CAN FEMINIST METHODOLOGY REDUCE POWER HIERARCHIES IN RESEARCH SETTINGS?

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ABSTRACT

In this comment the issues of power hierarchies and the role of feminist methodology in fieldwork are addressed. Observations from fieldwork in Turkey for research on gender-based constraints faced by women micro- and small entrepreneurs are used to identify some of the power hierarchies involved in research settings and how the use of feminist methodology can be instrumental in reducing these hierarchies. Linking research with action-oriented programs is one important aspect of this fieldwork which contributed to the communities where the research took place. The methodology used in this research also validated personal experience through qualitative interviews and the use of interdisciplinary methods. The focus group interviews proved to be the most flexible, egalitarian and interactive of all the methods used in the fieldwork. In conclusion, while a feminist methodology cannot eliminate power hierarchies in the research process, it can be helpful in partly reducing them.

KEYWORDS
Economics, feminism, methodology, qualitative research, focus groups, Turkey

I address the issues of power hierarchies and the role of feminist methodology in fieldwork in this comment. I will use observations from my fieldwork in Turkey, where I was researching the gender-based constraints faced by women micro- and small entrepreneurs, to identify some of the power hierarchies involved in research settings and how the use of feminist methodology was instrumental in reducing these hierarchies. Feminist methodology aims to improve the lives of women who are the subjects of the research. It is based on validating personal experience in the research process, using interdisciplinary approaches and combining activism with academic goals.[1]

The power hierarchies in the research setting result from a number of factors. One factor involves the different positionalities of the researcher and the subjects of the research. In my research there were power

hierarchies due to different positionalities of me as the researcher and the women entrepreneurs who were the subjects. While I was a Turkish woman, and an insider, I was also middle-class, university-educated and living in the U.S., therefore an outsider.

Another factor resulting in power hierarchies in the research setting is the power exerted during the research process and the ways in which the research relationship is defined. In my research, I felt the power hierarchies strongest during the structured survey questionnaires. The dynamics of asking specific questions and demanding concrete answers were very constraining. During the qualitative interviews, such as the focus group interviews, the women who were the subjects of the research had more voice and brought out issues of importance to them such as child care facilities and mobility outside the house.

Approaching the research with a certain sense of responsibility has also helped in reducing the power hierarchies in the research setting. Discussing with women entrepreneurs the most needed support services for their businesses gave us a clear idea for developing project suggestions to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. We also helped establish links between the women entrepreneurs and women's groups and government offices which provide credit, training and marketing facilities. Such an active involvement changed my perceptions of the work from being only for myself to being a contribution to the women entrepreneurs' lives.

I will concentrate on the focus group interviews as a qualitative and an interdisciplinary research tool. Eight focus group interviews were conducted with eight to twelve women entrepreneurs at a given time for one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours with a set of six or seven predetermined questions, one moderator and one observer for each interview. The observer was present for taking notes and did not participate in the conversations. The participants were a heterogenous group of women micro- and small entrepreneurs from different classes and generations.

Initially, the focus group interviews were expected to back up quantitative data provided by the survey. However, they turned out to provide a rich and detailed set of data about the perceptions, thoughts and impressions of group members in their own words. The direction of my research also changed when I found out during these interviews that there were self-employed women's informal nonfinancial cooperatives which did not surface in the structured survey questionnaires despite repeated questions on organizations.

The interactions between women entrepreneurs during the focus group interviews helped bring out generational, class and regional differences between them. In terms of class differences, working-class women entrepreneurs living in urban squatter neighborhoods usually relayed personal stories of poverty which pushed them to start their businesses. Many of them talked about the objections of their families to their work. One woman

entrepreneur had so much pressure from family and neighbors that she would leave her home each morning and slip into a black overcoat and head scarf to disguise herself before starting to sell her home-made slippers and loofahs on the street. On the other hand, middle-class women entrepreneurs mainly relayed stories of their desire to be productive. Quite a number of the older women voiced their feeling of uselessness after their kids grew up. Contrary to working-class women entrepreneurs, middle-class women entrepreneurs clearly wanted to leave an impression of working as a result of choice rather than need even if there was the push of financial necessity.

The generational differences with respect to intra-household bargaining issues were also striking in the focus group interviews. The older generations of women opted for "managing it all" without asking the help of their spouses in housework and child care since they did not want to jeopardize their right to work. However, younger women entrepreneurs would argue with their spouses to make them realize the need for them to participate in housework and child care responsibilities.

The use of a feminist methodology provided answers to my initial research questions on the gender-based constraints faced by women micro- and small entrepreneurs and revealed aspects of their lives that otherwise were obscured by the quantitative framework, such as their informal nonfinancial cooperatives. The research process validated personal experience through qualitative interviews and the use of interdisciplinary methods. The focus group interviews proved especially to be the most flexible, egalitarian and interactive of all the methods used in the fieldwork of this research. Evaluative interviews held a year after the initial interviews show that the efforts in establishing links between the women entrepreneurs and women's groups and government offices helped improve credit, training and marketing opportunities for women micro- and small entrepreneurs. In conclusion, while a feminist methodology cannot eliminate power hierarchies in the research process, it can be helpful in partly reducing them as the observations from the fieldwork of this research suggest.

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NOTE

[1] The research team consisted of an interdisciplinary group of economists, sociologists and political scientists.