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*Research Note*

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## **Neglected Voices and Excessive Demands in Feminist Research**

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The resurgence of the women's movement has led to a re-evaluation of previously accepted "knowledge." This re-evaluation, in turn, has identified bias, incompleteness and distortion in "knowledge" where certainty and objectivity had been thought to prevail. As a consequence of this discovery, feminists in the academy and in society at large charted a broad agenda for creating intellectual and scientific work that would generate a new body of knowledge. Acceptance of this agenda—to avoid the mistakes of pre-feminist scholarship and to engage in new feminist research—has led to the production of a voluminous literature on feminist research methods.

Because feminist research stems from the critical distrust (Reinharz, 1985/1988) of earlier non-feminist research, and because much of this earlier work was conducted using quantitative methods, a symbiosis has occurred between "feminist" and "qualitative" in the minds of many people. Qualitative methods are thought to be the methods that protest against the status quo, just as feminism does more generally (Reinharz, 1990). The unquestioned equation between the two may also be linked to the way American culture steers females away from mathematics, so that women come to believe that "qualitative" is a characteristically female way of knowing (Reinharz, 1983).

If one actually examines a large amount of feminist research, however, one quickly learns that the fusion of "qualitative" and "feminist" is more myth than reality. During the last few years I undertook an exhaustive study of the research methods feminists use, attempting to answer the question—is there a distinctive feminist research method? In pursuit of an an-

Based on a paper presented at the 87th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 20-24, 1992, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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swer, I used an inductive or “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Specifically, I analyzed a large set of examples of feminist research, which I defined as “research conducted by feminists or research that the researchers claim is conducted by feminist research methods” (Reinharz, 1992).

After collecting the examples, my first task was to create categories into which the examples could be divided. Employing the same principle as I had used for defining feminist research (i.e., self-definition), I also relied on the researchers’ terms to label the methods they had used. This principle produced the following categories:

- 1) feminist interview research
- 2) feminist ethnography
- 3) feminist survey research and other statistical research formats
- 4) feminist experimental research
- 5) feminist cross-cultural research
- 6) feminist oral history
- 7) feminist content analysis
- 8) feminist case studies
- 9) feminist action research
- 10) feminist multiple methods research
- 11) original feminist research methods.

Feminist statistical research clearly is one of the categories of feminist research despite the fact that theoretical writing about feminist research methods contains almost no reference to the existence of this type of research. For this reason, I have come to label “feminist survey research and other statistical formats” a “neglected voice in feminist research.”

The fact that feminist survey research is neglected in discussions about feminist research methods and feminist methodology is also important to recognize because of its historical significance (Anderson, 1992). Feminist researchers in the 19th century were involved deeply in the gathering of statistics in the United States and Great Britain. Florence Nightingale, for example, a woman remembered incorrectly for her sweet disposition in caring for wounded soldiers, was actually a warrior herself, fighting to give women, and herself in particular, a chance to reform sanitation and medical practices in the military. One of her primary tools for doing so was the careful collection and dissection of statistical materials, including inventing statistical procedures to enable her to carry out the needed studies (Diamond and Stone, 1981; Cohen, 1984).

Joan Mark, biographer of anthropologist Alice Fletcher, has analyzed 19th century U.S. feminist researchers’ use of survey research to study social change and social problems. Mark is one of many who have pointed out that in the late 19th century, “a tolerance for painstaking, tedious work,

applied in this case to the gathering of statistics,' was considered to be 'peculiarly feminine.'" (Mark, 1988, p. 25) . One of the people to use this 'feminine' trait to women's advantage was the renowned astronomer Maria Mitchell. In her 1875 presidential address to the Association for the Advancement of Women established in 1873, Mitchell urged members to "collect statistics." Particularly important to her were statistics concerning the effect of study on women, and on the number of female scientists in the United States (Mark, 1988, p. 24).

