

BROKEN MIRRORS:

The Deconstruction of Straw Women, and Mutual Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This paper deconstructs the anthropological claim to mutual understanding. I use the life-story project of female anthropologists to support my claim that life-stories are communicative events. As 'negotiated dialogue' they arise more from difference than from mutual understanding.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce papier déconstruit la supposition anthropologique de la compréhension mutuelle. J'utilise les projets d'anthropologues femelles d'histoires de vies afin de supporter mon argument que les histoires de vies sont des événements communicatifs. En tant que 'dialogues négociés', elles sont produites plus par des différences que par la compréhension mutuelle.

INTRODUCTION

For my graduate research (EppHeise 1987), I set out to construct life-stories of female anthropologists.¹ Initially, I thought of my co-participants' positions relative to each other and to myself, in terms of a mirror: we would produce reflections of/on reflections. Part of the project design was the creation of a double effect: women on women, anthropologists on anthropologists, life-story on life-story constructors.

The focus of the life-story research was to be on 'gender and self' with reference to the female anthropologists as professional/academic, fieldworker, and text-maker. In short, I wanted to explore the relationship of the 'life' to the 'work' in the context of academic micropolitics (Keesing 1985). In other terms, it was to be an exploration of corridor talk, where, according to

Rabinow (1985:11), important discourse occurs but is not written about.² The initial assumption was that 'female discourse', and that of feminist anthropologists in particular, remains largely in the corridors -- that is, outside of official academic forums. If this proved to be true, then the hierarchical structures -- gender, income, class, age, theoretical orientation, and so forth -- that excluded such discourse from the public domains of academia had to be examined and questioned.

My mirror concept, the device with which I proposed to examine the micropolitics of gender in academia, proved too facile. What became immediately obvious through the life-stories, was that a single 'female discourse' did not exist within anthropology at all. Consequently, any assumption that an unmediated flow of information would automatically be shared within this 'discourse' was also jeopardized. When I concluded my life-story project, I saw difference rather than likeness as the basis for communication. The mirror concept and the conclusions to which it leads, are limited; they bind us to other limiting concepts such as 'straw women' and 'mutual understanding'. Unless these are deconstructed, we will not be able to see or think about others' lives apart from our own.

This paper addresses the often implicit anthropological claim to mutual understanding. My argument is as follows: 1) There is a problem of the 'straw woman' in life stories written by women about women (and in others as well). The claim to mutual understanding here rests on the unexamined presumption of shared gender, and this has serious implications for the study of women by women; 2) 'Broken mirrors' is a metaphor for the deconstruction of the mirror concept -- mutual understanding -- that underlies textual productions of life-stories. Deconstruction enables us to see anthropology's ethnographic (i.e. textual) crisis as a communicative crisis³; 3) Life-stories, understood as a form of negotiated dialogue, are potentially both deconstructive and reconstructive for anthropological theory and method.

Since the differentials between my co-participants and myself did not seem severe, one might assume that communicative co-ordination, or even mutual understanding (taking our cue from Habermas), might have readily occurred. This was not the case, however. Rather, my research led me to conclude that negotiated dialogue, based on and in mutual difference, is a more basic communicative construct than mutuality. Difference assumes relations of power. Thus, this paper speaks to the very concept with which Ignatieff takes issue in his reading of Hume.

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

1) STRAW WOMEN

It is not so surprising that a single 'female discourse' does not exist within anthropology. Certainly, I had never expected one life-story (nor ten) to represent those of all female anthropologists; the one life mirroring them all. Nor did I wish to create a 'straw woman' which, in the prototypical case of Malinowski, became "a universal, a bundle of generalizations about the characteristics ... of Primitive [Wo]/Man⁴ (Strathern 1980:666). To avoid this singular representation, I had carefully selected women of varying ages, professional employment, theoretical orientation, marital status and so on, to take part in my study. But, this (mis)use of representativeness is a common trap and it soon became evident that I had succumbed to it. I became aware of this when one of my co-participants corrected my description of the project participants as 'female anthropologists'. She remarked, "I am an anthropologist. I am not a female anthropologist". In this manner, the positioning of the creator (me) vis-a-vis the straw-woman was challenged.

My assumption that female anthropologists would easily talk about gender in relation to their work was problematic. Forming a continuum of attitudes and responses, either there was complete resistance to associating gender with work, or the process of defining the relationship between gender and work became emotionally charged and/or was considered theoretically vital. My co-participants' resistance to my simple assumption, evidenced by careful but insistent statements and corrections (as demonstrated above), challenged the commonplace thinking that 'mutual understanding' necessarily arises from a basis of shared gender in particular, and likeness, in general.

