

Comments on “Rape in the field. Reflections from a survivor”

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abstract This article is a short commentary related to “Rape in the field: reflections from a survivor”, first published in 1995, in an anthology edited by Don Kulick and Margaret Willson who aimed to discuss sex and subjectivities in anthropological fieldwork. In this essay I resume some effects of the rape I suffered in my fieldwork research to reflect about my academic and personal trajectory as a feminist anthropologist and its echoes.

keywords fieldwork research; methodology; rape.

Comentários sobre “Estupro em campo. Reflexões de uma sobrevivente”

resumo O artigo é um breve comentário acerca de “Estupro em campo. Reflexões de uma sobrevivente”, originalmente publicado em 1995 em uma antologia organizada por Don Kulick e Margaret Willson sobre sexo e subjetividade no trabalho antropológico. Nesse ensaio eu retorno a alguns dos efeitos do estupro em campo para refletir sobre minha trajetória acadêmica e pessoal como uma antropóloga feminista e seus ecos.

palavras-chave trabalho de campo, metodologia, estupro.

Rapists bury landmines in the minds of their victims...
(WINKLER, 1991)

In 1995 I wrote an account of a sexual attack that had taken place when I was doing fieldwork in Ethiopia many years earlier. Now, in 2018, when my text is translated and re-published I was asked to think about it again. What happened afterwards?

There are several “afterwards”. The first is what happened after the rape and my disentanglement with the Ethiopian town where it occurred. The second is what happened after the rape chapter was published in the anthology *Taboo: sex, identity and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork* (KULICK; WILLSON, 1995). The third afterwards is how I feel about the text in now.

After the rape

After I returned to Sweden and my university I could not bring myself to work on the Ethiopian material. In addition to the psychological barrier of opening documents where my assailant's handwriting and spirit atomized my resolve, my funds were exhausted. I had been lucky enough to receive a doctoral grant at the beginning of my graduate studies. When I returned home after four years of preparation, waiting for visa and permissions, and fieldwork the grant was exhausted.

The next few years were spent on replacement activities. I took an administrative job at the university and after a couple of years threw myself into a new research project which I hoped would enable me to pick up the doctoral dissertation again.

The new project was conceived as a comparative feminist anthropological study. The rape had made me accept the fact that I was a woman and that this fact made a difference, in the academic world as well as in the world outside academia. I did not seek counselling to deal with my 'rape trauma syndrome' (nausea, nightmares, tremors, depression, shakiness) but was helped through by Susan Brownmiller's book *Against our will* (BROWNMILLER, 1976) and the patient listening and sharing by women friends and colleagues. Women in my vicinity in Ethiopia had tried to convince me that being subject to rape and other forms of sexual intimidation was part and parcel of being a woman which I found oddly comforting.

In the meantime, between the end of my fieldwork in 1973 and the start of the new project in 1976, the Ethiopian revolution which began relatively peacefully with the deposition of the Emperor in 1974 was evolving into a violent struggle for power and control within the military. After a short reconnaissance visit in 1976 I realized that there was no way I could go back to work in Ethiopia again. The situation was dangerous for everybody, and my symptoms of rape trauma flared up again. I moved my fieldwork for the new project from Ethiopia to an outlying district of Sweden and did not return properly to Ethiopia until 2008.

The rape changed the direction of my fledgling academic career. If I had not had that gun poked into my ribcage in 1972 ... I can't speculate on how events had turned out. What I know is that if I had not had the wind knocked out of my complacent belief in myself as an objective and gender neutral "scientist" in 1972 I probably would have produced a dull dissertation or none at all. The data I had gathered fell between the chairs of sociology (too little, too diverse) and social anthropology (too superficial) and I was not mature enough a scholar to handle that challenge. The dead stop of the analysis of my Ethiopian material in 1975 and the following years of anthropological feminist study and research gave me the time and tools to handle the data when I

picked up the Ethiopian material again in 1982, while on maternity leave with my second child. In the end I produced a dissertation that I am proud to have written (BJERÉN, 1985).

After Taboo

When Don Kulick and Margaret Willson announced that they were going to put together a volume on “sex in the field” I felt that I this was my chance to defuse the land mine of my rape trauma. In the intervening years I had used my experience of sexual violence in teaching and lecturing but twenty years after the event, I still suffered from some of the initial reactions of shakiness and bouts of panic whenever I brought up the subject. I harboured a burning sense of anger that would not subside. My motivation for writing about the rape was complex. I wanted revenge –this was my main motivation. When I was attacked, I was paralyzed by fear and shock and could not defend myself in any way. This is a common reaction to death threats combined with sexual violence as is the consuming anger that follows (BROWNMILLER, 1976). With my contribution to *Taboo*, I was able to revenge myself by shaming my assailant – no matter that he was unlikely to ever read what I wrote.

Another motivation was that I wanted to tell young fieldworkers of some of the dangers that lay inherent in the absurd fascination with “lone wolf” fieldwork that I felt was part of the way social anthropology in my youth was considered synonymous with participant observation of a most intrusive kind.

The effect on myself of having written this piece and seen it published in a book that would have hundreds of readers was one of emotional catharsis. Finally I felt that the rape victim syndrome subsided. I had taken an unbearable experience from inside my mind and placed it in public. I was freed from the obligation of remembering. This might be common place to a psychologist but to me it was a revelation to realize that suffering carries with it an obligation to remember the pain. The pain becomes meaningless if forgotten. Shared, confirmed by others, documented, stored. And then healed and if not forgotten so at least defused. That is the route I have taken.

Effect on the discipline of social anthropology? A rapid check in Google Scholar reveals that the chapter has been cited more than 1,000 times since its publication. I think that the relatively frequent citation of the text is a consequence of the breakthrough of reflexive approaches to anthropological research and the avalanche of anthropological feminist studies after *Taboo* was first published. I could have been famous were I not obliged to publish under a pseudonym. On the other hand, being open with who I was might have branded me forever as a rape victim. I am not. I am a rape survivor, and being raped was an awful experience with lifelong repercussions, no more.

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