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New Feminist Approaches to Social Science Methodologies: An Introduction

From the early days of the women's movements of the 1970s, feminists have tried to intervene in the ways that the social sciences think about and do research. They have attempted to transform the methodologies and epistemologies of their disciplines. Central to these projects have been concerns about whether and how customary approaches to knowledge production promote or obstruct the development of more democratic social relations.

Knowledge and power

These theorists and researchers have argued that conventional standards for "good research" discriminate against or empower specific social groups no less than do the policies of legal, economic, military, educational, welfare, and health-care institutions; in fact, these standards actually enable the practices of these institutions. Social research turns the chaotic and confusing experiences of everyday life into categories of people in society, categories that reflect prevailing political arrangements. The social sciences then assign causal relations to people and social relations in these categories. These causal accounts enable institutions to govern our everyday lives in ways that fulfill the interests and desires of these institutions, and of the social groups that design and manage them, but not the interests and desires of our societies' most economically, socially, and politically vulnerable groups. Thus the social sciences, while claiming to do impartial research, construct the "conceptual practices of power," as Dorothy Smith (1990) said of standard methods in her own discipline of sociology. The social sciences are complicit in the exercise of power, including the power to control relations between men and women.

Good method is supposed to guarantee reliable research results. In the conventional view, research methods do not contribute any social features, such as culturally local values or interests, to the phenomena they map

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or to the maps themselves; good research methods are supposed to be culture free, value free. Yet it became clear to feminist scholars that this standard had not been and could not be met in practice. Researchers, like the societies in which they live, cannot detect—much less correct—the assumptions and practices that shape the interests, conceptual frameworks, and research norms of social sciences.

Dominant groups are especially poorly equipped to identify oppressive features of their own beliefs and practices, as standpoint methodologies have argued (Harding 2004). Their activities in daily life do not provide them with the intellectual and political resources necessary to detect such values and interests in their own work.[1] Value-free research is an unachievable ideal.

It is also an undesirable one, many feminists have maintained. Socially engaged research—that is, research that holds itself ethically and politically accountable for its social consequences—can in many instances produce knowledge. Think, for example, of the production of increased social knowledge made possible by overtly politically engaged research on violence against women, on women's double day of work, and on the costs to men of maintaining norms of masculinity. To be sure, social values and interests can often block the growth of knowledge; sexist, racist, bourgeois, Eurocentric, and heterosexist ones certainly have. Yet the history of the social sciences makes perfectly clear that feminist, antiracist, postcolonial, antibourgeois, and antiheterosexist research projects, among others, have often advanced social science understanding and knowledge. Such projects bring fresh perspectives to bear on old questions and ask new questions about ourselves and the social worlds with which we interact.

In challenging conventional epistemologies and their methodologies, both of which justified problematic understandings of research methods, feminists have contributed to the epistemological crisis of the modern West, or North. No longer is what the ruling groups in the North think and do regarded as the legitimate standard for what the rest of the world should think and do, if it ever was so regarded anywhere except among such groups. The epistemological crisis is also a political, economic, social, and ethical crisis. The point of good research, for feminists as well as for

[1] Research methods can detect values and interests that differ among observers, but not those that such observers share. Androcentrism, Eurocentrism, racism, heterosexism, and bourgeois values have generally been shared by research communities. Consequently, these cultural values and interests have tended to persist unnoticed in the social sciences until pointed out by social justice activists.

many conventionalists, has always been to advance social progress. Of course, feminists and conventionalists disagree over what constitutes such progress, as well as over the best procedures to achieve it.

The familiar focuses of feminist theory reappear in concerns about research methods. These methodological and epistemological issues include concerns about how to understand the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other structural features of societies; about inappropriate essentializing of women and men; about phenomena that are both socially constructed and fully "real"; and about the apparent impossibility of accurate interpretation, translation, and representation among radically different cultures, especially in the glare of today's dangerous media politics.

Feminist solutions?

Feminists have also pointed the way to possible solutions to controversies about relations between knowledge and power. They have insisted on the adoption of research principles and practices that are both intellectually alert to and sensitive about what disadvantaged groups want to know. These feminist proposals are also politically and ethically more accountable to such disadvantaged groups. Feminist methodology and epistemology are thus part of the postpositivist moment. Important tendencies in this work are also part of the field of critical studies, which prioritizes "studying up"—studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern. By studying up, researchers can identify the conceptual practices of power and how they shape daily social relations. Understanding how our lives are governed not primarily by individuals but more powerfully by institutions, conceptual schemes, and their "texts," which are seemingly far removed from our everyday lives, is crucial for designing effective projects of social transformation. Feminist researchers have insisted that their research projects have practical implications for the improvement of women's lives. Thus they have developed the controversial notions that research itself can contribute to producing a liberatory, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group and that this kind of engaged research can produce knowledge that such a group desires.[2]

[2] The people whom social scientists study are conventionally referred to as research *subjects*. Thus it can be confusing to refer to the person presumed to be the *speaker* of a text, or to the position of the researcher as the *subject* of research—as feminists and other social justice researchers often do when they say, e.g., that women (as a class or group) have never been the *subjects* or speakers of research. The shift in the referent of this term, widespread

But can it do so? Under what conditions? Feminist researchers have been especially alert to the difficulties in designing and carrying out such progressive projects. One approach has been to try to eliminate or at least to minimize the power differences between researchers and the disadvantaged groups that remain the objects of their study. Another approach has been to design research projects that from the beginning maximize the possibility of using researchers' powers to transform social relations. Whether we try to minimize the power relations of the research process or to use them, such powers must always be negotiated within larger contexts of local, national, and global relations that are frequently themselves unstable.

