

REFLECTION OF DOING POST MODERN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON THE DILEMMAS OF WORKING OMANI MOTHERS

Najwa Abd Ghafar*, Norhalimah Idris

Faculty of Management, UTM Skudai, 81310 Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: drnajwa.ag@gmail.com

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Abstract

In response to modern ethnography, post-modern ethnography views that reality is multi-faceted and humans are affected and influenced by the research process. This article is a reflection on conducting post-modern ethnographic research on working mothers in Oman. This study is based on my experience doing ethnographic interviews where two different types of interviews were conducted on two groups of research participants. The different modes of interviews yielded variant of outstanding findings which provide comprehensive data useful in providing comprehensive understanding of work-family interface experiences of working Omani women.

Keywords: post-modern ethnography, feminist ethnography, working mothers, work-family balance, work-life balance

Abstrak

Tidak seperti etnografi moden, etnografi pasca-moden berpendapat bahawa terdapatnya beberapa realiti. Ia juga berpendapat bahawa individu yang terlibat di dalam saesuat kajian terkesan dan dipengaruhi oleh proses kajian. Artikel ini adalah tentang pengalaman saya membuat temubual etnografi di mana dua jenis temubual dibuat ke atas dua kumpulan peserta kajian. Dua cara yang berbeza ini menghasilkan gabungan data lengkap yang penting untuk kefahaman pengalaman golongan pekerja wanita Oman dalam mengimbangi kerjaya dan keluarga mereka.

Kata kunci: etnografi pasca moden, etnografi feminis, ibu bekerja, keseimbangan kerjaya-keluarga, keseimbangan kerjaya-diri

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ethnography as a research strategy has evolved from classic ethnography to urban ethnography, and later to reflexive or critical ethnography (Crowley-Henry, 2009). The evolvement marks the shift from objectivist to constructivist stance – thus post-modern ethnography, considering the idea on co-construction of reality through the research process participated by both the researched and the researcher. I adopted ethnographic strategy in studying dilemma of Omani working mothers as I was convinced that the conceptualization of work-family experience would fail to capture its dynamic and complex realities if it was to be measured through statistical analyses. I believed that the researcher is a primary tool in data generation and knowledge construction. Indeed, the research process uncovered not only the reality of work-family interface, but also captured the difference in the data yielded from the two groups of respondents.

■ 2.0 POST-MODERN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnography is generally known as research strategy aiming at studying exotic and unfamiliar cultures. However, Clair (2003) established that the actual objective of studying the unfamiliar cultures was to colonize what dubbed to be the primitive worlds. Early ethnographic accounts evidenced the prejudice of the writers. They were known to construct other cultures as ‘the Other’ and to describe them as uncivilized and immoral. This dated as early as 3 B.C. when Herodotus wrote 9 volume tome and extended until the mercantilist period in Europe through the 1800s. Clark also stated that ethnography was utilized to serve colonizers’ interest. Under the pretext of saving ‘the Others’ from ignorance, colonizers used knowledge from their inquiries to subjugate them. Historians, poets, explorers and missionaries kept careful journals that detailed the conquest of the strange cultures. Indeed, the New World cultures (Native Americans) were strange to the Europeans.

Until the end of the 19th century, ethnography inquiry remained as tool for the colonizers to tighten their colonial grips. An ethnographer enters into a culture completely foreign from his/hers; engaging in anthropological fieldwork while remaining there for some time, researching the primitive, observing and doing piles of note-taking, then return to home country where he/she share his/her knowledge and observation made in that foreign land (Crowley-Henry, 2009). In this sense, there is no doubt objectivism is natural. Perhaps, it was made as a rule of thumb as to safeguard the ethnographer from falling sympathy into the primitive. Later this became a

legacy when an ethnographer has to assume outsider and objectivist position, where he/she should put aside any preconceived perceptions in order to relate the facts concerning the observed culture in a so called unbiased way.

