

Media Coverage of Ethnographic Work: Opportunities, Problems and Dilemmas

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*We should be aware that there is an audience outside the scientific community.
It is vividly interested in hearing, reading and commenting on what we write.*

Hüwelmeier (2000: 48)

Coverage of research in mainstream media is a crucial means for the circulation of ethnographic knowledge. It creates opportunities for ethnographers to reach audiences outside academia and also to take part in public social and political debates, namely by drawing attention to issues which are being overlooked in those debates or are being framed within them in problematic ways. Authors have noted how mainstream media coverage of their ethnographic work has allowed them to effectively and successfully (however this may be defined) influence policy making and institutional practices. This is what happened, for example, with media coverage of Diane Vaughan's (1996) ethnographic study of how NASA's organisational structure had led to the Challenger launch disaster (Becker et al., 2004; Vaughan, 2005).

Media coverage may play a particularly important role in the case of research which critically analyses dominant discourses about what is 'normal', 'natural' or 'ideal'. We know that the media are one of the central vehicles for the widespread circulation of such discourses (see for example Dines and Humez, 1995; Doty and Gove, 1997; Ferguson, 1998; Gill, 2007; Gross, 2001; Malik, 2002; van Zoonen, 1994) - but they can also be spaces for the disruption of their dominance. The reporting of critical ethnographic inquiry in the media can contribute to this disruption by raising people's awareness of the exclusionary character of these dominant discourses, by making visible the social inequalities which they produce and legitimate, and by proposing alternative discourses about 'normality', 'desirability' or 'deviance'. As Newman has argued, ethnography has 'the capacity to redefine the social landscape, to explode received categories, ... the capacity to develop different ways of thinking about a social universe that [people] often take for granted' (in Becker et al., 2004: 270). Therefore, communicating the observations and conclusions of ethnography through the media can be 'a teaching opportunity' (Vaughan and Newman in Becker et al., 2004: 267, 271) and, I would add, a chance of contributing to emancipatory social change.

However, coverage of critical ethnographic work in mainstream media does not always have such straightforwardly favourable effects. In their own writing, ethnographers have control over the ways in which the settings, participants or observations of their ethnographies are described. Producing these descriptions is often a difficult process of attempting to balance competing demands and concerns, where one chooses words carefully, frequently with the clear feeling that there are multiple people - research participants, informants, peers, supervisors - looking over one's shoulder¹. In the case of media coverage, on the contrary, ethnographers generally have

¹ McLaren describes this feeling very vividly: '[i]f other anthropologists aren't always perched on one

limited control over the actual terms in which the people and places which they have studied are described in articles about that study. This means that one's conclusions may, often inadvertently, be misrepresented and end up having an unexpected and unwanted impact on public debates. It also means that people and places may be represented in problematic ways, potentially with detrimental impacts on life within those communities and also on the conditions of fieldwork.

Several authors have described negative experiences of media coverage of their work, sometimes with irreversible destructive effects on relations of trust within the field which made it difficult or even impossible for them to do future research in that context (Brettell, 1993a; 1993b; Greenberg, 1993; Hüwelmeier, 2000; Rosaldo, 1989; Wrobel, 1979). In a description of the local and national polemic that resulted from inaccurate media reporting of the conclusions of his ethnographic study of a Polish-American community, Wrobel writes:

an anthropologist and a reporter meet as strangers, each carrying cultural baggage from their respective work environments. The language of social science is not always understood by journalists, and the time constraints a reporter faces seem incomprehensible and unfair to an anthropologist who is asked to summarize three years of work in three minutes. Yet social scientists have a responsibility to communicate their findings to the general public. (1979: 171)

In this paper I will discuss that responsibility of communicating ethnographic work in the media, looking both at its potential contributions to the disruption of dominant discourses and also the impacts it may have on daily life in the field. These issues will be addressed specifically in relation to media coverage of my recent ethnographic study of the negotiation of gender and power among young people in a school in Lisbon (Portugal). I will start by briefly introducing this ethnography. I will then describe my conversations with the journalist who wrote about my study, and characterise the tone and content of the published article. This will be followed by an account of the ways in which the teenagers involved in the ethnography reacted to the article, and a discussion of the opportunities, problems and dilemmas that this created.

