

Walter L. Williams, "Being Gay and Doing Fieldwork," in *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

While writing this essay I am in Rarotonga, in the South Pacific, and the problems of doing fieldwork are immediately apparent. As I type these words I have to shoo away the chickens, which seem attracted to the peck-peck-peck sound of my portable laptop computer. This is the first time I have brought a computer along on fieldwork, and the manual does not explain how to keep insects out of it. Sometimes I think I have inserted a misplaced comma, only to realize it is a tiny ant on the screen. At night the huge roaches here insist on crawling all over everything. They are not shy at all, and seem to realize that I will not smush them as they wander across the keyboard. I hope none will be inside my portable printer as I try to print out the finished product. Last night I was reluctantly forced to do battle with the biggest spider I have ever seen in my life, which had settled on my bed.

The point of this introduction is to say that being gay is only one potential issue involved in living in a fieldwork setting. In my experience doing fieldwork on numerous Indian reservations, in a Maya village in Yucatan, among Native Alaskans, in Java, and most recently among Polynesians, I have found that my gayness is much less of a problem than the common obstacles facing most fieldworkers. Sanitation, deciding what local foods and drinks I can safely consume, money transfers, diarrhea, snarling dogs, allergies, finding a suitable place to live, arranging to keep in touch with my parents (who worry about me constantly, even though I assure them I am much safer in these villages than I am back home in Los Angeles); these are the kind of daily issues to which one has to adjust when arriving at a new locale. They must be attended to, before one can even begin to think about one's interactions with the local people.

In terms of personal interactions, the most immediate issues are being misunderstood and possibly offending someone while trying to speak a foreign language (or even in English!), violating some cultural style that makes one appear foolish or uncouth, and deciding what to

share or hoard among one's few (and usually absolutely necessary) material possessions one brings along to the field. In addition to all this, I now have to worry about voltage regulators, finding a dependable source of electricity, and what to do if my computer malfunctions.

Yet despite these petty problems of day-to-day living, I would not once think of trading my experiences as a fieldworker with those of any other profession. Looking back over my life, I consider my times doing fieldwork to be among the happiest years of my life. I do not think I would have had the fascinating experiences that I feel blessed to have had, if I had not gone out to live among peoples of quite different cultures. One gains daily insight in the continuing education that is lived experience, and feels enriched by the wealth of experiences one would not have in one's native society.

Because some of the other essays in this book cogently address some of the problems facing lesbian and gay anthropologists in the field, I want to focus on the advantages gained by being open about one's affectional orientation. While just being uncloseted is no guarantee that doors are automatically opened in every research situation, it can provide positive benefits. I would like to use my own personal history of research to show how I happened upon my research topics. From the beginnings of my academic career, I structured my research around questions that are important to me. Many anthropologists do this, of course, but it strikes me as odd that some ethnographers don't seem to have any particular personal motivation for doing what they do. My suspicion is that those anthropologists who have personal motivations make better ethnographers.

In my case my initial fieldwork, among the Eastern Cherokees, was partly motivated by my desire to learn about my own family heritage, due to childhood memories of my Cherokee great-great grandmother who died when I was six years old. That research led to my first book (Williams 1979). My next books, though based more on library research than on fieldwork, were a result of my personal involvement in (and political commitment to) the 1960s Pan-African Black Pride movement and the 1970s American Indian activism (Williams 1982; Williams 1984).

It was in terms of my gayness, however, that led me to my next experience with fieldwork. The late 1970s was when I began coming to terms with my homosexuality, and a turning point for my personal development was reading Jonathan Katz's book Gay American History. A whole section of that book consisted of documents relating to the Native American Two-Spirit alternative gender role, and to the attempts of European imperialists to wipe out culturally-accepted "sodomy" among Native Americans (Katz 1976). In all of the anthropology classes I had taken, I had never once heard mention of such traditions. My anger at this denial of knowledge -- information which I desperately needed at that stage in my life -- helped me determine to publicize this subject so that gays and lesbians in the future would not feel the isolation that I had felt.

Even before I was openly gay at my university, I began to incorporate mention of the Two-Spirit roles into the class I was teaching on American Indian ethnohistory. In 1980 I received a Woodrow Wilson Foundation grant to do research at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center, on ways to improve Indian legal status. After quickly writing a couple of essays on that topic I devoted the bulk of my grant time to research on Two-Spirit traditions.

