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Women working on a fair flower farm in Ecuador: An ethnographic study

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Contributor biography

Corrie Ellis is a PhD student in the department of Sociology at the University of California Santa Barbara whose area interests include gender, development, labor, environment, social change and Latin America. She holds an MA in Sociology from the University of California Santa Barbara and a BA in Sociology and Spanish from the University of Idaho. Corrie is currently preparing research examining women's organizing strategies in the global climate justice movement.

Relevant disciplines

Sociology, Anthropology

Academic level

Intermediate Undergraduate, Advanced Undergraduate, Postgraduate

Methods used

Ethnography, feminist research, qualitative interviews, participant observation, focus groups, grounded theory

Keywords

Ecuadorian floriculture, women and work, gender, flower industry, Fairtrade, ethical certifications, export production, labor conditions, ethnography, feminist research methods

Link to the research output

Ellis, C. (2013). *Como es duro es bonito: Labor conditions and gendered complexities for women working on a fairtrade rose farm in Ecuador*. (Unpublished MA thesis).
University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, USA.

Abstract

Despite a history of worker exploitation and environmental degradation, today the cut-flower industry is striving for ethical production practices. Ecuador is leading the way in this regard, and one farm, Fairtrade certified Nevado Roses, appears to be a shining example.

In 2012, I set out to conduct ethnographic research centering workers' perspectives about labor conditions and life as Fairtrade rose cultivators at Nevado Roses. I wanted to understand how women, who comprise the majority of flower workers, fare on a farm with socially and environmentally sustainable policies. The research confirmed the benefits of ethical production practices, but also revealed that Fairtrade production does not alleviate workers' struggles to balance work and family.

This case describes the research methods I employed, from the inception of the research idea to the final stages of analysis. It highlights the challenges encountered and choices made at all stages of the project to give readers a behind-the-scenes view of ethnographic research. I

focus attention on feminist research methods and the relationships between the researcher and the research subjects.

Learning outcomes

This case seeks to expose the reader to the kinds of decisions that go into planning and conducting an ethnographic study. By the end of the case, you should:

- Be more aware of the challenges that arise when conducting ethnographic research abroad or at home.
- Understand the value of feminist research methods that take account of the power, privilege and difference of the researcher and research subjects.
- Develop an awareness of the importance of creating reciprocal relationships between the researcher and informants or gatekeepers.
- Understand how to incorporate reciprocal practices into your own research.
- Be able to critically examine methodological weaknesses, strengths and strategies in this case that can extend to other ethnographic studies.

Women and floriculture

Since the 1960s, women have been the primary cultivators of cut-flowers in equatorial regions of the world. These women are often exposed to unstable, unsafe and unjust working conditions. Today, however, there are signs of change. In Ecuador, a top exporter of flowers, a number of farms are implementing ethical labor initiatives, one of which is Fairtrade.

Fairtrade is an international certification body that works to secure better trade conditions for workers. Fairtrade standards on flower farms require that employers meet health and safety standards, pay decent wages, guarantee workers' rights to join labor unions and share a portion of the profits, the Fairtrade Premium, with the workers. By purchasing products with the Fairtrade label, consumers around the world can help support more equitable trading relationships.

Nevado Roses (hereafter, Nevado) is one farm in Ecuador that is leading the way toward socially and environmentally responsible production practices. Nevado has been Fairtrade certified since 2002 and has implemented a number of projects to improve workers' lives. Among other benefits, the farm offers free day-care and a medical center on site, dental care and scholarship programs for workers' children.

Previous research on the cut-flower industry has focused overwhelmingly on abuse of workers' rights. The Colombian film by Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, "Love, Women and Flowers," is a classic example. Though a few recent studies have begun to consider ethical flower production, they devote little attention to worker experience. My research centers on workers' perspectives to provide an understanding of labor conditions and workers' lives on a Fairtrade rose farm in Ecuador.

