



## Quadrivium: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship

Volume 1  
Issue 1 Issue 1, Spring 2009


Article 15

12-1-2014

# Watching Each Other: An Essay from the Field

Eileen M. Smith-Cavros  
Nova Southeastern University, eilesmit@nova.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Smith-Cavros, Eileen M. (2014) "Watching Each Other: An Essay from the Field," *Quadrivium: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 15.  
Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/quadrivium/vol1/iss1/15>

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## About the Author

Eileen M. Smith-Cavros is a professor in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Her work focuses on debunking stereotypes about rural communities.

## Watching Each Other: An Essay from the Field

by Eileen M. Smith-Cavros

Lines blur in the field all the time. Textbooks and courses and conventional disciplinary wisdom would make you think that research is like a coloring book. That the researcher and the subject roles are well-defined. That objectivity is just a matter of following the rules. That not getting involved is ideal. But the lines blur in the field all the time.

One fine April day, I sat in a small, economically-challenged church, primarily attended by African Americans, that was one of my research sites. I sat with a man who played his guitar like it was on fire. Brother Paul just picked it up one day, no lessons, no book, and he started, in his own words, "beating on it." Gripping his guitar and strumming it, the musician said "I wasn't nothin' but a crackhead. God saw more." He noted that the pastor of the church in which we sat had "made a four dollar investment" in him once, giving him money and trusting him to do with it what he would. Without a drug program, without a medical program, he was clean.

I had talked to the guitar player before about his habit, his pastor, and about God. I had always asked him questions, bringing along my tape recorder, pen and notebook. By all accounts, he was the "subject" and I the researcher. I had colored in the lines. But I had been away from this particular church for months after having moved across the country yet I was back there during an extended visit to Miami. I needed to follow up. I couldn't stay away. The place and the people drew me in.

Before this Sunday, the guitar player had always dutifully answered my endless questions. Always blunt, he loved to talk and I learned a lot from him about the church, its pastor, and their beliefs. This Sunday was different though. Perhaps it was the distance of time since my last visit. Or maybe he just got tired of answering my constant, inquisitive questions. He took the lead and started talking about my research. The guitar player said that I'd been able to "fit in" to the church and learn things, get close to people, because I was "open-minded." I smiled and listened, thinking how quickly I had gone from observer and researcher to being "the watched." I had been, all the time, a subject to another's keen observation.

Brother Paul put down his guitar gently and offered:

You're an anthropologist, right? Margaret Mead, a lotta people said she was too close [to those she researched]. But you have to be close to understand...it's not all lists and neat. It's more under the surface understanding that makes a place special. When everybody *knows* each others got names. You got to look under the surface. Walk in someone else's shoes.

My subject knew Margaret Mead? I remain embarrassed to this day that this surprised me. The researcher working on debunking stereotypes finds that she has some of her own. It struck me, too, how much I had been studied, carefully, and methodically, all along. My reactions had been noted and "recorded," if not literally, at least mentally. The people I had been observing were collecting their own informal data on me so they could draw conclusions about what I was doing and how I was doing it. I already had proof of their observation before this particular Sunday. At the same church, months before, I walked down the steps after a marathon five-hour worship service which had left me exhausted. The service had been full of testimony, song, prayer, old-fashioned preaching, and raw emotion. I leaned on my car, a beat-up Dodge, to catch my breath. Over a decade old, the car bumper was hanging on by a thread where someone had rear-ended me a month before. The side was dented where another driver sideswiped me in glorious Miami traffic. It was not worth fixing. My car fit in here, parked in the church's grassy lot with other tired old cars. Most people in the neighborhood walked or rode bikes.

As I went to the car, I pushed my power windows down by hand, because the mechanism was broken and my mechanic wanted more than the car was worth to replace the window motors. The church's young Bible study teacher saw me pushing the windows down and laughed loudly. He came over to me and said, "That's why we like you, Eileen, you're humble." I smiled and told him it would be silly to get the windows fixed and that how my car looked wasn't a priority as long as it got me from point A to point B. I hoped to deflect his generous comment, which I didn't think I particularly deserved. My friends would describe me in many ways, but humble would definitely not be the word they would use. The Bible study teacher grinned and continued, "You're down to earth." He explained how some people with educations often "forget" other people and how they can be haughty and materialistic, even though they are just people, too. Very embarrassed, I gave him a brief hug, thanked him, and turned to leave. He said, "We at the church are growing to love you." Unusual for me, I was at a loss for words, lacking a smart response, or a quick follow-up question, deflection, or probe. The researcher disarmed with kindness. I responded with an awkward thank you, waved, and sped away. I drove past the local convenience store with its mural of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. I felt the blush that had risen in my cheeks from his unwarranted compliments and his sincerity. I certainly wanted the church members to like me, and I probably needed them too, for the research to be successful. All researchers are a bit calculating. But for them to love me? It sounded a little serious, like a commitment.

It struck me then, how deeply they were searching to find out who I was in the same way I was searching them. As I sat in my room analyzing data, I too, was the object of study. These were the people I thought of as "my subjects" yet I seemed as much "their subject."

Are people properly labeled as "subjects," anyway? I have trouble with that. Every time I write that word, I feel uncomfortable. Aren't they really research partners? "Subject" is almost a derogatory term; at the least, it seems a condescending one. If they are "subjects," what are we subjecting them to? Does it change everything if we are all on equal footing, researching each other, knowing the same names to drop or not, the anthropological terms to spout? What if everyone starts asking questions and starts developing social theories and hypotheses (even if they don't call them that)? What if there is a movement for the equality of ideas? It would be anthropological anarchy and sociological socialism. And that could be a good thing.

