

A FEMINIST INTERVIEW? INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the construction of an intersubjective methodological strategy for an ethnographic project on gender inequalities in the social sciences. Composing the main qualitative instrument – the interview script to be used with female researchers – was a transcendent learning experience. We approach this analytical process by reflecting on the negotiation of the interviews as part of a feminist ethnography. To do so, we synthesise what we understand by feminist ethnography, delving into criticism of the interview as a tool. Then, we narrate the process of formulating the interview script, explaining the research team's susceptibilities, and our decision to interview our team members before heading into the field. In addition, we explore the reflections and analyses undertaken in weekly workshops conducted with a feminist therapist. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the limits and possibilities of (self)recognition in the methodology adopted.

KEYWORDS: Ethnography; feminism; qualitative interview; intersubjectivity; methodology.

¿UNA ENTREVISTA FEMINISTA? INTERSUBJETIVIDAD EN UNA ETNOGRAFÍA SOBRE LAS DESIGUALDADES DE GÉNERO EN LAS CIENCIAS SOCIALES

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la construcción de una estrategia metodológica intersubjetiva para un proyecto etnográfico sobre desigualdades de género en las ciencias sociales. La composición del principal instrumento cualitativo —el guion de la entrevista que se va a utilizar con investigadoras— fue una experiencia de aprendizaje trascendente. Abordamos este proceso analítico reflexionando sobre la negociación de las entrevistas en una etnografía feminista. Para ello, sintetizamos lo que entendemos por etnografía feminista, profundizando en las críticas a la entrevista como herramienta. A continuación, narramos el proceso de formulación del guion de la entrevista, explicando las susceptibilidades del equipo de investigación, y nuestra decisión de aplicarlo a las integrantes de dicho equipo antes de salir al campo con ella. Además, exploramos las reflexiones y análisis sobre nuestros relatos en los talleres semanales que llevamos a cabo con una terapeuta feminista. Concluimos reflexionando sobre los límites y las posibilidades de (auto)reconocimiento de la metodología que adoptamos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Etnografía; feminismo; entrevista cualitativa; intersubjetividad; metodología.

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1. Introduction

In January 2023, we received funding for a three-year anthropological study on the gender inequalities and violence experienced by female social scientists in Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. The general objective of the project was to analyse these experiences comparatively, identifying their economic, hierarchical-institutional and political asymmetries. We also sought to observe the reproduction and/or rupture of stereotypes, symbolisms and moralities that marginalise these women and their responses to these challenges.

We framed this proposal as feminist ethnography, based on our self-recognition as members of the professional community of female academics (Gregorio, 2023). In doing so, we adopted an intersubjective, reflexive, and experiential perspective (Esteban, 2004) that places emotion at the centre while committing to denouncing abusive relationships (Gregorio and Alcázar, 2014) and focusing on the construction of female narratives (Kauffman, 1992). Our aim was to analyse the personal and professional trajectories of 80 female academics (20 from each country), primarily by conducting in-depth interviews. Encouraged by the funding, we began fine-tuning the methodological instruments for submission for ethical review and approval.

This was no small feat. The implementation of our methodology would shape the entire project, as we required common parameters across all four cases. Relationships, social processes and settings are not comparable in themselves. Comparability does not derive from inherent conditions, but from the researchers' construction of comparative parameters (Mauss, 1979:158-162). Such construction must be supported by theoretical and analytical perspectives and methodological procedures that can be replicated in all contexts under investigation. If these parameters are absent, social experiences are incomparable (Mauss, 1979). The feminist ethnographic approach adds another layer of complexity in that it must facilitate the analysis of the conflicting relationship between the similarities and differences of identities (based on gender, class, ethnicity, race and age) and the ways in which they are embodied in specific situations (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]).

Feedback from peer reviewers during the evaluation of our project highlighted the need to describe the intersubjective procedures we would adopt to establish our position as part of the academic community we sought to investigate. How would we implement this feminist ethnographic approach in dialogue with female social scientists? This prompted important discussions about the political nature of our (apparently neutral, objective and technical) tools, in particular the qualitative interview (Harding, 1987; Kauffman, 1992; Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000; MacKinnon, 1982; McNamara, 2009; Stacey, 1988; Yost and Chmielewski, 2013).

To adopt a feminist perspective in our study meant intensifying our reflexivity about the methodological tools used, the dialogue with the women, and our treatment of their narratives. These elements had to align with the feminist ethics we proposed for the project. These ethics guided us to “act carefully in the human world”, to recognise “the cost of carelessness” and remain grounded “less in moral precepts than in psychological wisdom, underscoring the costs of not paying attention, not listening, being absent rather than present, not responding with integrity and respect” (Gilligan, 2014:103). Thus, we were called to adjust our methodological procedures and consider an “ethic of care, in its concern with voice and relationships” as a “resistance to moral injury” (Gilligan, 2014:90). Our research instruments demanded considerable emotional investment and time. Reaching a consensus on their design was neither instantaneous nor easy, but we remained persistent. Our epistemological reflections made at the project’s outset followed Esteban (2004) three key principles: First, we debated the importance of adopting an “auto-ethnographic level”, that is, “the relevance of starting from within oneself to understand others and vice versa, especially when one has had similar experiences” (Esteban, 2004:1); second, embodiment, that is, “the conflictual, interactive, and resilient incarnation of social and cultural ideals, a concept that perfectly integrates the tension between the individual, social, and political bodies” (Esteban, 2004:1); and third, “a non-victimistic and committed vision of individual processes that take into account their articulation with the contexts in which they occur” (Esteban, 2004:1).

