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A Feminist in Brussels (and Glasgow, Berlin, Düsseldorf . . .)

Self-Configuration in Research into European Union Politics

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ABSTRACT   This article discusses the conditions of research in international and European contexts, in particular European elite politics and politicians, arguing that the researcher is a central agent and research instrument in this process. The article suggests that the researcher finds herself renegotiating parts of her socially assigned identity in relation to European national and international structures and discusses the ways in which the gendered 'self' remains the centre of a research project above other identity *components* even in such conditions that might appear to be gender neutral. The article examines the micro-politics of research from the level of archive research to elite interviewing.

KEY WORDS   age ◆ elite ◆ European politics ◆ gender ◆ nationality ◆ research methods ◆ self-reflexive

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to identify and analyse the reversal of power hierarchy in the interactions between the researcher and her surroundings during fieldwork. The article addresses the conditions of power relations between interviewer and interviewee in European elite politics and politicians. It also addresses interactions in surroundings traditionally designed to function as assisting resource mechanisms that operate with specific assumptions about the gender, age and indigenousness of the

(universal) researcher. Three dimensions of the perceived self are examined here: gender (as the performance of sex categories); age (associated with social status); and indigenousness, insofar as to define the relation of the researcher and cultural and geographic locations of research. The research settings were predominantly international in character and were experienced through three stages of fieldwork: archival research, interaction with actors surrounding political elites and research interviews with European elites.

Contrary to 'orthodox' accounts of the role of the researcher as a detached, neutral and value-free facilitator or extractor of information and facts analyst, feminist scholarship has emphasized the *value* already embedded in these assumptions that the position of the researcher, whether sociocultural and/or political, does and should not constitute a separate factor in the research process. Drawing upon common considerations of feminist self-reflective accounts of the research process, the following discussion identifies some of the complexities which exist in the interplay between particular perceived identity traits of the researcher and the research subjects. The following reflexive account seeks to identify the degrees of influence that identity traits had during fieldwork, by looking both inward and outward, that is by identifying both the emotions and behavioural patterns of the researcher (inward) and those produced by her surroundings (outward).

THE NECESSITY, DIFFICULTY AND MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN RESEARCH

The researcher, as an agent with a specific goal and working within specific, often pre-existing conditions and structures, has a number of seemingly incompatible characteristics and roles that require her to operate on multiple levels. These are first defined by her role and 'function' to seek and record information. Second, the researcher not only makes decisions about the choice of tools but *is* also the main tool that will 'extract' information from primary and secondary sources and interpret it. Yet, the researcher does not perform these tasks in a vacuum. Research is part of a series of social interactions that are governed by the norms of the structures within which they take place, and by the performance of socially constructed actors including the 'researcher'. Therefore, traits with socially assigned connotations such as gender, age and ethnicity rarely remain neutral in the process.

Calls to explore and critically reflect upon one's own research experience point to two aspects: the researcher's own mechanisms of sense-making and the influence of the research field in shaping the researcher's

understandings (Kanpol, 1997; Lentin, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1993). The difficulties of self-reflexive accounts that bring the 'personal' into the fore-ground are twofold. First is the need to use personal experience as a point of departure and not an end goal to reach a deeper understanding of the structures responsible for unequal conditions in the making of know-ledge. Second, it requires a consciousness alert to signs that develop into patterns. To a significant extent, even the very fact of being *aware* of some-thing presupposes a certain kind of *knowledge*. As far as the scrutiny of the research process is concerned, feminist epistemology has championed the idea of a multiplicity of knowledges and therefore regarded experience as valid and legitimate information. Haraway (1991) speaks about a 'web of knowledges' that, far from claiming that all positions are equal (even of those with the power to define legitimacy of knowledges), recognizes that truth consists of the positions of those making and requiring knowledge or in other words of 'situated knowledges'.