Fieldwork has been one important site in which feminists have tried to minimize or eliminate power differences between the researcher and the researched. As anthropologist Diane L. Wolf points out, in fieldwork there are three contexts in which such issues arise (1996, 2). One is that the researcher and the researched usually bring different amounts and kinds of social power (class, race, gender, ethnicity, urban or rural backgrounds, etc.) to the research situation. Second, research processes themselves produce power differences in terms of who defines the research project—Who defines what counts as a problematic situation? Whose concepts, questions, and hypotheses are the focus of the research? Whose theories and methods of producing knowledge are favored?—and the relations between the researcher and the researched during interviews, observations, and other data collection processes. Finally, writing up and representing the research provides a third site conducive to creating and exercising power differences. In spite of feminists' heroic attempts to eliminate such power differences, this goal has proved impossible, though obviously there are better and worse ways for researchers to negotiate relations with their subjects of research.

Another approach to using research methodology in service of democratic social transformation is for researchers to use the powers they have in ways that directly advance social justice. By designing projects in which they can transform the conceptual frameworks of the disciplines that service powerful social institutions, or projects in which they can directly affect social policy, researchers can use their distinctive powers on behalf of disadvantaged groups. Standpoint methodologies have been perceived

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in social justice research in the humanities and natural sciences, challenges the actuality, possibility, and even the desirability of research presuming to occupy, or speak from, a culturally neutral position. (Note that an "engaged" position is never a personal, individual one in these writings but, rather, the position of a collective, historically shaped group.)

as one way that research projects can turn disadvantaged social positions into powerful intellectual and political resources. Participatory action research projects, which often incorporate standpoint approaches, are another. Of course these two ways of decreasing power inequities may sometimes conflict. The essays in this collection address the strengths and limitations of both.

This collection

We are delighted to present here a small selection of the many first-rate essays we received on the ongoing challenges of how to think about and do good social research. There is no way that we can fully survey the recent multidisciplinary and theoretically complex feminist writings on these topics in so small a collection of articles. Nevertheless, these essays do represent a wide range of concerns and perspectives. The authors focus on methodological issues in a variety of social science disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, international relations, and economics. They represent feminist concerns in several particular parts of the world outside the United States, including Pakistan, sub-Saharan Africa, and Canada, as well as in the transnational political economy.

The first two articles deal with the difficulties of doing social research that is both "here" and "there." Shahnaz Kahn, a Pakistani Canadian, reflects on the challenges of trying to block potential misreadings and misuses of her account of the situation of women in Pakistan. In the context of contemporary Western imperial and colonial practices in South and Central Asia, such misreadings and misuses appear virtually inevitable both in the imperial West and in Pakistan. Mike Kesby reviews and ultimately challenges some recent pointed criticisms of participatory action research, and in the process of doing so he reformulates the conception of empowerment, which has been especially important to these kinds of research projects. His own such research has been on HIV/AIDS education for women in Zimbabwe.

The next three essays take on challenges that arise when women interview men. These researchers discover that the expected powers of the researcher over her subjects are often diminished in such cases, even when the researched are far from customary exemplars of powerful men. In at least the first two of these studies, the authors discover that their loss of power is not always a good thing, either for social justice or for the production of knowledge. Sabine Grenz engages with the need to negotiate power relations with johns, or clients of prostitutes, who are her research subjects. Lois Presser reports a similar negotiation process with

the violent criminals she studied. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp describe how they learned to negotiate power relations between themselves and the marginalized but nevertheless biologically male community of drag queens, a community that was the subject of their recent book-length study.

Research ethics is the subject of the next two essays, though these issues arise in the other articles as well. Christine Halse and Anne Honey take up the difficult moral questions that arise in gaining research approval from an ethics committee review, especially when the research subjects are "sufferers," in their case, anorexic teenage girls. In their view, the ethics review process can compromise its own goal of nurturing ethical behavior and moral action. Gesa E. Kirsch also reflects on the paradox of unintended consequences. Some methods, she writes, "intended to achieve feminist ends . . . may have inadvertently reintroduced some of the ethical dilemmas feminist researchers had hoped to eliminate: participants' sense of disappointment, alienation, and potential exploitation" (2163). She focuses in particular on the challenges created by attempts to create close, interactive relations with research subjects, and she finds service-learning projects involving students promising but also potentially problematic or even dangerous.

Feminist attempts to intervene in the ways that social sciences think about and practice their epistemologies and methodologies have been more successful in some disciplines than in others. The essays of Drucilla K. Barker and J. Ann Tickner reveal the extreme resistance that standard-bearers in the fields of international relations and economics have mounted with regard to such projects. Barker identifies the immense contributions that feminist methodology has made to our understanding of women's economic conditions and that it could make to mainstream understandings of global economic relations. She also points to perhaps unavoidable contradictions in feminist projects within such a context. Tickner points to the deep attachment to positivism in the field of international relations, which has relegated feminist scholarship to the margins. She also identifies the contributions that feminist postpositivist methodology in this field can make to our understanding of gender relations.

We end this collection with a review essay by Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook, editors of one of the most widely used feminist methodology texts, *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (1991). In this essay they reflect on changes in the field since that collection was published. Readers will find guides to additional relevant literatures in the other essays.

We hope that *Signs* readers find these essays provocative and useful in

their own search for effective and progressive ways of thinking about and practicing feminist social research.

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