An Ethnography of Class 8X

In March 2006, I became a temporary 'student' of a Year 8 class of a public school in Lisbon, which I have called class 8X. I spent the next two months with the 23 girls and boys, aged 13 to 15, of that class, taking part in their academic and leisure activities within, and sometimes outside, the school. The central aim of my study, part of a dissertation in Sociology, was to analyse the ways in which they performed and negotiated gender in their daily life at school. During my time with them, I observed that discourses about, and performances of, gender were not a stable, fully formed and totally fixed product of an earlier socialisation, which they mechanically reproduced in the same way in all interactions. These teenagers actively drew on such discourses and performances in variable ways in their life at school, often in the context of the production and legitimation of power hierarchies between them. Differences and inequalities based on gender (not just those

shoulder like plump little dybuks, homunculus heads reminding you of the interpretive functions of their various schools and their special claims to pedigree, then the participants are sitting on your other, challenging conceptual dysesthesia and ethnocentrism with frequent sharp (and, I might add, frequently deserving) blows to the side of your head' (1999: 264).

between girls and boys, but also those between girls or between boys, according to how 'masculine' or 'feminine' they are perceived to be) were not always marked in the same way by them and did not have the same meaning or relevance in all their daily interactions.

After the two month fieldwork period, I left the school to analyse the data that I had gathered and returned in June to share my observations with the class. As an ethnographer committed to involving research participants in the construction of the ethnographic narrative(s), I wanted to give my data back to the students and let them 'have their say' about my interpretation and representation of their daily life. I also thought that a collective discussion of the ways in which gender is negotiated in their interactions would create an opportunity for them to interrogate a wide range of phenomena which they - and people in general - usually take for granted. I hoped this would contribute to raise their awareness about the role that their own discourses and practices play in the production of inequalities and discrimination. They participated enthusiastically in the debate, were very open to thinking critically about their interactions, and told me later that reading the dissertation and discussing it with me and each other had made them think about gender and their relationships in new ways and prompted many of them to change some of their behaviours. When I submitted my dissertation, I felt happy that it had not only contributed to increase our knowledge about the daily negotiation of gender among young people, but had also helped to disrupt, even if just temporarily, the normality, normativity and 'taken-for-grantedness' of particular discriminatory ways of doing gender and power in a specific context.

The Interview

Less than a week after my dissertation had been submitted, I was contacted by a journalist from a Portuguese monthly women's magazine, *Activa*, who had heard about my work through a friend of a friend of a relative of mine and wanted to interview me for an article she was writing on girls' friendships. I was very surprised and, must admit, rather flattered by her interest and I agreed to the interview, thinking that it would be a great opportunity to reach a wider audience. She proceeded to explain that she had contacted me because she was interested in adding a scientific dimension to the article, by presenting a specialist's description of girls' behaviours in a particular context. She began the interview by asking why I had chosen to do an ethnographic study. She told me she found it extremely interesting that I had spent so much time with the teenagers and had made the effort to 'really go back to school'. She added that she considered that this would make my study especially appealing to the magazine's readers.

Her first question about my findings was: 'the girls in your class have intimate and very small groups of friends, unlike the boys who usually hang out in bigger groups, right?'. I was initially startled by the way the question had been formulated. It assumed and prescribed its answer and, moreover, it reinforced and reinscribed the familiar dichotomies which I had attempted to problematise in my dissertation and also in the discussion session that I had organised with the class (as described above). I told her that what I had observed in class 8X was that these differences were not that straightforward and both boys and girls had different types of friendship groups. She insisted, 'yes, of course, but wouldn't you say that girls are different from boys in their friendships

and are, for example, closer to their friends than boys?'. I explained that even though differences such as that one could be observed in specific cases (although they did not apply to all teenagers in the class), I had attempted in my study to critique this understanding of boys and girls as two homogeneous groups, defined by the differences between them. I mentioned that I considered that this way of seeing and describing femininity and masculinity prevented us from noticing crucial aspects of young people's (and adults') daily negotiation of gender, and tended to reinforce dominant stereotypes about women and men. I told her that, therefore, the aim of my study had not been to identify general differences between girls and boys, but to look at how discourses about those differences were produced and used by the teenagers. To illustrate what I meant by this, I described episodes from my fieldwork. One of the examples I gave was that girls and boys in the class love gossiping and do it very often. However, the dominant discourse among them is that only girls gossip. Boys' talk about others is described as 'curiosity, not gossip, they are two very different things', as one boy told me. This narrative about the difference between female gossip and male curiosity allowed some of the boys to engage in gossip and at the same time use accusations and denigrations of gossiping to symbolically distance themselves from the girls and also the boys who were perceived as less 'appropriately' masculine.