I had decided that, having devoting years of my life to helping racial minorities overcome prejudice and mistreatment, it was time for me to devote my energies to helping my own gay minority. I clearly would not have undertaken this research if I had not by that time developed a positive gay identity. Yet, this was a case where my interests would not be in conflict, since I felt that by doing research on Two-Spirit traditions, I would also be helping contemporary Native Americans recapture part of their own cultural heritage. I dedicated my energies especially to those young gay and lesbian native people, on reservations or in urban areas, who might never have heard of the Two-Spirit idea. The 1970s had been a time of cultural renaissance among Indian people, and I felt that gay and lesbian Indians deserved to participate in this renaissance of their heritage as well.

Because I was lucky enough to be in Los Angeles, I had access to the library of ONE Institute of Homophile Studies and to the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. Dorr Legg,

Harry Hay, and Jim Kepner, truly pioneering heroes of the 1950s homophile movement, encouraged me and kindly provided additional sources. The most valuable anthropological writing they gave me was the pathbreaking essay by Sue-Ellen Jacobs (1968). Armed with these leads, I began traveling to different archives, scouring obscure sources to see if I could find other mention of "berdaches" or "sodomy." My coming out in the profession consisted of a paper I presented on Two-Spirit people at the 1980 American Society for Ethnohistory annual meeting.

By 1982 I decided that, to pursue this topic, fieldwork with Native American traditionalists who were still following their aboriginal religions needed to be done. I was not confident of my ability to do such fieldwork, because I did not have any prior experience among Western Indians, where knowledge of Two-Spirit roles was most likely to be remembered. Nevertheless, Sue-Ellen Jacobs and Harry Hay encouraged me to go ahead. I decided that if I did not pursue this fieldwork, it would not likely get done. After all, I at least had a background in American Indian Studies, and had had fieldwork experience living as part of an Indian community. I realized I could probably not get a grant to do research on homosexuality, but I had a sabbatical due me and I could choose whatever subject I wanted. Having the advantage of being tenured at my university due to my previous publications, I realized I was at that time one of a very few uncloseted gay scholars who had enough income and job security to conduct this research.

I felt lucky to know that the cultures which were my research specialty had a heritage of acceptance of same-sex eroticism. Still, I surmised that the impact of a century or more of Westernization and Christianity could not have failed to make such subjects sensitive. I hoped that, as I traveled to the Plains, I could locate a reservation where traditionalist elders might agree to talk to me about Two-Spirit people they remembered from their youth. The first reservation I went to in 1982 was the Omaha reservation. I had read century-old written documents about androgynous "mex-oga" being highly respected. When I asked local people for someone who could talk to me about the old Omaha traditions, I was referred to the tribal historian. He was a kindly gentleman who seemed to take an immediate liking to me. Yet, after

long discussions on Omaha history, when I finally got up nerve enough to ask about the term “mex-oga,” his demeanor suddenly changed. His eyes narrowed, and he took on a hostile look as he demanded abruptly: “Why do you want to know about that?”

My heart raced as I nervously thought about how to respond. In near panic I visualized this man making sure I was immediately kicked off the reservation, or worse. Finally, not knowing what else to say, I decided to be honest. I summoned every bit of my out-of-the-closet gay pride that I had picked up from my gay activist political activities over the past few years and responded. I explained that, although my interests were about Omaha traditions in general, I had a personal interest in this particular subject, because I am homosexual and wanted to see if the mex-oga tradition had anything to do with homosexuality as the written documents suggested. As soon as I said this, the man relaxed and smiled warmly. I will never forget his next words: “We don’t talk about me-xo-ga [which I had mispronounced] to outsiders, but I appreciate your honesty. I’ll tell you. Me-xo-ga is the same thing as gay; it’s just like in California.” After that, we relaxed and began an even closer interaction. It was as if, knowing something deeply personal about me, this man found it easier to reveal his sacred tribal traditions. This was to be my first experience in coming out as openly gay to informants. I can say that in virtually all such experiences during the last ten years I have received a positive (or at the least, neutral) response. In my opinion, many lesbian and gay ethnographers have been unnecessarily closeted and overly cautious during their fieldwork, and I am dismayed that even some of those who are open about themselves at their university have so little self-esteem that they will lie to their informants. This statement of course ignores the fact that being openly gay or lesbian might have negative consequences in some situations, but I will argue that in most instances an attempt to hide or deny one’s sexuality results in a less trusting and information-sharing relationship with informants.