Strathern suggests that the only consensus for an anthropology of women is that women are regarded as social actors of consequence. Yet there is a pervasive belief in anthropology that women can best study women (Strathern 1980:669). In addition, the doubling -- of women on women -- increases the project depth: for example, a person familiar with the genre of life-stories is more critically informed about the process than persons unfamiliar with it (and critiques were freely given by my co-participants even when not requested). Thus, there must be some credence given to the proposition that likeness helps establish mutual understanding. Here we agree with Hume; we are mirrors to each other.

2) FEMALE MUTENESS

Assuming that none of the women in this study who believe women study women best are proposing an explicitly essentialist argument, on what basis then does this claim lie? One goal of feminism -- and indeed, of life-stories -- is to enable speech. The anthropological literature from E. Ardener (1972) on, suggests that women's voices are 'muted', although Keesing argues that "'muteness' must always be historically and contextually situated and bracketed with doubt" (1985:27). The fusion of women's speech with the life-story mode has become, for many, a privileged and essential feminist project (e.g. Gelfund 1983; Geiger 1986; Gluck 1984; Kauffman 1987; Keesing 1985). The corrective to this muteness is the production of women's texts. But here we still have an author -- a woman who speaks with, yet in the end, for other women. Herein lies the dilemma of the mutuality argument, as evidenced in the following feminist critique:

For one thing it is not an unproblematic project to try to speak for the other woman, since this is precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has always done: men have constantly spoken for women, or in the name of women. Is it right that women now should take up precisely that masculine position in relation to other women? (Toril Moi 1985:68).

The relation between the creator of these texts and the potential straw-woman is not so easily dissolved even when our mirrors insist that we are the same. For, as most anthropologists now admit, gender is a social and ideological construct. The value of the life-story, however, is its potential to break the mirrors. For this to occur, however, we must be more accepting of difference, indeed, embrace difference as a more basic construct than mutuality.

BROKEN MIRRORS

'Broken mirrors' is a metaphor for the deconstructive potential life-stories as negotiated dialogue have for our anthropological projects. Seen as the most interactive and person-centered ethnography, life-stories have the potential to speak to the heart of anthropological praxis. The life-story seeks to reintroduce the 'I', the "narrative, subjectivity, the confessional, personal anecdote,

[and/]or accounts of the ethnographers' or anyone else's experience" (Tyler 1985:85), that most ethnography has excluded. Deconstruction implies a violence: it is, as Derrida would have it, a 'rendering' of the text.

Anthropology's current ethnographic crisis is situated by anthropologists such as Dwyer (1977), Clifford (1983), and Rabinow (1985) in the act of producing texts out of the unruly encounter(s) of 'Self' and 'Other'. Authorship is in crisis. How does the text incorporate both relationship and representation, that is, co-presence in the ethnographic encounter and the depiction of that relationship in the writing of ethnography?

My co-participants created for me my own ethnographic crisis. For example, I did not initially perceive of myself as an interviewer, but as someone sparking life-stories that would take on their own flow. "To spark" did not, in my mind mean 'to interview'. I was quickly disabused of this romantic notion by my participants. They demanded a project outline, critiqued my style, suggested other participants, restated my comments, and outlined my assumptions.

In this manner, I have been forced to come to terms with the tension of sharing this project. This juggling -- this dialogic negotiation -- is conflictual, no matter how kindly it is done.

What this paper suggests, as I indicated earlier, is that the ethnographic crisis is a communicative crisis. But my concern extends beyond the rendering of the text. In this life-story project the text is situated in the world and deconstruction takes on other, broader applications. For Edward Said, "Texts are in and of the world because they lend themselves to strategies of reading whose intent is always part of a struggle for interpretive power" (1979:177). The co-construction of life-stories of female anthropologists can be seen as the discursive production of such texts. But to choose negotiated dialogue invites rupture of the anthropological encounter which is prior to and greater than the production of texts. Specifically, the communicative frame for the anthropological life-story 'interview', and the premise of mutual understanding on which it lies, is subject to rupture.

NEGOTIATED DIALOGUE

1) A COMMUNICATIVE EVENT

What does it mean to say that life-stories are negotiated dialogue? Negotiated dialogue is the communicative co-ordination of

power relations in the life-story interview. In colloquial terms. It is the vying for turf in the communicative arena. From my definition two aspects of life-stories as negotiated dialogue can be highlighted.

First, a life-story interview is a communicative event where the co-ordination of communication is a more basic construct than commonality of meaning. "Communication", to quote Cronen, Pearce & Harris (1979), "is the process by which persons co-create, maintain and alter patterns of social order". Although mutual understanding was one goal my participants made concerted efforts to obtain (evidenced by their considerable energies in explaining their lives to me), mutuality was not the only intent.

