

# Distinct and separate feminist sociology essay

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Is there a distinct and separate feminist research methodology or simply social research informed by feminist ideas? This has been a recurring question in the study of feminist research, regarding the distinctiveness of feminist approaches to methods, methodologies, and epistemologies. Having read through some research papers, articles and essay on feminist research methods, it has become apparent that answers to this question is not straight forward given the frequent evolving nature of feminist reflections on the methodological and epistemological dimensions and dilemmas of research. (Doucet-Mauthner, 2005). Maguire argue that " Feminist research consists of no single set of agreed research methods nor have feminists agreed upon one definition of feminist research" (Maguire, 1987, p. 74). Therefore, to answer this question there is need to explore feminist challenges to existing modes of social research and to identify feminist contributions to the field of social research. This essay will begin with definition of feminist methodology, epistemology and research methods, followed by a similar overview of feminist methodologies in an attempt to explain whether feminist methodology is distinctively feminist methods. This will be explained by demonstrating distinguishing characteristic of feminist approaches to social realm and its challenges to the traditional social research methodology and epistemology using two empirical social researches that used feminist methodology. The final section will cover possibility of a standalone and distinct feminist methodology within the social research realm. Methodology can be define as the study of research and how research is done, it explain what type of data to gather , how to gather the data or information and how to analyse the data or information gathered. The structure of feminist research have not been agreed upon by <https://assignbuster.com/distinct-and-separate-feminist-sociology-essay/>

the feminist, this may be due to the lack of agreement over what constitutes feminism as theory and practice.(Brayton , 1997). Sharon Bird explains in her presentation "Feminist method of research" that method are informed by methodology, she further stressed that the feminist method is a means of conducting scientific investigations and generating theory from an explicitly feminist standpoint . The research concepts- methods, methodology and epistemology are all connected and interrelated but they are separate and distinct terms that refer to different aspects of research as process. Methods are the tools and techniques used to gather evidence, information and data. Methods are also the research practices chosen by the researcher, be it qualitative or quantitative methods. Methodology addresses theoretical questions about the study of research and how research is done. According to Sandra Harding in the "Introduction to Feminism and Methodology: " A methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does and should proceed" (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Epistemology is basically concerns with the theories about what constitutes knowledge, knowledge construction by questioning whose knowledge is validated. It is also the philosophy of knowing, the construction and authentication of certain forms of knowledge. (Brayton, 1997)Feminist methodology is not distinguished by female researchers studying women. In view of the fact that feminist consciousness is not derived from a female body, women do not have a special claim to know gender. Those who are materially and socially more or less female do not necessarily fully share political interests or experience a common social existence. Since feminists can make choices in relation to all the key characteristics of methodology, the idea of any distinctively feminist approach to methodology is problematic (Harding 1987a) the academic area <https://assignbuster.com/distinct-and-separate-feminist-sociology-essay/>

of feminist methodology was initiated primarily as a way of characterizing existing methods of producing knowledge as masculinist, and of challenging existing understandings of gendered social life. On the contrary, Yolland Wadsworth argues that feminist research is that research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing why of particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about what, and an identifiable method of knowing how, which specifically draw on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men. (Wadsworth, 1991 as cited in conference paper in 2001). The gender dynamics of power and resistance are taken up by several critics whose research encourages the development of a feminist scholarly methodology that focuses on women's subjective experiences (Hesse-Biber, 1999). There is no standard agreement over what constitutes feminist research; many authors make use of certain elements as defining features to feminist research (Brayton, 1997). However feminist theory of all categories is based on the variety of real life stories women provide about themselves (Lugones and Spelman, 1990, p. 21). Similarly, Maguire commented that "Feminist research consists of no single set of agreed upon research guidelines or methods. Nor have feminists agreed upon one definition of feminist research". (Maguire, 1987: 74). Methods used in feminist research are concerned to present women's perspective and are more likely to be, particularly at the earliest points of inquiry, 'naturalistic' and resemble the normal ways women communicate, or involve sources accessible to women. These normal ways are the ones with which women feel most comfortable and thus empowered to speak. This is evidenced in a study by (Mandis, 2009)." I endeavoured to create a sense of equal footing with the <https://assignbuster.com/distinct-and-separate-feminist-sociology-essay/>