My experience on the Omaha reservation was also the first time I noticed that elderly Indian traditionalists prefer to use the term “gay” rather than “homosexual.” To them, focus on the sexual inclinations of the person is less important than what they call the person’s “spirit.” It

took me a long time to realize, in many conversations with traditionalist Indians, that what they mean by “spirit” is close to what Westerners might call a person’s “basic character.” Because of my informants’ emphasis, my initial focus on homosexual behavior shifted to the spiritual and religious aspects of Two-Spirit traditions. That is why I ultimately titled my book The Spirit and the Flesh (1986).

When the Omaha historian became satisfied that I did not intend to approach his tribal traditions in a disrespectful manner, he did something even more surprising. He took me to meet a 62 year old male who is identified by his reservation community, and who identifies himself, as me-xo-ga. After I identified myself as gay, that man agreed to talk with me about his life. He said he would not have opened up if I had been the typical heterosexual anthropologist. He was the first Two-Spirit person I interviewed. In that experience, as with numerous others since then, I feel that I have had an enormous advantage in doing my fieldwork by being openly gay. Of course, a shared sexual orientation is not enough by itself to guarantee continued good relations with others (either cross-culturally or among persons of similar cultural backgrounds), but it does help to open many doors that might otherwise remain closed. What I have said certainly depends on my choice of subject matter and fieldwork locations. I have consciously searched out cultures which have a tradition of acceptance of same-sex eroticism.

Since 1982 I have resolved to do a different kind of fieldwork. Rather than living on one Indian reservation for a year, and doing the usual community study that ethnographers regularly do, I decided that my community of study would be Two-Spirit people themselves. Although an intensive community study focusing on such persons' interactions within that community is without doubt of value, the notion that Two-Spirit traditions have completely disappeared is so widespread among anthropologists that I decided it was more important for me to do a comparative study of these unique individuals on several reservations. I also think my prowess for exploring new locales and subjects are my strongest talents, while other ethnographers are more skilled in doing intensive analysis of one locale over a longer time period. Both kinds of researchers are necessary to gain greater cross-cultural understanding.

After staying for a time with my initial Omaha informant, he sent his nephew to accompany me to the Rosebud Sioux reservation and to introduce me to “winkte” Two-Spirits among the Lakota. After more experiences living at Rosebud, and doing life history interviews of winktes and additional interviews with their relatives and neighbors, they referred me to other winktes on the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation. And from there, those winktes referred me to others they knew on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. And so it went, as I worked my way across the Plains.

I ended up observing, and eventually participating in, traditional religious ceremonies to which I am sure I would never have been invited, if I had not established a personal gay-to-gay (or Two-Spirit to Two-Spirit) relationship with my native informants. I was warned by whites in South Dakota that a white man would not be safe living on a reservation, especially in Pine Ridge, yet I never experienced any hostility. I believe my acceptance in the community was because of my association with winktes. Traditionalist Lakotas are somewhat afraid of the spiritual power of winktes, which provides winktes and their consorts with a convenient form of protection. Being openly gay thus provided me an advantage in this fieldwork situation.

Although personal involvement was not my motivation for undertaking this research, one of my informants and I became very close as he went with me in doing my interviewing and I accompanied him in his Lakota religion ceremonial activities. We went everywhere together, and his religious intensity opened up a whole new realm of spiritual concern in my personal life. He is without a doubt the most spiritual person I have ever met, and I consider my interaction with him to be a turning point in my life. Shortly before I was scheduled to leave his reservation, he surprised me by proposing for me to become his husband and live with him on his reservation. I had known of his sexual attraction to me, since I had previously gently deflected his initiatives for sexual involvement, yet I considered him more as my teacher than as my husband. I explained that I had to return to my teaching job after my sabbatical year was over. He responded that I could quit my job and he would support me. He said that I would not have to worry about anything, since I could move into his house and he would provide us a good living.

