Identity, Gender, and Tracking

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A SOCIOLOGIST AT VETERINARY COLLEGE: RESEARCH METHODS

This is an ethnographic research project that primarily draws on qualitative in-depth interviews and participant observation within the context of veterinary medical education. The research spans the course of four years and provides an up-close account of the experiences of veterinary medical students in the educational system known as tracking, described in the previous chapter. Tracking separates veterinary students into distinct specialty areas, similar to majors. I argue that the different tracks create distinct experiences for the students. These differences ultimately illustrate the nuanced and varied social processes involved in veterinary medical education. These include socially constructing nonhuman animal species, attaching differential value to the related areas of knowledge, creating a collective professional identity, negotiating the fit within the constructed boundaries, and managing gender within an increasingly feminized field. Needless to say, the students I met and came to know throughout this research encountered more in their educational endeavors than just learning anatomy and biology. During our interviews we often discussed difficult topics and, consequently, I took care in my methodological approach. In this chapter I first explain how I gained access to the setting and describe the participants. I then explain how I collected and analyzed the data. Finally, I discuss my own positionality throughout this project by providing a reflexive account of my standpoint and how it not only brought me to this topic but also shaped my research goals.
OVERVIEW AND GAINING ACCESS

This research focused primarily on a veterinary college in the western United States that offers a tracking system for its students, henceforth referred to as Foothills Veterinary College (FVC). After collecting preliminary data there, I did also interview students from a variety of veterinary colleges spread out across the U.S. While I ultimately was able to capture detailed stories from a range of settings, FVC was the site where I observed firsthand many of the experiences students described. Ethnographies are often critiqued for this single-site or limited sites field study approach; however, it is this intense immersion in place that gives ethnography its greatest value. The in-depth interviews provided much rich detail that helped me to unpack the realities of these students, but being present on a campus performing ethnographic participant observation allowed me to distinguish any inconsistencies between their words and their actions. In *For Ethnography*, Steve Herbert, a geographer, makes the case that ethnography is underutilized in his discipline; his argument is that in studying place, ethnography is extremely valuable since it “is also different from surveys and interviews because it examines what people do as well as what they say” (Herbert, 2000, p. 552).

I chose the particular program at FVC for the simple fact of accessibility. Its proximity to me made it convenient for me to spend adequate amounts of time there. I also had the good fortune of knowing a gatekeeper, my academic mentor, who had also conducted research at this college and therefore could direct me to people who might help me gain access to students (Harrington, 2003). After gaining approval from my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted the dean at FVC to introduce myself and my project and to ask for his blessing in reaching out to the student population. Although his approval was not a research requirement, I did want to extend the courtesy and provide transparency for the college’s administration so that they knew of my intentions should they hear about my research from any students (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). This initial contact proved fruitful, and the dean even gave me the email listserv addresses of the different cohorts of veterinary students so that I could contact them.

Data collection took place in two major phases. The first phase, which began in 2009 after I received IRB approval and introduced myself to the dean, went smoothly. I experienced few of the struggles that researchers who study vulnerable or difficult-to-reach populations encounter. I was pleasantly surprised that I was welcomed onto the FVC campus and given the assistance of the listserv
addresses. This resulted in initial conversations with 20 veterinary medical students, which ultimately amounted to less than half of my final pool of participants. Consistent with the grounded research approach I employed, our conversations ranged widely because of the broad questions I brought to the students (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Not quite knowing what would end up being the focus of my analyses, I mostly allowed the students to shape the direction of our talks (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This was extremely beneficial as it raised numerous significant themes that I explored in more detail later in the research.

After completing the first 20 interviews, I paused in the fieldwork to analyze the interviews and the field notes I had made thus far. I began to think analytically about the data and make sociological sense of hours of conversation and observation (Becker & Geer, 1960; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Lofland et al., 2006; Ritchie et al., 2003). During this time, I received a fellowship from the Animals and Society Institute, which allowed me to develop my ideas with scholars who approached human-animal studies from various disciplines. This experience greatly shaped my emerging analytic process and pushed me to make the case for why sociology is helpful in understanding human-animal relationships within the context of veterinary education, rather than simply describing what happens within that social setting. The fellowship resulted in my first sole-authored publication using this data, which ultimately became Chapter 5 in this book.

