

## The Emerging Significance of Feminist Research and Methodology

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### Abstract

In its present state feminist research is a growing field bringing to the surface women's voices and perspectives often ignored in the past in academics as well as policy making. This research is informed by women's struggles against oppression, their beliefs and values, and its diversity. This paper puts forward the need for Feminist Research and Methodology to grow and evolve as a research discipline informed by feminist beliefs and concerns with increasing support from decision makers to actively aid the process of social change for global gender justice, changing women's subordination and ending social inequality in all forms.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminist, Research, Methodology

### 1. Introduction:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (Simone de Beauvoir, 1952, pp. xviii, xxiii)

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. . . . she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" We can no longer ignore within women that voice that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home." (Betty Friedan, 1963, pp. 15, 32)

Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, speaking many decades later, expresses their deep feelings of exclusion from the dominant avenues of knowledge building, seeing their own experiences, concerns, and worth diminished and invalidated by the dominant powers of their society.

### 2. Hypothesis:

The argument put forward in this paper is that there is a need for Feminist Research Methodology to be a separate branch in the social sciences. Feminist research is research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about and an identifiable method of knowing which distinctly draw on women's experience of living in a world in which they are subordinate to men.

Feminist research is expected to adopt critical perspectives toward dominant intellectual traditions that have in the past ignored and/or justified women's oppression (Acker J., and others, 1983). It is intended to bring to the surface voices that are often excluded from knowledge production and policy making, and critically reflect upon how it can all be done better. It is seen as being concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice and committed to changing the condition of women (Acker J. and others, 1983). It is concerned with asymmetrical power relationships including hierarchical power relationships in the research process and the relationship between researchers and researched. The role of the researcher is thus to produce useful knowledge which contributes to global gender justice, to changing women's subordination and to stopping all forms of social inequality.

### **3. Theoretical Perspective on Feminism:**

'The most central and common belief shared by all feminists, whatever our "type" is the presupposition that women are oppressed. It is from this common acceptance that there is indeed a problem, that there is something amiss in the treatment of women in society that feminism arises.' (Stanley and Wise, 1983)

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies which share a common stated aim: to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist generally self-defines as advocating for or supporting the rights and equality of women. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender.

Charles Fourier, a Utopian Socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word "feminism" in 1837. (Goldstein, 1982, p.92) The words "feminism" and "feminist" first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872, Great Britain in the 1890s, and the United States in 1910. (Mina Kruseman, 1994, p. 31)

If there is a central reason why feminists do feminist research it revolves around the need to know and understand better the nature of the hurt we sustain as a group - a group which is subordinated on the grounds of our female gender. This is not 'knowledge for its own sake' but rather is knowledge explicitly dedicated to bringing about change and improvement in our situation as women.

### **4. Various Perceptions of 'the Problem':**

There are many different views amongst women who identify themselves as feminists about what our oppression entails, what are its sources and what should be done about it. Women may call themselves radical feminists, socialist feminists, humanist feminists, separatist feminists, democrats, liberal feminists and so on, to express in shorthand form their different positions on 'the problem'.

All of these different 'feminisms' lead to women's differing interests in topics for research, differing preference for techniques, differing theories for interpreting what they see as going on, and differing conclusions about what new actions to take.

One of the most distinctive features of feminist qualitative research is the emphasis placed on reflexivity or engaging in reflection about the research process (Ackerly & True, 2008). Scholars recognize the importance of being reflexive about how we interpret our data, our role in the analytic process, and the pre-conceived ideas and assumptions we bring to our analysis (Devine & Heath, 1999). After all, the 'voices' of respondents do not speak on their own. Rather, it is the researcher who makes choices about how to interpret these voices and which transcript extracts to present as evidence. Researchers are thus encouraged to reflect and locate themselves in social structures in order to understand themselves and others.

### **5. Study of the Feminist Theory:**

Feminist research starts from the personal experience of unease about a difference between the way things are and the way we might prefer them to be, whether in our 'private' lives at home or at work.

Our history and cultural heritage over the centuries and millennia, of our childhoods, our teenage years, our young adulthood, of being wives and mothers, of being single women, of getting educations and jobs, of being in the paid and unpaid workforces, of institutions we find ourselves in.

Feminist perspectives also carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions. Feminist thinking and practice require taking steps from the 'margins to the centre' while eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known. For Virginia Woolf, it is the demarcation between the "turf" and the "path"; for Simone de Beauvoir, it is the line between the 'inessential' and the 'essential'; and for Dorothy Smith, it is the path that encircles dominant knowledge, where women's lived experiences lie outside its circumference or huddled at the margins and women's everyday lives.

