AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMINIST RESEARCH

By

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Introduction

Research methods are technique(s) for gathering data (Harding, 1987) and are generally dichotomised into being either quantitative or qualitative. It has been argued that methodology has been gendered (Oakley, 1997; 1998), with quantitative methods traditionally being associated with words such as positivism, scientific, objectivity, statistics and masculinity. In contrast, qualitative methods have generally been associated with interpretivism, non-scientific, subjectivity and femininity. These associations have led some feminist researchers to criticise (Pugh, 1990) or even reject (Graham & Rawlings, 1980) the quantitative approach, arguing that it is in direct conflict with the aims of feminist research (Mies, 1983). Feminist researchers have accused quantitative positivistic methods of ignoring and excluding women (Oakley, 1974) and *adding* women to male knowledge. Feminists have also criticized the *context-stripping* nature of traditional methods (such as surveys, questionnaires, psychological tests and experiments, and even interviews), as a result of which as the reality of human experience, and more so women's experience, is lost (Bohan, 1992). Feminists have consistently emphasized the importance of social context, insisting that feminist methods should be contextual - that is, avoid focusing on the individual in isolation, cut off from interactions and relationships with other people. As Fine and Gordon (1989:159) note:

> … do not put us in a laboratory, or hand us a survey, or even interview us separately alone in our homes. Watch me (MF) with women friends, my son, his father, my niece, or my mother and you will see what feels most authentic to me.

Feminists have also criticized traditional quantitative research in which people are transformed into 'object-like subjects' (Unger, 1983), with the interests and concerns of research participants completely subordinated to those of the researcher (Campbell & Schram, 1995). In such research, participants' voices are typically silenced or severely circumscribed by the powerful voice of the researcher, and their experience may be occluded, ironicized, invalidated or even erased (Woolgar, 1983)

It has therefore been argued that qualitative methods are more appropriate for feminist research as they are best suited to reveal and understand experiences of women in contemporary society and adequately address their needs by allowing subjective knowledge (Depner, 1981), thus challenging the partial accounts of the gendered lives of both women and men. In feminist research, respect for the experience and perspective of the other is upheld, with many feminist researchers expressing commitment to "realizing as fully as possible women's voices in data gathering and preparing an account that transmits those voices" (Olesen, 1994: 167). Furthermore, feminist research is characterized by 'non-hierarchical relations' between the researcher and the participants.

Feminist Research methods

The question as to whether there is a feminist method has been debated for a long time, and although there is no definite answer (Harding, 1987), the general consensus of feminist scholars is that feminist research should be not just on women, but for women and, where possible, with women (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminist research is expected to adopt critical perspectives toward dominant intellectual traditions that have in the past ignored and/or justified women's oppression (Acker et al., 1983). It is intended to bring to the surface voices that are often excluded from knowledge production and policy making, and critically reflect upon how it can all be done better (Frisby, Maguire, and Reid 2009)

Feminist research is seen as being concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice and committed to changing the condition of women (Acker et al., 1983; Fonow & Cook, 2005). It is concerned with asymmetrical power relationships including hierarchical power relationships in the research process and the relationship between researcher and researched. The role of the researcher is thus to produce useful knowledge which contributes to global gender justice, to changing women's subordination and to stopping all forms of social inequalities.

A major criticism leveled against traditional methods by feminists is that they tend to be hierarchical. To this end, feminist researchers promote a participatory model for research where the relationship between researcher and the researched is nonhierarchical, non-authoritarian, non-exploitative and non-manipulative (Oakley, 1981). In fact, according to Ramazanoglu and

Holland (2002, pp. 2-3), "feminist research is imbued with particular theoretical, political and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive".

One of the most distinctive features of feminist qualitative research is the emphasis placed on reflexivity or engaging in reflection about the research process (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; England, 1994; Ackerly& True, 2008). Scholars recognize the importance of being reflexive about how we interpret our data, our role in the analytic process, and the pre-conceived ideas and assumptions we bring to our analysis (Devine & Heath, 1999). After all, the 'voices' of respondents do not speak on their own (Reinharz, 1992). Rather, it is the researcher who makes choices about how to interpret these voices and which transcript extracts to present as evidence. Researchers are thus encouraged to reflect and locate themselves in social structures in order to understand themselves and others (Letherby, 2003). They are reminded that the validity of their interpretations is dependent on being able to demonstrate how they were reached (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996). As Strauss and Corbin (1990: 75) have noted, "The trouble is that researchers often fail to see much of what is there because they come to analytic sessions wearing blinders, composed of assumptions, experience, and immersion in the literature".

Qualitative research

Qualitative research has been described as a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Holloway, 1997). It refers to a study process that investigates a problem where the researcher conducts the study in a natural setting and builds a complex analysis by way of rich description and explanation, as well as a careful examination of data (Creswell, 1998). Although there are different approaches within the wider framework of qualitative research, most of these have the same aim of understanding the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have noted that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach, meaning that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. As Malterud (2001) elaborates:

> Qualitative research, also called naturalistic inquiry, developed within the social and human sciences, and refers to theories on interpretation (hermeneutics) and human

experience (phenomenology). They include various strategies for systematic collection, organization and interpretation of textual material obtained while talking with people or through observation. The aim of such research is to investigate the meaning of social phenomena as experienced by the people themselves. (p. 398)

Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) observe that a key aspect of qualitative research is the idea that meaning is constructed by individuals in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and interactions, and those meanings are in turn reflected in state policy documents and laws.