The first phase of the research helped me design a more thoughtful approach to the second phase (DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Silverman, 1997; Stewart, 1998). I returned to the field and began phase two of data collection with a more refined research agenda. The second phase did not prove as smooth as the first, however. Whereas the first phase was exploratory and thus felt more casual, open-ended, and enjoyable, I focused the second phase more explicitly (Prus, 1996; Puddephatt et al., 2009), pushing interviewees to discuss topics in greater detail. Some of these were simply topics to which students had previously given little thought, such as instances of inequality in their education, whether around gender or area of practice, which I examine in Chapters 3 and 6 (DeVault, 1999; DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Hawkesworth, 2007). Others, however, were quite heavy and uncomfortable, for the students and even for me (Sanders, 1998). For example, the topic of death was an important one to explore. It showed me how the students managed their own participation in the killing of their patients and how they attached different definitions to the act of killing, whether in the form of euthanasia, its linguistic roots meaning “good death,” or slaughter (Herzog et al., 1989;
Sanders, 1995). I found that the approach to death influenced the respondents’ construction of their identities, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

The second phase was also logistically less smooth because FVC then had a new dean. Unlike his predecessor, the new dean did not roll out the red carpet for me. My previous run of good research luck seemed to have come to an end. This dean felt that the students were already the focus of so much research inquiry that he would prefer them not to be involved in yet another study. To be sure, veterinary medical students endure vast amounts of research, largely survey-based and quantitative, and conducted by the veterinary community itself (see Hooper, 1994; Klosterman et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2009; Willis et al., 2007). I tried to explain that this was a very different kind of project, one not done with this population before, which could provide greater insight into their experiences. Despite my best effort, I did not receive the same blessing the previous dean had given me, nor did I receive access to the email listservs. Nevertheless, because the dean’s approval was not a required step in my research but more of a courtesy, I moved ahead with the second phase of data collection.

I ultimately conducted in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 42 veterinary students at various levels in their training. In the first phase I used three strategies to recruit participants. First, as mentioned, thanks to the dean I sent emails to the cohort listservs. Second, the presidents of the various veterinary student clubs emailed their members on my behalf. These clubs provide opportunities for like-minded students and professors to meet and learn more about specific topics. For instance, the Bovine Practitioners Club offers students interested in working with cattle a chance to gain more experience in that area. I obtained the presidents’ email addresses from the contact information listed on the club websites. The club presidents proved essential in recruiting participants, especially in the second phase of data collection when I did not have the listserv addresses. And third, I recruited students through posted advertisements around their campus (see Appendix A). The ads probably garnered the fewest participants. The personal emails from members already within the veterinary community, such as the club presidents, proved much more successful in legitimizing the study (Harrington, 2003).

The number of participants in ethnographies is intentionally lower than in quantitative studies such as survey research. Due to the in-depth methodological approach of ethnographies, larger sample sizes do not garner the sort of data that ethnographers are typically seeking. Qualitative studies with larger participant pools and quantitative studies with huge datasets provide great insight
into larger systemic patterns and trends. But they can lack the nuance of how those processes form, how they operate, and how they are maintained. This is why smaller, more focused methodologies are helpful. Ultimately, the research questions should drive the choice of method. For this study I was interested in observing and analyzing the process by which veterinary students managed the tracking system in their education. To get at questions around professional identity formation and maintenance, socially constructed meanings around scientific knowledge and different animals, and how gender works to shape everyday realities, I needed to step into their shoes for a long period of time. An ethnographic approach pushed me to spend that quality time to dive deep into their world. While I remained a researcher, an outsider, I got as close as was possible.

