

Feminist research

THIS CHAPTER

- deals with the nature and purpose of feminist research
- discusses briefly its basic theoretical foundations
- depicts its major research positions
- debates its epistemological and methodological position

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist research has emerged as a legitimate, relevant and popular research model. Its quality, and the validity of its findings are beyond contention, and over the years it has produced a significant output that has provided guidelines for policies central to modern societies (Roberts, 1981). Its domain is wide and diverse, and so are its basic methodological principles.

Feminist research is a type of inquiry that deserves its place in this text not primarily because of the nature of methods it employs or the output it produces but rather because of the manner in which it uses conventional methods, the areas on which it focuses, and the manner in which it employs its findings. In this sense, feminist research is an emancipatory type of inquiry. This means that it not only documents aspects of reality; it also takes a personal, political and engaging stance to the world.

In this chapter we shall address the theoretical foundations of this research model, its domain, its nature and diversity, the identity that marks its distinction from other research models, and its epistemological and methodological status. We begin with a brief description of the foundations of feminist research.

1 THE NATURE OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

The foundations of feminist research are those of critical theory, and hence this research model is critical and emancipatory, and perceives reality, science and research within this context. Briefly, feminist research studies the social conditions of women in a sexist, 'malestream' and patriarchal society (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 12), and enlightens people about taken-for-granted sexist practices and the gender-blindness of government and community practices (including publications) that displaced, ignored and silenced women, led to an unequal and discriminating social order, and held them captive for millennia.

Hence, the focus of research that binds together all branches of feminist research is their strong commitment to changing the status of women in modern societies, to studying women, and to employing female feminist researchers: feminist research is research on women, by women and for women. In summary, this emancipatory nature of feminist research is depicted in Box 3.1.

It should also be stressed that feminist research is based on the assumption that the world is socially constructed, displays a relative aversion to empirical positivistic methodology, and rejects the value-free nature of research (Haig, 1997; Punch, 2000). Feminist researchers employ a qualitative and/or quantitative methodology, although they adjust the latter to meet the requirements of the feminist paradigm.

Beyond its emancipatory endeavour, feminist research is a model guided by sound methodologies and producing valuable and high quality research findings. A combination of a variety of theoretical paradigms, as well as methods and procedures adjusted to comply with feminist principles, are the major factors for this. The major criteria of feminist research are summarised below.

Feminist research: the quest for emancipation and change

Feminist research ...

- Assumes:
 - that the powerful dominate social life and ideology
 - that research is owned by the powerful (men) at the expense of women
 - that men and women differ in their perceptions of life due to their social status.
- Employs:
 - engaging and value-laden methods and procedures that bring the researcher close to the subject
 - subjective principles of research, encouraging taking sides and personal commitment to the feminist cause
 - a political stance to research topics and procedures.
- Aims to:
 - expose the structures and conditions that contribute to the present situation
 - enlighten the community to the factors that generate this phenomenon and propose ways that can help alleviate the problem
 - empower women and give them a voice to speak about social life from their perspective
 - ultimately contribute towards social change and reconstruction.

2 PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

It is often taken for granted that feminist research takes an anti-quantitative attitude and therefore abstains from all quantitative standards and principles of research. Feminists are usually thought to abstain from taking any interest in measurement, validity, objectivity, reliability, representativeness and generalisation. Although some feminists may do so, in the majority of cases this assumption is not correct.

Feminist researchers who follow the interpretivist/constructionist paradigm accept these principles, and ensure that validity, objectivity, reliability and similar standards are considered. We shall see later, when we address these principles, that researchers of both research models adhere to most research principles, in their own way. They may not specify the conditions under which these principles are followed, but nevertheless, they value these principles in their own context.

Feminist research:

- Is contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant, complete but not necessarily replicable, open to the environment and inclusive of emotions and events as experienced (Nielsen, 1990: 6; Reinharz, 1983).

