

OF “LOOSE” WOMEN AND “GUIDES,” OR, RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FIELD*

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Critiques emanating from postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism challenge objectivity in the social sciences and lay the groundwork for theories that rest on a complex of discourses, ideologies, social constructions, and power relations. Emerging from these critiques are provocative questions about how knowledge is constituted, with considerable attention devoted to the decisive role of a researcher's identity in field research (Crapanzano 1977; Smith 1988; Sidaway 1992; Herod 1993; England 1994; Enslin 1994). Less attention is accorded interpreter-assistants and to the relationship between a researcher and a research assistant.¹

Yet research assistants mediate research, particularly for those who do fieldwork in foreign settings. How a researcher is perceived by informants, the particular guise by which one enters a community, and the relationships formed with informants are all central to the process by which knowledge is generated (Bogdan and Biklen 1982). Research assistants influence these relationships, especially in their role of establishing contact with informants.

This essay discusses the ways in which our relationship as researcher/interpreter-assistant and as wife/husband informed field research in Kerala, India (Figure 1). We draw on recent theories of the body and performance (Butler 1990), and on disciplinary interest in what has come to be known as researcher positionality, to discuss our relationship as it was mediated by local contingencies: We encountered a number of issues connected to our identities/bodies and our relationship that influenced the research we conducted, and together we both formed and adapted to others' constructions of ourselves to navigate “the field.”

Geographical research is not an innocent, objective process. Rather, it is constantly mediated by gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and relations of power—each and all inscribed on the bodies of researchers and research subjects. The identities they etch on our bodies and our own counterconstructions heavily influence how we relate to our research subjects, which then influences the generation of knowledge. In this essay we share some of our experiences conducting research together as a Western, white, female researcher and an Indian, male, research assistant, and speak to how our marriage midway through the research period modified perceptions yet again.

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