

# Feminist research about women and for women sociology essay



Since the early 1970s when women movements started to gain momentum feminists have been attempting to affect the way in which social research is undertaken. They have endeavoured to revolutionise their disciplines by creating new ways of thinking about epistemology and methodology. Of vital importance to these endeavours lies concerns that traditional ways of gathering knowledge are hindered, the answer to these hindrances, say feminist theorists is a methodology which is inherently based around women and women's experiences of the social world.

After noting the defining features of feminism a question must be raised as regards the distinction of feminist methods, are they distinct or is feminist research simply good reflexive research. It is true that many aspects of feminist research are replicated throughout much social research practice, however the backbone of feminist research, that it is fighting gender inequality is what separates it most notably it from other types of social research (2005, 10).

Feminist theorists argue that traditional practice regarding "good research" empowers men whilst alienating women (1990, 60). Traditionally social science has tried to unravel the extensively multifarious nature of the social sphere by categorising certain social groups and giving causal relations between individuals and social phenomena. These relations are then used by politicians to govern day to day life for the benefit of the group that create them, men. Therefore, the social sciences are inherently linked with power, including the power relations between men and women. It is thus clear that the social sciences need reformatting in order for a social understanding that is not based on power control.

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Feminism is both theory and practice. Feminists start with a basic political stance which says that they want to produce knowledge that is useful for and beneficial to women socially, individually and politically. Feminists are concerned with changing the way mainstream research is done, by ending women's exclusion from it and highlighting the political nature of most research, that is, that the research methods, topic and population of study are always politically motivated for the benefit of powerful white men (2003a, 4).

As mentioned there is not a full understanding of exactly what feminist research. What feminism most certainly is about is challenging gender inequality and male dominance (Ibid, 12 – 14). Whilst there is undoubtedly incredible diversity the world over which structures women's lives in many differing ways there is a fundamental sense in which the world is organized by gender differences. By this I do not mean to say that feminism should be the horse behind which the women of the world should unite, rather I understand gender as the ingredient that should be paid most attention to in terms of power relations and undertaking and understanding social research. What differentiates feminist research from other research is the questions that feminists ask, the way they locate themselves in the research and the intentions under which the work it produced (2003a, 5).

Feminist social research starts off by analysing the assumptions made by malestream social science. Firstly, that the social world is knowable in the same way the natural world is knowable. That is, it is knowable through a subjective entity who observes and records that which appears to be objective. This is the assumption of objectivity. The second assumption is the <https://assignbuster.com/feminist-research-about-women-and-for-women-sociology-essay/>

subject-object separation, the idea that the subjective entity should not affect the objective object of truth. The third assumption is the empirical assumption. This assumption is that the social world should be understood by reference to one's senses, which are assumed will give correct knowledge regarding human behaviour. The assumption continues as it is also supposed that each subjective entity will yield the same objective information. The fourth assumption is that the social world is inherently ordered. Things don't happen without reason, do they!? This is the cause and effect assumption. The final assumption is that all the sciences are united because they provide knowledge using the same methods and that these are 'the best' and only methods (1990, 4 - 5).

These assumptions provide us with knowledge that is rational, impersonal, controllable and predictive (Ibid, 5). In the natural sciences this is fine as we need controlled predictions in order to help humans by fighting illness and so on. However, in the social sciences it has not been possible to obtain knowledge based on the same principles. This is because the social world is intrinsically more complex than the natural world due to the nature of human beings, we are unpredictable.

There are two brackets under which social research can be undertaken, quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative research involves observation, interviews, focus groups, fieldwork and ethnographic studies (2010, 118). Qualitative research is seen as subjective due to the nature of the methods used, it is clear to see that two different people could interpret and interview or focus group in two very different ways. Quantitative methods on the other

hand are seen as more objective because they deal with surveys questionnaires and statistics (Ibid, 106).

There has been a long running methodological dispute in feminist research regarding “ ideological representations” (2000, 42). Qualitative research is seen as feminine, its sensual, subjective, compassionate, soft, unreliable. Quantitative research on the other hand is masculine, reliable, measurable, objective and hard. Here we see the concept of gender moving beyond genetic makeup and into something bigger, something that describes the powerful (quantitative / masculine) and the powerless (qualitative / feminine). Ann Oakley explains that this is why the qualitative method is advocated for research on less powerful groups such as “ women, children, the disabled, ethnic minorities, travellers, patients, homosexuals – all who are excluded from the mainstream white, male, able bodied culture” (2000, 42). However, it seems that such distinctions merely reinforce historical stereotypes.

