

'Studying up': Researcher as Supplicant in Feminist Studies of Elite Spaces of Work

Jennifer L. Johnson¹

Abstract

This paper explores the process of 'studying up' in feminist qualitative research, including how to approach and gain access to participants in elite spaces of work. I offer a discussion of supplication and the search for positional spaces as a qualitative research methodology across Northern and Southern 'post' colonial research contexts. I focus on the process of access to interviews with trade negotiators using field notes from 2005-06 fieldwork in Canada and CARICOM countries where the failed Free Trade Area of the Americas Agreement was negotiated. Researcher positionality and specifically the idea of 'researcher as supplicant' are then explored in the (post) colonial research setting. In contrast to research relationships in which the researcher and participant are imagined as sharing power, I argue that supplication and seeking out positional spaces with interviewees are productive ways of negotiating research relationships with interviewees who exercise economic and political forms of power that the researcher has no or little access to.

Keywords: gender, postcolonial, trade negotiation, feminist methodology, qualitative methodology

Feminist research methodologies are centrally concerned with acknowledging that research relationships are unequal and situate issues of power as central to feminist research projects (Lal, 1996; Esim, 1997; Mullings, 1999; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Naples, 2003; Harding and Hintikka, 2003). As Mullings (1999) notes, feminist qualitative methodologies have been largely shaped by the reality that feminists often conduct research with communities who are vulnerable to exploitation, and may be poorer or subordinated to the researcher in some way (338).

¹ PhD, Department of Women's Studies, Faculty of Arts, Thorneloe University Federated with Laurentian University, Ramsey Lake Road, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, P3E 2C6. Phone: 011-705-673-1730. E-mail: jjjohnson@laurentian.ca

Feminist geographers have shown that the exercise of power in the research relationship is very much a question of spatiality. They demonstrate that the location of research can shape the likelihood of building trust at the same time as it might emphasize difference between the researcher and the researched (Datta, 2009). But what of a feminist methodology for those cases where the research participants can be considered to be of a politically or economically elite status, or whose daily work is deliberately removed from spaces accessible to the public? Do spatially imbedded hierarchies pose inherently different problems for the researcher? Certainly the potential for the researcher to exploit participants exists but the more subtle questions of how to carry out research such as how to approach and gain access to elite spaces of work deserve consideration. If participants exercise structural power such as political or social status, and exclusivity in their conditions of work or economic status, as Smith (2006) has queried, how should feminist researchers approach? Additionally, the question of how to preserve the anonymity of elite research participants operating in deeply interconnected work communities have some particular qualities that bear further scrutiny.

Any strategy for feminists doing research among elite research participants is complicated further by the types of power shared and not shared by researchers and research participants in the post/neo-colonial context. The field is especially complex when the ways in which gender, racialization and social class shape qualitative research are acknowledged. Informed by the nascent literature on feminist engagement with research subjects in 'elite' spaces of work (Conti and O'Neil, 2007; England, 2002, 1994; McDowell, 1998; Mullings, 2005, 1999; Roberts, 1995, Smith, 2006) I offer a discussion of supplication and the search for positional spaces as a qualitative research methodology as I attempted this practice across Northern and Southern 'post' colonial research contexts while researching the negotiation of a free trade agreement. Specifically, the research concerns the failed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) Agreement negotiated between 42 countries between 1995-2005. In contrast to research relationships in which the researcher and participant are imagined as negotiating transfers of power, I argue that supplication and seeking out positional spaces with interviewees are productive ways for feminist researchers to negotiate research relationships with interviewees who exercise economic and political forms of power that the researcher has no or little access to.

My contribution to this discussion is to explore the terrain that must be covered in materially and discursively accessing the spaces that elite private sector and government actors inhabit, a process that required me to take on the role of supplicant and to search out the positional spaces that Mullings has suggested are useful when 'studying up'. I also explore how supplication helped me through several research dilemmas including the specifics of gaining access to interviewees who may be considered 'elite' in their field of work and the process of material security measures. Finally I return to the question of researcher positionality as a feature of feminist methodology in this research.

The Research

Between 2005-2006 I carried out research on the negotiation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement with a focus on interactions between Canada and the Caribbean Community trade bloc CARICOM. My objective in this work was to discover how elite participants such as trade negotiators representing government, a foreign service, or negotiators seconded from the private sector, shape and determine flows of trade between wealthy North American countries like Canada and those so-called 'smaller economies' of the English-speaking Caribbean. I found that despite the frequent assertion that social relations of power have nothing to do with the 'objective' practice of negotiating a free trade agreement, their participation in constructions of gender and citizenship were a constitutive part of the negotiation process (Johnson, 2013, 2009).