Beginning an ethnographic study: Arranging fieldwork at a multimillion-dollar company

I first learned about Nevado in the fall of 2011 when I saw a U.S. public television special that portrayed it as a farm doing things right—both socially and environmentally. Since so

much previous research documented the dangers of working in flowers, I wanted to see if Nevado was as rosy as it appeared.

In the following months, I delved into the literature on floriculture in Latin America. I drew on both academic and popular sources, as well as film. I also learned all I could from Nevado's website.

The next step was gaining access to the farm, a multimillion-dollar business that produces over 25 million roses per year. In March 2012, I emailed a letter in Spanish and English to the owner of the company. I described my position as a U.S. graduate student and expressed my research intentions in an honest and truthful way that would appeal to a business owner—I wanted to conduct interviews and observations to learn about flower production and highlight ethical workplace practices. To my surprise, the owner responded the next day and welcomed the project.

Over the next two months, however, the owner did not respond to my queries as quickly. I often waited weeks before receiving responses to emails asking for information critical to arranging my travel and lodging. Though anxiety inducing, this experience taught me that once you've done all you can to organize your research trip, it's best to step back and try to trust the situation. In ethnography, important knowledge will be gained, even if it ends up being about how the project did *not* go according to plan. Suffice it to say, I gently persisted with emails and skyping and within days before leaving for Ecuador in June, everything fell into place. I arrived in Ecuador with a scheduled interview with the owner and set dates for fieldwork on the farm.

Research design

As an ethnographic study, this research sought to gain in-depth understanding of labor conditions and life for women working on a Fairtrade flower farm. The study was not designed to be generalizable, but to offer a case of what ethical production practices mean for workers at Nevado Roses. This case can be compared with others to understand how diverse conditions and policies impact worker experiences.

My preliminary review of the literature made me aware of the information gap about working conditions on Fairtrade farms, especially information coming from workers, rather than management. For this reason, I targeted workers as my key data source.

Qualitative interviews: Conversations with a purpose

My primary methods of data collection were qualitative in-depth interviews with workers and observations on the farm. I designed interviews according to a method developed by Robert Burgess, who advocates for conducting interviews as “conversations with a purpose.” In this method, the researcher develops themes and then guides the conversation to ensure that all themes are covered. For this research, I chose five themes that would provide information about what it was like to work at Nevado and to live life as a Fairtrade flower cultivator. The themes were:

- Life
- Work
- Other employment
- Community
- The Future

For each theme I developed a series of questions that I could use to structure the conversation. Questions included requests for the worker to describe her typical day, how she began working on the farm, if she had worked on other farms and how those job experiences compared to those at Nevado. I also inquired about what it was like to manage work and family and what interviewees hoped for the future. These questions ensured that I wasn't leading the interviewee to answer in any particular way. By speaking about their daily routines and work experiences, interviewees shared what *they* thought was important.

To address themes in a conversational manner, it is vital to actively listen, encourage the interviewee to expand on important details and respect the conversation as a reciprocal exchange. Toward reciprocity, I always asked the interviewee if she had any questions. This ensured that the conversation, though heavily focused on the interviewee's perspectives, also had room for her curiosity about me.

To gain a well-rounded understanding of the flower industry, I planned interviews with a variety of actors.

Industry experts

I first interviewed five academics and flower industry actors in Ecuador's capital, Quito. While these interviews were conducted as conversations with a purpose, and often included similar questions and themes to those I describe above, they were targeted toward learning about the industry on a national level. Knowledge of current issues in the Ecuadorian flower industry that I gained from these interviews prepared me to pick out important topics to probe further during worker interviews.

Focus groups with workers' committees

With a basic knowledge of previous research of flower farms and, from my Quito interviews, knowledge of the situation in Ecuador, I headed to the flower farm, my primary research site. Once there, I held two focus groups (or interviews with a group of people) with individuals who served on the committees that were in charge of developing Fairtrade projects. Workers on Fairtrade farms receive ten percent of sales as a Fairtrade Premium for use in community projects. At Nevado, two committees, one comprised of workers and the other comprised of workers and management, managed the premium, which totaled \$67,447 in 2011. Each committee included approximately 12 individuals, the majority of whom were present for the focus groups.

