

Distinctive  
contribution of a  
feminist methodology  
sociology essay



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This paper examines the distinctive contribution of a feminist methodology in social science research. The Introduction outlines both the historical and future perspectives. The paper is then divided into two distinct parts (1) Feminist Research - What this means in terms of social science research, the methods used together with the challenges and choices involved. Concluding with the epistemological issues raised by doing feminist research (2) considers the different perspectives and critique of conventional research. This illustrated by appropriate case study examples. Most researchers in sociology tend to agree that there is no single distinct feminist methodology. There is more a collective consciousness that was born from feminist movements in the 1960's and 1970's where a group of women talked openly, developing a mode of inquiry that challenged the conventional norms of research. These women collectively became known as feminists and enlightened individuals that formed a new basis for knowledge. Although the original works were conducted outside of an academic setting, it soon became apparent that there was a lack of feminine representation in mainstream sociology or social science. (Devault 1996). Over the last 25 years female sociologists have made significant advances in pushing back the prejudices against women and in general interpreting the workings of society. Feminism was essentially born from a movement and a belief in resolving gender inequalities.

Within the general claims to male dominance in social theory, three challenges have emerged (i) the criticism against that of female knowledge and its' inability to demonstrate adequate work that illustrates scientific or unbiased knowledge. This resulted in feminists coming under scrutiny in

order to demonstrate abilities to rationalise knowledge, perform verification, subjectivity and freedom from political bias. Secondly, how different influences shaped women's lives. Examples cited included that of " cultural divisions, social divisions and power relations" (Caroline RamazanoÇlu 2004). The danger here is one of stereotyping and simply branding women as one gender that provides a uniform result. The third challenge intertwines that of knowledge and gender whereby in essence women are taken for granted.

In 1987 Sandra Harding (Harding 1987) provided insight into the difference between that of Method, Methodology and Epistemology. She equated Epistemology to that of a theory of knowledge with the objective of answering specific questions. Further, that there are two distinct epistemologies namely that of a ' Feminist empiricism' and a ' Feminist Standpoint'. The empirical part is that where a response is provided to bias and traditional responses (Harding 1987). Whereas, standpoint refers to a specific feminist opinion founded upon an explanation of knowledge. In order to understand and complete a feminist standpoint the reader needs to become more involved with the " intellectual and political struggles that a women's experience is built upon Sandra Harding's views on Standpoint Epistemology focused more on the concepts of objectivity. Harding advocated a new concept of ' strong objectivity', as opposed to that of the weak concept which she referred to as ' objectivism'. She stated that objectivity must contain all social values and interests from the research that is carried out. She was aware that certain social values could adversely impact the research and cause potential distortions. As such Harding viewed traditional research concepts and objectivity as the denial of cultures best

beliefs (knowledge), whereas the new version fully embraces both political and historical origins.

Harding believed that her new theory holds validity, particularly from the feminist standpoint i. e. women are part of an oppressed group and as such they approach research problems in a less arbitrary way. They are more likely to evaluate theories that might otherwise be overlooked or denied by more traditional concepts or viewpoints. Harding states that that the standpoint has a substantial foundation in the empirical experiences of women and although this may not constitute a foundation of knowledge, nevertheless it does create a more diverse contribution leading towards increased objectivity." (Stanley 1990).

Historically the most common expression of female action has been associated with that of liberation and the emancipation of women. This has ranged from the concept of radical insistence, to clarifying the purpose of research and ultimately to transformation in terms of political action. It was Maria Mies that proposed feminist research should be consistent with the overall political goals and aspirations of women. Hence, there needs to be a full integration of social and political; action appropriate to the emancipation of women. (Mary Margaret Fonow, *Beyond methodology: feminist scholarship as lived research* 1991).

## **FEMINIST RESEARCH**

Feminist research can essentially be defined as research conducted by what has become known as 'feminists', essentially drawing upon experiences of women in what is perceived as a male dominated world. The objective of

research is based the creation of useful knowledge in order to make added contributions by different perspectives of thought. Feminism is based upon a praxis of women sharing the same agenda with men and overcoming the struggle relative to gender, race and class. The foundation of this was really built in the 1980's. Feminist research has since become more focused on how the lives of women have become materially altered by men and the development of strategies in order to resist this process (Mary Maynard 2005).

Feminist research in general terms has had a lack of agreement to what precisely defines feminist theory and practice. As such there is not really a single unifying theory. It was Patricia Maguire (Breyton 1997) that offered the premise that feminism is (i) An understanding and belief that women face some form of oppression (ii) A commitment to understand female oppression and exploitation in all of its forms (iii) A commitment towards elimination of all forms of female oppression. (Breyton 1997).