I could, he said, focus on my writing and would not have to worry about teaching at a university. I thanked him for the offer, but told him I could not give up my academic career. Besides, I needed to pursue research on Two-Spirit people among other groups of Native Americans beyond the Plains.

By the end of 1982 I traveled down to the Navajo reservation and did additional research and interviewing. I was amazed to find that Navajo traditionalists were even more respectful of “nadleh” than the Plains tribes had been of their Two-Spirits.. But I found the Arizona winter unexpectedly harsh and decided I could depend on several excellent published sources on the Navajo nadleh. So, in the spirit of Joseph Campbell, who said the highest life course is to be attained by following your own personal bliss, in January 1983 I took off for Mexico. In my library research I had run across a few sixteenth century sources by Spanish conquistadores complaining about how the Mayas in particular were “addicted to sodomy,” and another later letter claiming that the Catholic missionaries and Spanish government officials had successfully wiped out such vices among the Indians (quoted in Williams 1986: 135-140). My previous research led me to distrust that claim.

Armed with nothing more than those few four hundred year old references, and knowing no one, I headed for Mayan villages in Yucatan. Although I had not one personal contact, my positive experiences on the Plains during my 1982 fieldwork led me to approach the task with anticipation. I spent my first weeks in Yucatan touring through the magnificent Mayan archaeological sites of Uxmal, Chichen Itza, Tulum, and other ruins. Whenever I asked my Mayan tour guides about homosexuality, they uniformly replied in a non-condemnatory accepting way. Within a couple of weeks I had not only made contact with a group of Maya “homosexuales,” but was developing a circle of friends as well.

I found the Mayas to be among the most friendly and attractive people I have ever met. One, whose nickname was “El Sexy,” took a particular liking to me. He lived with his mother, who took me under her wing and was soon cooking delicious meals for me. They both became committed to the importance of a book being written on this topic. El Sexy helped me meet

other “homosexuales” to interview, and was a joyful companion as I did my study. He felt pleased that his and other homosexuals’ lives and viewpoints were going to be included in a book. He also used me as a status symbol in his pueblo. One day, as we were riding in my automobile, he got great enjoyment from the fact that a boy publicly called out to him, “El Sexy, I see you have found your husband!” This humorous reference to me was not in any way derogatory, but merely a relaxed kidding that reflected the general knowledge of his attraction to men (Williams 1986: 143-14).

While I feel positively about all my fieldwork locations, and each group of people has left its own unique imprint on my education and personal life, I left Yucatan very reluctantly. I think the Mayas are my favorite people of all. Their friendly and open demeanor, as well as their whole joyful approach to life, impressed me deeply.

Again, I want to emphasize that being openly gay is not by itself sufficient to insure a good fieldwork experience. What is most necessary is to treat people with respect, caring and earnestness, and to interact with them on a human-to-human basis. Without this, no amount of fieldwork training or sophisticated research methodology will allow one to establish and maintain a positive relationship of any kind. I will argue that being open about oneself is necessary before one can establish a genuinely trusting and sharing interaction with people. As Stephen O. Murray and others in this volume rightly point out, we still cannot assume from personal experiences that what we are told or observe is the kind of behavior which actually occurs among people of the studied culture. But we cannot gain much valid knowledge without these conversations and observations.

After returning from Yucatan, going back to teaching and staying busy writing my fieldnotes and publishing my research, my next fieldwork was in 1987-88. I had written a number of grant proposals to do research on homosexuality cross-culturally, but all of them had been rejected. Finally I managed to get funding by--once again--writing a grant for a different topic. This time I won a Fulbright Scholar Award in Indonesia. My Fulbright research proposal was to do life history interviewing of Javanese elders, with a special focus on gender. On the

way to Indonesia, I took the opportunity to stop over in Bangkok and did some interviewing of Thai gay activists (Williams 1990). My experience has been that I have managed to do fieldwork on gay topics by getting grants on other subjects, and then doing my gay research in addition to the research I did for my grant. The only time I have received a grant specifically on homosexuality research was in 1989 when I won a small travel grant from the Institute for the Study of Women and Men at my university, to go to Alaska to do research on homosexuality among Aleuts and Yupiks. In the case of my Indonesian work, I published a book of Javanese life histories (Williams 1991), and am still working on other publications specifically focused on homosexuality in Java (see, for example, Williams 1992a).