A larger sample size would have spread my attention too thin and detracted from the rich time I was able to spend with these participants. A smaller sample size, though, would have been insufficient. I stopped at the number that I did because at that point I had reached what qualitative researchers call saturation. Saturation refers to the point when the data no longer offer new theoretical explorations nor add to the development of the conceptual ideas already found (Charmaz, 2006). While this point is challenging to operationalize, there are attempts to provide direction on when and how researchers know that they have reached an adequate sample size. Qualitative scholars often settle on at least 20 and not much more beyond 50 in a qualitative sample (Vasileiou et al., 2018). While this range is debated and still does not provide a quantified metric to answer the “how many?” question for qualitative researchers, the few boundaries that have become institutionalized at least provide a guide. For example, an editorial from the Archives of Sexual Behavior, upon noting an increase in qualitative submissions to the journal, put forth a policy for authors drawing on grounded theory and in-depth interviews to have a minimum of 25 to 30 participants in order to reach saturation (Dworkin, 2012). The number I settled on fits well within all of these recommendations and is in line with similar ethnographic studies. But, moreover, this sample size allowed me to go in-depth with my analyses without being overrun with data; and, ultimately, it demonstrated saturation in my conversations with students when I could actually anticipate certain responses that I kept hearing from them. My hope, nonetheless, is that more research can be done to address the limitations that smaller sample sizes and limited field sites inevitably bring. After presenting the data and analyses in Chapters 3 through 6, in the Conclusion I discuss in more detail what the limitations of this study are and what they mean for our understanding of this topic,
along with recommending areas for future research. Ethnographies can often serve as a great launch point for further inquiry by revealing realities that, previously, we did not even know were there.

While I was getting this rich, nuanced data at FVC during the first phase of data collection, I was indeed concerned about whether the location of this study not only influenced but also limited my conclusions. Studying students at first from only one specific veterinary college raised questions about the applicability of my claims to the wider population of veterinary medical students. To access students from other programs within the U.S. without undertaking extensive travel and without taking away from my ethnographic attention at FVC, I took advantage of a veterinary training program at the clinic of the local humane society. Because of its reputation in the growing specialty of shelter medicine, students from across the country come to this clinic to do externships. Although this setting allowed me to access students from different veterinary colleges across the country, because its population consists of dogs and cats, the interviewees I recruited there were small animal students. Nevertheless, my major goal in these interviews was to see whether and how their responses differed from those of the students at FVC. Because veterinary colleges from other regions of the U.S. use tracking in different ways, the student externs allowed me to examine the differences. The humane society provided me with the email addresses of these students; I contacted them before they arrived for their externship and asked them to participate in my study, and the administrators at the humane society validated my research (Harrington, 2003). Although I did not interview an overwhelming number of students from schools other than FVC (14.29% of the participant pool were from other veterinary programs), my conversations with them did provide some preliminary insights, which I incorporate into Chapters 3 through 6. Ultimately, I noted few substantive differences across the veterinary programs; participants largely echoed the same broad discourses about animals, medical knowledge and treatment, identity, and gender. I believe that differences in geography do matter, however, and in the Conclusion I suggest future research inquiries.

Although I did not compensate my participants for their time, I usually bought them coffee or other food or beverage, since we often met at coffee shops near the veterinary teaching hospital. The students seemed to appreciate this small gesture, and it even became part of the pitch they would use when they emailed their cohort mates on my behalf. For example, emails would usually state
something along the lines of “Jenny is really interesting to talk to, and she even treated me to a coffee!”

Although many interviews took place at local coffee shops, I also often met students at the veterinary teaching hospital, either in empty classrooms or even in the barn while they were on duty to check on the animal patients there. In this way I could see the students in their own environment (Atkinson et al., 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2002, 2008). This prompted further questions about what they were doing, how they interacted with actual animals who were just as present in our interactions as the two of us were, and whether what they said and what I witnessed them doing were in sync with one another. I recorded all interviews with participants’ informed consent and kept recordings and transcriptions confidential. All names I use here, or in any presentation or other written work based on this research, are pseudonyms.

**DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

The students came from diverse regions, but mostly from the United States. Many planned to practice in different parts of the U.S. once they graduated. Their ages varied somewhat because of some nontraditional students pursuing veterinary medicine as a second career, but most were in their 20s and 30s. The majority of participants identified as women (N = 35), consistent with the demographics of veterinary medicine. The majority were white (N = 36), which also coincides with the demographics of the profession (Elmore, 2003). Of the participants, 6 had declared the small animal track, 3 the large animal track, and 10 the mixed track. Of the undeclared students in the first and second year of study, 5 were considering the small animal track, another 5 the large animal track, 11 the mixed track, and 2 remained undecided.

