

Book review

Eom Eunhui [Uhm Eunhee] 엄은희 and Gu Giyeon [Koo Gi Yeon] 구기연, eds. 2020. 『여성 연구자, 선을 넘다: 지구를 누빈 현장연구 전문가 12인의 열정과 공감의 연구 기록』 [Women researchers, crossing lines: A research record of the passion and sympathy of twelve experts in fieldwork around the world]. Seoul: Nulmin 놀민. 540 pp. ISBN 9791187750284 ₩26,000

Women Researchers to Weave Threads of Life:  
Ethnography as Process\*

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1. Ethnography as Process

Ethnography, which is defined as “descriptive study of particular human societies or the process of doing this research” (Britannica, entry on “Ethnography”), has its roots in systematic fieldwork conducted in small-scale ethnic groups under colonialism, as espoused by British anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard in the

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early to mid-twentieth century. Although the poststructural and feminist turn since the 1990s brought up multiple critiques related to power inequalities in the areas of colonialism, gender, race, and class in ethnographic research and writing, this did not completely negate the ethnographic virtues of interpreting people's actions and daily life practice through the "native point of view" or the "perspective of subject and actor." In fact, ethnography is now not only used in anthropology but also is pervasively used as an important qualitative research method in sociology, geography, international development, policy studies, ecology, public welfare, and medicine, among others. "Participant observation" and "in-depth interviews" are no longer unfamiliar concepts in social science research. Within the practical definition of "research into diverse sociocultural behaviors and values that arise in groups, organizations and communities, and interactions between them" (Reeves, Kuper, and Hodge 2008),<sup>1</sup> ethnography has been evaluated highly as an "effective method of research."

However, even though ethnography's utility has recently been recognized, this has often been limited to its value as a research method, such that its power as a "means of knowledge" about intrinsic relationships or practices appears to be overlooked. In this respect, *Women researchers, crossing lines* clearly illustrates the power of ethnography in its questions about people's ("ethno") lives and the process of writing ("graphy"). As shown clearly in the book cover and title, the experts in anthropology, geography, and international development in this book bring their identity as "women researchers" to the fore, recording their fieldwork experiences at sites around the world, including China, Japan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Iran, Israel, and Venezuela, among others. While it was not the intention of Nulmin publisher Jung Seongwon to include only male authors in the preceding volume *Barefoot scholars: The challenges and passionate fieldwork of six Southeast Asia experts*, critical feedback following its publication became an important motivation for publishing *Women researchers* (Channel Yes 2020). The fact that there was no book that brought the identity of "women researchers" to the fore—even in academic fields that fully recognize that the researcher's location and positionality mutually affect and are affected by the setup of the research object and analysis of results—has profound implications.

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<sup>1</sup> (Editor's note) Throughout the article, quotes from English-language sources are translated from the Korean original.

This book shows how in ethnography the researcher's gender, age, marriage and family status, nationality, ethnicity, class, and social position can affect the research process itself or be a strong element in the obstruction or smooth progress of research. In particular, the book seriously and honestly investigates the question of how "women," "research," and "the field" mutually constitute and transform each other, taking the positionality of gender as its center. Moreover, the questions the researchers ask are not only directed to the object of research but also to themselves, showing us their meeting, asking, discussing, waiting, stopping, and writing during their own fieldwork experiences.

## 2. Distance and Engagement between Researcher and Research Subject

The twelve authors of *Women researchers, crossing lines* write about going into the "field" with their prepared research questions and forming particular relationships with research subjects, and about the process of engaging in intimate spatial-temporal, social, and emotional interactions. Far from experiencing the "romantic comedy happy ending" version of the rite of passage of "rapport formation"—talked about in ethnography as a kind of trump card—No Goeun [Noh Gwoon] shows us researchers' complicated feelings of alienation, frustration, and depression during fieldwork. She writes of the grief caused by lack of progress in "a field site in which just letting the locals know of the researcher's existence is difficult.... Every morning I gathered my courage and started going here and there in the city" (316).

