Harassed: Gender, bodies, and ethnographic research

Hanson, Rebecca and Patricia Richards, 2019 University of California Press

Review by
Courtney Hayhurst & Tara L. Joly

Since Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement went viral in 2017, academic communities have followed suit with efforts to expose and prevent gendered sexual violence at universities. In their book *Harassed: Gender, bodies, and ethnographic research*, sociologists Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards (2019) provide a crucial intervention in this movement. They shift readers' attention towards the (re) production of gendered sexual violence in social science's "dual" workplace of ethnographic fieldwork. This workplace is one that isn't defined by the boundaries of office walls. Instead, ethnographic field work extends into an entire community, incorporates entire families, and liminal spaces such as personal homes, social media, and community centres. The book is an important yet emotional read, that necessitates a content warning due to its focus.

Based on 56 interviews conducted with ethnographic researchers, with added insight stemming from their own personal experiences, Hanson and Richards unpack the epistemological foundations of ethnography that allow sexual violence to perpetuate in academic research settings and suggest alternatives. Drawing on sociologist Joan Fujimura's work, the authors show how instances of harassment are often relegated to the category of "awkward surplus" and excluded

from ethnographic texts (p. 23). They argue that the occurrence of and silence surrounding sexual violence in the field are reinforced by three "fixations" that, according to interviewees, shape ethnographic standards (p. 11): working in isolation, exposing oneself to danger, and creating intimacy with participants. Throughout the text, Hanson and Richards challenge these fixations and re-examine methodological issues and systemic inequalities that can (re)produce harm in the field. The authors promote an alternative approach that they term "embodied ethnography", which is "a call to think and write about how our bodies – the meanings, practices, and experiences that constitute them – are implicated in the research process" (p. 9). With the combination of embodiment and "collective reflexivity" (p. 188), which calls all researchers to include their own experiences and personal reflections into their writings, Hanson and Richards offer potential to shift academic structures from reproducing harm to creating open dialogues and awareness around sexual violence.

This book excels as a guide for ethnographers, serving to illuminate many experiences of and responses to sexual violence in ethnographic research. The "awkward surplus" (p. 23) of sexual violence is, as the book notes and from our experience, often omitted from ethnographic methods training. Hanson and Richards include questions for reflection, which prompt the reader throughout the text to apply the concepts to their own research contexts. *Harassed* is an essential book for any methods course in the social sciences that touches on ethnography – particularly, graduate seminars or workshops.

While comprehensive, *Harassed* has some limitations. We were left questioning how the author's own positionality affected the research, results, and data collected in this book. Considering the care taken to explain the benefits of embodied ethnography, more reflexivity on behalf of the authors would have provided an example from which others could draw. Though *Harassed* includes a detailed methodology section, readers are only left with an awareness of embodied reflexivity, rather than the skill to enact it in their own research and writing.

Additionally, vignettes provided by Hanson and Richards offer necessary insight into the realities of sexual violence in the field, yet we feel the authors omitted potential drawbacks of an embodied ethnographic approach. For example, the authors take for granted that safely disclosing embodied relationships in research and writing is a privilege not held by all researchers. The authors provide limited discussion regarding the potential harms – be they legal, relational, political, or personal – of reporting sexual violence in ethnographies. These potential harms relate to a fact the authors recognize: the silence surrounding gendered violence in the field is not only reinforced by methodological hegemony in academia, but also by broader societal norms that keep survivors from safely reporting.

Hanson and Richards make their own suggestions for how future research can build upon their own, by focusing on more exclusive documentation of queer and BIPOC experiences of sexual violence in fieldwork. We add that future research must also explore the limitations of reflexivity in terms of safety, and document gendered violence in practicing, non-academic ethnographic research settings. As the only full-length manuscript of its kind, *Harassed* provides the foundation for larger conversations about gendered sexual violence in ethnographic research. *Harassed* is essential reading for all ethnographers, regardless of the context in which they work.

About the reviewers

Courtney Hayhurst is an Anthropology undergraduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia. Interested in equality, Indigenous sovereignty, oral tradition, and folklore, Hayhurst plans on continuing her academic career by returning to complete her Masters upon graduation. Hayhurst is a Research Assistant for Dr. Joly's current research project.

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