This article addresses this process. We examine behind-the-scenes of an intersubjective, reflexive, and feminist methodology used to guide the interviews in the project's four case studies. The entire team (initially comprising six members) reflected on this model, which took six months (January-July 2023) to establish. Drafting the interview script was an invaluable learning process, one we address with a central objective: to explore the negotiation of narratives and interviews as key to adopting an intersubjective feminist ethnography. We begin by outlining what we understand by female ethnography, including critical perspectives on the interview as a tool. We then describe how the interview was designed, how it stirred an emotional response in the research team, and why we chose to pilot the script among our team members before heading into the field. We also touch on how we analysed our own accounts during weekly sessions with a therapist. In our conclusions, we draw on Butler (2012) to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of (self)recognition in the adopted methodology.

2. The Feminist Ethnographic Interview

Ethnography is an approach, a method, and a dialogical exercise in the construction of intersubjective narratives (Guber, 2001). It entails the systematic observation of, and participation in, social contexts in order to build narratives about everyday practices and human relationships (Guber, 2001). However, the term also refers to the written outcomes of these practices, which constitute a semi-literary genre (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]). Since the 1980s, ethnographic practice has been influenced by the notion of “thick description” (Geertz, 1991), which seeks to interpret everything observed within the specific contexts in which they acquire meaning (Castañeda-Salgado, 2010). This hermeneutic exercise is assumed to be “a partial description, derived from the gaze of the observer and unfinished” (Castañeda-Salgado, 2010:220).

Feminist ethnography began to take shape in the 1970s, led by female Anglophone ethnographers who offered sharp critiques of the classical meanings of the method (Reiter, 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974;

Rubin, 1975; Sacks, 1979). Their work sought to identify and analyse “gender orientations, contents and biases”, that place people from different “generic social categories in differentiated positions”, thus articulating patterns of inequality (Castañeda-Salgado, 2010:221). They were opposed “to the androcentric concepts that are at the core of classical anthropological theories” (Castañeda-Salgado, 2010: 222) and criticised the naturalisation of partial male perspective as “universal” and “objective” (MacKinnon, 1982:537). Their critiques redefined objectivity, asserting that the extrapolation of the male/female binary into scientific discourse transformed it into a neutral and universal status, responding to the representation of the masculine (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]).

Feminist ethnography is thus based on the assertion that “all knowledge is partial”, that it “comes from an embodied perspective”, and that it is “situated” (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]:27). It aims to position female researchers and research subjects on equal footing (Harding, 1987) without “creating ethnographic authority” that distances us in time or space from others (Weston, 1997:174-175). It challenges the notion that the selection and construction of research questions are neutral, arguing instead that these choices are shaped by the interests and limitations of both researchers and the people or communities they study (Harding, 1987). It also criticises the idea that research methods are neutral and that the resulting knowledge (as well as the interaction itself) is unaffected by social values, identities and political leanings (Harding, 1987). This implies focusing on the recognition of both the communalities and differences between researchers and their subjects (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]), while relieving “the experience of oppressed, subaltern non-hegemonic subjects” (Castañeda-Salgado, 2010:222). These aspects mean that we, as female researchers, must recognise the subordinate place we occupy within academic environments.

It is one thing to consider and discuss these aspects theoretically and epistemologically. It is another to engage with our own embodied experiences during an investigation that requires great courage and professional fortitude. In this respect, we appreciate the sincerity of great feminist anthropologists, such as Esteban (2004), who speaks of how it

took her many years to speak openly about the relationship between her life (her sexual, bodily, emotional and intellectual experiences) and her research.

Ethnographies are intertwined with the local manifestations of political hegemonies through incarnations that shift over time while mobilising personal and community trajectories, including those of female researchers (Haraway, 1988). This leads to the recognition that female researchers “are political subjects” (Kauffman, 1992:188). However, “the political accounting this analysis attempts is inevitably incomplete” (Kauffman, 1992:201). The “construction of a standpoint always excludes another”, “conceals even as it reveals”, and depends on “a partial, imperfect hearing of others” (Kauffman, 1992:201). Why should we undertake such a frustrating task? Because in our “privileged lack of critical self-awareness, social and cultural hierarchies are preserved and extended” (Kauffman, 1992:201).

In order to frame our ethnography with female academics through a feminist lens, we needed to discuss the qualitative interview (Kauffman, 1992; Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000; McNamara, 2009; Stacey, 1988; Yost and Chmielewski, 2013). For decades, this technique was considered a neutral instrument, in which researchers had no influence on the interviewees’ narrative (Kauffman, 1992). However, since the interpretative turn inspired by Geertz (1991) in the 1970s and the debates by Clifford and Marcus (1986) on ethnography’s textual and authorial dimension, it is unusual to find people defending the “objective” notion of the interview in anthropology.