Qualitative/Quantitative Research

It is important to note that although a majority of feminist researchers use qualitative methods, it has been argued that it is not the use of a particular method or methods which characterizes a researcher or a project as feminist, but the way in which the method(s) are used (Letherby, 2003; Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007). As such, both quantitative and qualitative research methods are useful in feminist research and that the choice of method should depend on the research questions and objectives, rather than on which method is considered to be most feminist. They note that although feminist quantitative researchers have different views on epistemology, the use of statistics does not violate any feminist principles and may actually be effective in the promotion of feminist goals (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007). After all, there is no one way of doing feminist research, as there are multiple feminist epistemologies.

Feminist researchers Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne (2007) highlight four main advantages of using quantitative methods in feminist research. First, quantitative survey research can introduce social justice issues into the mainstream discussion, e.g. classism, racism, sexism in public policy arenas. Second, statistics and numbers can be concise which means that they can be easy to remember and communicate to others. Third, quantitative methods can identify patterns in women's oppression, and can inform decisions about the best course of action to implement social change. Fourth, surveys can access large numbers of people and so can potentially represent a wider population and their multiple perspectives, something feminists advocate.

Other feminists, such as Jayaratne and Stewart (2008) have advocated for the use of mixed methods whenever it is possible and practical, as they can serve feminist research agendas.

Seemingly however, despite the fact that the 'old-fashioned' debate between quantitative and qualitative research methods has supposedly ended, feminist work more often uses qualitative than quantitative tools.

Feminist Qualitative Methods

It is possible to conduct feminist qualitative research using a range of research methods. Some of the methods include: life histories, interviews, focus groups and conversational analysis; diaries, letters, documents and texts; questionnaires and statistics; Content Analysis; Oral History; Ethnography; Discourse Analysis; and -participant and non-participant observation.

Interviews

Although various data collection techniques are used in qualitative research, interviews, and more specifically face-to-face semi-structured interviews, are commonly used by feminist researchers. Mathers et al. (1998) have noted that, although personal interviews are labour intensive, they are also the best way of collecting high quality data. Interviews *capture the multitude of subjects'* views of a theme so that the researcher comes to see the respondents' complex social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In-depth interview can successfully be employed to this research on women's experiences with food security as a main data gathering technique as it will allows for the exploration of women's subjective experiences and the meaning that they attach to those experiences. In-depth interviews are guided conversations utilizing open-ended questions and various forms of (informal) probing to facilitate a discussion of issues in a semi-structured or unstructured manner (Devine 2002 quoting Lofland and Lofland, 1984:9).

Focus Groups

Feminist qualitative researchers are often drawn to focus group methods because they are particularly useful in offering two key features often suggested as essential in feminist research. First, focus groups are a *contextual* method: that is, they avoid focusing on the individual devoid of social context, or separate from interactions with others. Second, focus groups are a relatively *non-hierarchical* method: that is, they shift the balance of power away from the researcher towards the research participants. Third, focus groups have potential to help women to

collectively change their consciousness by fostering collective identities and solidarities. Group interviews are said to facilitate such connections because they can go beyond uncovering "already existing meanings produced by already constituted subjectivities"; they can bring "into being new meanings and new subjectivities" (Modleski cited by Montell 1999: 54). In this way, participants gain access to new information, new ways of thinking, to the sense that they have the right to speak and the authority to act – in short, a sense of emancipation (Goss & Leinbach 1996).

Case Studies

The case study is a common qualitative method which allows for the use of multiple methods or triangulation and reflects an attempt to secure an indepth understanding of a phenomenon in question. Yin defines the case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (1994:13). In this study intended to document women's experiences, knowledge and perspectives in food security, the case study method will be instrumental in facilitating a holistic understanding of the complexities of the social phenomena under investigation. Additionally, the case study method is likely to allow participating women to construct their own realities and arrive at their own truths based on their lived experiences and on their own terms.

Discourse Analysis

There are many definitions of discourse and discourse analysis in the literature, which may vary not just with discipline, but with intellectual persuasion (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Sunderland, 2004). Discourses, as defined by Michel Foucault (1978), both reflect and shape the way we experience and interpret the world around us, and consequently the way we act upon it. Hajer (2005, p. 1), defines discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena" while Fairclough (2003, p. 124), identifies discourses as "ways of representing aspects of the world". As defined by these scholars, discourses can be summed up as the structuring principles of society (Weedon, 1987), and because discourses are constitutive of the way of talking and writing about a particular issue, they frame the way people understand and act with respect to that issue (Watson, 1994). Food

security discourses in this project can thus be understood as structured discussions of food security by different actors, with each discourse providing its own version of *the truth* asserting their experiences of food security and/or insecurity, and proposing different strategies for dealing with the issue.

Foucault (1978) suggests that although discourses both reflect and shape the way we experience and interpret the world around us, the public spaces where discourses interact and are deliberated are seldom fair or equal. Rather, the voices and interests of the powerful, or the dominant discourses, often have an upper hand. The dominant discourses not only get institutionalised in key discursive sites such as state laws and constitutions, but also become reference norms, thus silencing and/or marginalising all other opposing discourses. In this for example, we may find that women's knowledge of food security is marginalized while dominant discourses such as those that concentrate on cash crops are institutionalized.

Discourses are embodied and enacted in a variety of texts and although they exist beyond the individual texts that compose them, texts can be considered a discursive unit and a material manifestation of discourse (Alba-Juez, 2009). Texts may take many forms, including written texts, spoken words, pictures, symbols, artefacts, and so forth (Grant et al., 1998). For the current project, written texts and spoken interviews may be analysed as manifestations of given discourses.

Since the focus is not on language as an abstract entity but as the medium for interaction, analysis of discourse will be an analysis of what people do and say. Discourse analysis thus will involve systematizing the different ways of talking about food security, with the aim of making visible the perspectives and starting points on the basis of which knowledge and meanings are produced. According to Foucault (1972), expressed perspectives are based on background assumptions, which are themselves the necessary and implicit starting points behind a particular way of speaking about a phenomenon.

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