In an effort to pursue this line of inquiry I met with 40 interviewees selected through purposive sampling during two trips within Canada (Ottawa during October 2005 and August 2006), and two trips to the Caribbean (between 2004-2005 to: Kingston, Jamaica; Port of Spain, Trinidad; and Georgetown, Guyana, and in 2006 to Bridgetown, Barbados). Some of the would-be creators of the FTAA had extensive knowledge of trade history in the Americas; some were freshly arrived from the private sector; others were junior foreign-service officers. Others still were highly trained specialists in particular areas of trade law. Although the scope of research at that time included analyses of both policy documents and cultural texts representing the negotiation process, in the present work I limit my discussion to findings from my field notes collected during the process of doing qualitative interviews with trade negotiators who worked for CARICOM countries and Canada.

The Role of Supplication as a Feminist Research Methodology

In order to give a name to the exhilarating and often perplexing research relationships that are necessary in qualitative research I consider Kim England's typology of researcher positionalities. As England notes:

In general, relationships with the researched may be reciprocal, asymmetrical, or potentially exploitative; and the researcher can adopt a stance of intimidation, ingratiation, self-promotion, or supplication. (1994: 82)

The honesty of her statements about power between the researcher and the researched is striking: to exploit; to intimidate; to ingratiate, all of these terms potentially describe the ways in which a researcher or research participant might feel or want to act (or fear adopting) in the course of obtaining and participating in an interview. Ultimately, the strategy she suggests in cases where the 'field' is utterly hostile to feminist intervention is for the researcher to adopt the position of supplicant. This entails one's "unequivocal acceptance that the knowledge of the person being researched is greater than that of the researcher... (effectively) shifting a lot of power over to the researched" (1994: 82). At the same time, it is necessary to problematize the colonial legacies that bring together the work of white researchers with people of colour in research settings. Here, I understand that as a white Canadian with intentions to explore my own country's involvement in a commonwealth/colonial past as well as Canadian foreign investments, development and policing aid in CARICOM countries, my presence still invoked historical relations of privileged mobility on my part. These circumstances make the assumption of participants or researcher holding more or less power rather problematic.

England's approach envisions the role of power in the interview as structural power, as something the research participant holds over the interviewer and although I find the concept of supplication very useful I agree with Smith (2006) that such a conception of power has distinct limitations. For this reason I add to the concept of supplication that of shared positional spaces – that is, searching for some thread of shared experience, despite difference. The search for positional spaces, as Mullings (1999b) suggests, can be a fruitful method for conducting research with elites whose work is located in and continues to construct elite spaces of work.

A feminist theoretical approach helps make visible the social relations of power that are at work in structuring access to interviews and in negotiating the minutiae of gestures, posturing, assumptions and critical exchanges between these parties in an interview, not to mention the significance of the researcher's entry into elite spaces of work.

Accessing the world of Elites

Gaining access to and interviewing elites has dimensions of its own that merit discussion because it is an obvious requirement of qualitative research and in my case it proved to be the most significant challenge in this work. To my surprise, often an email or verbal explanation was enough to secure an invitation to call or speak with an administrator, but then more information would be requested and the vetting process would begin. Sending an informed consent form in advance, as required by my university ethics board, tended to be a turn off. The informed consent form proved not to have enough information about the background of the research and the legal tone of the document raised more questions than I could answer. At the request of one interviewee: "Send me an executive summary or something..." I provided such a document tailored to help trade negotiators, persons in the private sector, government officials and NGOs understand specifically why their expertise in the trade negotiations would be of interest to me. This document became important in establishing my credibility as a researcher because it conformed to the textually appropriate forms of communication used by negotiators.