Feminist epistemology has opened the door to the legitimization of 'personal' accounts (e.g. Stanley, 1990) and to a re-evaluation of criteria of 'legitimacy' found in scientific enquiry (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Harding, 1998) that discredits reflections on the research process as too 'personal' and 'self-centred' to have any 'objective' value for the main body of research. Stanley and Wise (1993) map this analysis as a five-dimensional task that: seeks to expose the relationship between the researcher and the researched; recognizes emotion as a research experi-ence; promotes an 'intellectual autobiography' of the researcher with the aim to make transparent the background of the researcher; acknowledges the existence and analyses the management of different realities; and, crucially, questions the power relations in the research process. Gender is the common denominator in this process, and the basis upon which further sociocultural and economic 'identities' are examined. One of the tasks of a feminist self-reflexive account is to produce contradictory meanings and recognize such meanings as valid. Davies (1992: 56) argues that once women 'refuse to ignore that which does not fit a linear, non contradictory storyline and see how they are positioned within various discourses . . . they begin to refuse that particular discourse in which these positionings are embedded'. The gender-ness, in particular, and other-ness, in general, of the self are positionings used to support oppres-sive discourses and linear 'stories'. Reflecting upon these positionings as they derive from real-life research experiences contributes to the enrich-ment of our knowledge of what constitutes research and how far such positionings can influence research. Moreover, it offers the possibility of creating a discourse that derives from the *phenomenon* that expands well beyond the boundaries of 'personal' or 'individual' professional lives and therefore actively 'refuses' discourses, which embed (subordinate) posi-tionings of gender.

The legitimacy of experiences of the 'self' as a gendered issue is reflected in everyday life as much as in scholarly practice. Morgan (1988) speaks of 'mono-genderness' at work to refer to male dominance in discourses, as much as in the material world. I understand 'mono-genderness' to refer to the legitimacy of one 'set' of values, often adopted by women too, to the exclusion of others and to the imposition of subjective meanings onto the researched as objectivity and to the signalling of the universal male object that finds expression in subtle ways, well beyond those areas marked as 'men only'. Examples of such expressions not only exist in the male-dominated natural sciences, but also within disciplines where women constitute the majority, such as policy research (male dominated) in the field of communications (strong female presence). Morgan's argument therefore expands to cover not just areas hostile to women but also scholarly practices more generally and research ethics and codes that privilege male-defined (mono-gendered) standards. I would add that this may also expand into other areas as well such as politics and decision-making centres. In an attempt to demonstrate the links between 'personal' and 'political', 'subjective' and 'scientific', feminist accounts of research, gender and the acquisition of knowledge have stressed the importance and implications of 'self' in a process that aims to be objective in scope but remains highly personal in effect. Conceptualizing the 'self' as the main research tool presupposes some objective conditions, i.e. conditions beyond the control of the subject, that range from abstract, socially embodied traits such as value systems to physical characteristics. Such conditions become personal traits that once placed within a social and political frame, acquire significance, powerful enough to influence the outcome of a scientific enquiry (Pettigrew, 1981). As Gagnon (1992: 235) rightly says, the 'self' is a sociocultural invention that is called to speak in a singular voice in everyday life while other voices are present. These 'other voices' refer to the complexity of the self, the selves within the self or the (highly contested term of) hybridity of identities. I look at some of these selves and their life in the research process. In order to do so, the 'self' actively takes part in a series of negotiations, which respond to and interact with external conditions, imposed positionings and confrontation with others. Therefore, the symbolic and material surroundings are constant parts of this negotiation or configuration process, which the researcher must be prepared to record, attach meanings to and reflect upon.

Increasingly, the micro-politics of doing research attract the attention of reflexive accounts (e.g. Pettigrew, 1981; Ronai, 1992; Yuen Kay, 1990). In these works the analysis of micro-politics and everyday interaction goes hand in hand with notions of space and location, subjectivity, performance of the self and aspects of 'movement' to, from and within the field in geographic, spatial or cultural terms. The absence or existence of relationships formed with others during fieldwork is a common theme

addressed by reflexive accounts. Indeed, human interaction obtains a centrality in the process of critically analysing the role and position of the researcher. Three common considerations deriving from self-reflexive accounts echo the locations of feminist analysis as identified by Stanley and Wise: access to subjects directly or indirectly controlling information useful to the researcher; effects on emotions as a result of establishing a relationship with these individuals; and reflection over the negotiations of the self during these encounters. This in-the-research reflexive practice produces a continuity of further analytical reaction and renegotiation of the self and therefore further emphasizes the importance of studying and including subjectivity in the production of meaning.

International settings are spatial and cultural locations that have not been adequately addressed in self-reflexive discussions, with the exception of feminist geography. Furthermore, the analysis of the experiences deriving from interactions with international elites and in international settings is also just emerging. Although there are studies that relate the studied object or 'subjects' in the research process with particular emphasis on the methodological problems and the politics of interviewing, very little attention has been given to the complexities and contradictions of the relation between the female researcher and political elites (for exceptions see Ball, 1994; Gurney, 1985; Puwar, 1997; Ross, 2000).