These focus groups, also conducted as conversations with a purpose, were an excellent opportunity to:

- learn how Fairtrade policies are implemented on a flower farm,
- gain a variety of perspectives from workers and management, and
- observe how workers and managers interacted with each other.

The most important aspect of the focus groups was that they gave me an opportunity to introduce myself to a variety of workers, supervisors and managers, who later, through snowball sampling (when one interviewee recommends another interviewee and so on), helped me build my worker interview sample. A few of the women I met in this first encounter later became key informants and brought me to their homes and the local community.

Individual workers' perspectives

In the following three weeks, I conducted 42 interviews with women workers in all areas of the farm (cultivation, post harvest packaging and pest control) and four interviews with administrators, including the company owner. Each morning, I arrived at the farm and followed a supervisor to the greenhouses where his or her group was working. Over the course of the fieldwork I interviewed at least four workers from all six supervisors' groups.

Supervisors varied in how they accommodated my presence among their groups. Some called the workers together to announce who I was, others simply said, "OK, let me know if you need anything," and walked off. One supervisor, a focus group participant, called each of her workers outside to sit with me for an interview. My initial contact with this supervisor during the focus group helped build good rapport between her and me, motivating her to use her supervisor position to help me communicate with workers.

My strategy for interviewing inside the greenhouses, while women worked, was to wait until the labor-intensive harvest was complete. I then approached women for interviews as they began to do the daily chores of pruning and weeding. I introduced myself, explained that I was a student writing a thesis about their work, and then asked if I could record an interview, assuring them of the confidentiality of their identities.

Most workers readily consented to an interview. Those who were hesitant about being recorded generally accepted after I explained that the recordings helped me capture *exactly* what they said and allowed me to review words that, as a non-native Spanish speaker, I may not fully understand at the time of the interview.

Interviews began with requests for demographic information and then transitioned into the main conversation. When I felt confident that we had covered the central themes and returned

to any interesting points, I asked interviewees if they had questions for me. I believe interviewees, who engage in conversation with the researcher and answer her curiosities, have the right to ask their own questions. Ensuring that interviewee questions were part of our conversations contributed to the reciprocal nature of our relationships.

Ethnographic observations: Being a sponge among the flower beds

My other primary method of data collection was ethnographic observation. When conducting ethnographic observations, try to be a sponge. Absorb what those around you are doing and the points of reference around which social actors organize. Comfort and skill in this methodology comes with practice and there are always areas for improvement.

An excellent resource to review before, during and after the observation process is *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw. These scholars not only discuss how to record what you see, and how to write about and analyze your fieldnotes, but most importantly, *how* to see. The ethnographer should pay attention to social interactions, scenes, characters and members' meanings and experiences.

On the farm

In my days on the farm, I focused primarily on scenes and characters. Each morning I stood among the rose beds in out-of-the-way places, careful not to disrupt the workers. As I watched workers complete the daily harvest I periodically took a small notebook out of my pocket to write short notes or quotes to trigger my memory later, when I drafted complete field notes about people, events and interactions. Observations in the greenhouses helped me

learn about all stages of rose production and made me familiar with the workers' daily routines.

My observations also took me to other areas of the farm and activities of the workday. I observed the administrators in the office making sales, speaking with clients and fulfilling orders on computers. I joined the workers at lunch, sitting with them, answering questions and listening to their conversations with each other. I was also on the farm for two special events—a competition for recycling creativity among local school children, and Family Day, an occasion when the farm holds special events to celebrate employees and their families.

Interacting in these different spaces allowed me to triangulate, or crosscheck, information with different sources. For example, after hearing about a conflict over pesticides from a local community member, I asked workers and management about the issue. Multiple individuals in different levels of the organization offered the same details and explanations about the event, giving me confidence in my understanding of the situation.