The categorization of trade experts, industry leaders and negotiators as having a relatively 'elite' positionality in terms of their social status, economic mobility and privilege, implies that certain procedures must be followed for approaching them. The prospect of contacting some of the interviewees was daunting for me as evidenced in my early field notes:

"It is 31 degrees (Celsius) in today and the same two mosquitos have been pestering me for hours. Trying to get over my shyness and near paralysis about contacting Mr. X and Mrs. Y. If brave, I will try their offices again this morning. This is what I am here for." (Fieldnotes, 2004)

It is quite humorous now to read about myself 'psyching' myself up to make these contacts, almost as much as my discomfort at that moment with the climate, having just arrived from a snow-packed Northern city. Although technically prepared and having made many contacts in advance, my awkwardness as a foreigner is evident. I imagine now that many of the interviewees would be surprised that I was intimidated to contact them, particularly given the humility with which many answered some of my questions. Had I only known that a common preface to answering some of my questions would be: "I am not an expert, but...". The prevalence of this statement was staggering, even among trade negotiators with decades of experience. By situating myself as a listener, or as a supplicant, I learned that there is a constant shifting of strategic alliances between negotiating parties which makes the decision-making process unpredictable. So it is no wonder negotiators do not assume that they can give even a broad interpretation of what the trade negotiation process looks like. The limitations of knowledge many announced to me are reflective of the massiveness of the negotiating task itself. With this proviso in place, many interviewees then proceeded to give rich and detailed accounts of the creation of the negotiation process, the stakeholders and their positions.

Navigating Virtual, Discursive and Material Security Measures

Navigating various layers of security such as the range of virtual, discursive and material barriers between trade negotiators and the public was important for gaining access to the interviewees. This was true of research carried out in both Canada and the Caribbean. To some degree, I had anticipated virtual and discursive barriers such as the vagueness of online directories of negotiating structures (limiting my ability to figure out whom to approach first). For example, in my field notes I describe my very first perception of the online text of the draft free trade agreement: "The site is heavy on the agreement [text], lite on names of people or governments with responsibility for it. There are no names, no addresses, no offices, no secretariat. Is this what people are getting shot in the streets for? It seems so abstract and so harmless..." (Fieldnotes, 2004). I also knew that the discourse of trade negotiations required me to learn a new terminology in order to be able to function in the interviews and interpret documents. However, I was somewhat intrigued and unnerved by the physical or material barriers that stood between me and actual entrance to the work places I visited, leaving me I believed, with no other subject position than that of the supplicant.

Material security measures shaped access to the interviewees and structured a better part of the entire fieldwork experience in both Canada and CARICOM countries. As a researcher carrying a Canadian identification I also navigated the many checkpoints that interviewees were familiar with. First, in gaining entrance to the work spaces of most interviewees I glimpsed the daily practices those involved in trade negotiations submit to, such as the searching of bags and briefcases by armed personnel, numerous trips through metal detectors, submitting one's name to security log books and databases or wearing official identification tags. These security measures are sometimes banal procedure and sometimes in response to the threat of violence at a local level. For example, in my fieldnotes from one city in a CARICOM country during the Christmas season, I noted: "We heard a huge row down the street like someone was being killed. I was not sure what to do – not sure I could do anything. Friends just talking now about how the police shot (shot at?) a bunch of people yesterday and killed a few of them..."(Fieldnotes, 2004). At other times, the constant surveillance and security presence were for naught, as on one occasion at an office in Ottawa I was permitted to stand in a small and casual crowd of Canadian trade policy experts with then US Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, except that I had not yet passed through metal detectors or shown my identification to any security staff (Fieldnotes, October 2005). Trade negotiators spend an extraordinary amount of time traveling and as such, are under almost constant surveillance in airports and across national borders, in addition to their usual places of work. Of course as politically privileged citizens of their respective countries they are not the true subjects of this intense surveillance. On this day there happened to be a moderately large group of political demonstrators outside a main entrance in response to the presence of the US Secretary of State. Perhaps it was their presence that offset the gaze of security officers and allowed me to get so close to the Secretary of State: a privilege that rendered me 'enough like' an elite subject to momentarily eclipse overtures to material security. In my notes I wondered how often these measures in elite spaces of work become so banal as to occasionally fail their purpose.

An equally important level of material security pertained more to my status as a Canadian researcher temporarily living and working in the Caribbean. In many respects, the professional environments I functioned in were not very different from any I might encounter in Canada. For example, the procedures for arriving and entering government offices in both Ottawa and CARICOM Secretariat offices in Georgetown were almost identical.

Although my presence in certain environments may even have been facilitated by virtue of my citizenship and whiteness, at many times my inevitable awkwardness as a foreigner and particularly as a white woman travelling alone certainly complicated things. Had I been an able-bodied white man of a certain age, like Jöns (2009) I imagine that the actual process of getting to and from interviews might have been very different. But the types of advice and assistance that are offered to white women traveling alone are of a particular nature. One must contend first with what other foreigners say about a place and the degree to which it is considered 'safe'. Second, one must also take into consideration what local residents of various backgrounds say about the safety of a place and their advice as to when and how it is prudent to travel. Most often, the two views clash. The views of foreigners often approach near hysterical suspicion about travel abroad, particularly in 'third' world countries.