International (and sometimes elite) settings, such as administrative centres and major archival centres can be seen as the hubs of contemporary multiculturalism. As such, their geography demands spatial mobility and presents the researcher with an environment 'away from home'. It is interesting to see the ways in which human interactivity, and in particular the relation between the researcher and the researched, produces the negotiation of selves, the (re)construction of identity and the 'hybridity' of identity. But in order to expose some of these issues, the researcher has to recognize and incorporate subjectivity in her research and incorporate a personal reflection as 'legitimate', as opposed to a detouched objectivity (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998).

SOME NOTES ABOUT THE PROJECT

The process discussed here is part of a particular study that took place within a discipline and a resource-base which is male dominated. The following discussion explores the interactions between the 'personal' and the 'public' in a culturally diverse context such as the European Union. It examines the ways that the different 'selves' of the researcher as 'woman', 'young' and 'foreigner' responded to external stimuli and the difficulties in locating the nature of identities at-work. The 'personal', lived experience, coexists with the 'public', a set of outside structures and norms, at

multiple levels within a set of broadly prearranged power relations. Here the self is the tool of research and the agency that needs to identify and negotiate structural arrangements in order to achieve a specific goal: acquisition of information (Walford, 1991: 3). More than simply a need to cover 'unspoken' ground, the following reflections are concerned with the power relations reflected in the everyday interactions that take place within European micro-settings, such as national libraries and the European Parliament. These interactions are organized into negotiations with surrounding discourses in fieldwork (library/archival work), interactions with administrators in order to obtain access to privileged information via members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and finally interaction with elites.[1]

THE 'PERSONAL' IN THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC CONTEXT: IN GLASGOW, BERLIN, DÜSSELDORF . . .

The collection and analysis of archive documents is a multifaceted task that involves practical or 'pragmatic' aspects of the research project such as tracing the development of a particular policy area in Europe. It is also a task where the researcher is emotionally and intellectually involved, partly due to the nature of the work. Research often demands high specialization that may cause a sense of scholarly 'loneliness' because of the intersection of interdisciplinary boundaries. The field of policy is only now beginning to witness female scholars and during my fieldwork I did not come across any other woman researcher, although I did come across quite a few male colleagues. From my encounter with librarians and readers in the European Documentation Centres (EDCs) and in the European Parliament, where the main part of the archive research took place, I only saw male political scientists or European or comparative law readers. The women I saw were library staff, receptionists, assistants but not EU or policy researchers and the only women in senior positions I met were MEPs. Because there were no other women of my own status, or carrying out similar work, a feeling of isolation was particularly present. In Ely's description of working in similar circumstances, she notes that 'loneliness' was the disadvantage of not being part of a 'support group', where I could 'compare notes' as far as my research experience was concerned (Ely et al., 1997: 36). This may leave the researcher asking herself if *she* is the one with the problem (being *over*sensitive, *over*reacting or seeing things where there is nothing).

> All research is political from the micro-politics of interpersonal relationships, through the politics of research units, institutions and universities, to those of government departments and finally to the state. (Bell and Encel, 1978: 4)

Very early during my fieldwork, it became obvious that micro-politics is present in the most unexpected situations. One of the first observations I was forced to make during archive research and interviews were the subtly different ways in which I was treated, compared to my male colleagues. These were mainly expressed through interaction with (predominantly female) library staff. It is quite difficult to distinguish which self (young, woman or foreign) was more dominant in the eyes of others, in this case, the library staff. Perhaps it was a combination of all three. Routinely, staff expressed reluctance to assist me, intolerance to questions and lack of courtesy, which was given off by looks and tone of voice. Being routinely patronized was also a common reaction to my questions. Typical examples of micro-politics were the reactions to these parts of my identity that entailed the refusal of most senior (female) librarians to understand my request for 'copies of the minutes of the plenary meetings of the European Parliament' on the specified dates. On the other hand, I observed male colleagues being treated with respect and greeted with a smile. The staff seemed 'happy to be of assistance'. Inter-actional micro-politics plays a significant role in day-to-day tasks. As Greed (1990: 152) argues, 'at the personal level all the little nastinesses and nicenesses of daily life, far from being trivial or irrelevant, are in fact the very building blocks of the maintenance of the sub-culture, making some feel welcome and others unwanted and ill at ease'. The environ-ment of European Documentation Centres and other archives of inter-national organizations is structured in a complex way that does not welcome beginners. Such centres are used for very particular studies by experts. They are not places where one can browse through books on shelves. The status of an expert is not associated with the female sex, youthfulness or often with 'foreigners'.[2] Living and working in geographical and cultural territories other than that of my ethnic origin for the last 10 years has made me aware of many of the little 'nastinesses and nicenesses' – a reaction to an 'unusual' complexion and accent which is often potentially marginalizing (Puwar, 1997: 5.4). Thus the physical and cultural characteristics of 'female', 'foreign' and 'young' become the first determinants when interacting within a social and professional environment. Although it is problematic to try and prioritize which of these characteristics was most influential at any given time, being 'other' placed me in a particular position in a variety of structural hierarchies. My own observations alone cannot allow generalizations as to the importance of these characteristics as there were no other women scholars with whom I could compare my experiences and draw conclusions. Yet, the absence of women colleagues indicates the rarity of the situation: during the four months I spent in EDCs my presence there was the exception rather than the norm.