Off the farm

Finally, I was able to make a few trips to the local communities and interact with workers after work hours. I attended a local farmers market, a parade for the town's patron saint and a going away party the workers threw for me—cake and Karaoke singing at a local restaurant! One worker welcomed me and a few other workers to her home for dinner. Seeing workers in street wear or colorful parade costumes, singing karaoke and conversing over the evening meal gave me a glimpse of their lives outside of the work place. It made me aware of their living conditions, leisure activities, community traditions and social class positions.

Feminist research methods

From the beginning of this project, I worked to incorporate feminist methodologies and feminist objectivity into my research. Attention to concepts developed by two scholars helped me fulfill these goals.

All research seeks to be objective, but unlike common understandings of this concept that see objectivity as all-knowing, impartial truth, feminists like Donna Haraway suggest that objectivity is complex. What we know depends on who we are and on how we are positioned in a setting. Because we are socially situated, all knowledge is partial. Thus, Donna Haraway defines feminist objectivity as situated knowledge. She urges researchers to be

- **accountable** to research subjects,
- aware of the **positioning** of actors in social settings and
- mindful of the **partial nature of knowledge**.

Explicit recognition of these elements and how they inform ethnographic research is critical for practicing reflexivity, or taking account of how the researcher's presence in the research setting affects social actors and the research process.

Kum-Kum Bhavnani complements Donna Haraway's ideas and specifies three things the researcher should look out for when conducting research:

- First, she cautions against **reinscription**, or putting people into stereotypical representations.
- Second, she pushes researchers to be aware of the **micropolitics** of the research setting, or how individuals' varying levels of power inform their interactions with each other.

- Finally, she stresses the importance of explicitly recognizing **difference**. The researcher should observe and record how the researcher's identity is different from that of research subjects and how individuals and groups in the research setting differ among and between each other. In other words, what forms of power, privilege and oppression do individuals experience as a result of their difference—difference along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation?

Feminist objectivity in practice: Avoiding reinscription

So how did I put these concepts into practice at Nevado Roses? To avoid reproducing stereotypes that portray rural women from the Third World as uneducated, deskilled and exploited workers, I tried to get to know my interviewees, not as Ecuadorian flower workers, but as June, Cindy or Gale (I use pseudonyms to protect worker identities). I took note of how their work was highly skilled—women had to know exactly when and how to prune and harvest roses—of the empowerment and enjoyment some women gained from their jobs—through sending their children to school, interacting with friends and producing a beautiful product—and the important critiques and ideas they offered about work, politics and family.

Feminist objectivity in practice: Accountability

Taking action

I strove to be accountable to my subjects for what I learned during my time on the farm.

- For example, I noticed there wasn't any soap at the washbasins where workers washed their hands before eating lunch. This was a health concern because workers handled

flowers that had been exposed to chemicals. I notified the nurse about this and the basins were promptly stocked with soap.

- Secondly, I learned from a few interviewees that one of the supervisors refused to provide the workers with enough time to complete their Fairtrade duties, such as management of Fairtrade-funded scholarships, during normal working hours. The supervisor had also made derogatory remarks about the indigenous workers. Disturbed by what the workers and I felt were injustices, I asked my informants if there was anything I could do. They decided that I should say something to management. Protecting the anonymity of the workers, I explained the situation to the director of Fairtrade. The management investigated the problem, and based on an ongoing conflict (of which I was unaware) between one of my informants and the supervisor in question, decided to move this informant to a different supervisor. Since this incident, workers have informed me that the worker in question is much happier in her new situation. It is important to note that I intervened only because I was asked to do so by those who were directly affected and that I did so after having built rapport with workers and management. Additionally, I intervened after completing my fieldwork and leaving the research site, thereby minimizing the effects that such an intervention could have on data collection.

In contrast to the stereotypical image of the impartial researcher who observes from a distance and asks pre-established questions in an effort to record what actors “naturally” do in a setting, feminist objectivity calls on the researcher to recognize that she is herself an actor, observing, learning and affecting social settings from her particular position. As a public sociologist interested in employing my scholarship for social justice, I felt a responsibility to use my position and skills to aid workers or management when they asked for my help.