Something I noted repeatedly in my diary was the way in which, for the white Canadians, Americans and Europeans I met, traveling in spaces populated by people of colour was posited as reason enough for discomfort, unless they planned to remain within the confines of a hotel or government compound. Sometimes the messages of these two groups converge though, for example, at the time of my fieldwork it was considered 'unsafe' for foreigners and many residents as well, to hail taxis off the street in downtown Kingston. In my case, this meant that I was house-bound until I could negotiate a business relationship with a driver who was well-known to friends of mine. I negotiated similar relationships in Guyana, Trinidad and Barbados although the public transportation systems were decidedly more accessible. I had to be certain that whomever I worked with would not only drop me off but return to pick me up after an interview. The privatization of the telecommunications industry meant the complete absence of public telephones. As a result I was wholly reliant on interviewees letting me use their resources to contact a driver. Alternatively, one friend lent me her cellular phone after I had trouble getting home after an interview one day. Of this incident I recorded in my field notes:

"I would never attempt a generalization but it would seem that based on people's behaviour with something as common as a cel phone the issue of personal security extends to a projection of class status. People wander around clutching their cel phones, strapped to their bodies. Apparently they are at leisure but really I think they look anxious. Anxious that they'll need it in an emergency?"

That they'll appear 'poor' and therefore not gain access to certain spaces? My skin colour apparently helps me gain access to these spaces where security guards lift barriers based on how you look and the state of the car you're driving or the clothes you're wearing".

(Fieldnotes, December 2004)

The high cost of calls to cellular phones was prohibitive to the staff at a bookstore that refused to let me make a quick call from a land line, even with a promise of cash reimbursement. It was at that moment when I most clearly realized that I was a bit of a walking contradiction: wealthy enough to travel halfway around the world to do research but not sophisticated enough to have a cellular phone while overseas.

Although I did not stay in any gated communities while doing fieldwork in the Caribbean region, the gated and well-guarded home and work place were certainly features of this experience. Michelle Mycoo (2006) addresses the re-invention of the gated community in Trinidad and the removal of the middle and upper classes to well-guarded suburbs. Her descriptions parallel some of my own challenges in navigating cities like Kingston, Jamaica. Many private homes in the capital city of Kingston, some shopping centres, schools and most offices are self-contained within highly secured fences and walls as is the public University of the West Indies. The existence of these walls, automatic security gates and guard dogs, seemed to underscore that a guest should not ever want to be left outside. They are also an expression of the growing divide between rich and poor in which urban elites have to a certain degree taken control of community resources. For better or for worse, many resources have been appropriated or privatized while publicly available resources often languish for the use of the rest of society (Mycoo, 2006: 3). Being more familiar with Canadian versions of communities 'secured' against outsiders, where great distances and 'land walls' separate members from outsiders, these material obstacles to conducting research led me to question how other types of barriers might aid or impede knowledge production about trade.

Researcher Positionality

I have argued that the process of doing fieldwork, of arranging and physically carrying out interviews can be described as a process of navigating many layers of security. Furthermore I have suggested that supplication is a useful subject position open to the researcher who is meeting interviewees who hold various forms of structural power. Despite all of these layers of security, I entered the research being highly conscious of the way in which my positionality as a white researcher from Canada may have made access slightly easier in the Caribbean region, with certain organizations. I do not wish to overemphasize the role that this type of privilege may have played because it would assume political naïveté on the part of interviewees, which is certainly not the case. But these issues do bear further examination.

Beverley Mullings (1999) suggests that researchers interviewing business elites must seek out 'positional spaces,' as opposed to just interrogating their own positionality. In her work within the Barbadian and Jamaican banking industries Mullings explores the racialized negotiations of class status and gender among women bankers. Although she had general familiarity with corporate environments in which the research was carried out she describes the need for the researcher to discover what she calls 'positional spaces.'