Quantitative research was not trusted by some researchers because it used statistics to belittle the reality of women’s experience of inequality in society. Quantitative findings may also not accurately describe or uncover phenomena such as sexism and deep seated patriarchal attitudes.

Therefore, researchers will inevitably “ find what they are looking for” (2005, 52) in order to back up these preconceptions. However, I feel that the problem may not be with the methodology, rather with the attitudes held by the researcher and subjects they choose to investigate.

The way that probably most encapsulates the findings of qualitative research is that it is valid, yet its reliability is poor, whilst quantitative research is seen as reliable but invalid (Ibid, 46 – 47). Feminist research has always been interested in giving a voice to the silent minority, Dorothy Smith often comments on women being silenced throughout history (1987b, 9).

Qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations and so on are very much based around interaction and close contact between researcher and participant. Interviews especially are necessarily long periods of close interaction and are the favoured method of feminist researchers (2010, 127).

Many reasons why feminist prefer qualitative research is precisely because it differs so greatly from quantitative research in the sense that the researcher is actually “ connected” to the research, as opposed to quantitative research where the researcher is seen as distanced by the natural boundaries that statistical work puts up, i. e. working on a computer crunching numbers. On the other hand, undertaking qualitative research involves dissolving boundaries and creating understanding based in “ concrete social contexts and experiences” (2005, 47). This is especially true in cases of extreme emotional content such as Lyn Kathlene’s research concerned with developing rape programs in American universities. This case study is also a good example of feminist researchers enabling the silenced voice of women who have been abused and were originally afraid to come forward (1995, 184 – 185).

As mentioned, the main problem encountered by qualitative researchers is the reliability of their findings. There is no one way in which qualitative data must be presented. The value of qualitative research is that it can describe and explain using images and words. Zina O'Leary believes that the best way to present qualitative data is through telling a story that has a clear argument and a careful word selection in order to weigh the narrative in the researchers favour (2010, 271). A good example of this is Gordana Rabrenovic's study of women and collective action in urban neighbourhoods. Rabrenovic builds up the story from the streets stating that there is "drug trade, street violence, inadequate city services" (1995, 77). Throughout the case study she brings in various stories regarding women's collective action such as the "Clean Sweep United, a citywide organisation, to deal with the city's overwhelming problem with drugs" (Ibid, 83) whilst relating back to the relevant sociological literature.

The very nature of qualitative research dictates that there are going to be many differing ways of reporting research. One study by John Lofland uncovered twenty differing styles in which qualitative research was presented (2005, 53). This is clearly a problem, especially as researchers are presenting their results as real social understanding. With qualitative research there is no easy way to compare and analyse findings and there is a lurking assumption that the research speaks for itself and has no need for further work by the researcher as it is inherently interesting (Ibid, 53 - 54).

A possible solution to this problem would be to employ mixed methods. That is, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed methods allow for capitalisation of the best parts of both methods and may even go <https://assignbuster.com/feminist-research-about-women-and-for-women-sociology-essay/>

some way to moving beyond individual problems they hold (2010, 127). I do not believe that feminist researchers should shy away from quantitative research, as mentioned earlier it merely supports stereotypes and it is a very useful research tool. Mixed method research approaches can offer a more controlled research programme and be implemented in natural settings, certainly the claim that only qualitative methods are of use to feminist researchers is “no longer valid” (2005, 10). Equally quantitative methods are not seen as inherently superior (Ibid, 10). For example Sue Griffiths and Jalna Hanmer use both qualitative research and descriptive statistics in their research on domestic violence (2005, 23 – 39).

The use of mixed methods enables a better view of the big picture by adding statistics to back up theory, or as giving statistics meaning via interpretation and narrative. Therefore, using mixed methods also gets around the main problem of quantitative research, that it overlooks and trivialises the lives of women. However, there is the possibility that when using mixed methods the results from the quantitative research clash with the results of the qualitative research. Ann Oakley believes that “using multiple methods does not lead to sounder explanation” (2000, 70), Oakley feels that feminist researchers should only use qualitative methodology. She claims that highly reliable knowledge can be gained from a small sample of research participants and “that asking questions produces honest and trustworthy answers” (Ibid, 72).

However, it seems that research participants can deceive researchers, either on purpose by lying or by deliberately leaving out information they do not want to give. This will inevitably happen despite feminists attempts to equalise the power structure of the research. It could be argued that <https://assignbuster.com/feminist-research-about-women-and-for-women-sociology-essay/>



participants can deceive researchers who are undertaking quantitative research by filling in surveys incorrectly and so on. However, I feel that this is less likely to occur due to the fact that when filling in questionnaires participants are alone and will have the feeling that they are faceless in the research and thus have nothing to hide. Whilst if participating in qualitative research the participant may not wish to disclose all the personal details the researcher may need for her research, thus leaving it incomplete.