Reciprocity

A final element of accountability is creating reciprocity, something I valued in all of my encounters:

- I made time during interviews for interviewees to ask me questions and satisfy their curiosity.
- Recognizing that it is important to develop reciprocity with people in power who make the research possible, I helped the owner. At his request, I spent an hour each day conducting English lessons with the sales team and wrote a blog for his website about my mother's floral shop in Idaho, U.S.A.
- I assisted the sales team with their correspondence to English speaking clients.
- Now, with the research complete, I plan to write a Spanish version of my findings and recommendations for improving working conditions to share with Nevado management and workers and the Ecuadorian flower export association.
- Finally, I share my knowledge of the benefits of Fairtrade production with those I meet and encourage friends, family and colleagues to buy Fairtrade flowers, something the workers asked me to do.

Partiality and positioning: Recognizing power and difference

I am a young, educated, white, American woman. I consciously worked to understand how these identities affected my interactions with others and how actors' differences impacted the micropolitics, or social dynamics, of the flower farm.

Positions of power

- My privileged position as a bilingual graduate student from the U.S. made it possible for me, through an email to the president of a multimillion-dollar company, to gain access to the farm. I was provided with free transportation and lunch each day and, especially near the end of the fieldwork, was permitted to navigate and observe the farm on my own.
- Assisting the sales team, and even the lead economist, with English emails to clients made me keenly aware of the power I wielded as a native English speaker.
- Conversations with mothers my age and older revealed the different mobility and freedom I enjoyed as a woman without children. Workers loved their children, but many had been forced to end their education in order to support their families.
- While I didn't share motherhood as a status with workers (38 of 42 women I interviewed had children), they often identified with me because I was someone's child, an aspect of my identity that was enhanced by my young age. Being someone's daughter, and positioning myself as a student who wanted to learn from them, experts in flowers, and in most cases, my elders, facilitated our conversations. Though the young student position was one of subordination, when used in this way, it helped me create an open and productive research environment.

Positions of subordination

- My age, however, and my gender, also placed me in a position of subordination in interactions with older men, many of whom held powerful supervisory or managerial positions. They didn't take me as seriously as they may have if I had been an older male researcher.

- Gender also informed difference and interactions between workers on the farm. In administration and cultivation, men occupied more of the powerful, well-paid, male-typed positions (owner, economist, supervisor) while women occupied more of the female-typed positions with little influence over coworkers (secretary, sales assistants, child care workers).
- Inequalities in the structure of the flower farm were further compounded by race, education and space. The majority of the workers were mestizo (mixed race), while the owner and I were white and of European descent. Administrative workers earned larger salaries and had lighter skin and more education than their indigenous coworkers in cultivation. Cultivators rarely entered the administrative building and administrators rarely went out to the greenhouses. Each group ate in separate lunchrooms and walked in separate groups to and from the bus.

Explicitly attending to difference during data collection, analysis and presentation of the research reveals the structures of inequality embedded in the research setting, interactions, and the research process itself. This allows the feminist researcher to recognize her position, the partial nature of her knowledge and to hold herself accountable to the research subjects.

Recognizing strengths and weaknesses

Attention to difference and power also improves the researcher's ability to critique her own methodology. Here, I raise a couple of issues that readers may consider when judging the validity of this research.

- First, how can we be sure that the workers expressed their true feelings when they were interviewed at the workplace? Wouldn't it have been better to interview workers at home?

Though some workers may not have felt free to express critical views of the farm while at work, many did, sharing stories of sexual harassment and complaints about supervisors. Interviewing at the work place was actually quite private. Workers were spread out in the greenhouses, the rows of roses were often taller than the workers, and workers were not subjected to surveillance by supervisors, who were often in separate greenhouses during the interviews. In addition, interviewing at the workplace meant that workers were being paid for the time they spent in conversation. Due to long work hours and time spent travelling to and from work, many workers would not have had time for an interview after work hours. Finally, the extensive time I spent on the farm allowed workers to learn about me from each other. I became recognizable as the student writing a thesis about their work and they became more comfortable and curious to talk to me.

- Second, did gaining access to the farm through the owner color the interactions I observed?