Feminist anthropology contributed to this debate by highlighting the political nature of the interview when used to amplify the voices of socially marginalised groups (Fraser, 2017[2000]). Many feminists have questioned how we represent others and the extent to which we record “their voice” in interviews:

This concern has given rise to a methodological strategy which Pamela Cotterill (1992) terms the “participatory model”. By this she means a model that “aims to produce non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to negotiate the separation between the researcher and researched” (Cotterill, 1992:594). Foremost among the strategies employed to break down power differentials between interviewer and

interviewee has been the recommendation to build rapport with respondents. (Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000:33)

This participatory approach seeks to show the asymmetries and hierarchies of power and establish “more horizontal” (Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000:34) relationships between researchers and their subjects. However, this intention is not always fulfilled, partly due to the temptation to naively believe that merely listening to others’ “voices” is empowering, when in fact it may perpetuate the very asymmetries, it seeks to dismantle (Yost and Chmielewski, 2013). This article draws on five insights from these critiques.

First, we must investigate “whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation” (Stacey, 1988:22). It is important to be frank about the possible harmful nature of the relationships we establish with people in the field (Stacey, 1988:22). Ethnographic research is based on “human relationship, engagement, and attachment” (Stacey, 1988:22), and this exposes people to the risk of being manipulated and betrayed by the researchers themselves. No matter how welcome or “even enjoyable the fieldworker’s presence may appear to ‘natives’, fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships” of which “the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave” (Stacey, 1988:23). So, “the inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship seems inescapable”, as is “the exploitative aspect of ethnographic process” (Stacey, 1988:23).

Producing the ethnographic text also entails an architecture of material, symbolic, and social inequalities (Stacey, 1988:22). Usually the researchers narrate, thus becoming “the authors” of the publishable material (Stacey, 1988:23). Feminist ethnography, as a written product, is a document produced by academics to offer their interpretation of the voices and experiences of others:

As author an ethnographer cannot (and, I believe, should not) escape tasks of interpretation, evaluation, and judgement. It is possible (and most feminists might claim it is crucial) to discuss and negotiate one’s final presentation of narrative with informants, but this does not eliminate

the problem of authority, and it can raise a host of new contradictions for the feminist ethnographer. (Stacey, 1988:23-24)

These considerations apply to interviews. Ultimately, it is the researcher who publishes them, deciding which parts to include and how to interpret them (Kauffman, 1992). A critical stance on the pitfalls of the interview should acknowledge that the interaction remains asymmetrical, despite efforts to reject androcentrism and methodological neutrality, and establish genuine horizontal relationships. This underscores the partial and incomplete nature of the equality we aim to build (Stacey, 1988).

Second, it is necessary to reconstruct the details of these asymmetries. The fact that the ethnographer's hierarchical position is not eliminated, despite their best intentions, does not mean that interviewees become passive victims. They have agency in negotiating multiple elements of the ethnographic encounter: the setting of the interview, the meanings attributed to both speech and silence, and the ways in which this interaction will shape politically situated identities (Kauffman, 1992).

Third, none of this negates the fact that it is the researcher who ultimately authors the interview, offering them symbolic power over its representation (Stacey, 1988). Moreover, the written account appropriated by the researcher "becomes a commodity in the publish or perish economy of academe" (Kauffman, 1992:198). The negotiations between researchers and interviewees can serve as a map to analyse identity and political conflicts. They can indicate interpretative axes, without which it is impossible to understand how each participant positions themselves and asserts their own interests (Kauffman, 1992:187). Researchers also play different roles in relation to their subjects when they propose the interview. Thus, Stacey's (1988) view, mentioned above, that the ethnographer is an individual author, must also be qualified, because "the fetishising of form and authorial personas is in itself a political as much as a metatextual move, once again privileging by exnominating a white, bourgeois, patriarchal standpoint" (Kauffman, 1992:191).

Fourth, the procedural nature of these dialogues goes far beyond recording the interview itself. The relationship, negotiations and contextual conditions precede and follow the moment of the exchange: "The tape

recording, its transcription, or other written record of the words spoken is not the interview, but a seductive reification of a partial” (Kauffman, 1992:203). It is therefore necessary to keep a record of “all other negotiations, plus a post interview write-up of what happens before, during, and after the question-answer period” (Kauffman, 1992:203).

Fifth, when women interview other women, the vicissitudes of the encounter cannot be understood according to the traditional binarism of anthropological otherness (“I” and “the Others”):

For me, as for many women scholars, the basis for granting women's identities and experiences seriousness and validity is my own life and feminism. It is no coincidence that I conceived this research at a time when “woman” in me seemed virtually displaced by “scholar-researcher”. I shared with the subjects in my research a “bifurcated consciousness” (Smith, 1987:90), an awareness (more or less) of tensions and discontinuities between equally serious and valid aspects of social identity. (Kauffman, 1992:195)

This “bifurcated consciousness” points to a crossroads between following the profession's scientific and ethical protocols and having the flexibility to shape the modes, ways, and places for establishing a conversation in line with feminist purposes (Kauffman, 1992:195). Thus, the feminist interview is inherently methodological and experimental and must question the supposed neutrality of research protocols, as will be discussed in the following sections.