**FEMINIST METHODS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH:** Feminist methods may have four main objectives: (i) the ability to uncover and overcome types of bias in research (ii) The ability to detect and create social change (iii) a concept or method to illustrate human diversity (iv) An acknowledgement of the credentials and position of the researcher. In order to create social change any method must include and respect the participants as change agents. The method needs to acknowledge diversity and that not all women see the social world in the same way e. g. the method approach to interviews and inquiry that explore the experiences of different religions.

(Sprague 2005) i. e. evidence has been presented to support theory presented.

Feminist studies use both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, although qualitative research is more readily used. The term methodology relates to more of a process of how to conduct research i. e. what you need to select, empirical study of what to observe, what to measure and how to conduct analysis. The method is more related to the precise technique of carrying out the study. (Sprague 2005) A common assumption has been that methodology and epistemology are identical. This has created a relatively narrow technical approach towards carrying out and conducting research. The concept of methodology essentially opens the way for conducting choice i. e. the implications of what we should do and how we might do it. It facilitates questions on data collection and assimilation. As such methodology paves the way for critical reflection and creativity within the social sciences.

THE CHALLENGES AND CHOICES: Feminist researchers have taken very different approaches to the adoption of methodology. As such they have adopted differing means to the acquisition and validation of knowledge. This has tended to lean towards a more scientific and evidential base of presenting knowledge. This has avoided the more serious challenges of refuting feminist research and rejecting it on the basis that it contains no scientific method. The example being the study into child abuse, as such it never becomes a clear cut case but contains many complex shades of grey and is nearly always disputable. In many situations feminist researchers are particularly vulnerable in this regard. (Caroline RamazanoÇlu 2004).  
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In current terms it is important to recognise that a large number of women are employed in science, engineering and academic positions. As such they offer a diverse range of opinions on a wide range of subject matter. The female positions tend to have two distinct types of focus (i) that engaged with the sciences and (ii) that focused upon society. Researchers have emerged from former marginalised groups and as such have had a profound way of changing the pattern of inquiry and thought process. There are still those however that holds the opinion that feminism is a threat to the objectivity of science. Sandra Harding pointed out that if all knowledge is socially constructed it will pose a major threat and challenge to science. For example with most scientists “ the notion that their views of the natural world are subjective is counter to their professional training”. (Wyer 2008) It is important to note that the feminist researchers have made a significant impact over the last thirty years. This has included a significant contribution to methodologies in the social sciences; particularly responding to the challenge of how women have been silenced in both society and research. The feminists have obtained significant success in bringing about social change and creating a degree of equity in both professional and personal lives. Whilst much of the success has been in the first world countries, there still remains a significant challenge for women in the third world and those emerging economies. In particular the native women of Africa, the women in the Islamic communities and others in the emerging countries like India and China.

**LEADING CONTRIBUTIONS:** Early contributions in the 1970's were made by feminist sociologists that include the likes of Marcia Millman and Rosebeth

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Moss Kanter.[1]They made a number of suppositions in sociology that focused on issues or problems with existing use of sociological methods. In essence they objected to how assumptions to sociological theories manifested themselves. They challenged the empirical views of male sociologists and demonstrated a new vision as seen purely from the female perspective. (Harding 1987).

The researcher and author Carol Gilligan[2][In a different voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development] agreed the point that conventional theorists are wrong to dismiss the wisdom of women on grounds of lower maturity. Gilligan asked that we listen to women in their different views and not try to compartmentalize them but credit women for the significant contributions over many disciplines in the sciences and the arts. (Harding 1987).

Evelyn Fox Keller[3]had completed a great deal of ground breaking work that exposed sexual bias in the sciences. She predicted that women needed to be careful in rejecting concepts of objectivity and rationality as they would not be regarded as the icons for creating a new frontier but were more likely to be doomed and marginalized outside of the political mainstream. Fox herself later found herself in the dilemma of having to choose between feminism and science. Fox stated that the more we questioned methodology the greater it generated papers on epistemology and as such methodology became an end-in-itself. (Winnie Tomm 1989).