This process is not something I complain about; lesbian and gay ethnographers just have to work twice as hard to get more research done while in the field. In addition, although I think it is important for openly gay and lesbian scholars to publish articles and books on homosexuality, it is also important for us to publish general ethnographies which include homosexuality as just one among many socially-accepted aspects of particular cultures. This is what I tried to do in my Javanese Lives (see Williams 1991: 180-190, 210, 230n2).

Anthropologists can perform valuable documentation for the effort to overcome homophobia, by pointing out to readers that same-sex eroticism is a fact of life in human societies around the world. It is thus doubly important that we focus upon cultures which are not inflicted with anti-homosexual prejudices. My most recent publication highlights the benefits which societies gain by not harboring such prejudices. This cross-cultural perspective can become an important part of the effort to reduce homophobia in American society (Williams 1992b).

I have written elsewhere (Williams 1990: 126) about the great need for openly gay and lesbian ethnographers to investigate non-homophobic cultures before their accepting values are destroyed by rampaging Westernization. In every area of the world in which I have traveled I have found it alarming the extent to which fundamentalist Christian groups are exporting homophobia. Barraged with American missionaries, movies, television, literature, and outdated

psychoanalytic theories of sexual deviance (that are still being propounded by many Western-educated teachers), many cultures are rapidly changing their attitudes toward sexuality. If we do not gather this research soon, it will be too late to learn about the vast array of differing institutionalized forms of same-sex eroticism.

We desperately need a more complete data base for a broader understanding of human sexuality. Given the almost complete ignorance of female-female sexuality in non-Western cultures, I think the highest research priority is for lesbian scholars to undertake this work. As a male interviewer, I was painfully aware of my inability to get women to open up on this issue, and even my male informants usually knew very little on the subject. In The Spirit and the Flesh, I could only depend on the few historical documents, and on the few publications on the subject by women scholars. In Java, I was not able to locate even one lesbian who would agree to be anonymously interviewed. I anxiously await the publication of more studies like Jennifer Robertson's (1992) fascinating ethnography of a female theater troupe in Japan.

It is not that sensitive heterosexuals lack the ability to do research on homosexuality, and indeed non-gay anthropologists such as Serena Nanda (1990) have made important contributions to the study of sexual variance. But it is still clear that openly lesbian ethnographers have an advantage in doing field research on female sexuality, and openly gay ethnographers have an advantage in doing research on male-male eroticism. Indeed, Peter Jackson (1989) suggested that gay people have a significant advantage over other foreigners in being able to integrate themselves quickly into a local culture. Because native homosexuals often see themselves as different, sometimes as "outsiders" in their own culture, they are likely to feel an immediate identity with others they perceive to be "like themselves" -- even if those persons are from a different culture. I have certainly found that to be the case in my research.

Jim Wafer, an openly-gay ethnographer in Brazil, pointed out several advantages to his being open about his sexuality among his informants. In the first place, his native lover provided many contacts and opened many doors. Because he had a personal relationship with the ethnographer, and was committed to the project, this lover had additional motivation to make

sure that what was written was accurate. Beyond that, Wafer pointed out, because their relationship was known and accepted in the community, it gave Wafer a “quasi-insider status.... It meant, for example, that I was regarded as ‘accounted for’ within the kinship system... [which] meant that I was less a threat than I might otherwise have been” (Wafer 1990).

Anthropologists often verbalize an expectation that single fieldworkers who go into the field should refrain from any sexual activity in their fieldwork community. This expectation appears rather strange to the people of sexually-free cultures, with anthropologists being pitied for denying themselves one of the basic necessities of life. Beyond the question of one’s personal happiness, sexual involvement might also yield important research findings. For example, one gay male ethnographer (who shall remain nameless for purposes of this essay) has verbally spoken informally of his experience in a non-Western fieldwork setting where he lived for over a year as an openly gay man. It was not hard for him to come out to people, because soon after meeting they would often ask him if he were married. When he replied that he was not married, they frequently asked “Why not?” He then simply responded that he preferred loving men. That response was greeted with an accepting understanding of his sexual inclinations, but many local people still could not understand why he did not marry a woman and continue his sexual activities with males as well.