3. The Script

The three project directors began discussing the interview script for female academics in January 2023. At our initial meeting, we proposed six sections: i) personal information; ii) family background; iii) academic trajectory (subdivided into three areas: undergraduate education, postgraduate education, and employment); iv) gender-based workplace inequalities; v) gender-based violence in the workplace; and vi) reproductive and caregiving overload. This structure covered all research objectives and allowed for a chronological reconstruction of participants' personal and professional trajectories.

The questions in each section required deeper reflection. The first challenge was to make them understandable and relevant in each of the four countries, using cross-cutting language and themes. After many conversations, we wrote the first draft of 90 questions.

The subsequent revision process proved highly emotional, as if the questions were disturbing a hornet's nest. It is one thing to assert the intersubjective dimension of our research, but quite another to put it into practice. We felt insecure and dissatisfied with the script. We struggled to manage the discomfort evoked by the questions. Each one felt personal, awakening painful memories; thorny issues affecting ourselves or colleagues that we had not been able, nor managed, to voice before. The effort required to think and verbalise them left us unsteady. Had we been the interviewees, we would not have been able to answer the questions. How, then, could we ask the same of our colleagues?

For example, when reviewing the section on "Academic trajectory", Author 1 initially said she could not recall any gender-based discrimination during her undergraduate education. However, almost immediately, memories resurfaced: a sexual harassment case involving a female classmate (perpetrated by a male professor); the countless aggressions suffered by a female professor, who was also the vice-rector; and the sexist language used by male students towards female students and professors. Author 2 said she had not experienced workplace inequality in recent years. But again, soon after, she recalled colleagues and superiors calling her "*hijita*" [little daughter], "*chiquilla*" [little girl], "*niña*" [girl], and making her feel patronised in a world of "adult men". Author 3 recalled examples of harassment, the first by a male academic colleague in a car park; the second by an abusive superior (who attacked several of his female subordinates).

We realised we had all built internal mechanisms to suppress experiences of inequality, abuse and harassment; hiding them in the recesses of memory. Our initial reaction was, "this never happened to me", or, "I don't have any examples". But as the discussion pursued, dispersed memories emerged, like pop-ups on a webpage. How had we overlooked the number and variety of experiences when we had been working together

for ten years, not to mention our long-standing friendship? We could all recall many of these stories because we had witnessed them together, so we could help piece together the details that others had not seen: “Do you remember when you took on that management position? You weren’t paid the corresponding salary for the position for three years. You were never given an explanation. The previous director continued to receive that salary after leaving the position that you took over.”

This led to us identify a second internal mechanism. When we recalled our experiences, we did not always recognise them as instances of gender-based violence or inequality. We saw them as isolated incidents rather than systemic experiences affecting female academics. Limited by a fragmented understanding, we were unaware of the broader implications of gender inequalities.

This exercise served as an “inventory” of our own experiences. It revealed insights that were painful and difficult to assimilate. The collective image of inequality and violence was deeply unsettling. Thus, we identified a third internal mechanism: an emotional resistance to being portrayed, or perceived by others, in this way.

These mechanisms reflect an observation by De Beauvoir (2018[1949]), who described how women experience a repeated fragmentation of their perceptions of the world because they have restricted access to the “Humanity” totality. What is universalised as ‘human’ is generally the product of male perceptions and experiences. The fragmentation of our experiences as female academics is neither coincidental nor personal. It is a product of a representational social system that treats non-male sensibilities as fractured, lacking and partial. What we express from these positions is understood to be the opposite of objectivity (Abu-Lughod, 2019[1988]; Behar, 1993; MacKinnon, 1982). The effect of this structuring on personal perceptions of experience can be deeply disturbing. Even women (such as female researchers) trained to question the naturalisation of social norms may spend years enduring gender-based violence in the workplace without recognising it as systematic.

Morrison (1988:126) defines these phenomena as “unspeakable things unspeakable”, alluding to the forms of production and reproduction of injustice

that, despite their implicit recognition, become socially unspeakable. In a world where representation (of oneself, one's demands, and one's positions) articulates access to power (Fraser, 2017[2000]), experiences that become "unspeakable things unspoken" are excluded from discourse on political hegemonies. Their suppression reinforces the invisibility of women and gender diversities in academia, reminded us that our existence does not conform to the dominant, white, masculine ideals of intellectual legitimacy.

Author 3 raised another point: we live in a competitive, hyper-productive, precarious academic environment with high levels of gender inequality (Enciso et al., 2021). In this context, classist moralism compounds androcentrism as a form of asymmetry, with a palpable impact on employment opportunities (Baeza and Lamadrid, 2019; Sanhueza et al., 2020; Undurraga and López Hornickel, 2021). By disclosing our experiences and presenting them as coherent narratives, we risked painting a picture that could be used to stigmatise, or even discredit us professionally. This terrified us. How could we ask our colleagues expose themselves to such risks?

