

Are There Feminist Research Methods?

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, feminist scholars have become increasingly more reflective with regard to the research process. Addressing the issue of what makes a particular piece of research specifically 'feminist,' they find that it includes incorporating gender, privileging subjectivity, avoiding exploitation, and empowering women. From these characteristics, they conclude that there are no feminist research methods, but that there is one feminist methodology. In this article, I argue that this position does not capture the broader contributions of feminist research, which indicate that there are not only feminist methods, but also multiple feminist methodologies. I outline these methods and methodologies and then call on future research to expand these approaches in order to produce better accounts of gendered lives.

Are There Feminist Research Methods?

Over the last several decades, feminist scholars have become increasingly more reflective with regard to the research process: in addition to undertaking studies related to women and gender, they have offered numerous perspectives on the nature of feminist research itself.¹ More specifically, in their efforts to identify new questions – or to approach traditional topics in novel ways – they have outlined a range of differences between feminist and mainstream approaches to social science, most notably in sociology, political science, anthropology, and history. Most conclude that there are no feminist research methods in terms of specifically feminist research techniques. At the same time, however, many also argue that there is a common feminist methodology, in the sense that feminists share a similar philosophy about the means and ends of social investigation, even when they employ a wide range of research tools.² This apparent consensus, I argue, contradicts the broader statements made by these scholars that there are multiple ways of doing feminist research.³ Rather, taken together their work suggests – albeit implicitly – that there are not only actual feminist methods, but also several distinct feminist methodologies. Embracing the conventional wisdom thus comes at a sharp cost, preventing further elaboration of feminist alternatives to mainstream approaches to social research.

Seeking to clarify the potential of these contributions in this article, I review and discuss the literature on feminist research methods in order to show that feminist scholars have not only adapted existing techniques to the demands of a feminist mindset, but have also devised new methods and perspectives for analyzing various kinds of research questions. In the first section, I find that central contributions in feminist methods and

methodology converge on a number of key features of feminist research, which include incorporating gender, privileging subjectivity, avoiding exploitation, and empowering women. Although these scholars subsequently conclude that these characteristics mean that there are no feminist research methods, but that there is one feminist methodology, I argue that their work supports the idea of feminist methods, as well as multiple feminist methodologies. In the second section, I discuss some examples of how feminists have adapted existing research techniques in order to make them more consistent with feminist concerns, as well as ways in which they have created their own research methods in order to answer certain research questions. In the third section, I elaborate five feminist methodologies – and one hybrid approach – that react to different aspects of (social research) in order to present various alternatives. In the final section, I conclude that feminist researchers should focus on expanding these six approaches in order to produce better accounts of gendered lives.

Perspectives on feminist research methods

Feminists writing on research methods have thought extensively about what constitutes a feminist research project. Although many assume that feminist research involves female scholars writing on issues of women and gender,⁴ most do not limit their scope to these kinds of studies. Rather, they focus on how the means and ends of the research process might be made more or less ‘feminist.’ Despite variations in their arguments, they generally identify the same key features, which include paying attention to the importance of gender as a central element of social life,⁵ challenging the norm of objectivity to incorporate subjectivity into research,⁶ avoiding the exploitation of women as

subjects and objects of knowledge,⁷ and empowering women through social research,⁸ goals that are usually informed by extensive reflexivity throughout the research process.⁹ As these goals are sufficiently broad, they argue, many different research techniques may be employed in a manner consistent with feminist values.¹⁰ Indeed, many note, a particular strength of feminist research is its largely ‘problem-driven’ nature: feminists as a group experiment with various types of methods when seeking to answer certain types of questions, and as individuals select different methods as they take on new research topics.¹¹ For this reason, they insist that feminist work can and should utilize both quantitative and qualitative techniques, even though many associate qualitative methods more closely with feminist research.¹²

These features combined with a diversity of research tools lead scholars to conclude that there are no feminist methods, but that there is one feminist methodology. Although often used interchangeably, these terms are in fact quite distinct, with important implications for evaluating feminist approaches to social research. Strictly speaking, methods refer to “techniques and procedures used for exploring social reality and producing evidence.”¹³ They encompass various processes for gaining knowledge, like life histories, interviews, participant observation, archival research, content analysis, experiments, and surveys. Methodologies, in contrast,

specify how social investigation should be approached...[by linking] a particular *ontology* (for example, a belief that gender is social rather than natural) and a particular *epistemology* (a set of procedures for establishing what counts as knowledge) in providing *rules* that specify how to produce *valid knowledge of social reality* (for example, the real nature of particular gender relations).¹⁴