Feminists engage both the theory and practice of research—beginning with the formulation of the research question and ending with the reporting of research findings. Feminist research encompasses the full range of knowledge building that includes epistemology, methodology, and method. An epistemology is 'a theory of knowledge', (Sandra Harding, ed., 1987, p. 3) that delineates a set of assumptions about the social world—who can be a knower and what can be known. These assumptions influence the decisions a researcher makes, including what to study (based on what can be studied) and how to conduct a study. A methodology is 'a theory of how research is done or should proceed'. (Sandra Harding, ed., 1987, p. 3) A method is 'a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence'. (Sandra Harding, ed., 1987, P.2).

### **6. Feminist Research Methodology:**

In their book, 'Questionnements féministes et méthodologie de la recherche', on feminist methodologies, Michel Olivier and Manon Tremblay (2000) identify three defining principles of feminist research. First, as opposed to traditional research, its objectives include both the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change. Historically, feminist research has been informed by women's struggles against the multiple forms of their oppression. Second, feminist research is grounded

in feminist values and beliefs. It seeks to include feminism within the process, to focus on the meanings women give to their world. Feminist principles inform all stages of the research, from choice of topic to presentation of data. Third, feminist research is characterized by its diversity. It is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, it uses different methodologies, and it is constantly being redefined by the concerns of women coming from very different perspectives. Feminist research thus requires that such issues as antiracism and diversity, democratic decision making, and the empowerment of women--including traditionally marginalised women--are addressed.

Feminist researchers, depending on their definition of 'feminism', will develop methods and preferences for techniques that they see as yielding the best results for women. Some women may use standard surveys, collect numerical information, and perform statistical computations, in order to establish matters of extent or amount regarding women's position vis-a-vis men's. Others will undertake secondary analysis of documentary material and policy papers or research and develop new policy and assess its impact on the position of women. Other women will concentrate on directly hearing the stories of women - perhaps using more or less in-depth interviews or ethnographies, recording verbal information, and writing them up and publishing.

At the commencement of 'second wave feminism' in the 1960s and 1970s, women gathered in self-study groups (called consciousness-raising or 'cr' groups) in their suburban family homes and in student households. These were very similar to third world study circles where people gathered to discuss matters troubling them, and to seek to transform personal experience of the world into collective understanding of how the world was operating to oppress some to the benefit of others.

Still others will work more as members of groups of women doing their own self-directed research; much as did the CR groups of early 'second wave' feminism. All of these techniques and methods continue to be subjected to healthy internal debate about whether or not, and in what ways, they may further perpetuate or alternatively contribute to interrupting patterns of oppression of women.

Methodologically, feminist research differs from traditional research. It actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject; it is politically motivated in that it seeks to change social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women. A wide range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, are available to feminist researchers. Instead of focussing on which type of research is better, it makes more sense to allow the context and purpose of the research to guide the choice of research tools and techniques. The particular situation or context should guide the methodological choices, instead of having a trust in the method as appropriate for every context and situation (Greaves and others, 1995, p. 334).

### **7. Criteria for feminist research:**

Research may be more likely to address women's oppression if the following criteria met:

1. It should be understood, that all research is essentially value-driven and always results in some kind of new action or practice.

2. It is 'driven' by the interests of the women whose problematic situation was the reason for the raising of the research questions in the first place.
3. It involves maximum attention to the benefits for the women involved and less emphasis on the benefits to a single researcher (tertiary qualifications, improved CV, published books or articles, career promotions, etc.)
4. Women experiences and their account of them are respected and valued, creating a collective 'culture' for the respectful sharing and examination of all relevant participants' experiences.
5. It does not only 'study down' but also researches other powerful or elite parties' contribution to women's oppression (e.g. that of men, professionals, bureaucracies, television, radio, videos, magazines, etc.)
6. Conceptual language is used, which accurately names the phenomena (eg. 'criminal or illegal assault in the home' rather than 'domestic' or 'family' violence; 'wife beating' rather than 'spouse abuse'; or 'women's resistance to isolation in the home' rather than 'suburban neurosis')
7. It should contextualise and substantiate various truth claims so that other women can make their own judgements, rather than attempting to identify something as a single irrefutable truth.
8. It contributes to women being able to identify new or better ways of understanding their situation; results in women being able to identify ways to change and improve their situation.

## **8. Conclusion:**

While feminist researchers can strive for the ideal feminist research process, there often exists a large gap between the reality and ideal goals of doing so. While the desire may be to promote equality in the research process through the validation of women's experiences and to enact social change and transformation, many barriers confront these researchers from achieving these aims. While feminist beliefs and concerns will help guide and direct the decision making process, outside forces also play a key role. Diana Ralph constructed a power pyramid that illustrates how power informs the decision making process; where the feminist researcher is on the bottom of the structure, she has more difficulty in controlling the choices being made (Ralph D., 1988, p. 140).

Marianne Weston sees all research as existing on a fluid scale between traditional research and ideal feminist research. She argues that one can evaluate to what degree a research project is feminist by looking at the choices being made by the researcher. Feminist research cannot claim to speak for all women, but can provide new knowledge grounded in the realities of women's experiences and actively enact structural changes in the social world.

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