- Involves an ongoing criticism of non-feminist scholarship, is guided by feminist theory, may be transdisciplinary, aims to create social change, strives to represent human diversity, includes the researcher as a person, frequently attempts to develop special relationships with the people studied and, finally, frequently defines a special relationship with the reader (Reinharz, 1992).
- Puts gender in the centre of social inquiry; making women visible and representing women's perspectives are a major part of feminist critical research (Harvey, 1990: 154).
- Places emphasis on women's experiences, which are considered a significant indicator of reality (Harding, 1987a) and offer more validity than does method; in a wider context feminist research involves primarily the development of women's history, for example by recasting history to take account of women's roles and by reconstructing it in terms of women's rather than men's concerns; or by writing the history of women's realms of experience (Harvey, 1990: 154).
- Discloses distortions related to women's experiences.
- Sees gender as the nucleus of women's perceptions and lives, shaping consciousness, skills, institutions and the distribution of power and privilege.
- Is preoccupied with social construction of 'knowing and being known'.
- Is politically value-laden and critical, and as such is not methodic but clearly dialectical. This implies that it is an imaginative and creative process which engages oppressive social structures (Harvey, 1990: 102–3).
- Is not solely about women but primarily for women, taking up an emancipationist stance.
- It entails an anti-positivistic orientation.
- Employs multiple methodologies and paradigms.
- Includes methods used (a) in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminists or as part of the women's movement; (b) in research published in journals that publish only feminist research or in books that identify themselves as such; and (c) in research that has received awards from organisations that give awards to people who do feminist research (Reinharz, 1992: 6)

These principles are neither clear-cut nor fully accepted by all feminist researchers. An example is objectivity, which obviously is considered to be a part of the identity of empiricist research. Although feminist research rejects objectivity, there are writers who argue that also there is a way of being objective although not of the positivist style.

It is argued, for instance, that although positivist principles such as experimental closure (controlling variables in experimentation), detachment, subject–object dichotomy, and value-neutrality are not accepted, other forms of objectivity are. Examples of objectivity types accepted by some feminists are: dynamic objectivity (Keller, 1985), entailing an emotional bond between the researcher and the subject; openness, where all facts are made known to the respondent, highlighting all contingencies of representation (Harding, 1991); democratic discussion, where all parameters are set out in the open, which encourages cooperation among all researchers as well as criticism from all points of view, and is based on equality of intellectual authority; and anti-sexist practices.

Research principles are addressed in various ways, in their own context, and serve the same or similar purposes as in quantitative research.

Feminist empiricism

- Employs a realist ontology; a modified objectivist epistemology; a concern for hypothesis testing, explanation, prediction, cause–effect linkages, and conventional benchmarks of rigor, including internal and external validity (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 101).
- Accepts objectivist principles of knowledge creation.
- Employs traditional social research, modified to avoid bias, sexism etc. and to meet feminist standards.
- Employs quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Accepts empiricism critically.
- Challenges the notion that the person/identity of the researcher has no effect on the quality of the findings (Harding, 1986: 162).
- Challenges the notion of the adequacy and validity of empirical rules and norms.
- Challenges the notion that science and politics should be kept apart.
- Employs traditional research methods.
- Employs a post-positivist jargon of validity, reliability, credibility and multi-method research strategies (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).
- Follows primarily more rigorously the existing rules and principles of the sciences (Harding, 1991: 111).
- Criticises not so much the foundations of science, but its practice.

3 FEMINIST RESEARCH POSITIONS

The diversity of research within the feminist paradigm and the boundaries of the attributes of feminist research referred to above are reflected in the research models systematically supported, defended and employed by contemporary feminist researchers, most of which rest on qualitative principles (see Olesen, 1994). Three such examples will be briefly described below. These examples cover the entire domain of social research, ranging from a realist-objectivist empiricism at the one extreme to a subjectivist postmodernism at the other.

3.1 Feminist empiricism

This version of the feminist paradigm accepts within its research model empiricist principles and practices that resemble those of other research models based on an objectivist epistemology, although with some adjustments. The main points of feminist empiricism are shown in Box 3.2.

The central elements of this type of feminist research are legitimate and valid, and are also well accepted by non-feminist researchers. Nevertheless, there are many critical voices. It is argued, for instance, that many principles of this feminist branch are in opposition to basic feminist research standards, which cannot be justified without changing standard feminist thinking. For many writers, also from within the feminist camp, this innovation, necessary and legitimate as it might be, cannot be upheld without serious implications for the overall feminist philosophy.

3.2 Feminist standpoint

Closer to feminist tradition are the feminist standpoint theories of knowledge (Harding, 1987c; Benini, 2000). This research model works on the theoretical proposition that women, due to their personal and social experience as females, are in a better position than men to face and understand the world of women. This relates to the contexts of the world of work, division of labour, mother–child relationships and so on.

Although there are many and different contexts within this model of feminist research (class, ethnicity, race, culture, education and other factors generate different standpoints and hence feminisms), and hence many standpoints, there are some common criteria which guide theory and research in this context. The main points of the paradigms referred to in the literature (Harding, 1989; D. D. E. Smith, 1992: 96) are shown in Box 3.3.