My study of "feminist survey research and other statistical research formats" documents a wide range of historical examples of feminist research of this type. It is important to recognize that this tradition continues to our day. Prime examples are the work of Diana Russell who studied marital rape, and Ronnie Steinberg and her colleagues who study comparable worth . In both cases, these feminist researchers understood that their topics would encounter a great deal of resistance in the mainstream community. People in power did not want to believe that marital rape existed, or if it did exist, they did not want to believe that it occurred in the broad spectrum of social classes and ethnic/racial groups, including their own. People in power certainly did not want to believe that women deserved higher pay and that whole job categories were underpaid because they demanded the same or higher levels of skill as did job categories where men predominated and had higher pay. If marital rape were found to occur throughout society, and men could be charged with this crime, many men would suffer. If wage discrimination were found to occur throughout society, and wages would have to be adjusted, then many men would be likely to suffer as well.

The pressure on the Diana Russell and Ronnie Steinberg to fail, and the importance to women that they succeed, were very great. Because of these factors both researchers stated that their intention was to use the most conventionally rigorous, most unassailable, and most convincing methods. In each case, the methods chosen were large-scale, scientifically sound surveys using the most sophisticated statistical procedures possible. In my view, the decisions and thinking that underlie these surveys are a "neglected voice" in our theorizing about the qualities of feminist research.

Following my collecting a large set of examples of feminist research and its division into the categories mentioned above, my next step was to examine the material I had collected within each category. This procedure produced two findings I consider salient:

- 1) there is a great deal of controversy among feminist researchers as to the appropriate approach to take when using each one of these methods;

- 2) there is little consistency in terminology when referring to any of these methods.

My final analytic step was to identify themes that cut across the range of research types, regardless of method used. They include:

- 1) (with very few exceptions) feminism is a perspective, not a research method;
- 2) feminists use a multiplicity of research methods;
- 3) feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of nonfeminist scholarship;
- 4) feminist research is guided by feminist theory;
- 5) feminist research may be transdisciplinary;
- 6) feminist research aims to create social change;
- 7) feminist research strives to represent human diversity;
- 8) feminist research frequently includes discussion of the researcher as a person;
- 9) feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the people studied (in interactive research);
- 10) feminist research frequently defines a special relation with the reader.

The second component in the title of this "research note" relates to item 9 in the list above; "feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the people studied." In essence, I found that the "attempt to develop special relations" can slip into an "excessive demand." The seed of this idea came to me even before I wrote my book. It developed in response to a visit made to a woman on whose dissertation committee I had served but who had not published her study in book form although her committee had praised her work and urged its publication. Much to my amazement, the reason she gave for not publishing her work was the feeling that she had violated a basic feminist principle of interviewing, as articulated in Ann Oakley's now classic essay—"Interviewing: a contradiction in terms." According to that essay, feminist interviewing differs from conventional interviewing because in feminist interview research a bond is formed between researcher and the woman studied that transcends the boundaries of the study. Ann Oakley describes maintaining intense relationships with women she had studied for years! The recent graduate of my department had not developed these kinds of relationships and therefore felt her study had violated a key principle of feminist research.

This conversation made me wonder if there were other feminist researchers burdened with excessive demands, exaggerated notions of bonding between researcher and subject, and unrealistic expectations. My examination of the material I had collected for my book corroborated my

concern. Evidence lies in the frequent apologies found in feminist publications: apologies that the researcher did not quite do what she<sup>1</sup> believes she should have done; apologies about the lack of diversity in her sample; and apologies concerning "rapport." This concern led me to examine the ideal of rapport in feminist research.

It seems to me that to the extent that part of the ideology of feminism is to transform the competitive and exploitative relations among women (and between women and men) into bonds of solidarity and mutuality, we expect mutual assistance and reciprocated understanding to be part of the researcher/subject relation. We assume that because relationships in general should be transformed, research relationships should be as well. In addition, to the extent that a goal of feminist scholarship is to reinterpret or redefine phenomena that previously were defined exclusively from a masculinist perspective, the only way to have access to a new definition is to understand women by way of rapport. Interpretation of motherhood, rape, incest, sexual harassment and other phenomena requires an openness thought to come only with rapport.