They thus constitute a broader theory of knowledge production, which shapes how individual researchers determine how and what they ‘know’ about the world. For these reasons, a particular methodology often leads researchers to choose certain methods over others: if they believe that gender is discursively constructed, for example, they are likely to opt for interviews or textual analyses, rather than laboratory experiments or surveys. However, there is no fixed relation between methods and methodologies: any number of techniques can be employed consistently with a variety of ontological and epistemological frames.

In light of this distinction, scholars argue that feminists may employ many different research techniques in their quest for evidence (=no feminist methods), but nonetheless share a common core approach in their research (=a shared feminist methodology). This feminist methodology, they propose, “is distinctive [from mainstream research] to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics, and ethics and is grounded in women’s experience.”¹⁵ What makes a particular piece of research ‘feminist’ is thus a normative framework that links injustice, a politics for women, ethical practices that reject the unjust exercise of power, and theory that conceptualizes gendered power.¹⁶ Some of these concerns, however, overlap with other approaches to social investigation, especially those that seek to question existing ‘truths.’ Further, they rely on contested definitions of ‘feminism’ and ‘women,’ which are not universal but closely linked to distinct arguments about the nature of sex, gender, and social change. Because feminists disagree in fundamental ways with regard to these concepts, it appears inconsistent – and even paradoxical – that those writing on research methods converge on the notion of a single feminist methodology. This consensus contradicts a broad range of feminist studies and,

indeed, statements by many of these same scholars that there are multiple ways of doing feminist research. Revitalizing these debates, I argue, requires taking a second look at this literature: first, to explore feminist challenges to existing modes of research, and second, to identify and promote feminist contributions to the field of social science.

Feminist methods

At a practical level, feminists use many of the same methods as other researchers, but adapt them in ways that make them more consistent with feminist concerns. Although relatively few of these scholars reflect explicitly on their methods and methodologies, many experiment with existing techniques as they try to answer specific research questions. In many instances, this involves adjusting the content and implementation of particular methods to incorporate gender, privilege subjectivity, avoid exploitation, and empower women. In the use of interview techniques, for example, feminists have often been careful to involve research subjects in the construction of data about their lives.¹⁷ In the process, they have become conscious of particular challenges inherent in generating feminist insights – or simply remaining consistent with feminist goals – when interviewing across age,¹⁸ race,¹⁹ class,²⁰ gender,²¹ and political differences.²²

Similarly, when engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, feminist researchers have sought to gain a more complex understanding of their subjects at the same time that they document their lives, activities, experiences, and social contexts.²³ Some have reflected on how different theories of ‘gender’ may influence research findings,²⁴ while others have addressed the ethical dilemmas in ethnographic work that, they argue, become particularly acute in light

of feminist goals to avoid any exploitation of their research subjects.²⁵ Feminists have also discussed ways in which other techniques may be employed to feminist ends: archival research – or even starting a group’s own archive – can help promote knowledge of many different kinds of women;²⁶ internet research can reach women who are geographically dispersed but ‘virtually’ connected in order to study how they share knowledge or mobilize collectively;²⁷ content analysis can provide insights into discursive and visual representations of gender through non-traditional research materials like artwork and other cultural artifacts;²⁸ and surveys and statistical analyses can reveal that gender inequalities do in fact exist, affording often crucial leverage for feminist activists in their efforts to influence public policy.²⁹

In other cases, feminist researchers create new methods in the pursuit of better knowledge of gender relations. The quintessential method of this type is consciousness-raising, a crucial tool in second wave feminism, which typically involves small groups of women who meet to discuss their personal experiences. These gatherings, which may also take the form of ‘speak-outs’ and ‘write-ins,’ help participants recognize the hidden and taken-for-granted aspects of their lives that not only enable personal transformation, but that also provide insights for devising strategies for change.³⁰