Box 3.3

Brief summary: feminist standpoint research

Feminist standpoint research

- rejects traditional research methods
- focuses on feminist methodologies/methods and the like
- builds on and from women's experience
- sets women's everyday experiences at the centre of research concerns
- employs feminist qualitative methods
- goes beyond the traditional methods
- assumes researcher reflexivity
- provides women with a unique opportunity for undertaking research.

(Harding, 1987c; Smith, 1992: 96)

This theoretical and research model lies very close to the traditional feminist paradigm, at least with regard to the position of this paradigm in relation to the traditional objectivist and positivist methodology and the postmodernist paradigm, both of which it rejects. This is the type of feminism and feminist research most feminists accept, and this is the impression non-feminists have of what is presented as feminism in all contexts.

3.3 Feminist postmodernism

Postmodern feminism is a newer development within feminist theory and research and has received diverse and contradictory responses from within and outside the feminist domain (see, for instance, Lather, 1991). Postmodern feminists adhere to general philosophical principles that have a strong impact on the way research is to be done. For instance, they view truth as a 'destructive illusion', and the world as endless stories or texts, many of which sustain the integration of power and oppression (Benini, 2000: 164).

Feminist postmodernism has been described by writers (Farber, 2001; Haig, 1997: 182; Nicholson, 1990) as an epistemology that is non-foundationalist, contextualist, and non-dualist, or multiplist, in its commitments. It basically rejects epistemological assumptions of modernism, the foundational grounding of knowledge, the universalising claims for the scope of knowledge, and the employment of dualist categories of thought (Haig, 1997: 182). Brieschke (1992: 174) notes that postmodernist feminism

has been multi-dimensional, that is, reciprocal and mutual, moving back and forth from self to other(s), concerned with the social structures that enable the self and other(s) to communicate symbolically and intersubjectively. It values and is based upon a sense of connectedness that recognises the interdependent construction of both self and other through different ways of knowing. Philosophically, postmodernist paradigms view rationality itself as a social symbolic construction.

Feminist postmodernists are critical not only of conventional research but also of feminist practices, particularly theories of gender and patriarchy, which they consider essentialist (Butler, 1990). They refer particularly to the feminist belief and practice of considering concepts such as 'women' and 'patriarchy' to be universal. Lesbian women and women of colour were the first to raise this issue very strongly, but class and race were equally stressed in the debate.

As stated earlier, despite its innovative approach it has not been received as positively as many other feminist branches. Many of the assumptions it makes about social structures and about women as well as science, truth and knowledge

Box 3.4

Brief summary: elements of feminist postmodernism

Feminist postmodernism:

- is non-foundationalist, contextualist, and non-dualist, or multiplist, in its commitments
- views the world as endless stories or texts, many of which sustain the integration of power and oppression
- views truth as a 'destructive illusion'
- rejects epistemological assumptions of modernism
- rejects the foundational grounding of knowledge, the universalising claims for the scope of knowledge
- rejects the employment of dualist categories of thought
- is critical of conventional qualitative research, and the 'power' of research in general
- is critical also of certain feminist practices which they consider essentialist
- objects to the feminist notion that concepts such as women and patriarchy are universal.

raise doubts as to its relevance to mainstream feminism, to feminist research and to social research in general. Concern has also been raised about its relativist view of social life and the fact that it overlooks serious social problems by overconcentrating on textuality (Farber, 2001)

Feminist postmodernism follows the central principles of postmodernism, which will be discussed elsewhere in this volume.

3.4 Putting it together

Despite the diversity in feminist theory and methodology, feminist researchers share many general and specific standards and principles, reflected in their research theory and practice. Some of these are:

- that women have been marginalised
- that male superiority is perpetuated despite policies, assurances and political promises
- that males and females are considered physically and emotionally different, with men being considered superior
- that there is still a long way to go to establish gender equality
- that the relationship between researcher and researched requires serious reconsideration (Farber, 2001; Pfeifer, 2000).

To reconstruct the research culture and strengthen the effectiveness of feminist research, it was proposed (Farber, 2001; Pfeifer, 2000) that the conduct of research be based on collaborative and non-exploitative relationships, that alienation of researchers from the researched be eliminated, and transformative research be initiated. Accompanying these requirements is the need to set gender at the centre of research as the basic organising principle of research itself and of data analysis and the implementation of findings. The involvement of the researched in the research process has been stressed by many feminist researchers and writers.

Box 3.5

The impact of feminist research

The advent of feminist research:

- helped to reconstruct the domain of conventional research
- brought to surface neglected aspects of social reality
- added a new view (lens, prism) to the perception of the world
- drew attention to problems in the conduct of social research
- challenged gender ethics, female subjugation and discrimination
- produced evidence that put gender in a new context
- helped to raise women's consciousness and empower them
- freed social research from 'androcentric blinkers'
- offered a legitimate basis for social change in the area of gender
- raised issues that helped to redefine the notion of humanity.