Differential treatment to male colleagues was also evident in the lack of

'patience' exhibited by library staff in showing me how to undertake a computer-aided record search – in most cases unique to particular institutions/countries. Male scholars were never questioned about their status. In one archive, however, the response to my request (to have access to public EU documents in the Documentation Centre, which is especially designated for public access!) was that it is '*very* complicated': the librarian made clear that she did not consider it her job to assist me.

The organization of EDCs varies according to institutions and traditions. In some cases, it is possible for the researcher to access data independently, in others certain application slips have to go through library staff, who then sometimes physically carry the requested material over. The de facto relationship of dependency created through a particular and complex form of 'power' imbalance is demonstrated through the actions described earlier. It is interesting to note that power dynamics in my case were reversed when compared to the same relationship (librarian–researcher) with male scholars, all of which looked older than me and who, I observed, had assumed a dominant position that regarded librarians and other staff as assistants to *their* work. I, on the other hand, felt intimidated after the first contact and often found myself avoiding further contact with them. Information became the mediator of the power relationship: asking for access to it was turned from a 'right' into a 'favour'. I felt I had to *prove* my entitlement to the same resources as my male colleagues. Constant negotiation of positions and adjustment of behaviour are strategies to achieve goals, and reflecting back on the situation, I realize that I was subconsciously adopting certain behavioural patterns and facial expressions, such as smiles, Goffman's 'ritualistic mollifiers', and low tones that would not be perceived as a 'threat' and were unlikely to provoke other negative reactions. In other words, I tried to avoid what I perceived to be conflict. It may be of interest to note that I am not a 'low key' person in my everyday life.

The researcher's potential 'assistants' become the gatekeepers of information in a relation characterized by dependency and unease. I was more reluctant to ask for help and in an attempt to minimize dependency, I proceeded to find my way around on my own, which did not prove time efficient. Occupying a subordinate position, however, does not teleologically mean that one remains powerless. Greed (1990: 153) notes that 'each self has a different role and sense of reality' that reacts and operates within the space available and creates its own meaning. My self was the source of empowerment that, through reconfiguration, asserted a male-ness: in the face of lacking female role models and/or colleagues, I identified myself with male colleagues. I observed their behaviour, their sense of 'being at home' and persuaded myself to *feel* that I could ask for the same things, to ignore therefore the shortcomings of 'woman' self and behave like a man. Davies (1992: 64) argues that 'we choose to assert ourselves as

"male" researcher because it is maleness in this world that guarantees agency'. Davies goes on to explain that,

> . . . in the meantime though personal identities have been (are being) constructed in terms of those very dualities we are in [the] process of challenging. Being a woman or a man has profound significance for who people take themselves to be and for the story lines through which they make sense of their own actions, emotions, bodily experience and their positioning in relation to others. (Davies, 1992: 67–8)

It would be naive to assume that because internal configurations take place, the outside structures or attitudes change. This was a tactic to regain emotional strength and courage to continue my tasks.