Since I was interested in learning about ethical production practices and workers' daily experience on the farm, it was necessary for me to have access to the farm and permission from the owner. To lessen the possibility that the owner would inquire about what workers said in their interviews, and to decrease worker concerns that I might report to the owner, I conducted the owner interview first.

The support of the owner, and therefore, the management, was important because it facilitated my ability to conduct interviews with a wide range of actors on the farm. Management had the power to call people to the office and arrange meetings for me.

Analysis: Making sense of the data

Upon returning to the U.S., interviews were transcribed and then coded using qualitative research software. Software facilitates the analysis and organization of interviews and fieldnotes and allows the researcher to highlight, search and run reports for codes that he or she has identified. See the web resources section for a variety of software options; many have student discounts.

For example, one code for this research was “mom wants time with kids”. With software, I was able to search for and highlight excerpts from interview transcripts that expressed workers’ concerns about not having enough time with their children. I could then see how many interviewees expressed this concern and examine the contexts in which it was expressed.

Next, I organized codes about the same topic into themes, such as childcare. As each theme emerged, I wrote memos, or short analytical essays about its variations, illustrations and how it connected to previous research or other themes. Using grounded theory, I began to see patterns that were grounded in workers’ words and my observations. The memos that expressed these insights, with editing, many drafts and continual reference to the data, evolved into the core elements of the analysis and findings of this research.

Findings

The central finding of this project is that flower production is a good job for women workers at Nevado Roses. There are many valuable benefits of Fairtrade policies. However, the job

still demands long hours, pays little and requires a constant struggle to balance work and family.

Women's primary concern was their children. Nevado's day care only served children less than six years old and low wages made the cost of childcare outside of this context prohibitive. This meant that children as young as six were sometimes left at home alone in the mornings before school began, and in the evenings before their parents returned from the flower farm.

Centering women in this study revealed these challenges and made it clear that there is room for improvement, even in the best of jobs in the Third World. Based on women's words, I argue for more flexible workplace policies, better wages, and ultimately, socialized childcare provided by the government. Industry, scholars and governments must continue to work toward valuing social reproduction and supporting workers' rights to spend time enjoying their work *and* their families.

Conclusion

In concluding this case, I'd like to leave the reader with the words of one of my interviewees, words that describe how she felt about her work, but also words that aptly describe ethnographic research—"Though it's hard it's beautiful" (*Como es duro es bonito*). There will be challenges in all research stages, but sharing knowledge through ethnographic encounters is a beautiful process.

Exercises and discussion questions

1. Can you think of challenges that may arise when conducting interviews as “conversations with a purpose”? What strategies could you use to overcome these?
2. Why is developing reciprocal relationships important in ethnography and what are strategies, not employed for this project, which can create reciprocal relationships?
3. Take your classroom as a research setting. What is your positionality and difference? What positions of power and subordination do you have in relation to a friend or classmate or the professor? Why might your perspective be partial and what are the micropolitics of the setting?
4. Upon learning about subpar working conditions, would you have taken the same actions toward accountability as the researcher—to inquire about soap and notify management of the supervisor problem? Please explain any concerns you have about these actions, what you would have done, and why.
5. The researcher chose an ethnographic approach to gain in-depth understanding of daily life on the farm. What other methods could be employed to learn about working conditions or how could the method used here be improved? Thinking about sampling, data collection and data analysis, please prepare a brief description (1000 words or less) of an alternate research plan, or improvements to the ethnographic approach.
6. The researcher conducted all but three interviews in her second language and in a culture different from her own. In such a context, what are some problems that can arise and how can you safeguard against them?

Further reading

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Links to web resources

Learn about Fair Trade

Fairtrade International: www.fairtrade.net

Fair World Project: www.fairworldproject.org

Qualitative Research Software

HyperRESEARCH and HyperTRANSCRIBE:

<http://www.researchware.com/products.html>

NVivo: http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx

Dedoose: <http://www.dedoose.com/>

ATLAS.ti: <http://www.atlasti.com/index.html>

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