Following these guidelines, the types of research which were considered consistent with feminist research were action research, participatory or collaborative research, needs assessment or prevalence research, evaluation research, and demystification research, where issues and relationships are explained, and the goals of the research are set to be consciousness raising, and emancipating and empowering the oppressed and powerless (Reinharz, 1992: 180–94).

4 FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODS

4.1 The issue

Initially, feminist research employed mainly positivistic methods, using conventional techniques, sometimes in their original form and at other times adjusted by eliminating inherent androcentric bias in method and approach. Nevertheless, this approach gradually changed by distancing itself from conventional methods, while working towards developing distinct feminist methods that would correspond to women's intuitive rationality and also to feminist political commitments (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

If we survey all feminist branches, we find a wide range of views on feminist approaches to methods (Althoff, Bereswill and Riegraf, 2001). One view suggests that there is no research method that is exclusively made for and employed by feminist researchers (Reinharz, 1992; Mason, 1997); rather, methods come from quantitative or qualitative research adjusted to meet feminist principles (Oakley, 1998). Hence, it is not unusual to hear of feminist survey research, or feminist experimental research, feminist field research and other relevant applications. Most common is the use of conventional qualitative research methods (Pilcher and Coffey, 1996), such as in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis, but there are also ethnographic and ethnological studies, deconstruction (historical or structuralist deconstruction) and semiological analysis.

4.2 Innovative applications

Despite the remarks above, innovative applications of research strategies as well as new feminist methods have recently been suggested by feminist researchers (Cook and Fonow, 1990). Reinharz (1992), for instance, reported some originality in feminist research in methods as well as in procedure, adding the following examples:

- *Consciousness-raising method.* This is a group discussion technique involving groups. There is no leader or imposed theme of discussion; the discussion is guided by a group facilitator.
- *Group diaries.* Diaries are kept anonymously by members of a group. Emphasis is placed on the group and can involve group interview or memory work, whereby stories are written by the group and read to the members, with discussion and analysis following later.
- *Dramatic role-play.* Views, opinions and feelings are expressed in the form of a drama. The discussion issue is introduced by the researcher; members of

Box 3.6

Feminist research focuses on

- consciousness-raising methods
- using intuition or writing associatively
- group diaries
- identification instead of keeping distance
- dramatic role-play
- studying unplanned personal experience
- genealogy and network tracing
- structured conceptualisation
- conversation, dialogue
- photography or talking-picture technique
- non-authoritative and neutral research
- speaking freely into a tape recorder or answering long, essay-type questionnaires.

(Reinharz, 1992)

the group then discuss the main issues and identify general trends or themes. Members of the group improvise, reflecting their feelings in their expressions; this is expected to generate further discussion.

- *Genealogy and network tracing.* This involves inquiring into a woman's history, tracing her relationships, friendships and origin.
- *Non-authoritative and neutral research.* Information is collected and presented to the respondent to make sense of. Emphasis is placed on the respondent and on subjectivity.
- *Conversation, dialogue.* A conversation involving a number of people discussing a topical issue, some impersonating historical figures, without division into questioners and answerers, is used in this method.
- *Using intuition or writing associatively.* This uses a way of 'blending dreams, reading and thought' (Reinharz, 1992: 232), in which the writer appears in a deep non-chronological, non-topical intuitive process; this requires passivity alternating with integration (Reinharz, 1992: 231).
- *Identification instead of keeping distance.* The researcher is expected to identify herself with the subjects, display this identification to the reader and encourage the reader to identify with the writer.
- *Studying unplanned personal experience.* Personal experience, for example illness or an operation (alone or with additional data), is used as the basis of the study.
- *Structured conceptualisation.* This involves recording, analysing and synthesising information related to certain issues, ideas and so on in order to demonstrate how feminists define and understand concepts.
- *Photography or talking-picture technique.* This technique involves a collection of pictures taken at certain intervals to be used in an interview kit; subjects choose pictures to be included in the interview kit and file them in the album according to certain categories. Pictures are used in conjunction with

questionnaires. They can also be analysed and interpreted according to the information they contain, such as sitting order/position, gestures or posture.

- *Speaking freely into a tape recorder or answering long, essay-type questionnaires.* This technique involves a set of questions sent to the respondent with the instruction to record the answers on tape.