We decided work collectively to overcome our instinct to hide our experiences of gender-based inequality, the "privileged lack of critical awareness" (Kauffman, 1992:201) about them, and the emotional resistance to portray them. A project grounded in an ethic of care (see introduction) could not ask others to do what we were unwilling to do ourselves. We had to make our bodies, memories and trajectories available to this exercise. Either we did it for and with them, or our research could end up reproducing the unspoken violence we sought to critique by objectifying the participants as though untouched by these shared realities. By early March, we had an updated script we felt more comfortable with. However, we wanted the wider team to participate in the conversation.

4. The Team's Interviews

Our team comprised three young social scientists: Researcher 1 (sociologist), Researcher 2 and Researcher 3 (anthropologists), with whom we have collaborated since 2014 across several interrelated projects. The recently awarded proposal represented the continuity of this collective work.

In March 2023, we invited these colleagues to collaborate on the interview script. Each researcher reviewed the document, providing comments and suggested revisions. Author 1 compiled all feedback into one document, which was sent back for a new round of revision before again being centralised into one document. Following these two stages, we met to discuss each question, which led to reflections on aspects we had not previously identified. The following examples aim to help to illustrate how this revision constituted a highly intersubjective process.

Author 3 noted that the questions tended to focus on traumatic experiences, thus blurring the strategies women develop to navigate them. She expressed her discomfort as it constructed an image of victimised female academics without agency. This was contrary to our intentions, as the nuances of agency reveal individual and collective strategies of resistance, even in the most oppressive circumstances. We therefore agreed to add questions to each section, as well as a new seventh section at the end of the interview.

Researcher 1 suggested adding a question to the “Academic trajectory” section on being inspired by female role models before entering undergraduate education. She was the first woman in her family to attend university and found it difficult to choose what to study and how to perform professionally. Author 2 agreed, noting a similar experience. This prompted broader reflection on how the lack of female academic role models had prevented us from learning shortcuts, progression strategies, and practical solutions to everyday challenges (Russ, 2022[1983]:173).

Researcher 2 adding a question to the section on “Reproductive and caregiving overload”, asking whether professional roles had impacted personal or romantic relationships. She noted how several partners had struggled to accept her position as a researcher, which had even led to break-ups. Author 1 concurred, noting relationships with researchers whom she felt found it difficult to assimilate her professional progress, leading her to downplay her academic achievements to avoid triggering discomfort or jealousy.

Researcher 3 highlighted the need to include questions on class-based inequality in the “Academic trajectory” section. She explained that her left-wing,

working-class family had high expectations of how education would transform her professional opportunities. Upon entering a prestigious university, she felt that students' employment opportunities were often shaped by pre-existing social circles, which benefitted those from elite backgrounds.

Each of these examples involved extensive dialogue and conversation, examining the script question by question and rewording many to include terms that would incite dialogues rather than foreclose it. By March 2023, our script was ready to submit to the university's ethics committee that was sponsoring the project. It included seven sections with a total of 127 questions (37 more than the first version). We submitted the documentation for the ethics review and while awaiting the decision, we began a new round of reflection.

The three project directors decided to discuss how to approach the interview script with the wider team. This seemed an ethical, moral and healthy imperative. We expressed our concerns about the potential asymmetric nature of our study if we did not engage in the same process ourselves before approaching other women.

We agreed to critically narrate our own genealogies. This meant revisiting our own experiences and transforming them into an open catalogue of interpretations regarding the academic world and our positions within it. We began the project by creating our own memory inventory. Only then could we present ourselves before our participants, whom we would ask to join us in this intersubjective and reflective dialogue.

The meeting in which we decided this was hugely impactful. We were concerned that this inventory would make us vulnerable, and force us to face things we could not fully recognise. Nonetheless, we agreed to proceed, convinced that we could not ask others to do something we lacked the courage for. We decided to interview each other before working with fellow academics.

Each co-director interviewed one of the younger researchers and, in turn, was interviewed by another. We intentionally began with the more senior team members so the younger researchers felt more comfortable applying the script after seeing it played out. These interviews were conducted in the first week of April, just as fieldwork was due to begin, thus

our researchers became the project's first participants. This exercise allowed us to systematise six key methodological insights for conducting the interviews with female academics.

4.1 Methodological Lessons Learned

First, we realised that being both interviewer and interviewee was an emotionally challenging experience. These sessions left us shaken, both personally and professionally, as we needed to reinterpret our experiences in new ways.

While some level of self-analysis is inherent in all qualitative interviewing, the intensity of these questions was atypical. We were unprepared for the emotional turbulence they triggered. Conducting interviews requires emotional control and we found that we struggled to finish these early sessions. We continued to feel the effects in the weeks that followed. The process awakened painful reflections regarding the gender-based violence and inequality we had experienced. Although we set out to reflect on the meaning of intersubjectivity in our research, starting with our own narratives, we needed to figure out how to organise and continue the task. The most coherent response was to treat our interviews as analytical material, consistent with the embodied feminist methodology we so strongly advocated. Even so, it was a painful and unnerving feat.

