



**Black Women in the Field: Experiences Understanding Ourselves and Others through Qualitative Research.** Gretchen Givens Generett and Rhonda Baynes Jeffries, eds. Understanding Education and Policy series. William T. Pink and George Noblit, eds. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003. 154 pp.

**ELISHA P. RENNE**

*University of Michigan*

*erenne@umich.edu*

In this edited volume, authors examine the social, ethical, and methodological dilemmas of black university women conducting research in their own communities. They consider a range of issues—identity, commitment to community, academic discrimination, fieldwork methodologies, the ethics of self-representation, and how their own backgrounds as black university women affect fieldwork. In their excellent introduction, the volume's editors, Givens and Jeffries, indicate two recurrent themes: (1) the difficulties for black academic women in maintaining their standing in both their university and home communities; and (2) the need for self-reflexivity in order to understand their distinctive social positions and identities.

While these essays derive from qualitative research on a range of educational issues, the contributors focus on their own reflections on their fieldwork experiences in black communities in various parts of the United States, rather than on research findings. They make an important contribution to the anthropology of education by eloquently illustrating how different racial, cultural, gendered, and ethnic identities affect individuals' training and distinctive perspectives. They also show how these perspectives are constituted, questioned, and changed. In the course of their discussions, other educational issues are also raised, including black students' self-concepts, the social context of black education (e.g., segregation and desegregation), the effects of television on black children, and black women's experiences in academia.

The volume consists of a foreword, an introduction, and eight chapters. In chapter 1, Sheryl Cozart considers the question of the black educational experience in the United States, focusing on the training and careers of five African American women who were educated in a segregated school system in North Carolina and who later taught in integrated public schools. As a black elementary school teacher in a predominantly white university town, Cozart wanted to know more about the history of the struggles black people made to acquire education, and the negative images of black education, as a way to understand her own teaching situation. Joan Dowdy (chapter 2) addresses the question of language training, by examining the experiences of one of her students, a recent immigrant from Jamaica. While this student succeeded in acquiring "standard English,"



he did so while also longing for the comforts of his "mother tongue." Through his struggle, Dowdy shows that while acquiring "standard English" may be essential to upward mobility, one does so at a certain cost; respect for different English dialects should also be taught. In chapter 3, Jennifer Obidah discusses some of the underlying assumptions held by some white social scientists about black children and schools, arguing for the importance of black social science researchers, who can provide alternate theories and interpretations, based on their own backgrounds and perspectives. She also considers the difficulties of representation—not wanting to perpetuate racial stereotypes—and the importance of accountability to one's community.

The issue of representation is also raised in Linda Quinn's discussion of her research on sexual abuse of black girl children and its consequences for their educations and careers. Stressing the perspective of her women informants and based on the coping strategies used by them, she discusses possible counseling programs for these women. In chapter 5, Gretchen Generett returns to the theme of segregation and desegregation, based in qualitative interviews with a black middle school woman principal. She relates this woman's experiences to her own experiences as an undergraduate in a historically black women's college, and as a graduate student in a white public graduate institution. Her discussion clearly illustrates the distinctive ways that race intersects with gender in the American education system. Paula Groves examines methodologies associated with qualitative research, arguing for a postcritical ethnography that will critically consider the power relations between researcher and researched, as well as politically contribute to making a more equitable society. In her discussion of research on an arts-based reform project in a predominantly black school in North Carolina, she shows how conceptions of racial identity and how who is considered an insider or an outsider may vary. Trevy McDonald explores the relationship between those being interviewed and black university women doing research in their own communities in more detail in chapter 7. In her research on black children's television viewing, she is concerned with these children's self-concepts and their concepts of black women, while also examining the research process and the effects of her presence on her child-informants and their families.

The volume concludes with Rhonda Jeffries' study of the ways that fiction can help black university women to better express their experiences in the academy (chapter 8). Specifically, she discusses the writing of Zora Neale Hurston as a framework for the qualitative analysis of her own experiences in a competitive and hierarchical system, in the form of a fiction allegory. She argues that the use of fictional and life history illustrates how the "best way" mentality held by some in academia undermines perspectives and practices by those from minority cultural backgrounds with other intellectual traditions. It is fitting that the final chapter of this informative and thoughtfully provocative volume cites Zora Neale Hurston, who was trained as an anthropologist at Columbia University, whose own distinctive views on race and identity are reflected in the range of perspectives held by the black university women presented here.



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