Another fascinating insight is of when the way to "understand and accept various emotions arising in the process of fieldwork" is not through in-depth interviews or participant observation but rather through "a new relationship to material reality." Two examples of this are Yuk Suhyun [Youk Su Hyun]'s work in Vietnam, in which scooters "can carry everything except your house" (271); and Im Anna [Lim Anna]'s analysis of the process of creating the social space of "apartments" for female migrant workers from the Philippines in Israel (76).

Although fieldwork was everything Jung Inna had hoped for—"I met such a variety of people as if arranged by fate, and shared their daily lives and touched their lives little by little" (460)—there were also many

instances of having to continue research in the face of disinterest, unkindness, refusal, and avoidance. Gu Giyeon [Koo Gi Yeon], who had the experience of being interrogated in the foreign affairs section of a police station, with the psychological pressure of having to protect herself and research subjects in a country with severe surveillance and control, writes, “It is so problematic to think romantically that I could become a ‘local’ through this process” (216–221).

“Fieldwork is always a continuation of uncertainty. It is the process of leaving the familiar comfort zone and coming out of one’s shell, as they say” (Choe Yeongrae [Choi Young Rae], 104), in which the schedule of research in the field cannot ever go according to the researcher’s plan. Even if the researcher experiences “handover” (Ji Eunsuk [Jee Eunsook], 358) to a few locals through unexpected hospitality and cooperation, even this can cause anxiety since it is not due to any “blessing” but rather “circumstances beyond one’s control.”

Various emotions, worries over relationships with research subjects, and the real problems of field research can be compounded due to the structural vulnerabilities of being a “female researcher.” Women researchers frequently experience issues of discrimination and exclusion along overdetermined categories of sex, gender, and sexuality in the field, academic circles, and the country and society they are affiliated with. This book contains experiences that women researchers frequently experience in the field but that are not easy to include in academic articles and other formal writing, as they lay outside the jurisdiction of academic writing as a kind of “gossip.”

In addition to the kinds of research problems discussed above, the book introduces in detail the information the authors have gained through honing themselves as a formidable “research tool”—from choosing research topics and field sites and structuring schedules to receiving research grants and visas and making key contacts. There is also discussion of how researchers mastered their own methods of putting into practice “their own rhythm even as they followed the rhythms of local life” (Eom Eunhui [Uhm Eunhee], 416).

However, the book does not stop at discussing the self-actualization process of the authors as they became regional or academic experts through their field research, or the skills they gained by overcoming hardship as a rite of passage. If ethnography is a process of putting “fresh” evidence—the kind that cannot be verified in books or documents that can support one’s

position—into secret storage, researchers must become hunters in search of evidence for the problems and structures they have set up. The researcher takes the research problems and framing they have set up into a suitable field place and casts the net of in-depth interviews and participant observation, and through secret methods or by displaying particular capabilities that others cannot approach, seizes the words and actions of “objective evidence,” with their own positions in the background. But even Malinowski, who emphasized that ethnography should retain positivist scientific values, did not presume that there was a “goblin’s club” to ethnography (Malinowski 2013: 38). In fact, even if fieldwork is carried out with these goals in mind, questions will soon arise: “How can a universal conclusion be drawn from this particular case?” or “How on earth can research objectivity be guaranteed?” However, even if one tries to reassure the questioner with the fact that ethnography’s specificity is connected to long philosophical traditions of analytics and phenomenology, the chances of success with this line of reasoning are not great.

Above all, if we say that ethnography utilizes this concept of “method,” we can see that it carries a much greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment than positivist research (Stacey 1988). The authors of *Women researchers, crossing lines* show how they learned of these power relations and problems inherent to ethnography through the experience of their fieldwork. They write that “the field” “is not a place where the researchers can obtain what they want to make their points” (Chae Hyeonjeong, 39) nor is it something self-evidently endowed as “living, raw materials (humans and events, material and nature) always there and pulsating, waiting for the researcher’s footstep” (Jang Jeonga [Chang Jung A], 178). “Gradually I awoke to the fact that I could not know another’s ‘sincerity,’ or presume that they were only acting out of ‘logical reasons’ that reflected their ‘true motivations’... I changed my questions” (Jang Jeonga [Chang Jung A], 164)