Our long-standing professional relationships with one another intensified the emotional intimacy of these dialogues. We believed this may also manifest in several of the case study interviews (albeit at different levels), given our personal and professional ties to women across academic networks in the four countries included in the sample. Conducting the internal interviews helped us understand the emotional demand involved, and acknowledge a collective lack of preparation to proceed, including the tools to navigate these traumatic reflections.

This acknowledgement was a relief. There is no shame in accepting one's limitations. On the contrary, it was the most responsible decision as none of us had formal training to handle this type of situation. We needed someone with therapeutic or psychological expertise, as well as

tools to help us manage the interviews on an emotional level and reflect on our own interviews.

Second, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriber, herself an anthropologist, also found the material emotionally demanding. Author 1 spoke to her about the emotional strain and offered support, ensuring she would not feel overwhelmed. We became concerned that she felt emotionally overloaded dealing with all six stories and saw it was not limited to those of us carrying out the interviews. Everyone involved in the process, including those working on transcription and analysis, felt its emotional impact; caring for them was crucial to the project.

Third, reviewing the transcription reignited anxieties, fears of being identified and concerns that others would recognise the institutions and individuals we mentioned (in cases involving potential legal consequences, such as those related to sexual harassment). We feared family, friends, and colleagues could be identified, potentially offending others or involving risk. It became evident that to keep the interviewees safe, we would need more than standard anonymisation techniques, such as pseudonyms or initials. In academic contexts, professional identities are shaped by distinctive disciplinary and institutional trajectories. We needed to anonymise these narratives without deducting value from the stories or decontextualising them.

Author 1 led the development of a pilot anonymisation system based on seven key areas: i) individuals; ii) places (cities, countries, regions); iii) institutions; iv) academic disciplines; v) research topics, vi) undergraduate degree courses; and vii) postgraduate degree courses. We applied these anonymisation criteria line by line, on a case-by-case basis.

We invited each participant to choose a pseudonym or initials to protect their identity. Researcher 1, Researcher 3, and Author 3 chose their initials, but soon realised they could be identified in academic settings, as first and last names are an important aspect of our professional identity. Many colleagues publish under their initials, which form part of their professional brand. Therefore, we adopted pseudonyms and warned the other interviewees accordingly.

Regarding individuals mentioned in the interviews, family and friends would be referred to using a random pseudonym chosen by the team, while professional contacts (academic colleagues, university authorities, managers, students) would be referred to using a letter (unrelated to their initials). This operational decision would allow for fast identification of personal and professional references during the analytical process.

Places (cities, countries, regions) proved more complex. Each case required different identification options. Regarding institutions, we created an alphanumeric coding system and applied it to all transcripts that assigned a code to each one, composed of its country's first letter, a number, and an indication of whether it was public or private, Catholic, or secular. We chose these axes after reflecting on previous literature and the variables that affect gender-based inequality in academic institutions. Only the research team has access to the database linking these codes to institutions. Similar strategies were applied to knowledge areas, research topics, and undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses, using more generic labels where necessary depending on each case.

Fourth, this anonymisation became a collaborative process that would be inadmissible from an objectivist methodological perspective. Author 1 applied these protocols to each transcript and marked all changes. Comments were also added to explain certain revision decisions so that each member of the team could evaluate their relevance.

Each transcript was returned to the respective interviewees to review. This exercise continued until the end of April, culminating in the final versions. Editing our own trajectories was a delicate and emotional process, sparking sadness and anger. We continued our discussions and fine-tuned the protocol, agreeing to ask the interviewees to review their anonymity to ensure identification was impossible to prevent emotional harm (or any other kind).

Fifth, reviewing our interviews, we noted that the transcriptions did not fully capture the oral dialogues. Despite the transcriber's excellent work, each oral story had its own rhythm, cadence, form and timing, which influence expression, gesticulation, and the mutual interpellation of the speakers. Transferring this into written words implies a reduction

and flattening of expressive elements. The written version of an oral register is a partial and limited translation, and did not express our stories in the way we would have chosen.

As academics, we are used to critically engaging with and evaluating our own and others' texts. Their quality often determines our professional legitimacy, and poorly written texts could undermine that. Thus, the interviews had to be polished so that the translation from oral to written form ensured our colleagues felt comfortable with their narratives.

Sixth, once the interviews were ready in their written form, a new fear emerged: that as a portrait of a specific dialogue, our narratives would appear shallow, incoherent, and disjointed. We feared they would suggest a lack of introspective analytical capacity. Reading each anonymised interview triggered another emotional response from the research team. Seeing our material gathered into a single document felt like objectification. The text was no longer ours; it could be appropriated in ways beyond our control. It was unsettling to see the big picture surrounding our experiences, and we were fearful that it could be used as empirical evidence.

5. The Intersubjective Workshop

At this point, we recognised we needed support in overcoming our fears and managing the emotional strain of the interviews and their analysis. This external perspective would help us reclaim a sense of agency. Author 1, the project's lead director, sought guidance from Therapist 1, a feminist occupational therapist with extensive experience in training professional teams in the field of gender-based violence.

Therapist 1 reviewed the research project, including our interview script, transcriptions and audio and video recordings. She met with Author 1, who explained the team's emotional and interpretative challenges while interviewing each other and during the subsequent revision. These conversations led to interesting insights, and Therapist 1's vision opened up new interpretations of our psychological responses.