In the beginning of 20th century, modern ethnography became a subject of criticism. Post-modern ethnographers challenged the notion of objectivism and viewed that nobody can ever be culture-free, nor value-less, as he or she is a product of society which embedded in it cultural values (Charmaz, 2003). A researcher therefore can never get into a research site empty-headed. In fact, a researcher comes with him/her a set of pre-conceptions that influence his/her understanding of the phenomenon he/she studies. It challenges the norm of 'objectivity' that assumes knowledge can be collected in a neutral way, and that the researcher can safeguard himself or herself from being influenced by preconceived knowledge. Most importantly it banishes the notion of the authority of the researcher and the notion of 'the primitive Other'. Both the researcher and the researched take active part in the construction of the reality through the research process. Both of them shape the course of the research in the sense that one affects and influences the other in the conversation. The ultimate objective of the inquiry is to gain informed understanding of a culture; both its uniqueness and commonality with the culture of the researcher, and in no way to subjugate it.

This has given rise to reflexive or critical ethnography that incorporates *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Emic means the insider's or native's perspective of reality and etic perspective means the outsider's or researcher's perspective of reality (Fetterman, 2010). A researcher cannot study the social world without being part of it, and by being part of it means the researcher and the research process affect the subjects (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Tedlock, 2003). While this is perceived as a flaw to modern ethnographies, the post-modernist proclaim that a certain degree of involvement and emotional connection are essential to ethnographic work. Ethnographers do not only do participant observation; but also do participant listening, which is more intensive and active ethnographic task (Forsey, 2010). This form of interaction, which is ethnographic interviewing, has become an avenue not only for the co-construction of realities but also a moment for the subjects to collect themselves and find their voices while articulating their perceived realities.

■ 3.0 DOING FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

Post-modern ethnography has been credited as a strategy to give voice to the oppressed. Clearly women are such a group, giving rise to feminist ethnography as one form of post-modern ethnography. It focuses on women's lives, activities, and experience. Its methods or writing styles are informed by feminist ethics and the analysis uses feminist lens (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Stacey, 1988). By documenting women's lives, experience and concerns, feminist research fosters empowerment and promotes social change and social justice initiated by the women through the research process (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Fontana and Ginnis (2003) asserted that even the female researchers have been 'the oppressed'. The language of ethnography has long been controlled by male prose - *layman*, *businessman*, *history*, and *he* when referring to an individual in general and researchers were always cautioned not to be 'emotional' or get affected by the research subjects. Feminist ethnography therefore liberates both the subjects and the researchers. A feminist researcher utilizes her own experience in understanding and interpreting the reality shared by the subjects in the interviews. Her feminine sensitivity sensitizes her to multiple realities and the multiple viewpoints. Charmaz (2003) credited this as enriching to ethnographic study as it 'allows emotions to surface, doubts to be expressed and relationships with subjects to grow' (p. 272). Rather than as a weakness, the researcher's feminine sensitivity is acknowledged as a strength. Data collection becomes less formal, and more immediate.

■ 4.0 THE FOREIGN RESEARCHER

When I decided to study dilemma of working Omani mothers as a result of work-family interface, I had no doubt that feminist ethnography was the best strategy. Omani women had been dubbed as silent and their existence in ethnographic studies was only through the narrations of Western researchers (Eickelmann, 1984; Chatty, 2000; Peterson, 2004; Limbert, 2008). Being among the few, or perhaps the only Malaysian who studied them, I reminded myself of Omani and my cultural differences as well as similarities. I took Burn's (2005) advice that 'a feminism that fails to understand and appreciate cultural diversity will be a failure' (p.8). It is important therefore to 'acknowledge cultural differences and emphasize the dimensions of commonality or inclusion that supersede these differences' (Devine, 1995 cited in Burn, 2005). I was merely a foreigner who tried to understand their psychological dilemma within their social and cultural context.

Speaking of difference, I definitely found that I came from a background totally different from the Omanis. More than half (53.6%) of Malaysian workforce is women, and 70% of them are mothers. At 2.0 fertility rate in 2014 Malaysian women are no doubt career-oriented (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2015). Education is accessible to all regardless of gender, and it has been empowering women since Malaysia gained its independence in 1957. 60-day maternity leave and flexi-time work arrangement are among organizational policies accommodating to working women. Many parents rely heavily on nursery, daycare, as well as maids and some leave their children with family members when they are at work.