These are...areas where the situated knowledges of both parties in the interview encounter, engender a level of trust and cooperation. These positional spaces, however, are often transitory and cannot be reduced to the familiar boundaries of insider/outsider privilege based on visible attributes such as race, gender, ethnicity or class. In fact, in interviews with business elites it may be better to seek shared spaces that are not informed by identity-based differences, because they are rarely failsafe indicators of an individual's positionality. (1999: 340)

Following Mullings's suggestions assisted me greatly with establishing some level of trust in interviews with trade negotiators. It was my impression that trade negotiators, government officials and private sector representatives tended to relate to me as a graduate student and a Canadian, above other identities that I clearly possess: such as being a white, middle-class woman, who is presumably heterosexual and monied enough to travel far from home. With trade negotiators my identity helped to position me in a range of people that trade negotiators and government officials might regularly speak with.

It is significant that almost all the persons I interviewed in the Caribbean, with a few exceptions, had some experience of formal education in Canada, a point that speaks as much to the pull of northern education for the middle class as it does for interviewees' desire to find some common ground for discussion.

My identity as a graduate student in particular also made sense, I believe, because they engaged in constant research and tended to relate to me on that level. In short, it was our common university education that we bonded over, if we bonded at all, but these other equally important aspects of my own positionality may have informed interviewees' perception of me and guided the ways in which I behaved in the interviews.

Conclusions

A feminist methodology requires that certain types of issues be addressed consistently in fieldwork: first, that the researcher be conscious of relations of power between researcher and researched in our immediate interactions as well as in the larger web of social relations of power that position participants. As England (1994) suggests, the role of the supplicant, or assuming that research participants are experts in their field of work, is of tremendous use in research situations where the researcher and interviewee may hold divergent interests and also exercise dramatically different types of structural power. Additionally, the search for positional spaces, as Mullings (1999) suggests, can be a productive method for conducting research with elites whose work is located in and continues to construct elite spaces of work. Being conscious of social relations of power foregrounds our actions in the field, which as it turns out consists of all our interactions, from hesitant first phone calls to full interviews given outside a negotiating room and the time it takes to ponder why someone does not call you back. A history of diplomacy and favourable trade relations makes it straightforward for a Canadian to conduct research in the English-speaking Caribbean but this ease is also couched in the various privileges accorded by citizenship, race and class.

References

- Conti, J. A., & O'Neil, M. (2007). Studying power: qualitative methods and the global elite. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 63-82.
- Datta, A. (2008). Spatialising performance: masculinities and femininities in a 'fragmented' field. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 15(2), 189-204.
- England, K. (2002). Interviewing elites: cautionary tales about researching women managers in Canada's banking industry. *Feminist geography in practice: Research and methods*, 200-213.
- (1994). Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research. *The Professional Geographer*, 46(1), 80-89.
- Esim, S. (1997). Can feminist methodology reduce power hierarchies in research settings?. *Feminist Economics*, 3(2), 137-139.
- Harding, S., & Hintikka, M. B. (Eds.). (2003). *Discovering reality: Feminist perspectives on epistemology, metaphysics, methodology, and philosophy of science* (Vol. 161). Springer.
- Harvey, W. S. (2011). Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 431-441.
- Johnson, J.L. (2013). Gendering trade negotiations: elite spaces of work as regulatory nodes in the global economy. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 36(1) 87-97.
- (2009). 'All's fair in love, war and negotiations': Gender, Nation and Spaces of Corporate Capital at the Free Trade Area of the America (FTAA)." Dissertation. Women's Studies, Faculty of Graduate Studies. York University, Canada.
- Jöns, H. (2011). Transnational academic mobility and gender. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(2), 183-209.
- Lal, J. (1996). Situating locations: The politics of self, identity, and "other" in living and writing the text. *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork*, 185-214.
- McDowell, L. (1998). Elites in the City of London: some methodological considerations. *Environment and Planning A*, 30(12), 2133-2146.
- Mountz, A., Miyares, I. M., Wright, R., & Bailey, A. J. (2003). Methodologically becoming: power, knowledge and team research. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 10(1), 29-46.
- Mullings, B. (2005). Women Rule? Globalization and the feminization of managerial and professional workspaces in the Caribbean.: ¿ Las mujeres mandan? Globalización y la Feminización de los espacios gerenciales y profesionales en el Caribe. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 12(1), 1-27.
- (1999). Insider or outsider, both or neither: some dilemmas of interviewing in a cross-cultural setting. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 337-350.
- Naples, N. A. (2003). *Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research*. Psychology Press.
- Ramazanoğlu, C., & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist methodology: Challenges and choices*. Sage.
- Roberts, S. M. (1995). Small place, big money: the Cayman Islands and the international financial system. *Economic geography*, 237-256.
- Smith, K. E. (2006). Problematising power relations in 'elite' interviews. *Geoforum*, 37(4), 643-653.