It must be kept in mind that when feminist researchers employ methods which were developed by and for other groups of researchers, they adjust them so that they fit within the critical and emancipatory stance of feminism, and they are directed towards breaking down taken-for-granted concepts and rebuilding them into new entities. 'In so doing they lay bare the essential concepts of the research and use this as the basis for revealing what is really going on' (Harvey, 1990: 101, 102, 152).

4.3 Dialectic method

Another method of feminist research is the dialectic method, whose roots reach back to the Greek philosophers of antiquity. The essence of this method lies in a process of constantly moving between concepts and data as well as between society and concrete phenomena, past and present issues, appearance and essence. In this process, after the initial concept has been chosen, the researcher looks for connections and reflections regarding surface appearances and real situations, forming opinions about the issue in question and thus new concepts, relating them to method and approach, re-examining the new concepts, correcting elements, getting deeper below the surface, and refocusing on the concept in the historical process. This process is continued until the analysis produces a coherent model (Harvey, 1990).

The process entailed in the dialectic method is based on a constant motion of deconstruction followed by reconstruction, which leads to new deconstruction and reconstruction, and so on. A comprehensive description of this process is given by Harvey, as illustrated in the following quotation:

The dialectical deconstructive–reconstructive process can be construed as a process of focusing on the structural totality or historical moment and critically reflecting on its essential nature. The totality is initially taken as an existent whole. The structure presents itself as natural, as the result of historical progress, that is, it is ideologically constituted. The critical analysis of the historically specific structure must therefore go beyond the surface appearances and lay bare the essential nature of the relationships that are embedded in the structure. This critique ostensibly begins by fixing on the fundamental unit of the structural relationships and decomposing it. The fundamental unit must be broken down until its essential nature is revealed; the structure is then reconstituted in terms of the essentialized construct. The reconstructive process reveals the transparency of ideology. The whole is grounded in historically specific material reality.

(Harvey, 1990: 31–2)

This brief reference to feminist research demonstrates that it employs a comprehensive approach and set of methods, the majority of which are shared with positivists and interpretivists, although their use may be different.

5 FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF CONVENTIONAL RESEARCH

Feminist research is generally different from, incompatible with (Miller and Treitel, 1991: 7) and also critical of conventional social research and science (Fee, 1986; Nielsen, 1990: 7), and the way they treat gender (CSWS, 1986). Quantitative research is thought to present a distorted view of the world (Westkott, 1990), to be dominated by a male ideology, and to suffer problems related to reliability, validity and representativeness (such as non-response, incomplete sampling frames or the hired-hand effect). Feminist research also takes a critical view of objectivity, detachment and hierarchy (Oakley, 1981), and of the conventional practice of using unidirectional instruments executed dispassionately, assigning researchers the role of an objective and detached observer, and devaluing, manipulating and exploiting the respondents. Feminists set the focus of investigations not on standardised ideals of statistical principles but rather on self-defined objectives.

Feminist researchers are equally critical of the use of interviewing practices that many (e.g. Oakley, 1981: 41) find morally indefensible. Interview practice that employs unidirectional methods and is based on a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched is thought to undermine the feminist reassessment of the interrelationship of women with one another (Harvey, 1990: 117). They see in-depth interviews as a better option for many other reasons, but also because they encourage subjectivity and intensive dialogue between equals, which are intrinsic features of feminist analysis of gender experience. Oakley (2000) notes that the opposition to quantitative research is associated with the masculine identity they assigned to it, whereas qualitative research was seen as reflecting female properties, and a female identity.

Feminist research is also critical of the sexist orientation of social research and of social sciences in general. Social sciences are not only based on the writings of their founding fathers, but are also dominated by male stereotypes and attitudes created through the socialisation and professional training of social scientists, the majority of whom are males. Many writers (e.g. Eichler et al., 1985; Eichler, 1988; Reinharz, 1983) have pointed to the many ways in which sexist practices exist and affect social life, and give the following examples:

- *Androcentricity*. The world is perceived and presented from the view of the male. In this context, women are presented as passive objects rather than as acting persons. This can lead to two extreme phenomena, namely *gynopia*, where women are totally invisible, and *misogyny*, characterised by hatred of women.
- *Overgeneralisation/overspecificity*. This occurs when research findings obtained from a specific study are used to explain behaviours of non-specific groups, and vice versa.
- *Gender insensitivity*. This occurs when gender as a factor is totally ignored; for example, when studies of the effects recession has on people neglect gender, or when a study of parents' influence on the socialisation of female children does not differentiate between fathers and mothers.

