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PERFORMING FEMINIST AFFINITY

Interviewing Feminist Men In Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist studies have come to include a focus on the issue of men and masculinities. This also includes methodological aspects of conducting such studies. When making an inventory of the feminist literature on *women interviewing men*, issues of risk, safety, vulnerability and the way to avoid, for instance, sexual harassment were prominent themes (Lee; Schwalbe and Wolkomir). One crucial difference from the literature on gender relations in interviews I have found so far is that in this study the men are being interviewed on their commitment to feminism. To put it bluntly, they were not considered likely to express sexism during the interviews or in any way harass the woman researcher. Looking for literature on the construction of gender and sexuality in interview contexts then made awkward results. Interviewing (pro)feminist men on issues of identity, positions and practices did not contain that many traces of overt sexism or threat. The gender and power relations seemed to be more complex and intrinsically built in to the very act of interviewing as well as the social affiliations of interviewer/interviewee(s).

Conducting interviews involves a strong element of intersubjective identity construction. Interviewing is an interactive method where both researcher and researched take part. The researcher influences too, for example through the questions posed, different responses to what is said, but also through her very presence. Narratives can hereby be seen as co-constructed at the very moment of the interview. This essay explores the performance of women interviewing men on issues where the positions of interviewer and interviewee are close and participants well-informed on the subject matter. The focus of this essay is how negotiation and control emerge from interviewees motivating and explaining their participation. I also provide empirical

examples of how the intentions may mirror interviewees' feelings of (dis)content after the interview. The aim of this essay is to discuss issues of gender, negotiation and control in qualitative interviews. This analytic theme proved to be found to a large extent in the meta-information of the interviews, pronounced as expectations on the outcome and content of the interview as well as on interview performance. In order to illustrate the findings I also present empirical examples of 'failing' interviews.

A study of feminist men in Sweden

The empirical material consists of interviews with 28 (pro)feminist men aged 20-34:¹ 17 individual and 11 participating in pair- and group interviews carried out during the autumn and winter of 2005/2006.

Important themes in the study are the formation of a feminist subject position and the embodiment of feminist or profeminist norms and practices in young men who describe themselves as feminist. The interviews comprise themes such as norms, consequences, change and feminist commitment in relation to personal/private relations; sexual practices; masculinity and gendered experiences from feminist and non-feminist contexts. Inquiries that I brought to the interviews have included what it actually means to call oneself feminist and how feminism is 'done.' Theoretical foci are issues of gender, masculinity and the significance of the feminist perspective for the subject position in a national context where state feminism and debates on gender equality are highly present.

In Sweden, where support for gender equality is broad and thought of as something that will also emancipate men, it is not unusual for men to call themselves feminists. In this study the men interviewed for the most part tried to position themselves as more 'for real,' radical, serious and well-informed compared to Swedish men in general (Hearn and Holmgren). This is reflected through themes of rebelliousness, degendering ideals and different strategies of passing by open criticism towards men's inability to act feminist—interviewees themselves reflexively included (Egeberg Holmgren).

¹ The interviewees form a varied sample concerning social and ethnic backgrounds (although interviewees born outside Sweden have spent at least part of childhood or adolescence in Sweden), sexual identity, place of birth, current occupation, organization of living and intimate relations. Although class has not been clarified in all cases, most of them have some kind of academic degree and/or are identified as middle-class. In common they have an engagement in feminist issues although influences, ideologies and identity markers differ. None of them is a parent.

The analysis of the empirical material in the overall study is thematic. In this essay I focus on the performative, interactional and constructing processes of interviewing, especially where gender and power relations emerge, not always visible as themes from the mere transcript.

THE GENDER(ED) POWER RELATIONS OF INTERVIEWS

From a social constructionist perspective, women and men can be seen as active agents in constructing and doing gender identities and gendered positions in an ongoing process.² From a post-structural understanding this comprises of taking up different discourses of masculinity and femininity (Pini 202). Placing this line of argument into conducting interviews we can conclude that they too are both situated and processed. Norman Denzin succinctly formulates this when writing that “Interviews arise out of performance events. They transform information into shared experience” (Denzin 24). However, in this sense “shared” is not necessarily the same as common or concordant.