Other innovative techniques developed by feminist researchers – usually invented in the course of asking questions whose answers are difficult to access through traditional methods – include: dramatization through role play, which allows research subjects to collaborate in research and to find their own voice; genealogy and network tracing, which draws on the networks in which individuals are embedded; multiple person stream-of-

consciousness narrative, which removes the voice of the author by offering multiple perspectives to communicate possibly conflicting research findings; conversation, which presents multiple voices as a way of gathering and displaying data; identification, which ‘breathes life’ into the person being studied through the personal reflections of the scholar doing the study; use of unplanned personal experience, which begins as a study of other people’s experiences but eventually draws in the author, who unexpectedly finds herself part of the group being examined; structured conceptualization, which entails synthesizing information in the form of a map in order to display how ideas are related to one another; photography, which compiles images of the research subjects to tell a visual story of their lives and experiences, sometimes involving their participation in the presentation of findings; and taped self-interviews, which enable respondents to answer questions at their convenience in the privacy of their own homes.³¹

These original solutions, combined with extensive feminist adaptations of existing techniques, suggest – contrary to the conventional wisdom – that there are in fact feminist research methods, consistent with different definitions of ‘feminism’ and various feminist goals in the research process. Indeed, these various innovations have sparked renewed interest among feminists in theorizing how their work speaks to the limits of traditional techniques, as well as how their experiences in the field point to new ways for conducting social research.³² Of course, feminists are not unique in challenging established research procedures: scholars in various fields of social science have developed a range of new methods for tackling issues related to the conceptualization, measurement, ethics, and impact of different kinds of research.³³ However, this particular literature pays very little attention to questions of gender. At the same time, feminist innovations have made few

inroads into the conduct of mainstream research. Promoting a dialogue across this divide requires more explicit elaboration of feminist alternatives that in many ways supplement – but also challenge – foundational aspects of social inquiry.

Feminist methodologies

At a theoretical level, feminists develop a number of alternative methodologies through various experiments in feminist knowledge production that reverse key tenets of traditional research. Their starting point is the ‘scientific method’ – often used as a synonym for conventional approaches – which they argue comprises at least five overlapping claims: (1) the mind is the only reliable source of knowledge, (2) the knower must not be influenced by his or her social context, (3) reason is the only means to gain knowledge, (4) the knower is an individual, and (5) the knower must stand at some distance from the research subject. In response, they outline at least five approaches – and one ‘hybrid’ approach – that react to different aspects of the scientific method in order to produce what they claim are better accounts of gendered lives. All six methodologies may be considered ‘post-positivist,’ in the sense that they question whether ‘reality’ is directly accessible through the scientific method.³⁴ Nonetheless, they cannot simply be subsumed into postmodernism: while they share a similar stance regarding the political power of knowledge claims, feminist approaches uphold the category of ‘women’ and believe that feminist knowledge is possible, ideas that are fundamentally undermined by most versions of postmodern thinking.³⁵

Like some postmodern theorists, however, the first methodology inverts the mind-body dualism and views *bodies as a source of knowledge*. These researchers argue that the ‘body’

is not only closely associated with the feminine, but also that feminists can talk of ‘women’ as an oppressed group only by reference to the female body and its place in women’s experiences.³⁶ As the ‘body’ is embedded in a complex matrix of power relations, they assert, it can become a source of knowledge in at least four ways: the embodied knower, the body as the subject of inquiry, the body as a category of analysis, and the body in relation to the material.³⁷ This approach may take a number of different forms, ranging from ‘writing women’s bodies’ to reveal the conditions for the repression of difference,³⁸ to analyzing how bodies are socially produced and culturally variable to gain insight into subjectivity and identity in particular places and times.³⁹

Overlapping with some of these concerns, the second methodology replaces the context-free knower and introduces *experiences as an alternative basis of knowledge*. These scholars suggest that studying women’s experiences has a number of important advantages for linking ideas and reality: as a research strategy, it provides data that otherwise does not exist about gendered lives and power relations, fosters knowledge about many different kinds of women, pinpoints ‘extra-discursive’ realities that do not yet find expression in existing theories and language, and identifies common features of gendered lives that connect one woman’s experiences with those of others.⁴⁰ Although some feminists question the authority of experience on the grounds that individuals may construct the same event in different ways,⁴¹ proponents privilege the partial and intuitive knowledge that comes from a subject situated in a specific social context,⁴² arguing that women must be able to speak for themselves about their everyday lives, especially when they occupy a position of multiple marginalization.⁴³ The information gained can then be used to analyze the language in which

these experiences are expressed in order to paint a more inclusive picture of the diversity of women's lives.⁴⁴