Having discussed the quantitative, qualitative debate I am now going to move on to examine what it is that makes feminist social research feminist.

Sandra Harding writes that feminist research can be thought of as having “ methodological features because they show us how to apply the general structure of scientific theory to research on women and gender” (1987a, 9). She is saying that feminist research is feminist research when one is studying women from their own perspective, realising that the researcher’s subjectivity will somehow affect the results of the research and recognising the position of the researcher in the research situation.

When using qualitative research methods the feminist researcher will dismantle and rebuild the power structure. For example in Melanie McCarry’s research she was dealing with a large group of young people from Glasgow, aged between 15 and 18, all of whom had suffered from domestic violence or abuse. Clearly this is a situation where the participants were powerless as young people, as participants and as victims of abuse. McCarry took “ a feminist standpoint that constructed the participants as experts in the area in which they were being interviewed” (2005, 88) this entailed that she was

no longer the expert, whilst the young people became the experts on the subject being studied, thus going some way to removing the power divide.

One of feminist researcher's primary concerns is to provide accurate information as regards social experience, an important aspect in which feminist research differs from traditional malestream research is the approach to findings. Traditionally the findings of research were the researcher's property. Feminist researchers are concerned with feeding their findings back to participants, as it is they who have had the experiences and they therefore have the right to see the final conclusions.

As indicated previously, locating oneself in the context of the research is another important feminist distinction. As Letherby puts it " it has become commonplace for the researcher to locate her/himself within the research process" (2003a, 8), if the researcher manages to identify her location with the research she may be more able to locate and deal with her own biases. As a feminist researcher location within the research is essential (1990, 12). Umme Imam and Parveen Akhtar undertook research with Asian children who had suffered from domestic violence. In this project they had to fully understand their positions within the research:

" We recognised that despite our backgrounds as South Asian women and our shared experiences [...], we could not possibly share all the characteristics and all the experiences of the sample. We had to recognise our own ' conscious partiality' as black feminists, in order to hear the voices of children / young people" (2005, 70).

I will now briefly discuss the notion that feminist research can only be undertaken by women. If the assumption is taken that a feminist is a woman whom by reference to personal experience holds the knowledge that she and all women are repressed by a patriarchal society (1997, 17), it follows that a man would not be in such a position. However, a man can come to understand that women are oppressed and that males have benefited from this oppression and he can take a position in opposition to this. Men can be pro-feminist and even undertake research in a pro-feminist light by following the criteria that has been laid out in this essay.

This will inevitably raise difficulties, not being a woman will mean that the man may not be able to grasp a topic which will be useful for the empowerment of women, due to his inherent sexual bias (2003b, 110). A man attempting to undertake feminist research is also likely to focus on what he perceives to be the problems or weaknesses in the patriarchal system, rather than understanding feminist issues. It may therefore be more appropriate for men to undertake anti-patriarchy research as opposed to feminist research.

I now wish to move on and outline the philosophy that backs up feminist research methods, feminist standpoint epistemology. One of the main problems feminism faces is proving that its research findings are better than malestream findings. Over the course of recent history positivism has been the dominating theory regarding truth claims. Positivism is the theory that objective, scientific knowledge can be gained by following certain scientific methodology. Of course this is massively under complicating the true history

of the philosophy of social theory, but positivism is the main force against which feminism battles (1997, 290).

Feminist standpoint theorists argue that what is of optimum importance is the production of social knowledge that is superior to malestream and even other feminist's researchers, thus moving social understanding forwards (Ibid, 291). The claim runs that findings must be both useful to and usable by women, but not solely women. This is not to say that standpoint theory is in favour of female self-government, rather it proposes removing " an existing methodological separatism" (1990, 39).

The founder of feminist standpoint epistemologists is Dorothy Smith, her aim is to create a " sociology for women" (1987b, 49). Smiths aim is to manufacture feminist research in which women construct and interpret the social relations which make up everyday life. Smith understands that women are engaged with the social sphere on many levels, she focuses her attention on women who are involved in the everyday world and those who are " excluded from the practices of power within these textually mediated relations of ruling" (Ibid, 4). As the nature of the discipline dictates Smith realises that she must attempt to combine an epistemology with methodology and relate the methodology to actual research practice. This attempt means that her standpoint epistemology remains rooted at the same level as all women, it does not attempt to transcend itself and become the provider of greater knowledge. It really is sociology for women.