women in line with my feminist approach". If there is a central reason why feminists do feminist research it revolves around the need to know and understand better the nature of the hurt sustain as a group - a group which is subordinated on the grounds of female gender. This is not 'knowledge for its own sake' but rather is knowledge explicitly dedicated to bringing about change and improvement in the situation as women." The most central and common belief shared by all feminists, whatever our " type" is the presupposition that women are oppressed. It is from this common acceptance that there is indeed a problem, that there is something amiss in the treatment of women in society, that feminism arises." (Stanley and Wise, 1983). This shows that there is a non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant in the research process (Harding, 1987; Oakley, 1981). Qualitative and quantitative methods used in feminist research have also been an unfinished debate. (Denscombe, 2007) argues that different approaches are selected in the social research process because they are appropriate for specific types of study and specific kinds of research problems. Berg defines qualitative research as the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things. (Berg, 1995: 3) The differences between qualitative and quantitative research are also argued in terms of epistemology. Brayton (1997) argues that qualitative research is thought to value subjective, personal meaning and definition, commonalities and giving voices to the oppressed. In contrast, quantitative research is constructed in terms of testing theories and make predictions in an objective, value free way where the researcher is detached from both the participants and the research process. Feminist

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researchers therefore, stress the necessity for feminist research to be qualitative and action-oriented (Deutsch, 2004). Oakley (1981) argued for the value of the in-depth qualitative interview for feminist research. She wrote of the inadequacies of the social science methodology and suggested that the interviewer should present her own identity in the process, not only asking questions, but also sharing knowledge. According to her model of research that challenges power relationships between researcher and researched should be developed for feminist studies. Whereas, some other scholars emphasise that a particular strength of feminist research is its largely 'problem-driven' nature: feminists as a group could use 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. For this reason, they insist that feminist work can and should utilize both quantitative and qualitative techniques (Krook and Squires, 2006) (Siim, 2004). Also, Akman and her colleagues (2001) argue that it is possible to conduct good quantitative research and remain committed to feminist values. In the same view, Jayaratne (1983) point out that quantitative and qualitative methodology, can and should form part of feminist research, since the quantitative can provide information not achievable through qualitative methods. Most of the feminist researches used qualitative method via feminist interventions. In her study, Mendis (2009: 378) indicates that " Given the intimate and sensitive nature of information that I was looking for, the best way to communicate with the research participants was considered to be via face- to-face encounters." Mackenzie (1997) also used qualitative method in her research. She indicates that feminist methodology was used in her study to gather the information needed. " When asking

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permission to audio-record the interviews, I explained to the women that I wanted the conversation recorded because every bit of the information that they shared with me would be helpful in my analysis and assured them that no one else would listen to those tapes. Some qualitative researchers nonetheless perceive audio-taping as a limitation which might inhibit participants accounts" (Patton, 1991; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Wilkinson (1998) goes one step further and suggests the need for more socially situated methods, and argues that group interviews or focus groups, are of particular value in conducting, and developing, feminist research. She argues that group interviews of various kinds (generically designated focus groups) provide a valuable methodological tool for feminist research. Ethical issues is another concern that feminist social scientists have expressed in one-to-one interviewing (Oakley, 1981). The potentially exploitative nature of the interaction in which the researcher controls the proceedings, regulates the conversation, reveals minimal personal information, and imposes her own framework of meaning upon participants have been important ethical issues for the feminist research (Wilkinson, 1998). Wilkinson (1998) also argues that these ethical concerns do not, simply disappear when the one-to-one interview is replaced with the focus group (in particular because the researcher retains a powerful role in the analysis and writing-up of the data), but in the data collection stage at least, the researcher's power and influence is reduced, because she has much less power and influence over a group than over an individual. Various feminist theoretical frames entail distinctive epistemological and ontological claims of their own. Despite this fact, debates continue to exist in the literature over what true feminist inquiry is and how to conduct it. However, there are some principles of <https://assignbuster.com/distinct-and-separate-feminist-sociology-essay/>

feminist research that cut across the differing methodologies and theoretical frameworks used by social scientists (Akman et al, 2001). It has been argued that making a methodology feminist entails diplomatic methodology through feminism. (Moss (2002) as feminist politics has a wide range of possibilities, it becomes understandable that why there has not been a single set of agreed feminist research methodology. Landman (2007) indicates that feminist methodology is specifically concerned with how, or whether, knowledge produced about social life can be connected with the social realities of women in the context of any methodology that is dominated by men and that neglects consideration of the gendered nature of social life. Similarly, Brayton (1997) summarizes methodological differences of feminist research from traditional research in three headings. Feminist research seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject; it is politically motivated and has a major role in changing social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women. Feminist standpoint as an approach is concerned with investigating and theorising the social world from the standpoint of women. The goal of such research is to give women tools to end their own oppression and feminist methodology is both an academic endeavour and part of the women's movement. (Bloom and Sawin, 2009). It is claimed that feminist researchers have consistently asserted that research itself can contribute to producing a liberator, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group and that this kind of engaged research can produce knowledge that such a group desires (Harding and Norberg, 2005). Whereas, Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) underline a risk for the feminist research here and indicate the importance of avoiding to position politically motivated researcher as active