Later, when word got around the community that he enjoyed sex with males, a number of local men (ages mid-teens to late-30s) made sexual advances to him. Not wishing to remain celibate for a year, he responded positively. Yet because he did not wish to impose his foreign sexual styles, he always let them take the initiative in bed. After several encounters he saw the pattern: erotic interaction between males in that culture involved only inter-femoral friction. That is, one partner would lie down on his back or front, rub spit or lotion between his legs at the crotch, and cross his legs at the ankle. The other would lubricate his penis and stick it between the legs of the other. According to this anthropologist, “having his legs crossed at the ankle made all the difference, and it felt great--just like intercourse.” Yet this was not intercourse, but “outercourse”, a method of sexual interaction which does not lend itself to the transmission of

most sexually-transmitted diseases (including HIV). If he had not actually experienced the feeling of this type of inter-femoral friction, with legs crossed at the ankle, he would not have thought to ask about the particulars of male-male sexual interaction, and would have missed its safe-sex implications.

Prompted by this testimony of direct experience, I began to reexamine the literature and found mention of such inter-femoral sexual methods being the standard form of male-male sexuality in many societies (ancient Greece, southern Africa, Morocco, some areas of Polynesia). With that anthropologist's encouragement, I hope to publish this data later as a contribution to safe-sex literature. By gathering information about varieties of sexual practices around the world, anthropologists in the age of AIDS can make important contributions in helping people expand their range of sexual practices to less dangerous non-insertive forms of expression. What more valuable application of applied anthropology could be more evident, if we will only drop our Western anti-sexual prudery? As Ralph Bolton (1991) has rightly pointed out, this is a high priority, even "urgent," agenda for ethnographic research in the 1990s.

In non-homophobic cultures a researcher can, by being open about his or her sexuality, be accepted by the local community and can gain access to people for interviewing. Over and over in my research, from Alaska to Java, informants have told me that they would never discuss such topics with a heterosexual. Native Americans in particular have reported feeling burned so many times, when things they told to white researchers were made fun of and written about in a disrespectful manner. By being personally involved in this subject, a researcher is better able to understand the issues facing informants and is more likely to be able to put data in their proper social context.

Yet it is not enough that a person simply be lesbian or gay, and expect instant acceptance. I recognize that informants would not have continued to talk and interact with me if they had not felt comfortable with me on an individual level. We must critically examine reports of non-acceptance by white anthropologists who feel that native people are summarily excluding them because of their race. Individual factors of personal interaction may more likely be the cause of

such native non-acceptance. For example, in 1992 I was invited to speak at the annual gathering of the Two-Spirited People of the First Nations, which was held in an isolated rural area of British Columbia. A number of non-Indian gays and lesbians attended this gathering, which was organized by lesbian and gay American Indians and Arctic natives. Native people in attendance reacted to the non-Indians quite differently. Those non-Indians who came on their own as single persons were treated rather coolly by the native people in attendance. However, those non-Indians who were there as lovers/partners of natives were treated warmly, like they were “part of the family.”

Native American gay people, like many other people I have encountered in Asia and the Pacific, seem to trust the judgment of their native friends. If a non-native outsider is a good enough person for a native person to enjoy being in a relationship with, then the others will accept that person's conclusion that such an outsider should be brought into the group. Otherwise, many of them will keep their distance. Given this situation, involvement of a fieldworker in an emotional personal relationship with a local native person can (besides its reward of personal happiness) also contribute to more effective interaction with the community among whom one is living. I am not advocating that lesbian and gay anthropologists go out into the field with a cynical plan to locate a local mate in order to accomplish their fieldwork; such a plot would be exploitative in the extreme. What I am suggesting is that a prohibition on such relationships is unrealistic and hypocritical. If a fieldworker and a local person are genuinely attracted to each other, and the local person understands the realities of the fieldworker's situation (the anthropologist is honest about how long she or he will be resident there, and that the information gathered will likely be published), then such a genuinely-felt emotional bond can be a positive experience for all concerned.

A fieldworker with a personal involvement in the subject of study, moreover, has an added incentive to persevere when problems arise (like a lack of funding). A lesbian or gay fieldworker can more easily avoid false information, which might be given to a heterosexual researcher because informants are well aware of Western anti-gay prejudices. As I found from

the help I received from gay archival organizations, an openly gay researcher is also able to draw upon specialized sources and unpublished documents which might be withheld from a non-gay researcher.