- *Double standards.* Here, different standards or instruments are used to measure issues related to males and females.
- *Sex appropriateness.* This is a problem derived from the application of double standards and relates to attitudes and expectations that assign behaviour patterns, traits, attributes or roles considered appropriate to a particular gender.
- *Familism.* This is a particular case of gender insensitivity and refers to the common practice of referring to families when in fact the issue in question concerns men, women or members of the family; or when, referring to families, it is assumed that all family members are uniformly affected by a particular issue or problem.
- *Sexual dichotomism.* This is another example of double standards and refers to practices that tend to consider genders as distinctly separate without considering the interrelationships and interdependence that exist between them.

For these reasons, most feminist researchers reject conventional research methods and employ other approaches, such as those referred to earlier. Others employ conventional methods but in a different form and context, retaining their advantages but avoiding their weaknesses. Overall, qualitative methods, adequately tailored to feminist standards and expectations, are the ones employed by the majority of feminists. The difference between feminist and non-feminist research lies not in the type of methods they use, but rather in the way they choose, change and use conventional methods to meet their research goals.

This point has been made clearer over the years even within the confines of feminist theory and research. A number of feminists have come to realise the power of quantitative research and to appreciate the impact it has had – although

Box 3.7

The Devil's advocate: let's think critically!

If the feminist paradigm is incompatible with quantitative research:

- Why does it employ quantitative principles, designs and methods to produce factual evidence (hours of work, income level etc.) to prove that women are discriminated against in family, society and the work place?
- Why is quantitative research employed within feminist empiricism?
- How else can evidence be produced to settle gender issues in wide and diverse contexts, and when complex and diverse issues are considered?
- How can women's issues be debated contextually if they are not measured in a manner that would allow comparisons with men's issues?
- Would feminism have achieved as much as it did without the factual evidence provided by quantitative research?

Well, what is the real problem here?

indirectly – on the women’s cause (Oakley, 1998; see also Maynard, 1994, 1998). How else could it have been demonstrated clearly and beyond reasonable doubt that women were discriminated against in their social, educational, economic, professional and family life, particularly in areas involving quantifiable and measurable issues (income, economic growth, length of employment, facets of household involvement and so on)?

Further, concern has also been expressed with the manner in which qualitative researchers approach reality and construct theory. In a way, leading feminists seem to doubt the approach of both research models, particularly with inductive versus deductive research. As Stanley and Wise (1983: 22) note, researchers cannot have ‘empty heads’ in the way that inductivism proposes; nor is it possible for theory to be untainted by material experiences in the head of theoreticians in the way that deductionism proposes.

6 IS THERE A FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY?

Particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, a number of writers argued strongly in favour of a feminist epistemology (Corman, 1978; Lehrer, 1974; Pollock, 1979, 1986). The main argument behind this view was that the characteristic position of women enabled them to see the world through a feminist lens. If epistemology is the science of perceiving knowledge, it is obvious that women have a case for establishing their own epistemology. Many publications (e.g. Duran, 1995) reflect this in their titles, and writers use this concept freely as if it were correct and legitimate.

Although this argument is still strong, many writers, even from within the feminist camp, do not see it as a viable and logical proposition. After all, epistemologies employed by feminists to access knowledge existed long before the advent of feminism, and were used very extensively by other social scientists. Some relevant views are cited in Box 3.8.

7 IS THERE A FEMINIST METHODOLOGY?

The question of whether feminism has developed distinct methodological principles that could justify the establishment of a distinct methodology alongside the qualitative, quantitative or critical paradigms is by no means new. Claims for a separate place in the ranks of paradigms and methodologies were made long ago, and are still being made. The responses to these claims are diverse, with some arguing in favour and others against such a recognition.

7.1 Arguments in favour of a feminist methodology

Those in favour of a feminist methodology argue, among other things, that:

- Feminism has developed a characteristic approach that is valid and also different from the approaches of the other methodologies. This approach rejects

Examples of arguments against a feminist epistemology

- Sandra Harding (1986): 'Can there be a feminist standpoint if women's (or feminists') social experience is divided by class, race and culture? Must there be black and white, working-class and professional class, American and Nigerian feminist points?' (p. 26)
- Loraine Code (1991): 'a feminist epistemology is not justified: the economic position is outdated; the positionality of the standpoint is questionable; following a monolithic tradition is not warranted. It is better to work towards transferring the notion of the ruling system, and to challenge the structure of the established epistemological position.'
- Susan Haack (1995): 'Unlike some proponents of a feminist epistemology, I do not think that women are capable of revolutionary insights into the theory of knowledge not available, or not easily available, to men.' (p. 8)
- L. H. Nelson (2002): 'Given the benefits of pluralism in the broader discipline, there now seems little reason to work to develop or to hope for 'a' feminist theory of science. . . . Feminists have found valuable resources in the larger discipline of philosophy of science!' (p. 326)

the male paradigm and the associated methodology and deserves a place in social methodology as a separate and distinct entity.