The authors of this book show that the benefit of ethnography is not objectivity based on a foundation of mechanical neutrality of the “distance from the research subject” that is impossible in practice; instead, it is the practical power of knowledge production and “ways of knowing” created out of the reciprocal relationship in the interactions between the researcher and those who become research subjects. They show activists who have shared the field for a long time asking the researcher their interpretation of the meaning of their activities (Jang Jeonga [Chang Jung A], 186), of

filling the margins with existing knowledge and theory that ethnography has not addressed yet, of executing one's roles while mutually affecting one another, and of existing in connection with another while living one's own life. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher makes patterns out of others' lives in interactions with research subjects, and, in looking at those lives, makes the imagined level horizon diversified and uneven. "The field site and the researcher do not stand as two entities facing one another, but in interaction both sides change" (Jang Jeonga [Chang Jung A], 185). "I am in the process of becoming a China scholar. I want to share in my writing this process of 'becoming' with those who became 'we' during and after fieldwork, and what I learned about the China sea in exchange with them" (Choe Yeongrae [Choi Young Rae], 104).

From early on, feminist scholars have not avoided the ethical responsibilities of knowledge production about communities as research subjects inherent to ethnography, but rather discussed it as an important tool of methodology (Schrock 2013: 58). This is because ethnography "avoids the mistaken dualism of positivism, while allowing for a reciprocal and equal relationship between the 'cognitive subject' and 'subject' on foundations of sympathy and care" (Stacey 1988). In this framework, ethnographic research has the potential to transform the power inequalities between researcher and research subjects, or encourage careful considerations of the problems of reconstructing research subjects through writing and the researcher's subjectivity, through research that secures participation and reform (Yun Taekrim 2002: 201). *Women researchers, crossing lines* is a powerful story about the process of "mutual learning" that begins with not putting one side of the researcher-research subject relationship in a position of epistemological superiority, instead placing both sides on the same footing, whether epistemologically or ontologically, through the transformative process of ethnographic research—in which one question turns into another question.

### 3. Writing Ethnography as a Process of Mutual Learning

Realizing that I wasn't the only one who was always looking out for whether someone was threatening my stability, gave me comfort that not only I but others had been living in this space. In this way, those who had been "others" became those in circumstances similar to my own, and I had the experience of "my people" becoming others as well, leading me to edit my research

questions. Those questions that I had thrown to “others” eventually came back to me. (Kim Huigyeong [Kim Heekyoung], 256)

If we examine this process, I as the researcher learn from my research subjects, and in putting this into language, influence my research subjects, and the results come back to me, in what we can recognize as a chain reaction. Namely, the researcher does not come down from the sky like a hawk to the research subjects, but is included in the earthly feedback loop, existing in interaction. (Ji Eunsuk [Jee Eunsook], 395)

Ethnography is a research method, but it is also the process of writing. Through ethnography, in recording, accumulating, and sharing people’s lives, researchers highlight their voices with stories as the center, endlessly reconsidering “the present” and “us” (Cave and Loan 2014).

When the results of research in the field are put into print in articles, it is not only the language of the researcher but a product of cooperation with those in the field. In this way ethnography is not simply formal knowledge put into text, it is a process of practicing ethics and responsibility as well.

We can understand the ethics and responsibility that accompany ethnography through the writing of Tim Ingold (2015), who refers to the “principle of mutual response.” According to Ingold, in a world in which our lives are tied up with the lives of others, we are always personally executing “principles of mutual response with a fundamentally social character.” Although this principle of mutual response and enmeshed lives began with perceptions of the united lifeworlds of nature and humans, and technology and knowledge, I think that the authors of *Women researchers, crossing lines* offer insights about the beginning of the thread of this perception through their worries and critical minds.

“The principle of mutual response” can be the “momentary solidarity” (Kim Huigyeong [Kim Heekyoung], 258) of passing someone in the field, or the more active agency “created in the mutual interaction and influence in the process of contact between researcher and research subjects” (Ji Eunsuk [Jee Eunsook], 393). I wonder what lines will be drawn from the worlds of lives woven in this book and the continuous interactions and responses in the field that “might continue somewhere else” (Im Anna [Lim Anna], 96) in ten or twenty years. I hope that this book’s promise to “take up the pen again in about ten years and see what kind of lives and stories of learning are unfolding” (Hong Munsuk [Hong Moonsook], 528) is realized.

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