The journalist became very interested and began to ask several questions about discourses and performances of gender, rather than about the differences between girls and boys. At the end of the interview, which lasted over an hour, she told me that she had found our discussion so useful, and it had drawn her attention to so many interesting issues, that she would ask her editor if she could change the theme of the article. She now wanted to write a piece about stereotypes of gender in young people's peer groups and how these stereotypes affect their interactions and often constrain girls' and boys' choices and opportunities. By the end of the interview, the journalist was talking about gender in a way that was very different from the framing of her initial questions. I did not know if this change in perspective would make it into the final published text, but I hoped that the interview had contributed to prevent this particular article from being constructed around the 'women-and-men-as-inevitably-different' narrative that is often dominant in mainstream media in general, and women's magazines in particular (Ballaster, 1991; Hollows, 1999; McCracken, 1993).

The Published Article

I asked the journalist if I could read the article before it was published but she told me that this would not be possible, so I had my first encounter with it when it came out some months later. My first reaction was of great surprise. The theme of the piece had in fact been changed, as the journalist had told me, but that was not the only change. It had become an article mostly about my study, rather than one where I would appear briefly as a commentator on a main theme. Class 8X and I were the central protagonists of the text. This was evident in the article's 'teaser':

Friends defend us and define us. But in what ways do they limit us? And how do we survive others? A sociologist spent two months in a Year 8 class. Discover her conclusions... and much more.²

² All quotes from the article are my translation of the original text in Portuguese.

As I read the three-page article, I felt both satisfied and dismayed. It did offer an account of the negotiation of gender which was more nuanced and less dichotomous than the narratives that are usually found in mainstream media. However, its descriptions of the daily life of the boys and girls in the class were written in a tone and style which I was concerned they might find upsetting. I will now illustrate both these aspects of the article with excerpts from it.

Throughout the article, the journalist describes beliefs about differences between girls and boys as something which one can be wary and critical of.

Girls are gossipers and boys are immature? According to Maria do Mar, these universally accepted differences may not be as true as we think.

She notes that stereotypes of gender constrain teenagers' behaviours and opportunities, and stresses that both girls and boys 'are subject to strong dynamics of control and monitoring' by their peers. Quoting me, she writes that 'there is crucial work to be done in terms of raising [teenagers'] awareness' of these stereotypes and their impacts. She ends a section with another quote of mine, underlining the possibilities for social change:

'They [the teenagers in the class] like to be in school and they have friends, but they all feel unhappy with this situation [restrictive gender stereotypes] which they end up reproducing every day. And these are all, at the same time, fragile structures. ... They could be changed...'

All in all, I felt that the article did a good job both of communicating the perspective from which I had problematised young people's negotiation of gender, and of outlining the key observations of my study. In my opinion and that of many of the teenagers, however, it did not do as good a job of representing class 8X and my relationship with the students in it. The article opened with the following sentence:

Imagine that you entered a time machine and went back to school: you see yourself surrounded again by the leader, the quiet girl, the 'fat girl', the boys... A nightmare?! Well, that is what sociologist Maria do Mar Pereira did.

In this and other sentences, the journalist suddenly shifts from references to abstract characters, general features of the teenage years or her own opinions, to direct allusions to my work. It is not entirely clear in this sentence whether the class I observed did in fact have 'a leader', a 'quiet girl' or a 'fat girl', or whether the journalist is referring to them as popular cultural tropes. It is not clear whether I was the one who described the experience of returning to school as a nightmare or if that is her evaluation of it. Either way, and because this is the opening paragraph of the article, it works to set a particular kind of scene: school life as 'nightmarish'.