- A feminist methodology places emphasis on women and their position in society and contrasts it with the emphasis on males that prevails in the other methodologies.
- It explains the world in a unique way (e.g. based on patriarchy), which guides the structure and process of research, the choice and type of methods employed, and the way the results are analysed and interpreted.
- It sees women as the most appropriate researchers for dealing with women's issues, because only women can truly understand women and their unique position. This is what is generally termed feminist standpoint epistemology (Stanley and Wise, 1983).
- A feminist methodology is the sum of feminist methods and deserves to be recognised as such (Reinharz, 1992: 240).
- Feminist research is genuine in that it is marked by seeing reality through a 'female prism', that it rejects the notion of equating 'masculine' to 'universal', recognising the central place men have held in social research and lifting the 'androcentric blinkers' to allow a better vision of reality; it also locates the researcher as a gendered being in the web of social relations (Cook and Fonow, 1990).
- In feminist research, consciousness raising is central not only as a specific research tool but also as a general orientation. Women are in the best position to carry out research on women because, due to their particular position as members of an oppressed group and as scholars, they possess a 'double vision' and are therefore better equipped to identify, understand and interpret

women's experiences. The research process becomes a process of 'conscientisation', and through this a research object becomes a research subject and learns to perceive contradictions and to work against oppression (Cook and Fonow, 1990).

- Feminist researchers reject the artificial separation of the researcher and the researched, as well as the implied notion that such a separation produces more valid results. They demonstrate how the research process encourages and reinforces subjugation of women, and challenge the norm of objectivity that it entails and the beliefs that objectivity can be achieved through quantification and statistics. Instead, they advocate a dialectic relationship between subject and object of research, a form of participatory research and a 'conscious partiality', that is, the 'researcher's understanding of the connectedness to the experiences of the research subject through partial identification' (Cook and Fonow, 1990).
- Feminist researchers point to areas in which ethical standards are being violated. Such violations create or perpetuate forms of oppression of and discrimination against women, for example using sexist language that perpetuates female subjugation, using unfair practices related to publication of feminist works, intervening in the respondents' lives and withholding information from women subjects (Cook and Fonow, 1990).
- The purpose of feminist research is to empower women to transform oppressive and exploitative conditions, to provide visions for the future and to attend to the policy complications of research.

Despite the validity of these criteria, there is no agreement as to whether they are sufficient to establish and justify the existence of a feminist methodology. The same authors who presented the above criteria note that there is no agreement among feminists about the right methodology, and go on to say that there is in fact no 'correct' feminist methodology; they conclude that 'at least within the field of sociology, feminist methodology is in the process of becoming and is not yet a fully articulated stance' (Cook and Fonow, 1990: 71). This position does not seem to have changed since then.

Box 3.9

Think critically: time for a male prism?

- It is generally argued that feminist research should be for women, on women and by women. Does this call for men to make similar proposals on research?
- Feminists reject the 'male paradigm' because it is male; should males reject the 'female paradigm' for being female?
- If the notion of the 'female prism' disqualifies men from studying women, should women be disqualified from studying men for not having the 'male prism'?
- What is wrong with men studying women's issues and vice versa? Doesn't diversity in perceptions and procedures produce richer information?

Think about it. There must be a good reason for the feminist position!

7.2 Arguments against a feminist methodology

More conservative are the views of the critics of a feminist methodology, many of whom argue bluntly that such a methodology is not justified. Some of the arguments against a feminist methodology are shown below:

- Feminists do not have a perspective of their own; rather, they use theoretical and methodological principles of other paradigms, such as Marxism, naturalism, critical theory and psychoanalysis. Without having distinct principles it is not possible to claim a separate methodology.
- There is simply ‘a multiplicity of standpoints, values, outlooks among feminists’ (Assiter, 1996: 8). Feminists are very diverse (Marxist feminists, liberal feminists, feminist empiricists, psychoanalytic feminists, poststructural feminists, postmodern feminists etc.) and do not present ‘a coherent and cogent alternative to non-feminist research’ (Hammersley, 1992a: 202).
- Many of the criteria and principles on which feminist research is based, and many of the methods they employ, are found in the non-feminist research domain and do not support a convincing argument in favour of a feminist methodology (Hammersley, 1992a: 202).
- Unique attention to gender is not justified; even post-structural feminists (Alcoff, 1988: 407) argue that such a proposition and practice should be reconsidered and replaced by an emphasis on a plurality of differences.
- Its objection to positivistic methodological practices, such as the value of method versus experience, its objectivity, its emancipation as a goal of research or a criterion of validity, and the relationship between researcher and

Box 3.10

Think critically: why a methodology?