'The activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' is gendered performance (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). The positioning of 'self' within these situations required conscious – and subconscious – decisions that relate to a mode of conduct described by West and Zimmerman. In the course of data collection, participatory observation methods helped me record the research process, in order to understand the politics of the acquisition of knowledge but also to critically self-reflect on my own performance and level of achievement at the various stages of research. Since the process and end result of research is not an 'objective', socially de-touched, apolitical action or set of actions, it is reasonable to argue that the role of the human agent, researcher, in this process is not neutral either. Claiming purity of science or scientific investigation and objectivity is deceptive, since the critical discussion of questions of 'objectivity' lives within the science (Habermas, 1963: 383). Methodological problems, setting the criteria for the assessment of data and the rules of a critique reflect a subconscious choice of standards. And even this dimension of self-reflection of science reveals the social implications of the immanent orientation of research. Research therefore is not a gender-neutral activity.

. . . AND IN BRUSSELS, THE MICROCOSM OF EUROPE: THE EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS

Do 'ethnic' or 'national origins' become less significant or marginalizing in an international environment, such as the European Parliament? Is there a difference between an international and a national research environment such as the EDCs and libraries in Germany or the UK? In an international context, it would be expected that there is less interest in and fewer assumptions about one's ethnicity as, by definition, international institutions assume an international user community. More especially in

Europe, the 'accepted' degrees of indigenousness should be broad enough to include Europeans from a wide geographical base. But would regional or national settings, with a significant presence of international workers and users, such as university libraries, be similarly open? Would my gender and perhaps age still be parts of my socially assigned 'identity' that would continue to need negotiation tactics?

Fieldwork,[3] as a process that starts well before the material experience of the field, requires mental preparation (Puwar, 1997). Conscious decisions about appearance were part of the preparatory stage of conducting interviews with the aim to reflect 'professionalism' through adopting formal dress codes. Further gender-specific decisions dealt with my concerns to avoid clothes that *might* have been perceived as too 'feminine' or signalling sexual availability. In that sense, I *performed* twice over: I tried to conform to the norms of elite environments *and* role-playing (Goffman, 1990), and this performance was facilitated by appearance and dress codes that would convey the message that I was not 'foreign' to the environment and therefore could be trusted with time and information. Meanwhile, being a woman, I felt that I had to prove that my sex/gender did not obscure the task of doing high-profile research. At the same time, being young was also something I tried to conceal through formal wear: around me, women of my age were employed as supporting staff (receptionists, PAs, trainees, etc.). Relations of individuals to elites are mainly within the context of either representation of interest groups (e.g. industry, consumers, citizen organizations) or journalists. Given the elite environment of the EU, it is often considered a privilege to work in Brussels, something that young professionals are unlikely to experience. Negotiating the positioning of my gender and age in decisions that involved degrees of perceived 'femininity' and professional esteem was an integral, almost routinely performed task throughout the fieldwork, even during coffee time. So, while I did not pay attention to my appearance during the early stages of archive research, as I did not expect to experience interactional problems with staff, clothes associated with youth culture were soon left untouched at the bottom of my suitcase. If I was to be taken seriously by librarians, I had to appear 'serious'. Of course, I was already fully aware of the need to 'fit in' at least visually when preparing for interviews with MEPs, based on unwritten rules and assumptions about the 'approved' style of professional women.

This gendered experience was further reinforced at the entrance of the European Parliament.[4] Visitors to the EP or the Commission report to reception, so that a PA receives and escorts the visitor to the MEP's office. Female staff were more casual and informal with me than with male visitors. The latter (especially older) were attended to immediately when waiting at the reception desk and were addressed with overt politeness and respect by female and (the few) male staff. The reception staff were

also polite to me, but informal. I remained loyal to my 'professional' image and addressed the – what I understood them to be – 'gatekeepers' with formality, politeness and assertiveness. These are the traits of my male counterparts, which seemed to be qualities well respected.

My gender and age was perceived quite differently by the PAs. A general observation was that PAs mainly from Nordic countries were formally and professionally polite and often friendly. In some cases inter-action with PAs (young women and men) was in a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere, while waiting for my appointment with the MEP or after the interview when I might be offered further assistance in the form of docu-ments, telephone numbers and contact names. It is possible that they were more able to identify with me, seeing in me perhaps another young person whom they might socialize with after work. In a few cases, male PAs' interest was not purely professional: on one occasion a (male) MEP having noticed his PA's 'fondness' of me 'warned' him with a smile to 'behave himself' while he was attending a plenary session.