In the research project on which this essay is based, the issue of definition and control of the situation is not definite or one-way authoritative. Rather I argue that the exercise of power and control seems to be flowing between interviewer and interviewee, or as Enosh & Buchbinder eloquently put it, “we may say that power in the interview process is a paradoxical phenomenon, where each of the participants is dominant, trying to steer the interview, but at the same time each is also submissive, being steered by the other” (Enosh and Buchbinder 590). One important aspect of this negotiated power and control is gender.

When women interview men patriarchal gender relations are often reinforced due to the verbal interaction of interviews (Winchester 123) where the interviewer is to be helping, attentive, understanding, agreeable and so forth (see also Pini). What I want to point to in this gender(ed) setting is that the researcher’s role per se becomes a situated position of doing femininity due to the gendered structure of interaction and language.

² Since gender performance in this case refers to a situated interactional setting I use the concept of *doing* gender. For a more thorough account of gender as an interactional and micro-political activity, see West and Zimmerman (1987). However, I do not use this more ethnomethodological perspective as if it were incompatible with post-structural lines of argument.

In my study the constructions and performances varied between different interviews pointing in the direction of an interactive and mutual process where one of the remaining impressions was that of *adaptation and negotiation*. This mainly surfaced in different strategies of trying to maneuver and control the content of the interview as well as the performance of the interviewer, affecting her performativity. This can be thought of as an outcome of an exercise of power, flowing between interviewer and interviewee.

The space and place of meta-information

The performance and performativity of interviews are to be found in both transcripts and in reflexively experiencing conducting them. A common critique of the modern perspective of interviews is that they are conceptualized as techniques and tools for getting true, clear and consistent statements (Alvesson 126). Barbara Pini is right in arguing that reflexive analyses of gender issues in qualitative interviews need to go beyond the mere gender of interviewer and interviewee. The place and space of the interview can play an important part of the data produced. In her case, not only the research environment was gendered but also the research topic itself. In order to go beyond the subject positions and social belongings of researcher and researched, qualitative researchers need to question “the broader field or context in which the research is taking place” (Pini 202, 204). One way of achieving Pini’s suggestion is to simply include the subject matter. Moreover, this broader field or context ought to have an effect on the presentation of the self and impression management (Goffman).

Elements found in the whereabouts of interviews are often left as an “internal methodology knowledge” and personal experience for each individual researcher or research group. This sort of surrounding and social aspects forms important so called meta-information of qualitative interviewing (Näsman 209). Following the well-known quotation “everything is data” (Glaser), I argue that such aspects should not automatically be left out of analysis.

In this study, the expectations on and conceptualization of being interviewed turned out to be valuable data. The expectations on the interview and interviewer were not only made explicit, but were implicitly to be found in the space of meta-information. We now turn to this subject matter.

EXPECTATIONS ON INTERVIEWER PERFORMANCE

One 'chatty' introductory question that proved to be valuable data was the reasons for participating in the study. I sum up these motives for participation as a way of pointing to the expectations of the performing researcher, the most common being fun, interesting and identifying with the group advertised for. But there were also motives of more specific, sometimes unexpected character. Taken together these proved not only to be noteworthy but also altered my view of what the study had been about and who had actually been performing and that some performance was still to be done. Here is the echo of voices:³

Get the chance to think another lap; Likes to talk about oneself; Getting the chance to talk on the subject matter without prestige; Doesn't get those questions that often, to really think about them; Be fun to hear what one has to say; Done interviews earlier but felt not really talking about oneself; Will work with interviews myself; Get back on track/restart feminist engagement; Coming in contact with issues of feminism again felt natural; Learn something, test myself a little; One way of making a contribution to gender research; One of the things one can actually do to make change; Helping out knowing how hard it is to get informants; Wanting to speak up after the debate that followed the Gender War;⁴ Interesting since those men working with feminism are a mystery, very few of them seem to know what they're actually doing; Been arguing with feminist men and don't like them; Show another side of the matter, worrying others will take the chance to promote themselves as good guys/feminists.