- What is the real advantage from having a methodology of your own?
- Do feminist researchers really need a feminist methodology?
- Will a feminist methodology meet the theoretical principles of all feminists?
- Will a feminist methodology improve feminist research in any way?
- Wouldn't a feminist methodology act as a restricting agent upon researchers' decisions?
- Why should feminist researchers follow malestream practices? (Men have it, why not women?)
- What is really important in emancipatory research? The methodology or the way methodologies and methods are applied and the purpose they aim to achieve?
- Doesn't freedom to choose among existing methodologies offer more research options than tying research down to one methodology only?
- Haven't many feminist researchers accepted qualitative research as most appropriate for guiding feminist research?
- Will a feminist methodology unite or alienate feminist researchers?

Is the argument about a feminist methodology really worth the trouble?

researched (hierarchy), which many theorists use as a justification for a feminist methodology, are all questionable (Hammersley, 1992a). (For a response to these criticisms, see Geldsthorpe, 1992; Ramazanoglu, 1992.) Apart from this, one major branch of feminist research is based on feminist empiricism, which is not very different from the positivist paradigm.

- The fact that positivism is considered 'inappropriate' does not justify a feminist methodology as its alternative. Qualitative methodology may be the answer, since its principles seem to be similar to those proposed by feminist critics.
- Most feminist criticisms of conventional research speak for a qualitative methodology and not for a feminist methodology. These criticisms were introduced by qualitative researchers long before feminist researchers addressed them. After all, most feminist researchers adopt a qualitative paradigm in their research.
- Many writers argue for a methodology that would be for women, on women and by women. This is neither logical nor valid. The object does not determine the methodology. Will this justify also an ethnic methodology, a racist methodology, ageist methodology and so on? Where will ethnic women belong?
- Gender has been very frequently placed at the centre of the debate on methodology and on other issues. What is misunderstood here is that gender is not synonymous with women. Men are also a part of it.
- Feminists argue that the 'male paradigm' is wrong because it is male; is a 'female paradigm' not equally wrong for being female?
- If the 'female prism' disqualifies men from studying women effectively, and obviously from making judgments about them, does this mean that women are not qualified to study men and to make decisions about them?
- Why methodology? This is a male invention, a part of the oppressive male paradigm, which feminists reject. Why do feminists want to become a part of an establishment they reject?

The question of whether or not a feminist methodology exists has not been answered fully yet (see, for example, Geldsthorpe, 1992; Hammersley, 1992a; Ramazanoglu, 1992); the debate is still alive. Without denying the value, extent and significance of feminist research, at this stage it is reasonable to argue that current developments in feminist theory and practice cannot support a claim for a distinct feminist methodology. Even prominent feminists are against such a proposition (Harding, 1987c). Referring to the differences of opinion within the feminism ranks, and particularly to feminist postmodernists, Harding (1987b: 188) notes that 'there can never be a feminist science, sociology, anthropology, or epistemology, but only many stories that different women tell about the different knowledge they have'. Blaikie (1993: 125), noting this point, comments that 'in an unstable and incoherent world, the establishment of consistent and coherent theories would be a hindrance to understanding and practice'.

MAIN POINTS

- Feminist research is an established type of research, which has the specific purpose of studying women and their status in the community.
- Feminist research is an emancipatory inquiry focusing on enlightenment and on social change.
- Feminist research employs a variety of methods, adjusted to meet the requirements of the feminist paradigm.
- There are at least three positions within feminist research; these are feminist standpoint, feminist postmodernism and feminist empiricism.
- Feminist standpoint stands closer to the mainstream feminist cause than the other two.
- The three research positions fully cover the range of methodological issues within the feminist paradigm.
- Feminist research borrows methods and designs from other methodologies, especially of a qualitative nature. There are only a few methods that can be characterised as exclusively 'feminist'.
- The characteristic of feminist research is not the methods it employs but their application and purpose.
- The nature of feminist research and the diversity of the paradigm speak against the notion of a feminist epistemology.
- Feminist research operates within an interpretivist-constructionist paradigm.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Before you leave this chapter, visit the companion website for the third edition of *Social Research* at <http://www.palgrave.com/sociology/sarantakos> to review the main concepts introduced in this chapter and to test yourself on the major issues discussed.

FURTHER READING

- Alcoff, L. and Potter, E. (1993) *Feminist Epistemologies*. London: Routledge.
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