On other occasions, (male) PAs, conveyed a feeling of competition, which was expressed by boasting about their achievements, and state-ments related to their closeness to elites (and therefore power). Being young and female and having access to, *without* working *for*, their bosses, I felt, was perceived to be a threat. These were PAs from southern Europe. Although it is dangerous to overgeneralize from moments like these, it is nevertheless interesting to note that sexism has different manifestations that depend on culture, whether national or organizational. Although I expected that my ethnic origins and gender in some cases might contribute to the creation of special links with female PAs to gain access to MEPs with common cultural backgrounds to mine, this was not the case. On the contrary, in one instance, when I called the office of a (female) MEP to rearrange our appointment, as requested, I was referred to by the female PA as 'a little young lady on the phone'!

ELITES, RESEARCHER AND THE REVERSE OF POWER

Interviews with politicians have been a substantial information source for this study. The power relations between elites and researcher are manifest in the fact that political elites have information that the researcher needs, in order to make sense of a complicated and unclear process (such as European policy-making). Political elites possess the highest possible political status, which in its turn reinforces power differentials. A political elite is a power elite. Called 'governing elite' by Pareto, 'oligarchy' by Mitchels or 'political class' by Mosca, it forms a ruling group and it has *effective* power even within societies that call themselves democratic (Schwartzmantel, 1993). Whether one relates elites' power to economic

determinants or psychological and political factors, the concept appears to be common in political philosophy that elites do not work unchallenged. In democratic societies, it is generally the case that accessibility and accountability are values defended by political representatives, but several studies of political elites (Hertz and Imber, 1995; Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987) have discussed the difficulty in accessing political subjects.

A considerable volume of feminist research has discussed the power relations between interviewer and interviewee (Ely et al., 1997; Oakley, 1981; Roberts, 1981), the mission of research and its relation with everyday world dichotomy (Fonow and Cook, 1991) and the interconnection of private life and social phenomena (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). In my study, elites were the gateways to insightful perspective and personal evaluation on public affairs such as the extent of supranational elite influence on policy-making. Elites also acted as gatekeepers to a considerable amount of information that was not available through official channels, i.e. publications. As Ball notes, interviews with politicians are 'political' (Ball, 1994: 97) and the imbalance of power was always obvious. Repeated patterns appear all too familiar to scholars who have interviewed elites (Ross, 2000): interviews had to be arranged at short notice and at even shorter notice would be rescheduled, postponed or even cancelled. On many occasions I had to wait for my interviewee to attend to other business. On one occasion I waited for 60 minutes only to find that the (female) MEP could not see me due to the unexpected delay of her breakfast meeting. I was able to see almost all of the male MEPs who agreed to be interviewed, on time but I had to negotiate these times more often with female MEPs, one-third of whom did not manage to keep our appointment. This may indicate a busier agenda of women MEPs than of men MEPs. On the other hand, it may be an indication of the seriousness they granted my request or a lack of interest in academic work.

Since I had almost no connections with people able to arrange interviews for me, I had only the persuasion of my letters and telephone calls to work with. As Puwar (1997) notes, elite networking is an important part of the research process and prior contact with elites provided the means for further contacts. On a few occasions, being introduced by an 'insider' also facilitated access to higher quality information (Pettigrew, 1981: 68). However, quite a few MEPs ignored my request for an interview. Like Puwar (1997) and Ross (2000), I was often aware of the fact that my subjects had the power to terminate, disrupt or change the pre-agreed interview: I was part of their schedule that could be postponed or cancelled. This disregard is in conflict with the accounts available on power relations between the researcher and their interviewee. In the course of the interviews, a range of variants emerged that constituted the micro-politics of interaction, location and disclosure of information. In

terms of access, it appeared to be the case that my efforts resulted in numerous rejections, disproportionate to the ratio of women to men in the Committee for Culture, which consists mainly of women MEPs. More men than women replied and arranged a time for an interview. As a researcher, I had almost no control over the situation except over the questions I wanted to ask. I had nothing to offer my 'subjects' in return for their time and help and I could hardly remain 'uninvolved' in the interview as my interviewees asked me questions about my project or myself. Indeed, I believe that it is my responsibility as a feminist researcher, to positively contribute to the empowerment of my subject by 'giving a voice' to her views (Bhavnani, 1990: 141–52), but I had very little to offer. As others have observed, I, too, felt privileged to be granted access to such influential people (see also Ross, 2001).