The requirement that feminist researchers establish rapport stems from the ideology that women experience relationships through an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982), and that feminists, in particular, are supposed to be able to establish intimate relations with women because of our political awareness of shared oppression (Miller, 1976). Put even stronger, feminists are supposed to feel toward other women as if they are their sisters, the unexamined presumption being that sisters have profound positive relations and shared interests (McNaron, 1985).

By "achieving rapport," the feminist researcher reassures herself that she is treating the interviewee in a nonexploitative manner. Rapport thus validates the scholar as a feminist, as a researcher, and as a human being. It symbolizes her sisterhood, her interviewing skill, and her ethical standing. Commenting on Marjorie Shostak's work, Mary Louise Pratt highlighted the importance of the 'current Western conceptions of female solidarity and intimacy' that produced 'cross-cultural harmony' between Nisa and Marjorie. Using words that seem to be describing romantic love, Mary Louise Pratt writes that Marjorie Shostak "and Nisa are bound together in ways that perhaps transcend culture" (Pratt, 1986, p. 45). Taking such descriptions to heart, the "rapport demands" internalized by a feminist researcher, particularly a novice feminist researcher, can be overwhelming. Rapport becomes the normative, not the special, condition.

When feminist expectations of rapport between the researcher and the women she is studying combine with expectations of ethnic solidarity,

<sup>1</sup>Use of the female pronoun does not exclude the possibility of men doing this type of research.

“rapport demands” are likely to be extreme. Expecting to “achieve rapport,” a concept that remains undefined, it is possible that the researcher will block out other emotions and reactions to the people she is studying. She might even romanticize the women or see them in stereotypic ways, because of her focus on “achieving rapport.” And if she does not “achieve rapport,” she may forego the study altogether. In my view it would be unfortunate if we were to introduce self-imposed limits to our research possibilities because of the obligation to achieve rapport.

The theme of the feminist researcher’s involvement in the lives of the people she studied is full of ambiguity and controversy. There seems to be a continuum of feminist positions on this topic ranging from those whose projects demand that there be no involvement to those whose projects allow for deep, mutually satisfying reciprocal relationships. When we discuss feminist research, therefore, it behooves us to not take an essentialist position, but rather to remember the entire continuum. If we feel compelled to develop deep lasting involvements with the people we study, we will be imposing unnecessary, excessive demands on ourselves and on them. Many people simply do not have the time or inclination to incorporate a researcher, even a feminist researcher, into their lives.

It seems dangerous to require rapport in all feminist research, even all feminist interview research. Any creation of absolute standards seem to me to be fraught with epistemological and even ethical contradictions. I do not believe we need an essentialist definition of feminist research, just as we do not need an essentialist definition of womankind. I prefer, instead, to think of research projects, researchers and people whom we study and with whom we study as varied, each deserving to be analyzed as to the most beneficial relation for the purposes at hand. In my view, “achieving rapport” should not become a burdensome, and sometimes inappropriate, form of “emotion work” feminist researchers must do if they engage in research involving interaction with people (Hochschild, 1983). Rather, feminists who do research with people should consider rapport to be a fortunate outcome of some projects rather than a precondition of all.

In general, rapport between people develops only with time and a sense of shared interests. To try to “achieve” rapport without these prerequisites is an arduous, almost cynical endeavor prone to failure. I also believe that we can develop nonexploitative relations with the people involved in our research projects, without attempting to “achieve rapport” or intimacy with them. Relations of respect, shared information, openness and clarity of communication seem like reasonable substitute goals.

There are times when feminists will engage in research that does not involve interaction with others. And there are times when feminist researchers will study people for whom they have little respect. In fact, as

sociologist James Ptacek has noted, based on his study of male batterers, to interact with understanding reinforces their sense of the justifiable and reasonable nature of their behavior (1988).

Feminist researchers must feel free to study anyone and anything. If the nature of the research relationship is defined in advance, then feminist researchers may feel restrictions in the phenomena and persons they can study. Earlier I argued against the rape model of research (Reinharz, 1979/1984). I suppose it would be fair to say that now I am arguing against a love model (Reinharz, 1992). What we need is options. I believe this is an appropriate response to both issues—neglected voices and excessive demands.

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