I consider some of these as rather well-reasoned motives, where there's something put to test. Some interviewees expressed the wish to give me something. There is an element of wanting to learn more about oneself and to try out some thoughts that had not yet become explicit in a "safe" environment. This first section ought to be common in all kinds of interview research. Several interviewees are using the male feminist strategy of shutting up as a way of listening to and confirming women, so being interviewed can also be a way to finally

³ Describing the motives in terms of "an echo of expectations" is of course to be found in the mind of the researcher and can be thought of as an 'aggregated result' not visible to the participants. Interviewees sometimes even forget they have participated in a study and/or are not that interested in following the research or notified on results.

⁴ A reference to the specific context regarding time and place is important to understand this motive. In the spring of 2005 the feminist chairperson of the Swedish national organization for women's crisis centers (ROKS) expressed support for the statement that 'men are animals' in a state television documentary, 'the Gender War.' A heated debate over the feminist movement and the role of men followed in the media for about a year. For a more detailed account of the debate see <http://www.alternet.org/story/24655/>

be the one to talk in a feminist context. At the same time there is a sense of being trialed, a personal challenge.

Several interviewees expressed the wish to give something i.e. to contribute to gender research or support feminism. Several expressed anger over how feminists were treated by the media and what they described as misconceptions of feminism in the public debate. Another way of “giving” was to save the researcher from having only “fake feminists” in the study and the outcome of the project prevented from becoming an uncritical depiction of “good men.” One interviewee’s motive for participating was that he was a former student in sociology and knew how difficult it was to get informants and therefore felt obliged to help me, unaware that I was forced to make a selection due to the massive interest. The image of the researcher as an ally becomes more evident, which also demands the researcher to confirm this affinity.

While some wanted to contribute, others wanted something from the researcher, such as being politically activated, learning something about oneself or about research on men. Some interviewees even stated that they volunteered for the project to allow themselves to follow the research from its very beginning (and from the inside), wanting me to recount my results so far and to report continually about the results. But there were also motives of wanting to be put to a personal challenge. Perhaps Melker best illustrated these motives when, my asking attendant questions having unintentionally led him to contradictory answers, after some thought he nodded approvingly and cheerfully replied, “*Touché!*” The researcher in this matter is being perceived as a challenger as well as a source of usable knowledge.

Even more remarkable for the researcher among the learning-motives: the participation of interviewees as observers set out to study her interview-technique in order to conduct a study oneself. I do not find most of the motives for participating interesting *per se*. The interesting thing is that interviewees share them in this way, but being a very ‘reflexive sample’ the confessional character even when it comes to the aim of studying the researcher might not be surprising. Considering the abovementioned reasons, it becomes evident that fieldwork also is a matter of performance that must be somehow reliable. When given information of this kind in the beginning of an interview it became apparent that I was up for a challenge to perform as a credible qualitative feminist researcher, and moreover, was being observed and studied. Although interviewing always is a matter of performance, when put forward this bluntly, performing the interview has a clear analogy with being on stage (cf. Goffman). Thus both

interviewer and interviewee enter the stage and at the same time sit in the audience as well as on a director's chair. The interest in and curiosity for qualitative interviewing was expressed by several interviewees and I found it intriguing and encouraging when starting the interview. It also made me feel like a gasping ski jumper just before the final signal.

Assumed affinity – the researcher as an ally

Most of the interviewees assumed that I myself was feminist.⁵ The assumption of my being a feminist sometimes seemed to be enough to create rapport. This can also be related to interviewees expecting the researcher to be a spokesperson for the group researched (Pripp). Nevertheless, expectations were more complex and expressed in different forms of meta-information. The gendered structure of language in interviewing, where the female researcher enhances the speech act of the male interviewee, has been identified as particularly complicated when the interviewer is assumed to share a set of political beliefs with the interviewee (Winchester 123).