Delving into one particular aspect of experience, the third methodology focuses on *emotions as a source of knowledge*, rejecting reason as the only valid path to the study of social life. Although women have historically been excluded from generating authoritative knowledge on the grounds that they are not rational but emotional,⁴⁵ these scholars propose that emotions can play a valuable role in developing critical theory, despite perceptions that they simply disrupt rational thought.⁴⁶ This is because people learn what their culture defines as appropriate responses to certain situations, not only influencing their ability to neutrally observe social facts, but also identifying emotions that do not conform to these social expectations. These 'outlaw' emotions – experienced, for example, by people of color when they hear a racist joke, or by women when they are in a group of men engaged in sexual banter – lead to individual confusion, which arises from a social position that makes them unable to generate a conventionally prescribed response like laughter.⁴⁷ Placing emotions at the center of analysis thus helps theorize how social life – and basic facts about it – is constructed through relations of power that remain invisible through an exclusive focus on 'reason.'

Rethinking the means and ends of the research process, the fourth and fifth methodologies recommend expanding the number of people involved in generating knowledge, although for two quite distinct reasons. The fourth suggests replacing the single, individual knower with *collective, interactive knowledge production*, on the grounds that all social research implicitly involves many individuals.⁴⁸ Although they appear to be individual

activities conducted in isolation from other researchers, even typical applications of the scientific method, like testing hypotheses and running experiments, form part of a broader process that entails the continual modification of existing theories. These feminists simply advocate making this dialogue more explicit through collective research projects that (1) foster ‘transformative criticism’ through public debates that engage conflicting perspectives on particular research problems,⁴⁹ or (2) establish group-generated expertise through a process that assembles the knowledge of many different types of women.⁵⁰

In contrast, the fifth methodology seeks to overcome the separation between the researcher and the research subject, as well as between the researcher and the research results, through what its proponents call ‘*participatory action research*,’ which invites research subjects to participate in the research process and connects the value of research findings to political goals. Although this type of approach may take a number of different forms,⁵¹ it basically aims to involve research subjects in order to empower disenfranchised groups in a way that promotes social change.⁵² In some cases, this entails a continuous set of feedback loops, whereby researchers solicit collaboration but also hope to change their subjects’ behavior as they go about collecting data.⁵³ In others, it involves drawing on participatory research to present new solutions to policy-makers in a way that directly affects the research subjects.⁵⁴ In many instances, however, the experience also changes the researcher in a very personal manner, in the sense that he or she comes to realize how widespread a particular problem is, what intended and unintended effects specific policies have, and how simple lack of information keeps certain groups marginalized.⁵⁵ Publishing in both popular and scholarly venues, these scholars maintain that all attempts to produce knowledge of social life are

political, and thus that political commitment is an inextricable part of social investigation, despite more traditional efforts to present research as an alternative to political action.⁵⁶

The sixth methodology, finally, is a ‘hybrid’ approach known as *feminist standpoint theory*, which is grounded in women’s experiences but also draws on knowledge of their bodies and emotions for political action purposes. At its core, this approach reverses ‘perspectival hierarchies’ by focusing on the lives of marginalized people – rather than the views of the ‘neutral’ observer, who is often implicitly a member of the dominant group – as the best starting point for developing ‘general’ knowledge.⁵⁷ As such, it undermines beliefs that women are not able to ‘know’ by legitimating women’s ways of understanding the world,⁵⁸ at the same time that it challenges the idea that detachment and reason alone lead to the correct research conclusions.⁵⁹ Feminist standpoint theory thus embodies three simultaneous goals: to incorporate new information into social research (based on the bodies, experiences, and emotions of marginalized people), to develop new standards for collecting and evaluating evidence (focused on subjectivity rather than objectivity), and to empower marginalized groups through the research process (centered on promoting participation and a political purpose).