Another incident occurred when I returned to the same church on another spring day. An intensely quiet young man I had previously interviewed began a casual conversation with me. I had left my tape recorder at home. I thought I was just visiting. I should know that you're never just visiting. He began to ask me about my other research sites. All of them were small, neighborhood African American churches in various parts of Miami. When I named the places in which I'd been working, from Liberty City to Overtown, he raised his eyebrows. His curiosity got the better of him. With my being White, and the areas I'd described being Black neighborhoods, he shyly stammered, "How were you received in those other places? I tried to explain it to him. I have never been able to hide or blend in during my research. There is no unnoticed observer status for me, no matter how far back in the church I sit. My interviewee had turned questioner, unable to resist doing a little research on race himself. I said to him that I had been warmly received, over and over again, except for the one time a minister raced to me, arms waving in anger. When I explained my research to the minister, he apologized for his behavior. The minister told me he had just kicked some drug dealers off the block and he thought the only reason I would be in the neighborhood was to "buy."

Other than that, the church people welcomed me in. They tried to save me and they placed oil on me. They prayed for me and they blessed me. They tried to make me comfortable, indeed, to include me. They joked with me. They fed me birthday cake and rice and beans and fried chicken. They fed me even in the poorest of places. That's how I was received. My questioner also asked me to compare those "other" churches to his. And he wanted to know "what I had found out." So I took the time to tell him and listen to his responses about African American churches and communities in Miami. He had his own theories about them. So there I was, sharing my research with him. Not performing it "on him." And he was a fellow social scientist who was commenting on it. At first, I wished I had brought my notebook that day, but had I done that, I'm not sure I would have had the same conversation.

Perhaps we should give our notebooks to "the other" more frequently and see what they do with them. What would they ask us? Could that tell us as much about them (and us) as our "semi-structured interviews" and our follow-up questions? What if our focus on structure truly hinders us? What if it obstructs that which our hearts and minds would lead us to find? Of course, grants rarely support truly exploratory research. Institutional review boards are often hesitant to approve research without a firm outline. Participants need and deserve protection. Peer-reviewed journals usually only publish model research projects, with neat beginnings, middles, and ends. The messiness of research is obscured with clarity. These are the dilemmas embodied in the current academic approach to anthropological and sociological research.

So few professionals talk about the spontaneity of research. Can we avoid the false temptation of thinking that every aspect can be plotted? While I did plan aspects of my research, I found that some of my most important findings came through informal and unstructured human interactions. And the results that rang the truest and revealed the most, sprang from the times when the traditional lines between researcher and subject blurred, when the semi-structured interviews became totally unstructured conversations, when a true give and take existed, and when the act of being human was shared. I learned the most when I wondered where something was going rather than predicting or thinking that I *knew* exactly where it was going.

I got a phone call from the pastor of the church I visited that original April day, months after I had left Miami, when I was living in the distant American West and feeling far. The pastor called and said he was glad I had stopped by the church during my visit to Florida. Before he hung up, he said, "We at the church love you." And I realized I could finally say it back without embarrassment. I had grown to love this church, too, for its members' optimism, for their belief in some greater "good," and for their unswerving hope in the face of the neighborhood's many economic and social maladies. I was struck and touched by what they had so openly shared with others, and with me, a stranger. Does this mean I believe in their God? No. Does it mean that I do not see their frustrations, their inability to raise enough money for projects they desire, and the potential for their trust to be taken advantage of by others? No; I see it and I recorded it all. But I respect and love them for their abiding and active faith in their God and in people. They have a capacity for something I do not.

Does my loving them mean I lose all ability to research them? No. As in all human interactions, even research, I am reminded to try to examine my own emotions, not to deny them, but to learn from them. I still tread that fine line between self-reflection and self-absorption; the research I set out to do is not about me. Nonetheless, emotion is not a contradiction of reason in research. If we have no passion, after all, why bother to research anything in the first place? From all research, I believe that we learn something about the research and something about ourselves.

In the end, I learned a few lessons that spring and summer: first, that in the course of my research, I too was watched. Intimately. And another lesson was that caring for people and getting involved in what they do doesn't have to compromise a researcher. Indeed, it can help establish rapport and provide research opportunities that might not otherwise exist. There is a touch of the mercenary in that and we all must beware of the potential to abuse the profound trust that sometimes develops. Ultimately, though, my greatest lesson was that research allows for extraordinary human connection, not in terms of the hierarchical researcher to subject relationship, but as people conversing, interrelating, disagreeing, challenging, questioning and watching *each other*.

The church with the guitar player is a place I researched. It is a place where I shared lunch in the food kitchen. It is a place I wrote academic articles about. It is a place where I shared jokes and hugs with the congregants. It is a place where I gathered data. It is a place where I cried during a sermon. It is a place where, on a sunny day, I helped the daughter of sharecroppers fill out adoption paperwork. It is a place I analyzed. And it is a place where people analyzed me. And long after I file my notes and matrices in a drawer, I will carry with me the sound of these research partners, their songs and spirits shaking the floor of a tiny church in a nearly forgotten

corner of Miami.

*\*Names in this article have been changed or omitted to protect anonymity.*