Smith is a materialist feminist, who identifies with Marx and Engels in the sense that she understands ideology as rooted in material institutions and

traditions (Ibid, 54). Her investigation continues with a look at the sexual division of labour, for example she looks at women's place in educational role in Canada (Ibid, 27 – 28). Smith also includes within her analysis a complete overview of women's position in society, this includes the entire assortment of women's 'services' to the capitalist patriarchal culture in which we live. Smith states that women's lives are formed by their individual situation, women are not part of the abstract process of policy making as men are, rather they are grounded in reality and must perform the everyday tasks, such as taking children to school, whilst men go to work and come up with educational policies (Ibid, 84 – 85

Despite its claims for seeing the big picture feminist standpoint has been criticised by feminists for not being specific enough. For example some black feminists are critical of the term feminist standpoint theory, claiming that it should in fact be "black feminist standpoint", or "white feminist standpoint" (2004, 321). The reason for the criticism is that as the more oppressed social group black women's standpoint is much unlike that of a white woman's. This is not to necessarily say that the black woman's position is better than the white woman's, they are merely different.

Taking the above argument as my premise I am now briefly going to discuss Patricia Hill Collins essay 'The sociological significance of black feminist thought' (1986). My reason for looking at Collin's essay is that in this paper I must uncover whether feminist research is for and about women. I therefore feel that if feminist research is indeed 'for' women then logically black feminist research should be 'for' black women.

In her article Collins explains how black women, as outsiders within, can offer a distinctive standpoint regarding sociological facts and theories (2003c, 416). Collins describes how,

“ A variety of individuals can learn from Black women’s experience as outsiders within: Black men, working-class individuals, white women, other people of colour, religious and sexual minorities, and all individuals who, while from social strata that provided them with the benefits of white male insiderism, have never felt comfortable with its taken for granted assumptions” (Ibid, 418).

This clearly indicates that Collins believes black feminist research should be utilised by vast number of differing social groupings, including men and it certainly should not be limited to use by women alone. The black feminist standpoint has been somewhat “ silenced” and being a black woman and a feminist is to distinguish oneself from white society (1990, 29). In her essay Collins gives a sense that she feels split in her position as sociologist between being an insider and an outsider in disguise “ how does one know when an individual is really an insider and not an outsider in disguise?” (2003c, 417). For black feminists theory is driven by context, that is, it is based on experience and it necessarily involves the identification of difference.

Therefore, standpoint feminism is not a simple epistemology, rather it must incorporate within it other variations of feminism, not just ethnic variations, but also sexual variations and possibly even age variations (1990, 33).

Smiths conception of standpoint epistemology is wide enough to incorporate

and recognise these differing ways in which individual feminist standpoints are constructed and it understands that in reality there is not one truth.

Feminist research may not focus solely on gender and inequality, indeed feminist research is not necessarily exclusive to women. For example Lynne Harne in her research on violent fathers uses feminist method and feminist understanding of domestic violence to examine vicious father's attempts to achieve contact with their children. Harne notes that "establishing some rapport with the violent fathers and appearing to maintain a non-judgemental 'facade', was also important in initially facilitating their talk of violence and abuse" (2005, 182).

To say that feminist research is about women and for women is to massively underestimate the value and scope of social understanding that feminist research can provide. Indeed one of the main aims of feminist research is to remove social inequality and this cannot be achieved if the findings are reserved for the sole preserve of women. As one of the golden rules of feminism dictates, the findings should always be fed back to the participants and if these participants are men it necessarily involves that qualitative feminist social research is not just for women but for the good of the entirety of society.

Feminist research for is the empowerment of women. Feminism takes women as its starting point and seeks to uncover patriarchy and social inequality from a female viewpoint and refigure the unequal power relationship between men and women. There is not one feminist method, as mentioned feminist research is concerned with pluralism, this is why I

advocated a use of a feminist espousal of mixed methods. The feminist researcher's goal is to focus on the position women hold in society and understanding that all research is undertaken in a patriarchy. Feminist research uses feminist principles throughout, although this not to say that it is only for the benefit of women. What it can offer is a new understanding that is grounded in women's experience of the social sphere. It is also necessary to note that for a full understanding of society it is required that men's lives are understood because if they are not there is only a partial uncovering of social life, and this is inadequate (2003b, 16).

In conclusion, feminist research can be attempted by men, but I propose that they would be unable to fully grasp the inherent 'womanness' involved in feminist research. Feminist research does not have to be about women, as shown by Lynne Harne's research involving violent fathers, feminist methodology can be used when researching men. The findings of feminist social research are primarily for the empowerment of women, but they are by no means exclusively so. Feminist research should be used for the good of society as feminist research enables in depth insight in social phenomena that can be used by the whole of society, as Patricia Hill Collins shows us in her essay on black feminist thought.

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