She observed that, at varying levels and intensities, the entire team exhibited signs of trauma associated to workplace inequality. These responses

paralleled with patterns associated with previous family experiences (addressed in section two of the script). Our emotional responses to conflict, problem-solving and difficulties in our childhood and adolescence were similar to how we had responded as adults. However, we were unaware of having repeated old response patterns (not necessarily the most suitable in our current professional relationships).

According to Therapist 1, the unconscious repetition of childhood coping strategies as an adult in response to aggression is a serious matter. It could indicate an inability to assimilate present-day experiences. Specific coping mechanisms developed in childhood stay with us into adulthood. In psychoanalysis, this mechanism is called “fixation” (Bouchoux, 2022:76). When individuals face emotional suffering they are unable to rationalise or assimilate, they may unconsciously revert to these childlike responses or “fixations”, a phenomenon known as “regression” (Bouchoux, 2022:76). These defence mechanisms are not necessarily problematic (Bouchoux, 2022:77), but they sometimes become “massive” and habitual responses to life’s recurrent problems and relationships. In such cases, regression can lead to “psychotic anxieties, fragmentation, dissociations, paranoid, abandonment... Unbearable anxieties” (Bouchoux, 2022:77).

She also observed recurring signs of dissociation in our narratives. In enduring sustained inequality, we had become unaware of it, not through denial, but by failing to consciously register its presence. These experiences were not fully inscribed in our memories or consciously related to broader and repeated patterns of aggression. For example, in response to questions on gender-based violence in postgraduate education, several of us initially reported none. However, when describing relationships with male students, instances of such violence began to emerge in the narrative, without the participant identifying them as such. The interviewers emphasised: “You said that you had no experience of violence in graduate school, yet what you relate is a story of sexual harassment; that is gender-based violence.” The entire team was fully aware that sexual harassment constitutes gender-based violence; we had studied extensive literature on the subject for over a decade. This was evidence of dissociation, evident across all sections of the interview.

Another frequent defence mechanism we identified was “depersonalisation” (Bouchoux, 2022:124), “bear the unbearable”, whereby the subject becomes a “spectator of himself/herself”, “distances himself/herself from the scene”, and disconnected from their body (like a multidimensional sensor of the outside world) (Bouchoux, 2022:124). As researchers, the capacity to rationalise social relationships is an important analytical tool. But in order to apply this capacity to the experiences of others without extending it to ourselves, we were compelled to rely on selective rationalisation, made possible through depersonalisation and the separation of reason from the emotional/corporal: “Rather than signifying healthy forms of maturation, the separation of the self from relationships and the splitting of thought from emotion signal injury or responses to trauma” (Gilligan, 2014:89).

Our experiences of inequality in academia became a depersonalising void that threatened the integrity of our feminist methodology. As subjects, we were responding to painful and traumatic realities by fragmenting and compartmentalising the relationship between our feelings, bodies, and thoughts. Therapist 1 proposed we engage in a collective process to seek “to give an account of ourselves” and develop the tools for both conducting and analysing the interviews.

We implemented this proposal in eight “intersubjective workshop” sessions, held between 12 May and 7 July, 2023. We analysed our answers for each section of the interview, working through both the emotional and analytical dimensions together. Therapist 1 proposed starting each session with a physical activity so we could reconnect with the emotions we seemed dissociated from. The one-and-a-half to two-hour meetings were held online on Friday afternoons using Zoom, helping us connect from different locations. It was the last activity of the week. Each meeting was emotionally challenging, which would have made it difficult to continue with regular work afterwards.

Therapist 1 also pointed out that the objectification we experienced when reading our transcriptions was likely only an indication of a more overwhelming response once we read the scientific articles that would analyse our stories. She suggested we try writing a pilot article that analysed

the “family background” section (focusing particularly on gender patterns and mandates). We took on the task enthusiastically but were once again saddened to write socio-anthropological conclusions for the team’s family trajectories. Upon reading the finished article, we realised Therapist 1 was right, that the sense of objectification was much stronger than when reading the transcriptions.

We addressed this directly in the first workshop. We acknowledged the opacity and inconclusive character of our narratives in the interviews. We accepted that however we may be portrayed, it would always be open and provisional: the desire for recognition “is bound to be kept alive and, as such, not resolved” (Butler 2012:63). The exercise also allowed us to re-examine our relationships with parents and siblings; it was painful but summoned new frameworks for the desire to heal, as well as recognising the limitations of these desires. We left the first session feeling moved and open to revisiting sensitive chapters of our pasts.

Therapist 1 invited us to keep autoethnographic diaries, or “logs”, of each session, linking emotions and reflections to our analysis in each workshop using questions (sent to us after the session) to trigger our writing. We emailed our responses to the rest of the group and read them before each session. Therapist 1 would open each session with personal feedback. These diaries became part of our ethnographic records and served as qualitative material for the project (along with our interviews).