Conversely, another factor to consider is the disadvantage of lesbian and gay ethnographers trying to remain closeted. Frank Proschan reported the difficulties in his fieldwork with a Cambodian community in trying to hide his homosexuality. His informants could not account for his asexuality: "As a result of my own evasiveness and their sensitive avoidance of potentially embarrassing questions, I remained a riddle to the people with whom I worked" (Proschan 1990: 59). He realized he came across to his informants as a naive, asexual, childlike eunuch (*ibid.* p.61). Moreover (he learned years later) his informants had not told him of certain things about Cambodian sexual variance, simply because they were uncertain how he would react to them: "As long as I presented myself as a riddle, leaving any sexual identity undefined and unsaid, my Cambodian friends consistently left anything with explicit sexual content unsaid in my presence -- silence begetting silence" (*ibid.*, pp. 62-63).

Anthropologists are beginning to write about the intersubjective relations connecting fieldworkers to informants, yet the subject of sexuality -- certainly one of the most important aspects of human behavior -- remains practically unanalyzed in print. Anthropologists have incorporated the worst aspects of Victorian prudery in avoiding an honest assessment of our sexual behaviors in the field. Gay and lesbian anthropologists, by questioning sexual boundaries and social roles, seem ideally positioned to lead anthropologists into a new honesty and openness about sexual interactions in the field, just as we freely write about other forms of daily interaction. Bolton (1991: 138) has pointed out that after sexual intimacy, people often open up and speak honestly and profoundly about their lives.

When we live as part of a community as openly gay people, if that community is not inflicted with the kind of rampant homophobia seen in the West (and all too often reflected in anthropologists' writings), then we can truly offer an honest account of our participant-observation in that community. This is not by any means to suggest sexual irresponsibility on the

part of the fieldworker (especially in this age of AIDS), which will exploit or harm our informants. Just as there is a difference between an intimate union and a rape, we must learn to assess sexual interactions in a more realistic and sophisticated manner.

What is most important, I have found, is that if I want to be an effective fieldworker I must be honest, both with my informants and with my readers. If I wish to remain credible, I must inform my informants exactly what kind of information I am interested in, and that my intention is to publish a book on the information gathered. When doing interviews with informants, if at all possible I try to conduct the interview with no one else present. I assure them that I will protect their privacy by not using their real name, to get them to speak frankly and candidly about their experiences. I emphasize the need for us to know more about the lives of gay people in different cultures around the world, and then after the interview is completed I may tell them about my findings in other cultures if they are interested.

My research entails interviewing informants about their most intimate experiences and feelings. What I find is that, if a person reveals a particularly personal detail, it helps for me to throw in some intimate detail about my own experiences. This simple act makes the interview less of a one-sided probing of informant by researcher, and more of an exchange of information among equals. That ultimately, it seems to me is what anthropology really is all about: to establish an appreciation for human diversity and an empathy with other individuals across the boundaries of culture.

I certainly recognize my weaknesses as an ethnographer, but I also see that I have been able to get data in interviews that others have not been able to do. I do not exactly know what I do that seems to get people to open up about themselves. There is something intangible involved, something no amount of training in field-methods classes can impart, that promotes a deep person-to-person interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. My experience convinces me that the most important factor in successful fieldwork is one's ability to empathize with others, on a soul-to-soul level. Given the paucity of unbiased data on homosexuality in non-Western cultures, and the demonstrated incompetence of most heterosexual anthropologists

in gathering such data, I want to do everything I can to encourage more lesbian and gay male researchers to go out into the field and gather information about the subject before it disappears.

Other chapters in this volume have focused on the problems that might be encountered in fieldwork. While lesbian and gay fieldworkers should certainly be aware of such problems, I agreed to write this essay to provide an example which might help to inspire young anthropologists to embark on additional such research. My general approach to life is to accentuate the positive, and I find many academics so overwhelmingly pessimistic and critical that they unwittingly discourage others. I think ethnographic knowledge is important, and I take my role seriously as a mentor in encouraging other researchers. I have presented my experiences here, not to glorify myself, but in hopes that such knowledge may be of help to encourage others to accomplish better ethnography in the future.

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