It is made explicitly clear that the feminist perspectives of the interviewees are not to be “tested” during the interviews, which can be a relief enabling interviewees to be frank and feel secure. Nevertheless, being too cautious as an interviewer sometimes meant running the risk of creating an undesired position for interviewees, encouraging passing too easily as a “good man” or a “real feminist.” After the interview some, seemingly disappointed or surprised, expressed the view that they would have expected the researcher to be more “critical” or in other ways “tricky” in her inquiries. This put demands on the researcher to perform skepticism and simultaneously confirm affinity. The recognition from feminist women seemed fundamental and the conception of the researcher as an ally becomes evident.

The themes and questions of the interview guide ranged from general to personal. If an interviewee used general level interviewer probes in order to get him to relate to personal settings. I avoided arguing or questioning the credibility of the interviewees' narratives, although probing them to develop different statements and standpoints.⁶ This conversational style also had consequences in

⁵ Although I asked them whether they thought of themselves as belonging to a special perspective of feminism (such as radical, queer, liberal, socialist etc.), this was not a question interviewees asked in return.

⁶ This is due to my not being mainly interested in whether the interviewees told me ‘the truth,’ whether my interviewees were ‘real feminists.’ This remark has the background of feminists and research colleagues reacting to the description of the study by considering whether my interviewees are serious or ‘for real.’

cases where interviewees expected something else from me and the interview. Some thought me too abstract, others thought me too detailed and yet others thought I missed out on some levels, others that there were too many levels. Some expressed the wish to help me, or guide me into how I should change my technique or my interview guide. These different reactions varied and were not present at all in others.

There was an overall interest and concern about the sample; about what kind of analysis I was to make; what feminist issues should be given more space in the interviews and about my style and technique. All this mainly friendly enthusiasm and engagement was most of the time encouraging. But from another perspective, once summed up, it also took the shape of a need to maneuver and control me as a researcher and my project—with one interpretation that the conventional power position of the researcher is challenged.

NEGOTIATION, CONTROL AND FAILURE

As a social group, the men interviewed do not constitute a vulnerable one, although individuals might be. When it comes to *ethics* I find myself caught up in a stalemate. Given the co-constructive character of interviewing, there are 29 persons participating in my study—28 men and one woman (myself). As a researcher, having the final word of conversation, I am in a power position. In my writing, the borders are blurred when it comes to writing from a critical stance and risking violating the narratives of the informants. Being positive and critical at the same time, on the one hand we are on the same ‘team,’ on the other the aim and result of the study, and the presupposed outcome and expectations from the interviewees might differ, also between them. As Oscar Pripp points out, interviewing some groups can also mean being perceived as a mouthpiece for the group by the interviewees (Pripp 49), which often seemed to be the case in this study. The foci of the research project being a political issue for the participants at the same time as it is an academic one for me will inevitably make some disagree and others even disappointed.

Given this specific gender setting, the subject matter and the competence of informants, the gender, power and ethical relations of these interviews are not unilaterally authoritative. I will proceed by exemplifying how issues of power and control became visible in interviews where interviewees seemed somewhat discontent.

“You ought to be more aggressive”

At the end of each interview interviewees were asked if they wanted to add something to the interview, if there were topics missed out and if they had any questions they wanted to ask me. Adding could mean clarifying something said earlier on and often there were comments on that it had been interesting or inspiring to participate. There were also questions regarding when and where to be notified of results from the study and if there was possibilities of reading on forehand. Comments and feedback during the last minutes of interviews, when the actual interviewing had turned into a more ordinary conversation, also turned out to be valuable data.

The expectations of the researcher to enable a desired mode of presentation, performance or reflexivity were unfulfilled in some interviews. I would like to illustrate the demands put on the researcher's performance with an excerpt from the interview with Fadi, an interview I did not regard as an entirely successful one. Fadi wanted to participate to contrast the current media debates and linked feminism to his political engagement and his open-mindedness, but we did not establish good rapport and although being very determined about what to tell me, he kept feeling insecure throughout our meeting. He found several of my questions difficult to answer (and indeed some of them were if one has not considered them before); moreover he was reluctant to answer the less complicated ones, for example if he had a partner. Several times he chose to answer to something similar or something completely different.