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emancipator and to position participants as passive receivers of emancipation. Ramazanoglu and Holland, (2002) propose that feminist methodology is distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics, and ethics and is grounded in women's experience. In a similar way, Moss (2002 : 3) states that " taking on feminist research entails scrutiny and tactful of all aspects of the research process - from choosing a research topic to selecting data collection methods, from setting a research question to conceptualise theoretical build ups, and from designing a research project to presenting and circulating analyses" Feminist researchers are criticized to keep clear of traditional research concepts of validity, objectivity, reliability and generalisation (Sarantakos, 2005). But actually feminist researchers question on the definitions of all these concepts in traditional social sciences and they ask the questions " Do the methods used in social research accurately capture social reality?" " Who decides which topics are worthy of investigation?" " What is knowledge and truth in the social realm?" These questions mean that feminist perspectives enter into and try to transform existing modes of methodology and epistemology (Klein, 1983; Brayton, 1997, Ramzanoglu and Holland, 2002). Feminist methodology is informed by feminist epistemology. It questions who can be agents of knowledge, what can be known and how knowledge is validated, and the relationship between knowing and being (ontology) (Landman, 2007). " Discovery" of knowledge means that an objective reality awaits discovery. Whereas, " Construction" of knowledge suggests there is no reality outside our understanding and our own experiences (Westmarland, 2001). " Positivism" refers to an acceptance of an objective reality which exists prior to and apart from our experience of it. (Cosgrove and Mchug, 2000). Through feminist epistemology`s

questioning on knowledge, feminist researchers could raise new questions about the concept of objectivity. It has been argued that the feminist methodology aims to develop new standards for collecting and evaluating evidence and takes cognizance of subjectivity rather than objectivity. The critical awareness of the researcher's engagement or participation in the inquiry process and of her or his epistemological choices in the research design, implementation, and articulation is defined as reflexivity. Subjectivity and reflexivity have been initial elements of feminist critical inquiry (Villaverde, 2008). In feminist research, a commonly used reflective approach includes the researcher providing an intellectual autobiography tracing her interest in, relationship with, and approach to the questions and to the research participants (Stanley & Wise, 1993). This brings the recognition that the researcher's own experience in the research process has an impact on constructing both the context and the knowledge produced (Akman et al, 2001). Mendis (2009: 382) in her study on the impacts of childhood exposure to family violence on subsequent mothering states that "I told my participants that I was a mother and thinking about my mothering role since experiencing family violence. This concept of investing something of my identity in the research relationship had certainly facilitated the initial rapport building process with the participating women." Feminist critiques of objectivity are directed not against all claims to objectivity, but against particular conceptions of objectivity. The conceptions of objectivity considered problematic by feminists. The ideal of objectivity as detachment and controlling stance toward objects of study is defended as necessary to avoid projective error. Feminist research is based on the assumption that the world is socially constructed and value-neutrality is not accepted by the <https://assignbuster.com/distinct-and-separate-feminist-sociology-essay/>

feminist researchers (Punch, 2005). Keller (1985) argues that it is responsible for the symbolically "masculine" standing of science that marginalizes women in science by stereotyping them as emotional. Moreover, it reflects an androcentric perspective, in that it helps maintaining sharp boundaries between self and other, and keeping the "feminine" distant from the construction of knowledge (Keller, 1985, Bordo, 1987). Another main critic of positivist understanding of knowledge takes its root from postmodern theory. It challenges the relationship between knower and known, in addition to what can be known and how. Postmodern paradigms show multiple subjectivities, search for various truths, and expose where power relationships resides (Gannon and Davies, 2006). Villaverde (2008) argues that postmodern paradigms expose the embeddedness of androcentrism in traditional inquiry processes while stressing the importance of reflecting on one's subjectivity and agency. Postmodernism has offered feminism some useful ideas. Stanley (1997: 209) indicates that "postmodern feminist epistemology rejects the idea that there is a real reality independent of interpretation and which highlights the existence of interpretational disputes" Using interpretation as a tool provides feminist theory a ground to improve their critique on the traditional concepts of validity, objectivity, rationalism and brings the experience and emotions into the social science. Having a modified the concept of objectivism the feminist researchers` react to the positivist viewpoint in social science focusing on emotions as a source of knowledge and rejecting reason as the only way to the study of social life (Jaggar, 1989). Researching on emotions gives an opportunity to understand how the power relationships are constructed in the social realm which is one of the main aims of feminist social movements.