In Oman, women's share in the national workforce is about 34%. Although it is low compared to Malaysia, it is far exceeding the government target – 25%. The fertility rate had noticeably dropped to 3.5 in 2014, from 7.0 in 1970's; indicating the shrink of typical family size (The World Bank Group, 2016). Yet, being conservative in many ways (Peterson, 2011), career is the last excuse women can give to negotiate on their maternal role. Many working women still wish to have at least four children. Large family is a symbol of pride to this tribal society. Omanis society has been classified by Hofstede the least masculine – against the backdrop of Arab patriarchy society (Hofstede, 2011). Family is wealth and they put high value on family. As a strategy, women turn to their extended family as the most reliable support system, in addition to domestic helpers. Many women perceived 45-day maternity leave as too short and extend it to one-month unpaid leave.

In spite of the differences, Malaysian and Omani women share some similarities. They both desire for the same things – happy marriage, well-raised children, promising career, and ability to be successful in all of these. As such, again, both women are prone to and affected by work-family conflict, experience negative spill-over and burn out, tormented by guilt (Aazami *et al.*, 2015; Aachour *et al.*, 2014), and found withdrew from workforce due to lack of childcare facilities (Ler *et al.*, 2014; Long *et al.*, 2016; MONE, 2013; Subramaniam *et al.*, 2015).

The differences and similarities have triggered my interest to investigate their experience through in-depth interviews. I chose Rubin and Rubin (2012) interviewing model as I found it the most suitable for several reasons. First, their model acknowledges that the researcher and the researched influence and affect each other. Second, the model stresses on cooperation from both the researcher and the researched, which is preliminary for a successful co-creation of reality. Third, it acknowledges different characters and personalities of research participants, which subsequently allowed me to adapt to varieties of interviewing situations.

■ 5.0 THE CORE PARTICIPANTS

There were two groups of participants and each was interviewed in two different modes. The first group consists of 10 participants. All of the participants were purposively selected, and well aware that they were part of the study. Interviews with them were arranged, and some were interviewed twice. All of the interviews were done one-on-one. The interviews were also semi-structured, revolving around topics like family background, social support, challenges, and perception about career and job. The range of interview duration is about 40 – 90 minutes.

Earning Access and Rapport-building

Post-modern ethnography is distinguished from the modern ethnography in the sense that it begins and ends with the problem acknowledged by the society. The researcher's presence has to be approved; even if it she/he is not invited in the first place. Access has to be earned, and it is initiated by building and maintaining relationship (O'Reilly, 2005). Studying women's dilemma in work-family interface is potentially sensitive, thus trust has to be gained over a certain period of time, through considerable amount of contacts. This is the pre-requisite of in-depth investigation. Knowing this, rapport building began from the beginning of the study, prior to the actual data collection.

Maintaining relationship was done throughout the study and it was done primarily through WhatsApp texting. I chose communication through WhatsApp texting as it is the least disturbing. Participants could take their time and reply when it is convenient for them. More than as strategy to retain the partnership, it is also considered as proper manners hence culturally advisable.

Once a meeting is agreed, the choice of interview location will be negotiated. Again, this shows partnership between the researcher and the researched as the choice of interview location within a cross-cultural research is cultural-laden (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Omani household is normally dense with a family of three generations; and this poses special challenge to interviewing task. To gain more control of interviews, I normally insisted on place where the participants can be candid and truthful. As a result, there were only four interviews done at the participants' places. The rest six interviews were done at the participants' workplaces, café, and my home. After the first interviews, I normally let the participants to decide the next interview locations. There was only one participant whom I conducted two interviews at her home.