I have interpreted this as Fadi's finding my questions irrelevant, or even deleterious, to the way he wanted to present himself to me. He kept coming back to narratives on being open-minded, fighting against intolerance and believing that everyone is entitled to their opinion as long as they are willing to discuss it. After the interview he wanted to play music for me. At the end of the interview Fadi himself was not convinced I got anything substantial from him; he had expected me to “talk more about prejudices, but it's OK.” He then wants to give me advice:

LINN: Is there something you would like to add or something you thought I would ask that hasn't come up?

FADI: Ehm, well...If I'm to be honest I thought from the beginning that I wouldn't sit and, like try to muddle around what you might ask and don't ask, because it's such a broad issue, you know [...]. No, you brought up basically what I had expected without having [laughs] any thoughts about what you would ask. Maybe prejudices, but it's alright.

LINN: Good.

FADI: One thing I can tell you, though

LINN: Yes?

FADI: Maybe you ought to be a little bit more aggressive towards me, that might-

LINN: Why?

FADI: I don't know, I wanted to, it might have, that it helps sometimes if people don't agree with your opinions, or maybe... 'challenge you,' in English. I can't remember the Swedish word now.

LINN: To be defied or challenged?

FADI: Exactly. You know, I think it helps to make nuances and to go deeper. You know, because it's easy to put forward an opinion or thought about something if you *yourself* sit and analyse, because you have the facts in front of you and draw your conclusions from that. But if someone else comes along with totally different perspectives, you know. It doesn't necessarily change your opinion but it can make you put it into a more complex context, which you can build from. And I think it's a strength to be able to develop it from there.

LINN: I see your point. One could say it's two different methods [F giggles]. Would you have liked me to challenge you more?

FADI: Yes...As I said, I'm very open-minded when it comes to questions [laughs]

LINN: Yes, no, exactly. That's...I can understand that.

FADI: But hey, it depends on how you want to do research about this. Sorry I even brought it up.

LINN: No, absolutely not, it's great. That was pretty much about it. Are you doing alright?

In Fadi's opinion, my interview technique didn't make him look his best. To deliver really good answers he needed to be more challenged and called in to question. He then instructed me, or advised me how to achieve better data—I needed to be more aggressive. Integrated in this is Fadi's view of what the interviews ought to be about; his opinions rather than his experiences and 'identity talk.' This can also be traced in his ways of answering my questions earlier in the interview;

LINN: How does your life look otherwise, do you have a girlfriend, boyfriend?

FADI: I do music. It's an important thing for me to express myself, a little bit more about my thoughts and such. Otherwise...I'm engaged in different organizations and committees.

When considering the meta-information, this was not just a result

of bad interviewing⁷ but also attempts to maneuver the contents of the interview by avoiding answering some of my questions.

'Getting angry'

Klas expressed an interest to follow the research from its very beginning. He also would have liked to be in a group interview in order to learn more about himself when reflected in the experiences of other men. I use this interview here since in different ways it displays frustration and restrained dissatisfaction with the contents of the interview as well as the performance of interviewer and interviewee.

Sometimes interviews get emotional although in different ways. Narratives can deal with issues of sensitive character, for instance experiences of being shamed for sexual behavior as a child or discovering that domination is a source of sexual excitement, completely contrary to feminist beliefs and identity.

When transcribing an interview where I strangely enough did not remember what the interviewee looked like I came to notice how uncomfortable I sounded on the tape; I stumble through questions, have a soft and almost therapeutic tone of voice in some sections and laugh a lot on my own. It also happens that I 'check' with the interviewee whether he is ok and whether he wants to continue. I sense that the interviewee perhaps wants to leave the interview, that there is something I am not doing right. After one longer pause he asks me in an irritated tone of voice; "was that a bad answer or what?!" Later on I ask whether his being a man and a feminist poses some problems for him different from those of feminist women. "Problems?!" he spits out. I then reformulate "problems" to "challenges." These questions were asked at all interviews without leading to such reactions and were sometimes even brought up by interviewees themselves. To another topic Klas asks in response, after a while, "does it really matter?!" There is something else causing the lack of rapport and turning the interview to a less than pleasant experience for both of us.

