of categorizing me. Instead, as far as I can tell, there are at least four ways they have come to define who I am in this context: (1) almost a lesbian, (2) closeted lesbian, (3) theoretical lesbian, and (4) the sexuality is not an issue. It is I, not them, who have come up with the

names for these different categories based on the way they talk to me about who I am in relation to them.

First, *almost a lesbian*. A number of lesbians have been involved in the Marginalized Women project and in various ways. Some of them have been advisors, others have been researchers (doing fieldwork with lesbians and women with intellectual disabilities). Most of them, however, have been informants, research participants and collaborators in writing about their lives as lesbians. Many of them seem to regard me as a lesbian. When I tell them, "I am straight" they usually laugh and say "you're not all that straight." They see me as different from most straight people. I site with lesbians and gay men, behave and speak in many ways as a lesbian. And they conclude I am *lesbian-like or almost a lesbian*. I believe that my "inclusive talk" to disrupt Othering (described earlier in this paper) supports them in this view.

The second category is *a closeted lesbian*. The lesbians who see me this way believe that I am "really" a lesbian that has not "come out" yet. Many people in the gay community seem to hold this view of me and on a few occasions I have been asked directly when I was going to "come out." This position is encouraged by the fact that I do not have a partner. Besides, it is well known in lesbian circles that a number of women who have led a heterosexual lifestyle come out as lesbians in mid-life.

Third, *theoretical lesbian*. Those who define me this way know that I posses a great deal of knowledge about lesbian and gay issues. People are aware that I have an overview of research and information on different aspects of lesbian and gay lives, such as lesbian and gay families, health, relationships, and so on. Although lacking in personal experience I have more theoretical knowledge about lesbians than the lesbians themselves do. Thus, when the lesbian and gay community needs information they often turn to me for assistance.

Finally, is the view that my *sexuality is not an issue*. Some of the lesbians and gay men have said directly that they do not care about my sexuality. In the context of asking me to work with the Lesbian and Gay Association, one of the Association's leaders said; "I know who you are and what you stand for and that is enough for me. Your sexuality is your private matter." Those who categorize me this way see me as an allay and collaborator on different projects; a resource for the lesbian and gay community; and a supporter of lesbian and gay rights. They welcome me into their community regardless of my sexuality.

By incorporating me into their community in these ways the lesbians (and gay men) have opened up a space

for me that I can inhabit amongst them. This is a space I could not claim but one they can offer. Their way of understanding who I am in relation to them incorporates me into their community making me as much an insider as possible. Thus, in my interactions with the lesbians as a group I fill an ambiguous space where the boundaries of where I belong—as an insider or an outsider—are fluid and blurred. I am included and accepted but I am not quite one of them.

Conclusion

I began this article by raising some of the questions I have been struggling with in my research over the past fifteen years. I have reflected on some of the ways I have negotiated these questions in the context of some of my research projects. It has been a challenge for me to write this article. As researchers, we are used to writing about Others, not ourselves. We talk *about* and *for* Others at the same time we hide ourselves, who we are, our feelings, believes, strengths and weaknesses. It is important that we write ourselves into our research and critically reflect on who we are in relation to the people who participate in our projects. We need to make clear for others and ourselves how we influence our projects and why. Social science research is not a neutral objective way of reflecting or representing social reality. In doing our research and

writing our findings we always make decisions about whose story should be told and whose left out. In doing this we are creating and constructing reality. Our production of knowledge serves to legitimate some views and experiences while challenging others. I have become increasingly aware of the power of the researcher in creating knowledge about our social worlds and the peoples who inhabit these worlds. If we are self-reflective about ourselves in relation to our research we will be less likely to run the risk of uncritically reproducing Othering and oppression.

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Endnotes:

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[2] I use quotation marks for the word "race" to indicate how problematic I consider it to be. Although this concept continues to be widely used to distinguish between groups, there are, in fact, no biologically distinct races among human beings.

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