Second, negotiated dialogue is a specific means of communicative co-ordination which incorporates an understanding that power is part of the life-story interview. This insight corrects Jurgen Habermas' assumption that mutual understanding is the only goal of communicative action.⁵ His is a consensus model, wherein two or more participants agree on a definition of their situation. Thus, he is able to speak of an "ideal speech situation where all participants harmonize their individual plans of action with one another and thus pursue their illocutionary⁶ aims without reservation ... " (Habermas 1981:294). Any activity contrary to these aims, such as inability to verbalize or share meaning discursively, not wanting to communicate, hesitation or resistance, power strategies -- brought to and/or due to the situated encounter, 'irrational' speech and gesture, and so forth -- are considered as something other than, and external to, communicative action. It is as if action cannot proceed from communication unless mutual understanding is its base. Although partially valid, it is problematic when all the realities of communication (except one) are eliminated from the definition. Where in the world does the ideal speech situation exist?

I would suggest that "ideal speech situations" and the notion of "pure speech flow" rest in linguistic theories that uphold what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "fictions [such] as the 'listener' and 'understander'" (1986:68). A linguistic model that analyzes communication in terms of events constituted by interviewer (hearer/asker) and respondent (answerer), message form, referent, channels and codes, does not incorporate well the realities of communication comprised of dialogue between persons who are equally, and simultaneously, speakers and hearers. Rather, it is a model that assumes a more-or-less pure or unmediated speech flow and is, therefore, much more amenable to mutuality as the basis of communication, than one which requires co-ordination would be.

2) POWER

The life-story approach presupposes a situation of co-presence between interviewer-hearer and interviewee-speaker, where the latter is given a wide latitude of aural space to control and, presumably, fill with stories of her life. We might assume that therein lies the potential for an unmediated speech flow. Where is the power? Said (1983) shatters the dream.

By the valorization of speech I mean that the discursive, circumstantially dense interchange of speaker facing hearer is made to stand -- sometimes misleadingly -- for a democratic equality and copresence in actuality between speaker and hearer. Not only is the discursive relation far from equal in actuality, but the text's attempt to dissemble by seeming to be open democratically to anyone who might read it is also an act of bad faith As Nietzsche had the perspicacity to see, texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange (1983:45).

Said's premise is that power mediates all discursive relations. If this is true, as I think it to be, the life-story interview -- a highly discursive communicative process -- is certainly not exempt. Our task is to examine the facets of power within the life-story process. But power is like the wind, felt but unseen. One way of apprehending its presence is to look at the negotiated dialogue in the life-story process.

Bakhtin reminds us that "the externally most obvious, but crude[st], forms of dialogism ... are argument, polemics, or parody" (1986:121). These are the forms with which we most frequently associate power in discursive situations. It is here that we say power is evidenced in unequal and undemocratic relations. But, negotiated dialogue assumes a greater subtlety. Power, in itself, is neither negative nor positive. At the simplest level, it is a relation of force that must be facilitated. Consider the rhetoric of agency: power simply allows the agent to make a difference. Power takes on moral value, hence a political character, according to the positioning of the interlocuters. Let us briefly consider how negotiated dialogue, with particular reference to power, defines the life-story process.

3) THREE CLAIMS TO POWER

First, the life-story as negotiation creates space in a dialogical world. Judith Modell speaks of story-telling as mapping oneself into the world of social relations (1982:5). Here, telling stories about one's life extends beyond description. Power is conceived here as agency, the ability to make a difference. Agency of this type is an essential everyday life-occurrence.

The second claim of life-story as negotiated dialogue is one highly valued by its proponents. As a highly collaborative approach, "it is unique among the social science techniques both in its power to evoke the complexity of social reality and in the intimacy of the researcher/life-storyteller relationship" (Ortiz 1985:102). Ortiz demonstrates the potential positive outcomes. In short, they are validation, catharsis, improved family communication (for her project, life-stories were frequently told in the presence of other family members), and grounding in reality (ibid:113). A final positive outcome is that the very intimacy of the life-history interview "creates a particularly vulnerable space for all -- researchers and story-tellers alike" (ibid:116).

This claim speaks to the very intention of deconstruction, which is to reveal the entame -- the tear, the incision (Said 1983:207). More precisely, deconstruction here means to tear and incise solid frames -- in this case -- of hegemonic communicative methodologies. This claim also speaks to the feminist project which labels these hegemonic structures as patriarchal. The intention is to allow for the mutual creation, or negotiation, of the interview.