When human agents are the direct and immediate sources of information, the researcher is an agent in a dual capacity: on the one hand she follows the normative standards of her discipline, testing theoretical considerations and advancing them into categories. At a parallel and non-exclusive capacity, the researcher is part of a societal environment, which exhibits specific characteristics at any given point in time. As a researcher, I become 'a part of the social reality I am investigating' (Collins, 1998: 3.2). Interviews, which constitute a formally expressed research method, different from coincidental interactions, take place in a given reality, in my case the EU, where the interviewer and interviewees have predetermined roles and occupy different hierarchical positions in the power structure. Oakley (1981) and Collins (1998) argue that the researcher is the expert and has more power (the power of knowledge?) than their interviewees. Although this is true for peers, it is hardly the case for elites. I gradually, implicitly, (re)defined myself not as the 'expert' (Collins, 1998: 3.9) but as the 'beginner' and was certainly *not* defined by the interviewees as *an expert* in the field they claimed to know better. Nevertheless, women MEPs felt comfortable to give me an interview in their offices, either in a 'closed', private space or with the discreet presence of their assistants in their office space by the entrance area. From expressions 'given and given off' (Goffman, 1990: 14), I could distinguish a sense of 'belonging to the same gender', which was a particularly powerful tool in creating rapport. On one occasion, for example, the interview took place at a cafe outside the plenary hall right after a vote. This in itself may be a sign of how secondary a research interview is to a busy (female) MEP. My interpretation of the situation was quite different though the informal character of the location contributed to a more relaxed conversation, while it also conveyed the feeling of being trusted. No PAs or other staff were present to act as a witness or provide formal support to the MEP. In this case, my interviewee was one of the youngest in the Parliament and of north European origins. Interviews are also 'social events' (Gagnon, 1992),

whereby power dynamics are present. Although hard to measure, the dynamics of gender influence the way in which the interviewees and interviewer position themselves in relation to each other. Possibly, such positioning has been influential on the interviewees' decision to accept an interview and decide on its length. It is reasonable to argue that the positioning of selves of both parties during the course of an interview has been largely determined by gender dynamics. However, my experience echoes those of Ross and Puwar, that gender did play a part in the MEPs' more 'personal' disclosures of their personal views and feelings especially in cases of ideological conflict with the 'party line'.

My 'other' self (female and young) as opposed to the self I was interested in projecting (professional) was seen with suspicion at least at the start of the interview with women MEPs. Suspicion and mistrust about my capabilities *remained* prominent throughout interviews with male MEPs. In a couple of cases, both of which were interviews with male, conservative politicians from southern Europe, I felt extremely uncomfortable as they did not try to hide their displeasure with my questioning about their roles. The only reason they granted me access was because I was introduced to them by other politicians. During one interview, my (male, older, southern European) interviewee reacted abruptly when I projected a short sentence in a space *between* his sentences, capturing the meaning of his words up to that moment. Interrupting my 'conclusion' he dismissed my 'premature' summary, visibly annoyed with the fact that I drew conclusions 'so soon'. The politician's reaction felt like bullying. This MEP is one of the most experienced politicians in the Parliament and he could have been an invaluable information source for me. However, there was very little space for rapport because of the various hierarchies in play (age, gender, status). As Pettigrew (1981) points out, one turns into a different 'self' during a process of constant pressure from social and cultural norms and I found myself gradually performing in a non-threatening fashion by pretending to know less than I actually did and by making myself as invisible as possible, moving as little as possible, occupying as little space as possible, in order for me to make the most of a hard to win situation. Generally, I found it difficult to establish rapport with male politicians, except in cases of common cultural references, but even nationality/ethnicity did not prove to be a 'connecting' link. Gender – and to a certain degree age – proved to be the dominant 'criteria' by which I was judged by my male interviewees. My gender became the dominant identity, the dominant 'self' in my eyes too, that either helped me to establish rapport or hindered me from accessing valuable, high-quality information.

Like Puwar (1997: 10.2) however, I discovered that experiences other than gender, race or class became significant in establishing rapport. In one case 'rapport' between my male interviewee and myself was

established when he, late afternoon, expressed his need for a cigarette and offered me one. Being an occasional smoker (in a totally non-smoking EP environment) proved to be a common cultural reference that created a link between our worlds. Instances like that are imbued with extraordinary significance when in an environment with few other common references and many more differences, such as class, ethnicity, working language, status, gender, age, political affiliation and so on. On another occasion, a female interviewee became more candid because her son lives in Britain: we both share the experience of being actively 'European', demonstrated in our spatial mobility.