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For example in Mackenzie's (1997) study, "A thorny problem for feminism: an analysis of the subjective work experiences of enrolled nurses", feelings of the enrolled nurses on their roles are asked to the participants to understand women's experiences within social hierarchies. Gender theory is a general perspective rooted in the idea that gender is a concept that can be applied at many levels of analysis, from average gender differences in size and strength, physical abilities, personality, attitudes, and values to the gender structure of large-scale social institutions (Johnson, 2009). Taking the gender theory as a basis the feminist methodology is defined as introducing experiences as an alternative basis of knowledge. Feminist research strategy provides data that otherwise does not exist about gendered lives and power relations, fosters knowledge about many different kinds of women (Narayan, 1989; Ramzanoglu and Holland, 2002). For example, in her research Mendis (2009 : 378) states that " my framework consisted of a number of concepts drawn predominantly from a feminist standpoint theory including a theory of gender and power, a conception of feminist knowledge and conceptions of experience and reality". But, this point of view is criticized that women cannot have privileged access to understanding their own oppression, since this takes different forms for different women, depending on their race, sexual orientation, and so forth. This critique has been forcefully developed by feminist postmodernists, who question the very possibility of a unified standpoint of women, and see, behind the assertion of a universal woman's viewpoint, only the perspective of relatively privileged white women (Lugones & Spelman 1983). For example, according to the finding of the research done by Mackenzie (1997) form of oppression and exploitation (deriving from the relationship between enrolled nurses and their senior

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colleagues) experienced by enrolled nurses should be viewed as women controlling women. She argues that feminist researches on nurses have concentrated on the gender relationships between nurses and doctors, identifying nurses at the feminine axis of medicine's dominant masculinity. These works have viewed nurses as a homogenous group but using in depth interviews as a method she reveals women nurses' understanding of power structures in workplace. The research findings also show that not all women experience social world in the same way. Although the importance of feminist critique of objectivity in social research, this rejection of pure objectivity is not limited to feminist researchers, and many other sociologists have questioned and rejected the notion, preferring to make knowledge claims based on findings being corroborated by other research. So it is not easy to mention about feminist critique of objectivity as a constituting part of a distinct feminist methodology (Westmarland, 2001). Validity and reliability have been important methodological concerns in social research. In traditional meanings reliability indicates getting consistent results from the same measure to produce the same findings if used under the same conditions, whereas validity refers to getting results that accurately reflect the real meaning of the concept being measured (Babbie, 2007). Kirk and Miller (1986: 20) define reliability as the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research. In feminist research Reason and Rowan (1981) advice borrowing concept of validity from traditional research but refining and expanding them in ways appropriate to "an interactive, dialogic logic". So it is also possible to say that the feminist methodology challenges the traditional concept of validity and brings the interpretive validity, which is related to whether or not the

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account given in the research connects with the lived experience of people studied (Punch, 1999). To ensure reliability as the consistency in their research, feminist researchers use a variety of techniques and tools like interviews, participation and transcripts. Like other social researchers, feminist researchers aim to ensure reliability and validity. Another feature of feminist methodology is its political and action oriented nature in contrast to the traditional valuation of theoretical and pure science. For example, Maynard (1994) argues that feminist research practice can be seen as distinctive in its insistence on its political nature and its potential to bring about change in women's lives. But this point of view is criticized as, it is possible to say that all research is action oriented, but what varies (and ultimately what matters) is whose agenda is being served (McHugh and Cosgrove, 2004: 173). In Conclusion, there is no research method and methodology that is solely made for and employed by feminist researchers rather, methods come from quantitative or qualitative research adjusted to meet feminist principles (Reinharz, 1992). Feminist researchers have not only adapted existing social research methods in accordance with their feminist concerns, but have also designed new research methods which are more politicized and value-laden that bring the researcher close to the subject (Akman et al, 2001) . It can also be said that most of the methods of research can be used to attain feminist goals. However, method adopted depends on specific methodology and research questions. Feminist methodologies and methods assume that knowledge is socially constructed. Also, diverse nature of the feminists makes it difficult to present ' a coherent and cogent alternative to non-feminist research (Hammersley, 1992: 202)... Feminist research goes beyond the traditional methods but it is not enough

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to mention about a distant feminist methodology in social research area (Krook and Squires, 2006). Although it been argued that there is a consciously distinct feminist approach to methodology and methods but the summary of all the arguments on feminist methodology is that there is no separate feminist methodology.