Yet, there is a downside to consider. The third claim is that negotiated dialogue arises from difference that is situated in the interview. Herein, lies a "... built-in inequality. The interview situation invariably demands an assessment and then a juggling of position -- a claiming of 'turf' and an allotment of power to interviewer and interviewee" (Modell 1982:8). Given the interview situation, there is potential for communicative hegemony, both in the life-story event as well as in the writing of the text.

The charges of communicative hegemony are: first, that the interviewer imposes a different communicative framework than that of the interviewee towards specific, frequently unitary, goals of information collection; and second, that having forgotten that both interviewer and interviewee make an implicit (and sometimes explicit) agreement to accept the communicative frame of the interview, the researcher becomes mystified -- her analysis is

believed to be derived from the interviewee's life-world, not from the artificiality of the interview situation.

CONCLUSION

There is a case to be made for the life-story project. If hegemony can result from the most person-centered and discursive form of ethnography, where negotiated dialogue is presumed possible, what does this say about our research based on more standardized interview methodology?

The life-story as negotiated dialogue addresses the following problematic set out by Charles Briggs in his book, Learning How to Ask (1986). "Interview techniques smuggle outmoded preconceptions out of the realm of conscious theory and into that of methodology" (1986:3). While we may be willing to incorporate 'new' theory such as deconstruction and communicative action, we are reluctant to query our methodology. For, according to Briggs, "the interview encapsulates our own native theories of communication and of reality" (ibid:3).

There is an opposition at work. The dialogical emphasis of current theory must be in conflict with standardized interview procedures. In my view, our procedures are so commonplace, so habitual in everyday 'academic life', that we do not think to carefully analyze them in the light of their disjuncture with our theory. They are seen, all too often, as tools with which to do the job. Method is thereby artificially separated from practice and theory.

However, the reasons for the disjuncture between our theory and methodology cannot rest only on the premise that one is discursive -- hence subject to critique -- and the other habitual -- hence lodged in a non-reflective attitude. Briggs posits that the interview creates communicative hegemony. It imposes our communicative frameworks on those of others. Hence, the interview reflects -- and creates -- our political positions in the world.

A life-story approach that incorporates negotiated dialogue as its base will be less hegemonic than interview-based projects (life-story or not) that are not similarly informed. Life-story interviews that celebrate difference invite negotiated dialogue and this inevitably has the power to break mirrors. If our mirrors are left undisturbed they tie us to limiting concepts of straw-women and mutual understanding and we are left in the vortex of our ethnographic and communicative crises.

NOTES

1. Interviews took place between May, 1986 and January, 1987. The study is comprised of ten participants, including myself. All currently reside in Canada, living in three different provinces. They have been trained as anthropologists in Canada, the United States, and in Britain. All participants are white, and as professionals their current status is at least middle class. (Two or three would say that they came from working class or lower middle class backgrounds. The rest claim roots in middle or 'solid' middle class.) Ethnically they are differentiated: Jewish, German and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.)

General selection criteria was that participants were female, anthropologist, and someone who has written texts. The age range is from the late 20s to 60, with at least one person-- usually more than one -- within each decade.

The interview format followed included three separate three hour sessions each, producing an average of nine hours of interview time with each participant. The interviews were done consecutively. Therefore, the relative place in line is important for, in a sense, the last person was being cumulatively interviewed by all the previous subjects.

2. By using the word 'writing', Rabinow -- intentionally or not-- must see this as the public domain of serious, and important, discourse.
3. The term deconstruction is used here in a generic sense and is not specifically drawn from Derrida.
4. Malinowski did not, of course, speak of the Trobriand Woman.
5. For Habermas, a critical theorist from the Frankfurt school, a theory of communicative action is essentially one of "communicative competence". Communicative action occurs "whenever the actions of the agents involved are co-ordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding" (Habermas 1981:286). This theory is situated in his program of "universal pragmatics", a pragmatic view of language where utterances (rather than sentences) are

normatively and rationally grounded. He assumes communicative competence has just as universal a core as linguistic competence (McCarthy 1975). The problem he struggles with in critical theory is to bridge the separation of theory and practice, which is, according to Livesay, an issue of normative grounding versus the notion of praxis. Habermas focuses largely on the former and fails to "confront the issue of power as an asymmetrically distributed resource fundamental to the ongoing production of social life [which] is tantamount to a failure to thematize action itself" (Livesay 1986:74).

6. From the standpoint of sociological theory of action, Habermas is primarily concerned to make clear the mechanism relevant to the coordinating power of speech acts (Habermas 1981:298). These are illocutionary acts. He draws on Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts which may be described as follows: "to say something, to act in saying something, to bring about something through acting in saying something" (ibid:289). Meaning and reaching understanding, in his view, constitute illocutionary acts.

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