Maria Mies[4](McDonald 2004)concluded that " the quantitative survey method is itself not free from androcentric bias", further " there is a



contradiction between the prevalent theories of social science, methodology and the political aims of women” (McDonald 2004). Meis argued that if we revert to these old traditional concepts they will again be turned into instruments of repression – “ new wine should not be poured into old bottles” (McDonald 2004)

One of the most influential people in the field of standpoint epistemology was that of Dorothy E Smith. Smith is famous throughout the world as a developer of theories and as such she has advanced the academic position from a feminist standpoint. Smith developed theories and concepts around the subject matter of gender and particularly that of the ‘ ruling texts’ of man. She advocated that many texts were compiled from the male perspective and as such were responsible for defining gender. She further advocated that such rules written by men determined the rules of society and defined the way in which we live and conduct our lives. Amongst the books that Smith referenced were the US Constitution, The Holy Bible and the Communist Manifesto. Smith stated that the rulings defined in many of these books were completely opposite to the manner in which women conducted their lives today. Such obsolescence creates the way for transformation of thinking and revision in these areas. – Ryan B Johnson (Johnson, Standpoint Epistemology Summary 2010).

## **EPISTOMELOGICAL ISSUES OF FEMINIST RESEARCH:**

Epistemology of feminist research broadly refers to the value of knowledge or the scientific method applied in order to conduct the research. An example being that of empirical or qualitative research. One of the important <https://assignbuster.com/distinctive-contribution-of-a-feminist-methodology-sociology-essay/>

issues relates to the variation between quantitative and qualitative techniques in feminist research. The historical association that exists between the two research methods have been documented; however the logical associations remain debateable. As such feminist methodology cannot be firmly anchored to either camp of quantitative or qualitative style of research.

Gilligan[5]pointed out that qualitative research represents the voice that is most consistent with female research values. Equally the researchers often use the perspective of a ' different voice', this being done in order to provide the distinction between that of a male opinionated voice. The female voice seeking to be far more evident in defining in the definition of connection and relationships. Mie's stated that because women have been well versed in repression they have greater objectivity than men in this subject area. This is evident when they are involved in researching exploited groups. In essence women have more empathy and are able to better understand the important issues in a different light or perspective. (Janet Holland 2010).

There is also the concept of stereotyping all women as feminists. Many female researchers have been primarily trained in traditional qualitative methodologies and despite the fact that they may have alternate or other views are most likely to revert to the traditional methods of carrying out research. Psychologist Laurie Rudman has completed research that has changed the views on negative stereotyping of women. Rudman's research found that negative stereoptypes of women are very widespread and even include educated young women. Her research further substantiated that " strong independent women have satisfying romantic lives and their men are <https://assignbuster.com/distinctive-contribution-of-a-feminist-methodology-sociology-essay/>

happy too - as opposed to the widely held convention that feminists are man hating harpies" (Branson 2007)

## **SUMMARY PERSPECTIVES**

Female researchers have made a number of distinctive contributions to feminist methodologies in social science research. It remains questionable however as to whether a distinct feminist methodology exists, rather it is an approach to which female researchers have enlivened the debate by bringing fresh perspectives and valuable new insight, thereby challenging traditional methods. There have been some outstanding contributions to social science research from leading female researchers - " Goelting and Fernstermaker,[6]1995; Orlans and Wallace, 1994 and Thorpe and Laslett, 1997" are to name but a few. (DeVault 1999)

Many sociologists agree that the original feminist movement had a core objective of changing the method of consciousness that was historically rooted in concepts of empirical research. Women became more aware of an alternate base for knowledge and the concept of introducing ' the women's experience' into the methodology deployed. The early movement thereby highlighted the omission of this perspective. In addition, the group highlighted the racism that was faced by African/Americans in the USA and how white women had an advantage in obtaining academic research jobs. From these early beginnings female researchers have learnt to respond to the issues in social sciences and improve the overall field of inquiry.

The female approach has been compared to that of ' excavators' (DeVault 1999)where female researchers have been used to identify gaps or missing

components in research or that which has been ignored. The unique voice of women often lends itself to a more empathetic approach to those delicate research areas i. e. child abuse, drug or substance abuse, juvenile crime etc. This often results in a more holistic and complete enquiry than would otherwise have been obtained from the traditional male dominated approach. (DeVault 1999).

The emancipation of women in social science would provide women with an increased knowledge of their own social circumstances within society. Any feminist methodology therefore needs to be grounded in objectivity in social science. The feminist movement, in achieving liberal values, must not itself become an instrument of repression against the male community. As such the concept goes beyond methodology to more of a process of transformational change and make research more inclusive and objective. Feminist research is therefore aimed at the liberation of women. In achieving these objectives they increase the base of knowledge and add value to the overall method approach in social research and inquiry. (Mary Margaret Fonow, 1991). " All the decent people, male and female, are feminists. The only people who are not feminists are those who believe that women are inherently inferior or undeserving of the respect and opportunity afforded men. Either you are a feminist or you are a sexist/misogynist. There is no box marked ' other'.- Ani DiFranco". (M. P. Johnson 2005).

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