These numbers represent more diversity in specialties than exists in the profession. For instance, in 2020, only 1.7% and 3.9% of total private veterinary practices were food animal exclusive and food animal predominant, while 66.8% and 8.4% were companion animal exclusive and companion animal predominant (AVMA, 2020). Mixed animal practices constituted 5.4%, equine practices made up 5.6%, and 0.5% and 7.8% represented other types of practices and practices in which species were unspecified (AVMA, 2020). Overwhelmingly, companion animal exclusive practitioners constitute the majority of practicing
veterinarians. However, this research represents significant numbers of students in the other specialties; half of the participants were pursuing or interested in pursuing a mixed animal practice. This diversity helped the analysis, since I was able to access students who worked with all the different species in veterinary medical education.

**QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROCESS AND ANALYSIS**

After asking the year and track of participants, I followed a conversational style in the interviews I conducted (see Appendix B for the interview guide). We first discussed the history of their relationships with animals. Then, I inquired about their experiences in veterinary school, with the tracking system as the guiding topic. I initially asked broad questions: What made you decide to become a veterinarian? What past experiences do you have with animals? Then I asked them to explain the tracking system in their own words, which opened up the conversation to how we categorize animals. For example, I asked: Can you walk me through the key milestones of veterinary education? Which species were present in these key teaching moments? By asking questions such as these, I was able to get the students to tell me the stories of their lives with animals. I encouraged them to speak about the experiences they found most important or salient to them (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Thus, I was less interested in facts or truths and more interested in how they constructed their realities through narratives (Maynes et al., 2012).

Overall, the students were willing and even eager to talk to me. Several pointed out that the topics we discussed were interesting and sometimes even provided a learning experience for them. I conducted the interviews myself and personally coded the transcriptions, using emergent inductive techniques (Becker & Geer, 1960; Charmaz, 2006; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Lofland et al., 2006; Naples, 2003). I read the transcriptions repeatedly until I recognized recurring themes. I then coded the transcriptions, looking for these themes. Consequently, the themes revealed subthemes and I further refined my analysis. For instance, once I realized how important the definition of horses was to the students, I focused my examination on the instances in which they discussed this species and equine medicine. Writing descriptive accounts for every mention of horses enabled me to pull out the main ways they discussed these animals. I was able to limit my biases as well as possible by using this inductive method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).
RESEARCHER ROLE AND REFLEXIVITY

I had an insider/outsider role in this particular setting that had the potential to create bias. Specifically, I had once been a student in an undergraduate animal health program that would have allowed me to bypass a bachelor’s degree and go directly to the training for the doctorate of veterinary medicine upon admittance. My time in this program, along with working in various veterinary medical clinics in preparation for a career in the field, gave me particular experiences and knowledge that proved helpful in navigating the research setting I discuss in this book. However, when I began this study, I worried that this background would either generate bias on my part or create a barrier between the participants and me for I had left that pathway toward veterinary medicine before completing the animal health program and before applying to a veterinary college. It was then that I began to pursue the social sciences instead. My decision to change career directions was multifaceted. Ultimately, I became more interested in understanding why we treat animals in the way we do rather than learning how to treat them. In part, too, my decision was influenced by the fact that I did not like inflicting harm on animals to learn to heal them, and I feared the students would take offense if they presumed we held differing ethics. Therefore, in the beginning, I did not discuss my own experiences unless directly asked about them; if asked, I was always honest. Those who became aware of my history did not seem insulted by my choice to leave the field, as I had feared. Instead, those who questioned me about it seemed intrigued that someone with their similar background was doing very different work with animals; in some cases, this even bonded us in a way.

I did allude to all participants that I knew more than the layperson about veterinary medicine because I could speak in their own language using proper terms, I did not recoil at the description of invasive medical procedures, and I knew enough about veterinary school protocol that I did not appear surprised by some of their revelations. In this way, my insider/outsider status benefited my study. Other scholars have grappled with the insider/outsider dilemma and have used it to the advantage of their research. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) reflected on her own marginalized status as a Black woman in academia and used this outsider within status to contribute to Black feminist thought, a field that would be missing if not for Black female intellectuals in these unique positions. Robert Merton (1972) wrote on insider and outsider knowledge and the claimed advantages of each perspective: outsiders can claim detachment and better objectivity, but insiders can claim that only they have access to the particular knowledge...
concerning their group. By using the role-playing approach, I was able to use my role as “one of you” with the veterinary students and gain access to greater information because they could reveal their dilemmas to someone they felt had experienced the same complexities (Harrington, 2003).