We learned many lessons from the workshop. The first session was very challenging and moving. The following week, Therapist 1 encouraged us to discuss emotional limits for the interview process. What should we do if, as in our case, a participant became overwhelmed? She explained that we must put a limit on the emotional intensity of each interview by observing emotional, discursive and physical signs of distress and stopping if necessary, giving the participant time to recover. She offered several practical suggestions in this regard. Unfortunately, although we were trained in qualitative research, we had never covered such psychological dimensions. Therapist 1 also showed us practical examples of how to identify indications of post-traumatic stress, regression, dissociation, anxiety and denial.

The fourth session marked another milestone. We discussed inequality and violence in our careers. Several of us cried and we ended the session emotionally exhausted. Therapist 1 taught us breathing and mindfulness exercises to help us recover. The following week, we felt an enormous sense of relief and the subsequent workshops took on a new, lighter rhythm. Our fears of embarrassment subsided and a deeper sense of connection and intimacy emerged.

In the fifth session, we reached an important conclusion. Even when anonymised, these accounts, if narrated chronologically and in their entirety, could still be linked to the interviewees. We reflected on an ethical way to use the narratives and agreed not to present complete life stories, but instead segment them by topic, drawing on multiple voices per section. This meant imposing limits on the analysis, but it was essential to protect the women's privacy. As such, our methodology had to be adjusted.

After almost two months of reflection, we felt ready to begin fieldwork with other women. A new chapter began that took us to eight cities in central, northern and southern Chile. The results of this next methodological stage of the project will be presented in a separate article.

6. Closing Remarks

In this article, we narrate the collective development of a feminist ethnographic methodology. It has an implied and intersubjective dimension, wherein our self-recognition as participants in the context of academic gender-based inequality became a necessary condition for interviewing our colleagues. Numerous questions arose throughout the project and we would like to conclude this text by positioning ourselves epistemologically in relation to these concerns. We will draw on Butler's (2012) reflections on the extent to which we can, as socially embedded subjects, give an account of ourselves.

Butler brings together key debates in political philosophy (on ethics, morality, and violence) in order to theorise the limits and possibilities of self-recognition. She points to the historic emergence of a "Self" capable of responding narratively to the question "Who are you?" (Butler, 2012:48).

She argues that all self-knowledge is partial, just as all recognition of the Other is too. The question “Who are you?” presupposes at least two fundamental elements (Butler, 2012). First, the existence of an “Other”, a real or imaginary interlocuter who poses this question and to whom we respond. There is always an addressee to whom our narrative is addressed. Second, there exist norms (moral, linguistic, ethical) that allow a dialogue between Self and Other to be intelligible. Thus, the limitation lies not only in the subject’s constitutive opacity, but also in the fact that the subject must rely on a language they did not choose to use. A narrative about oneself is always shaped by formal structures beyond our control, which force us to communicate with others whose frameworks of understanding we cannot fully grasp. The constitutive opacity of the subject, the exteriority of the language, and the norms and exteriority of the Other as addressee are limits that every self-narration must face.

This presents a fundamental challenge for feminist ethnography: how can we narrate without losing sight of the partial and situated nature of this task? “Telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself” (Butler, 2012:24). To give such an account, we must ask ourselves what agency we have over the stories we narrate, and recognise subjects’ possibilities, constraints and limitations regarding others and social life. Consequently, “narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions through that means” (Butler 2012:25). If we give an account of ourselves to another person or group, we become implicated in a relationship with them (Butler, 2012:27-28). This bond is co-constitutive of the person narrating. A connection is formed between the narrator their audience, which, if not acknowledged from an ethical standpoint, may harm both parties:

Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one’s relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one’s ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (Butler, 2012:34)

These insights establish two critical axes for our task. First, it is impossible to give an exhaustive account of oneself (Butler, 2012:35), as subjectivity

is formed from an unrecoverable history. Moreover, we narrate for an Other within specific situationalities and positionalities and using a language we did not invent, which is part of a sociohistorical construction. Second, in seeking to question how academia normalises gender inequalities and violence, we also challenge a broader regime of truths in Foucauldian terms (Butler, 2012:40). Our resistance to this regime reflects a threefold desire: to question colleagues, recognise them and be recognised by them in return. We rebel because the androcentric foundations of the social sciences accepted as natural, frustrate our desires for recognition.

In recognising ourselves as subjects limited by opacity, unable to give an account of ourselves and motivated by a desire for recognition from others, are we bound to ethical failure? Can we sustain an ethics of care, within the team and towards our interviewees, given such limits? Once again, Butler (2012) provides a guide for interpreting these questions ethically:

To acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgement is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves. (Butler, 2012:63)

With these reflections in mind, we began to accept our limitations. We acknowledged to our interviewees that we did not fully understand all the implications of what we were inviting them to share; that we ourselves felt trapped between our own blind spots and our desire for recognition. We were willing to embrace our opacities and discuss them together. This dialogue was a privilege for the entire team, as it granted us an "Other" with whom to forge an ethical bond of self-recognition. To use Butler's (2012) own words, we accepted our limitations with humility and allowed ourselves to appear vulnerable before our colleagues. This vulnerability is not a weakness, but an ethical pact and, we hope, a strength of our research endeavour.

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