This is reinforced at other times in the text. On two different occasions, she stresses that '[Maria] saw things that parents and many teachers do not see' and that 'if these teenagers' parents saw how they behave in the playground, they would not believe it'. She briefly describes a case of aggression between boys in the class and says that I was 'horrified' by it. It is important to clarify: I do think (and I did say) that some parents (not all) would be surprised if they saw their son's or daughter's playground behaviour, and I did find the case of aggression upsetting. However, the way in which these issues were highlighted made them seem exaggeratedly grave and alarming, and

portrayed this particular class as rather intimidating.

Readings and Reactions

How did the girls and boys of class 8X react to the article? As soon as I was contacted by the journalist, I informed them that the study was going to be mentioned in the magazine. When the article was published, I returned to the school and had a group meeting with the whole class, where I read the article to them. When I finished, a girl asked: 'did you actually say to the journalist that it was a nightmare to spend time with us? You told us that you had really enjoyed it!'. Others nodded their head in agreement. A boy added, 'yeah, and did you also say we were that mean? If my parents read the part where it says that in school we do things that they don't even imagine, they're going to think that we do illegal stuff or something!'. Another student joined the discussion, 'what bad things did you tell the journalist about us to make her write that?!'.

When I told the students, at the beginning of our group meeting, that they had been mentioned in the magazine quite centrally, they got excited and seemed very proud. However, by the time I had finished reading the article, many of them looked disappointed and upset. I assured them that I had not told the journalist anything apart from what we had discussed in the earlier session where I had presented my observations and conclusions to them. I explained that I had not said things exactly as they were described in the article, and tried to initiate a discussion of the ways in which the media report events and conversations. We talked about high-profile Portuguese and international cases of media misrepresentation and we debated the extent to which one can believe and take literally everything that what one reads in the media. It was, once again, a lively and participated discussion. When the discussion ended, they seemed more relaxed and their trust in me - temporarily shaken, at least for some of them - appeared to be restored.

However, the negative impacts of the article were not felt only at the level of the teenagers' opinions about me but also their opinions about themselves. After the session, one of the girls, usually openly described by her peers as the 'fat girl' of the class, came up to me. She said that she had noticed that the article included several references to a 'fat girl' and was wondering if they were specifically related to her. One of these references was, in fact, about her. It was a quote where I explained that 'fat' was used as an insult for girls, but stressed that the description - and repudiation - of girls as fat often bore little relation to their actual physical appearance. I mentioned that in one particular case the use of the term as an insult was so frequent that the girl often was excluded, and felt excluded, from the rest of the class. The other mentions of a 'fat girl' in the article were all abstract references to cultural tropes of femininity, written in inverted commas. One of these references was quite long and appeared in the last section of the article, where the journalist outlined a psychologist's (another 'specialist' she had interviewed) tips to parents about how to help children deal with stereotypes and peer pressure.

And what about the case of the 'fat girl'? 'An example of a dialogue [that a parent can have with a girl] would be: Do you think you're fat? Yes. Would you like to not be fat? Yes. You don't accept that about yourself? No. So maybe it is more difficult for others to accept you, but we can change that.' The message is 'if there's something about you that you don't like, you can change it!'. If she chooses to continue being fat, then she must accept herself

without acting as the victim.

In the eyes of this girl, who was especially insecure about her body shape and was very frequently ridiculed by her male and female classmates because of it, this was another specific reference to, and message for, her. She seemed very upset by this section of the article and asked, 'do you think that I act as a victim?'. I tried to assure her that this section was not about her.

The Article's Narrative Features and their Effects

The article's references to the girls and boys of class 8X were so general that it would have been impossible to identify any of them through it. Their privacy and confidentiality was strictly respected both in my conversation with the journalist (I did not tell her the name of the school where I conducted fieldwork nor any other traceable information) and in the article. However, this does not mean that it did not have an impact on them and the ways in which they see themselves, each other and me. Knowing that the article was about their class, many students read and interpreted everything in it as an explicit or implicit narrative and judgement about themselves.