Although responses from male and female interviewees were not uniform and nor was my relation to them, some characteristics *were* common. One of the most significant was suspicion at the start of the interview. Very often, I seemed to surprise my interviewees with some questions, possibly because they did not expect me to address complicated issues. Those who had been active in the area of legislation, having written reports or other work, appeared confident and open to discussion. Generally, I established better relationships with women MEPs who were more open and responded with much more frankness than the men I interviewed. Rapport with women MEPs was established and developed in terms of gender, but also ethnicity and political standpoint. In general, left-wing politicians ('left' in its broad, conventional sense) were more open and friendly while conservatives' behaviour ranged from formal politeness to arrogance. In many cases, there was a view that the intention behind questions related to the power of the EP, and assumptions were made about my beliefs and my politics.

SELVES AND MICRO-POLITICS IN INTERNATIONAL AND ELITE SETTINGS

I have discussed the politics of the 'self' in the research process. My particular experience involved a self-positioning that was significantly determined by presuppositions, assumptions and preconceived ideas that I encountered both as an agent and instrument in the research process. These varied from everyday encounters with library and other services staff to interactions with elite interviewees, all of whom constitute gatekeepers, in their own way, to valuable information sources. Gender played a dominant role in various stages of this process, ranging from subtle and subconscious to blatant expressions. To a certain extent, gender functioned as a positive common denominator in my interviews with MEPs that allowed the establishment of rapport in interviews, but without surrendering the power structures that held the researcher in a subordinate position. This was the case in interactions with female

politicians, although it is important to note that reactions and responses depended heavily on MEPs' assumptions about my 'real' intentions.

Male MEPs were less likely to be open, and even traits we shared such as nationality were at times insufficient to develop rapport. Female MEPs seemed to become more comfortable as the interview progressed. Again this does not necessarily mean that women responded in a uniform way. However, the difference was that, in my experience, male politicians remained distant, whereas some women even provided me with further contacts and assistance.

It appears that assumptions about one's agenda are common among men and women politicians (Puwar, 1997; Ross, 2000). In the case of elite politics, it becomes very difficult to draw overall, generalized conclusions about the behavioural patterns of men and women towards me/the researcher. As the self and others interact, research does not remain an isolated activity or a genderless process. During the current project, it seemed that the more senior the female MEP, the less dismissive they were towards me, whereas quite the opposite was the case in my interactions with men. Multifaceted aspects of identity are also significant factors in interviewing European elites and working within the European cultural and geographical territory. My 'European' self was invisible in nationally/regionally closed settings such as libraries, where I remained 'foreign' and my experience remained generally negative. The opposite was the case during interviews in a European international setting. Nationality hardly played any role (positive or not) in my interactions with receptionists and librarians or male interviewees. It did however help establish rapport with female interviewees. At the same time, gender remained a dominant identity trait, present in all situations. Gender was generally a barrier in my interactions with others but also in the way I viewed myself at times, but it was the main component of my rapport with female MEPs. Life experiences are difficult to categorize and certainly cannot be compartmentalized to fit in clearly defined concepts (Greed, 1990).

Of course, such conclusions need to be studied further, combining not only knowledge acquired in elite studies and feminist studies but also through studies on reflections on research and methodology and cognitive accounts. Another issue that needs further and closer exploration is the micro-politics of research in environments that bear international, multicultural and other non-national characteristics, and research that is carried out in international settings, such as elite interviewing and research at a supranational level. In these cases, gender becomes a reinforced agent and component of identity not only for the 'subjects' of one's research but also for the researcher herself.

NOTES

1. My project involved the study of policy-making in the European Union. I conducted archival research in different European cities and interviewed members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The research undertaken was in an area that is considered by many to be 'hard' media studies, concerned with policy and decision-making and therefore masculine and technocratic, as opposed to 'soft' studies of cultural artefacts(!).
2. Although it is not the intention of this article to discuss the rich body of research into otherness, national identity and stereotypes addressing the construction of images of 'foreigners', the observation is generally accepted that public imagery and stereotypes of foreigners provide the epitome of the 'other', albeit expressed differently but persistently in countries across the world. This is particularly the case at times of crisis and conflict. In general, there is a tendency, evident in media representations among others, to treat 'foreigners' as unassimilable, dangerous for national job and security stability or as ridiculous caricatures of inarticulate 'exchange students' and au-pairs. Of course gender plays a central role in the form such expressions take.
3. Interviews with MEPs and further archival research in the library of the EP were the second stage of my fieldwork.
4. I conducted a total of 30 formal and 15 informal interviews with MEPs and Commission officers, conducting one set in 1998 and one in 2000.

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