Self-presentation in The Interview

Personal appearance is a salient consideration in an ethnographic study, regardless the degree of participation and observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In covert research, appearance might involve more than just attire. Relevant skills like spoken language, body language and mores often play essential roles to disguise and to reach to the natives. In overt research where the researched is well-aware of me as a researcher, I do not necessarily have to dress similar to the locals. Nevertheless, I did ponder the questions what clothes to wear for each interview, especially the first ones. In one of my first interviews I was told by a lady that they were approached by a Malaysian lady for a research, but her request was not entertained as she was not wearing hijab. Obviously, a Muslim woman is expected to wear hijab, even if the hijab is not identical to the black shawl donned by typical Omani women.

In overt research, dress reflects the researcher's self-presentation. Forms of dress, as Hammersley and Atkinson (*ibid*, p.68) said, can 'give off' the message whether an ethnographer seeks to maintain the position as an acceptable marginal member, or declares his/her affinity with the research subjects. As in my case, I did not want my partners to feel as if I was trying to deceive them, or 'play sympathetic' by wearing like them, thus I seldom wore 'abaya' (black dress customarily worn by Gulf Arab women) to the first interview despite the fact that I do wear it sometimes. Instead, I would choose either causal outfit, or *baju kurung* (a Malaysian traditional dress). By not wearing 'abaya' I was trying to portray the foreigner appearance, who comes to get to know them and to understand their experience. Only when I was confident that the participants had got acquainted with me, I would not be hesitant to wear 'abaya'.

The Strength and Weakness of Formal Interview

One of many strengths of interview, especially if it is well-scheduled, can obtain a great deal of information as it is flexible and adaptable to individual situations (Kerlinger, 1964). It is a powerful tool to elicit information on hopes, aspirations and anxieties. The face-to-face contact exposes the researcher to respondents' body language and cues that might not be revealed through telephone interview and diary entries (Hesse-Biber and Levy, 2007). The loosely structured ethnographic interview also has proven more effective than the structured ones (Wolcott, 1995).

My experience vindicated that in-depth interview has been the most fruitful tool in soliciting data on work-family balance issue in Omani context. The conversation-like nature of the interview has put the participants at ease and encouraged them to open up as they did not have the feeling as if they were being interrogated. The non-hierarchical level of relationship has also allowed exchange of experiences as they were also interested and took the time to get to know my work-family experience. Nonetheless, this method also posed some challenges. First, it is considered improper for women to talk about their personal in public especially if it concerns their family. Recruiting participants to take part in the research therefore was a tough undertaking. I had met and talked to at least 20 women, and eventually only 10 agreed to be research participants. Second, I found that in spite of the agreement, not all were ready to discuss the topic openly. This is obvious especially when they were dissatisfied with their non-supportive husbands and they were not willing to talk over about it.

■ 6.0 THE SECONDARY PARTICIPANTS

The second group of participants was interviewed rather informally in order to get unsolicited data. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) cautioned ethnographers that useful and meaningful data could be obtained unsolicited during unarranged and candid conversations with stakeholders other than the selected research participants. Indeed, as previously suggested by Nunan (1992), ethnographic research is collaborative that it involves the participation of stakeholders other than the researcher and the researched. In the study, the stakeholders are the members of the society who act as pressure groups to women. They could be mothers and fathers who have working daughters, husbands, or bachelors who are looking for potential brides.

I did informal interviews with 20 people. They were working mothers, working women who do not have children, unmarried working women, and non-working mothers/house-wives. I also interviewed taxi drivers who were of various ages. Some of them were senior citizens who have grandchildren, while some were bachelors. Most of the housewives were women I met in the neighborhood. The range of the interview duration is between 15 – 25 minutes.

Initiating Conversation

The challenge with informal interview is that I could not delve straight into the topic lest it would annoy the person as I might sound as if I am interrogating the person. So, I had to start a conversation on other topics first, like price inflation, weather, children's school etc. Sometimes I even had to set scenarios like I played as customer at shops. In both cases, they were time consuming, and sometimes the opportunity ended when the conversation had not yet got any deeper. I also found that I should not be inquisitive by asking many questions. In fact, it was enough to ask one or two key questions that trigger them to speak. The questions I normally posed were straightforward questions like, 'Are your daughters working?' or 'Is it good or not for women to work?', and questions like these were enough to initiate conversations with Omani people who are known with their hospitality.