This excerpt is to be read in a tone of voice to be understandable and make the gendered structure of language discussed earlier come through. The male interviewee's voice ranges from resignation to irritation, almost aggressive when asking questions. The female

⁷ This structure in asking questions is not preferable, since the formulation of two questions in one enables the answer "I do music." Still, a more common reply to double questions is that the interviewer only gets an answer to the last one. The interviewee in this case performed this way to avoid answering even more direct questions throughout the interview.

interviewer becomes friendlier and friendlier, smiling and softening or calming her voice each time she needs to ask a new question:

LINN: Is there something you think I haven't asked about that you would like to add or develop?

KLAS: Of course there is a lot of stuff if you think about it, because it's an interesting topic to discuss. I actually would like to hear what your thesis is.

LINN: Hmm, if I have a thesis-

KLAS: -yes, *if* you have a thesis. Because you have asked questions on pretty many, different levels, I must say!

LINN: Well, that's intended.

KLAS: Yes, I understand that. But the question, kind of; what is this going to boil down to? And will there be [inaudible, something there?] that, if I get to know about it [inaudible] as well?

At this point I start to explain the sociological perspectives of the individual vs. structure, that the sample is very diverse and that I don't come from a research tradition where one talks about theses, don't think it's fair to 'test' my interviewees against a presupposed thesis, and that the conversation we create together also can be understood discursively. The interviewee continues to say that he talks about issues of behaviour as important and asks if that is something I take an interest in. I answer by counting different topics from interviews (including the one we have just finished) ending with the comment:

LINN: So yes, sociology could be considered a kind of behavioural science...as you might notice my answer is very floating here [laughs].

KLAS: Yes, well that's ok.

LINN: [explaining even more about not wanting to turn the sample into an ideal type and being interested in the different ways that interviewees implement their feminism]

KLAS: Ok. No, I don't know if there's anything I think you've forgotten to ask about.

LINN: Well, the question might be phrased incorrectly; if there is something you want to add?

KLAS: Yes...I don't know if it's; a discussion that I would find interesting to hear what others have to say about, is if one experiences oneself a gender equal or not, especially within love relations [...]. I don't have any good answers and maybe we shouldn't go into that either. But I think it would be interesting anyway to hear what others say and what their reflections are.

LINN: Why do you say that you don't have anything to say about it?

KLAS: Well, it's so difficult. Because it's one of those really hard ques-

tions, because I would like to...I would like to have someone looking at me from outside and sees more what I do.

Interestingly, we have talked about behavior and love relations during the interview. When probed by asking how feminism concretely affects his relationship, how they behave towards each other, he gets stuck; these are questions difficult to answer in specific ways. Rather, the interviewee seems dissatisfied with the way the interview is performed and the issues addressed. Expressing this also affects the form and content of the interview.

This excerpt can moreover be interpreted as my performance of intersected femininity/researcher being enhanced and then caving in when bringing the interviewee backstage of the project.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this essay can be formulated as the observing outsider position of the researcher being challenged and negotiated. In the interviews of the study of feminist men, interviewees make themselves into observers, looking at their own narratives from an outside position. The researcher is no longer allowed to be an absolute ruler in constructing the framework of the study. Hence the issue of power and control is negotiated in a subtle manner. The interviewee's feminist project *per se* is comprised of engaging in reflection concerning the interviewee's own subject position as a man and as feminist in which self-understanding is central. For some this is also the only motive for participating in the study at all. The expectation of the interview to offer reflection and enhanced self-analysis is hereby formulated almost as a demand; the interviewer ought to challenge and call the interviewee into question. When this fundamental demand is not fulfilled because of ethical reasons or the purpose of the overall project, some interviewees got disappointed, frustrated, and even angry. Feminist social science need to do further research on reflective interviewees and gendered interview relations.

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