In an effort to extend my reflexivity to the larger macro-level structures that sociologists typically address, I would be negligent if I did not admit my own standpoint regarding gender and race (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). I am a white woman, a member of the largest demographic in veterinary medicine currently. My own raced and gendered identities influenced my entrance into veterinary medicine, as they had for many of my participants. For instance, veterinary medicine is composed mostly of people who look like me, thereby creating a certain level of comfort within this setting. Consequently, being a white woman was another insider status I could claim in the field. Because I looked like many of my participants, or at least looked like the norm, my interest in their field appeared unremarkable. Thus, my race, my gender, and my background in veterinary medicine all helped privilege me as an insider with this particular population.

My standpoint as a white woman with experience in veterinary medicine also influenced the questions that initially interested me, which stem from the feminist methodological tradition that places issues of power and inequality at the forefront of research (DeVault, 1999; Hawkesworth, 2007; Naples, 2003). Before I began this research project, I worked with sociologist Leslie Irvine on a study of women veterinarians (see Irvine & Vermilya, 2010). The profession has dramatically become numerically feminized in recent decades, with women now making up the majority of practicing veterinarians. Our research focused on how women understood the experience of feminization in their own careers. This project inevitably primed me to think about gender as I began my own research. Aside from researching gender, however, I considered it an important social structure for my study largely because of my own gendered experiences in animal health. While an undergraduate in the animal health program, I leaned toward studying large animal medicine. As I discuss in Chapter 6, men still dominate this area, which consists of fewer practitioners than the female-dominated area of small animal medicine. This distribution allows for the perception that the field, as a whole, is feminized, even though one of its two dominant areas is still composed mainly of men.

As a woman interested in large animal medicine, I often found myself surrounded by men: my fellow classmates and my professors. I vividly remember informal deterrents in the form of jokes and conversations embedded into our
education that effectively dissuaded many women from staying in this specialty. Specifically, women’s physical size was constantly the focus of skeptical comments questioning our ability to do the work involved in large animal medicine. I am $5'3"$, and my height was used as a reason for why I should consider a different line of work. Even as I performed the duties of a large animal student, these discourses about women’s physical abilities were commonplace during my time in animal health. I have one memory that illustrates this discrimination well. During an animal lab that took place outside the classroom at one of the barns on campus, my professor instructed us to select a sheep to flip. This involves placing the sheep in a submissive sitting position that then allows a veterinarian or owner to conduct an examination, trim hooves, or shear the wool coat. Once one learns this technique, it is relatively easy to perform. It does require a certain amount of strength, but all the able-bodied students in my lab could eventually perform this task after being shown how, regardless of their size and gender.

As a student who flipped her sheep successfully on the first try, I was extremely proud of myself, and I thought that this would end the discriminating comments, especially since most of the other women in the lab also successfully flipped their sheep. However, the gendered discourse persisted and eventually made the women in the large animal classes the outsiders, and—if they could keep up—the exceptions. Keeping up also made for a tougher road for women to walk as many of us felt we had to work harder and be smarter to have a chance at being seen as equals. My participants also experienced this gendered discrimination, and their descriptions and interpretations of it appear in Chapter 6. In short, my own experiences in animal health led me to assume that gender mattered in this way for the students I met, which I ultimately found that it did, but because of my experiences, I did not reach this conclusion as inductively as I did the other major themes that I present here.

I turn now to presenting the data from this research study (Chapters 3 through 6). Often, I use the direct words from veterinary students themselves. Short explanations from them are embedded into my writing, either as paraphrases or, if in quotations, as direct quotes. Longer excerpts are also included and are offset from my writing. These short and long quotes from the students are included to give them their rightful voice. I often chose to keep the slang terms they used and even some of the pauses and inevitable stumbling that we all do when we are in conversation with one another. I do paraphrase and attempt to clear up confusing passages for you, the reader, but I wanted to also present the moments I spent with these individuals as realistically as possible. Our conversations were
not always easy ones. The moments of reflection or struggles for finding the right words, to me as an ethnographic interviewer, are just as important as the words themselves. To begin, let us start with the focus of most educational settings: knowledge.