The Strength and Weakness of Informal Interview

The strength of informal conversation as data collection tool lies in the fact that it is an avenue to more realistic accounts. Murchison (2010) argued that people tend to give idealized answers to questions during formal interviews. If an ethnographer relies solely on these answers, he/she will only be able to construct idealized picture but fails to capture the real picture. He further argued that informal conversation has the advantage to provide counterpoint to this idealized version. The only weakness is that since it is unsolicited, the chance to get the data is relatively low compared to those gathered from arranged in-depth interview. In order to get such valuable data through this method, I made sure that I wrote down all the important points I gained in the conversation as soon as it ended or as soon as I got home.

■ 7.0 CO-CONSTRUCTING THE MEANINGFUL REALITIES

Interviewing is a culture-embedded process. Who and what the interviewer is and her relationship with the interviewees determines the extent an interviewee willing to share her story. In general, Omanis are known with their hospitality. However Omani women are also often described as 'silent' by foreign observers (Phillips, 1971; Chatty, 2000). This silence partly reflects the social value where women are taught not to express their grudges against family members in the public. Although safeguarding family's dignity is an obligation expected from both men and women, the expectation is heavier on women (Al-Talei, 2010; Mohamed Jabur, 2008).

Interviewing the core participants therefore poses a challenge I never encountered with in informal interview with general respondents. Perhaps because we have known each other for some time, they were afraid that I would share their stories with others, and it would expose them to criticism for revealing their personal and marital issues. There were times when I had to remind them that the issues are universal and that they should open up if they wished for change. I also shared my own work-family dilemma to make the point that I could relate to their experience. This normally eases up their worry and they got convinced that they were part of a research that has genuine interest to understand women's experience.

In addition to this, I found that younger participants took longer time to open up and share their stories. Perhaps, they feel heavily restricted with the norm that they should not be talking about their unsupportive spouses. Although they were not pleased with their spouses, they never deliberately mentioned the lack of spousal support. Below is the excerpt from the interview:

- Me: How is your baby...Does she sleep well at night?
Muna: No (she doesn't). She gives me headache! Last night she stayed up until 2 a.m. Sometimes (she stays up) until 1 a.m. (chuckled).
Me: So how are you in the morning?
Muna: That's the problem. I always feel dizzy...I am not having enough sleep.
Me: Does your husband help you...like taking turn looking after the baby?
Muna: No. He is always busy...I don't have the heart to ask him to help me. (Pause for about a second). But actually, he tries to help when he can. He plays with her or takes her out when I have to cook or do housework....
Me: You said that your baby does not sleep well at night...how do you focus at work?
Muna: (Laughed) Of course, I cannot focus! For example, now is examination week. I have to be at college early for invigilation, and I have examination papers to mark. I haven't even started. Last two days, I had invigilation, and my baby was sick. I asked my colleague to swap our turns, and she refused. That upsets me more. They (colleagues) know my problem, but they don't help. They all have babies like me, but they live with their mothers. So, they don't have problems.
Me: Do you share this with your husband? Can't he stay with your baby while you invigilate?
Muna: No. He has his own problem [at work]. I don't like to bother him.
(At this point, both of us went silent, about 5 seconds. She looked at her 6-month old baby who was lying next to her. I purposely did not say anything, giving her time in case she would continue expressing her disappointment)
Me: But you are far from your family Muna. That makes him the only family you have.
Muna: Yes, that's why my mother asked me to move and live with her. (pause). But I cannot....
Me: Do you feel uncomfortable asking your husband to help you?
Muna: (Muna was silent for about a second). Maybe it is me [my fault]. I feel that [because] I am the mother, so I should take care of her.