Despite these innovations, standpoint theory is often criticized by feminists and non-feminists alike as a research strategy on the grounds that ‘women’ as a category are not unified or fixed, ‘experience’ does not have a consistent meaning across all individuals, partial visions are not all equally valid, and the problem of ‘false consciousness’ may preclude political action.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, feminists have developed several distinct versions of standpoint theory that reflect at least partial solutions to these objections. The first argues

that, due to the sexual division of labor, women experience life differently than men. However, anyone committed to transforming gender relations – men included – can access this experience through considerable struggle in order to uncover gender inequalities, expose them as unjust, and devise a plan for change.⁶¹ The second elaborates how ‘black feminist thought’ as a type of standpoint theory has actually developed in practice, as black feminist intellectuals have negotiated their ‘outsider within’ status to analyze race, class, and gender inequalities. Themes common to this standpoint include the self-definition and self-valuation of black women; the interlocking nature of oppression, especially for groups like black women who occupy multiple contradictory positions vis-à-vis white male power; and the importance of a black women’s ‘culture.’⁶² The third focuses on how to theorize embodied knowledge through a strategy of ‘strong objectivity,’ which entails studying multiple – and possibly conflicting – experiences of marginalized people, often in collaboration with members of more privileged groups, in order to gain a better understanding of society as a whole.⁶³

Conclusions

Despite the worries of some researchers, feminists have not succumbed to ‘methodological essentialism’ in social research,⁶⁴ but have instead developed numerous approaches for undertaking studies on women and gender. However, existing work on feminist methods and methodologies – which maintains that there are no feminist research methods, but that there is one feminist methodology – does not reflect the diversity of these experiments in feminist knowledge production. In terms of methods, feminists have not only adapted existing techniques in order to make them more consistent with feminist

concerns, but have also devised new research methods when their topic required it. In terms of methodologies, there are at least five different approaches – and one hybrid approach – that appropriate and subvert various aspects of the ‘scientific method’ in order to produce better accounts of gendered lives. These include: bodies as a source of knowledge, experiences as a source of knowledge, emotions as a source of knowledge, collective knowledge production, participatory action research, and feminist standpoint theory. These various schools of thought, I argue, are in fact more consistent with the state of feminist research than the conventional wisdom, which restricts the scope of feminist innovation. Looking ahead, therefore, scholars ought to focus on expanding these six approaches in order to flesh out feminist alternatives and challenges to mainstream research.

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⁴⁶ Fonow and Cook, 2005; Alison M. Jaggar: "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology", *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.), Rutgers University Press 1989; Sara Ruddick: "Maternal Thinking", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, 1980: 2.

⁴⁷ Jaggar, 1989.

⁴⁸ Lynn Hankinson Nelson: "Epistemological Communities", *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.), Routledge 1993.

⁴⁹ Helen Longino: "Subjects, Power and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science", *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.), Routledge 1993.

⁵⁰ Reinharz, 1992. A quintessential example of such collective authorship is *The Boston Women's Health Book Collective: Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Touchstone 1984.

⁵¹ Reinharz (1992) outlines five different types of participatory action research: 'action research,' participatory or collaborative research, prevalence and needs assessment, evaluation research, and demystification.

⁵² Fonow and Cook, 2005.

⁵³ Reinharz, 1992.

⁵⁴ Spalter-Roth and Hartmann, 1996; Verta Taylor: "Feminist Methodology in Social Movements Research", *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 21, 1998: 4.

⁵⁵ Reinharz, 1992.

⁵⁶ Nancy C. M. Hartsock: "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism", *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Sandra Harding (ed.), Routledge 2004.

⁵⁷ Sandra Harding: *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Routledge 2004.

⁵⁸ Alcoff and Potter, 1993.

⁵⁹ Lorraine Code: "Taking Subjectivity into Account", *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.), Routledge 1993; Donna Haraway: "Situated Knowledges", *Simian, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books 1991.

⁶⁰ Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002.

⁶¹ Hartsock, 2004.

⁶² Patricia Hill Collins: "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought", *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Sandra Harding (ed.), Routledge 2004.

⁶³ Sandra Harding: "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?", *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Sandra Harding (ed.), Routledge 2004.

⁶⁴ Jane Roland Martin: "Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Types", *Signs* 19, 1994: 3.