Certain strategies of writing which the journalist used to engage the magazine's readers and make the article more appealing to them had the result of also making it more upsetting and confusing for the girls and boys of class 8X. One such feature of her journalistic style were the sudden and often hardly perceptible shifts between specific descriptions of class 8X and general comments about teenagers and their life in school. These shifts made it difficult for the students to understand what was being said about whom. A second feature was the use of generalisations about the class, where characteristics of specific groups of students were described as being shared by the whole of class 8X. A third feature were the journalist's use of dramatisation and exaggeration to 'spice up' the text - as in the allusions to the 'secret' and 'unimaginable' playground practices of these girls and boys. A fourth feature were the frequent references to cultural tropes and familiar types ('the fat girl', 'the leader', 'the quiet student'), which were not always clearly presented as such and so tended to be read by the teenagers as allusions to specific people in the class. These references were also felt by some of them as legitimating the terms with which they are ridiculed or excluded. In my own writing, I approached terms such as 'fat girl' as negotiated discourses, and never as a name that I could use to designate a given person. Their use in the article as a label for general and specific people worked to reinforce their symbolic power in the eyes of the students.

Due to these narrative and stylistic features, the published text was a blend of references to the real people in class 8X, and of fictional descriptions of teenage life only very loosely and indirectly based on my ethnography. Some students were not happy or comfortable with the representation of themselves which they felt was offered by it, and which they assumed had been provided by me. Some felt exposed by the article: being described in a popular magazine, even if indirectly, as 'fat' or 'aggressive' made the epithet seem more real and inescapable to them. Even though this initial dissatisfaction and discomfort seemed to disappear after our group discussion about the article, I could not help but wonder: should I have declined the request for an interview? Had it been naïve and irresponsible of me to expose the teenagers of class 8X, in order to be able to

circulate my observations and findings? Or had this been a useful learning experience for me, them, the journalist and, who knows, even some of the magazine's readers?

Managing the Opportunities and Problems of Media Coverage

How, then, does one manage the opportunities and problems of communicating ethnographic work in mainstream media? As Wrobel argues in the quote presented earlier, ethnographers and journalists frequently use different languages and narrative styles in their descriptions of the people, interactions, practices and discourses which can be found in a specific setting. Even though journalistic honesty, responsibility and accountability must be demanded, we can hardly expect the journalists who interview us or read our work to be as careful and 'ethnographic' about their narratives and their choice of words as we are. They have not been in the field with us and do not know the people we have met and their concerns, insecurities or investments in specific representations of themselves and others. Similarly, we cannot expect the people we have spent time with - especially when they are quite young, as in the case of my study - to be able to read media texts which they know are directly or indirectly about them with complete detachment and a total willingness to not take things literally, seriously or personally.

I would argue that even when we are cautious about how much we tell the media and how we do it, and even when a journalist is careful and well-intentioned about the article she or he writes, there is always a risk that the final text may be offensive or hurtful to the people involved or jeopardise the trust we have managed to build with them during fieldwork. Media coverage of our work is not simply an 'afterwards' or 'afterthought' of ethnographic inquiry. It is an integral part of the ethnographic process, to the extent that it has effects on life in the field and an impact on those within it. In some situations, it may require a return to the field to manage these impacts. In my specific case, it was fortunately possible to discuss the research participants' dissatisfaction with their representation in the media and minimise its detrimental effects on our relations of trust and rapport with each other. However, this is not always possible, especially in larger communities or fieldwork settings, as some authors have shown (Greenberg, 1993; Wrobel, 1979).

Does this mean that we should refrain from communicating our observations and conclusions through the media? I do not think so. As was the case with my own work, media coverage may offer crucial opportunities to shape the terms of public debates. The fact that I was interviewed for this text did not lead to a large-scale and long-term change of dominant discourses about gender in Portuguese media. However, and considering the questions the journalist initially asked, I am convinced that this particular article's narratives of gender would have been very different, and in my opinion more problematic, if I had not been interviewed about my ethnographic work. Our capacity to influence public debates as ethnographers is often small, but it should not be dismissed, neglected or left unexplored. Mainstream media coverage of ethnography does have risks and in some cases those risks may be too high to make it worthwhile. In many situations, however, it is indeed possible to strike a satisfactory, and potentially emancipatory, balance between the opportunities and problems of media coverage of our ethnographies.

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