Muna cautiously selected their words and took time to respond to questions. I found young mothers tend to have this kind of behaviour, and I accommodated to their hesitations by giving them time to select their words. Obviously, they were uncertain whether or not they should share their issues. On the other hand, other participants who are more matured did not hesitate to express their opinion. These women normally have colleagues or family members who experience the same issues. They know what they experience in fact is social, rather than personal issue thus perceived the interviews as channel to engender a reformative action.

Respondents in informal interviews however were more candid and relax. One possible reason could be because we were total strangers to each other thus they were certain that what they revealed to me would not leaked to other people they know. Interview excerpt with a senior teacher with five children below revealed her candidness.

- Me: Who helps you in childcare?
Salma: My husband.
Me: Not your mother, or your mother-in-law? Or your sister, or sister-in-law?
Salma: No. My family, and my husband's family are small. I have only one sister, and she is also working as teacher like me. My husband has two sisters, but they live far. My mother is very old, and my mother-in-law has passed away. So, we have nobody.
Me: How does your husband help?
Salma: He does everything. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children...
Me: Does he do diaper changing?
Salma: Yes, everything.
Me: I was told that it is shameful for Arab men to do that (laughed).
Salma: Well, don't tell other people. Who would know? (laughed, and clapped her hands)

Unlike what I had with the core participants, I earned their trust almost instantly. The fact that I was a stranger had allowed them to open up to me the way the core participants did not to.

Yet, despite the differences, I never failed to notice that both group of participants were thrilled with the interviews. They were the sessions when they get to express their regrets for not being able to fully breast-feed their babies or attend to their children when they are sick. They were also the opportunities for them to acknowledge that it is because they are working, they get to send their children to better schools and provide them better healthcare. To me they expressed their dreams and hopes for better childcare facilities, understanding boss, supportive husband and colleagues, and friendlier policies. They also get to acknowledge and self-recognize their sacrifices. Their inability to be fulltime mothers is indeed a form of motherly sacrifice to their children. Their absence from home is to earn better living for their family.

I also noticed positive changes that occurred throughout the interviews with core participants. After having the chance and the avenue to verbalize their thought and feelings, many of them seemed to have regained their confidence and self-worth. They got clearer about their ambition, source of strength and threat, how to use or maneuver around them, and able to identify their priorities. Indeed, I could not help but notice that many of them appeared rejuvenated at the end of the interview phase. As for me, I am not an exception. I learnt that trust does not necessarily take time. It can be earned there and then by the way a researcher presents herself, by her ability to convince the respondents that their experience – joy and struggle, are relatable.

Feminist interview indeed is empowering. The conversations, especially in-depth, one-on-one conversations have the tendency to compel the participants to be critical of their situations: whether to stay as victim of situation or to take control of their lives. If they want to see improvement in women's work-family experience, change has to be initiated and no one is the most powerful change agent other than themselves – the people who are living the experience personally.

■ 8.0 CONCLUSION

Feminist ethnographic research emphasizes women's experience and it approaches knowledge contextually and interpersonally. The constructionist interview with feminist orientation reduces the researcher and the researched gap thus allows exchange of thoughts and feelings. The change in the core participants was observed throughout the interview period showed that the interviews had not only been therapeutically beneficial, but also had empowered them to embrace their difficulties with open heart. Sometimes the change is noticeable in the second interview. They appeared less apprehensive and opened up more to share about their unfortunate situation. Perhaps, by exchanging stories, and discussing about the experience they realize that the issue is not just personal, yet social as well.

The striking difference between modern and post-modern ethnography is the change is internal, due to the native's reflexivity developed through the conversation. The change is never imposed by the researcher. Although work-life balance experience is universal, my social and cultural backgrounds are different from theirs that I had to be careful and avoid placing my cultural values on what would be 'better' or 'emancipatory' for Omani women. As the researcher, I merely played the role as sounding board, where the natives think out loud and verbalize their desires and dissatisfaction. My objective is achieved as I understood the phenomenon, and the understanding is confirmed by the subjects. Long has gone the concept of 'the colonizer' and 'the Other'. Seeing the similarities and the differences in my experience and theirs is indeed enlightening; and being able to construct an informed understanding is empowering to both the researched and the researcher.

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