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TALKING BACK TO SOCIOLOGY: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology

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ABSTRACT

This essay characterizes "feminist methodology" as a field of inquiry rooted in feminist activism and in feminists' critiques of the standard procedures of social science. Feminist methodologists do not use or prescribe any single research method; rather, they are united through various efforts to include women's lives and concerns in accounts of society, to minimize the harms of research, and to support changes that will improve women's status. Recent writing on feminist methodology has addressed the uses of qualitative and quantitative research tools, possibilities and problems of research relations, epistemologies for feminist research, and strategies for developing more inclusive methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly every writer on the topic agrees that there is no single feminist method, yet there is a substantial literature on "feminist methodology" representing a diverse community of sociologists in lively and sometimes contentious dialogue. This community, and the very idea of "feminist sociology," are products of the "second-wave"[1] women's movement that began in the 1960s and early 1970s,

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[1] Scholars refer to the women's movement of the 1960s as the "second wave," to distinguish it from the earlier period of feminist organizing in the nineteenth century. The earlier wave also brought women into the universities and produced a significant body of work by feminist scholars; Reinharz's (1992) survey of feminist research includes these forerunners in order to emphasize the continuity of feminist concerns and strategies.

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and has grown and differentiated in the years since through specialization, conflict, institutionalization, and cooptation (Ferree & Martin 1995, Roby 1992).

Many would agree that a method, consciousness raising, was at the heart of this women's movement. In various settings, small groups of women began to talk together, analyze, and act. The method of consciousness raising was fundamentally empirical; it provided a systematic mode of inquiry that challenged received knowledge and allowed women to learn from one another (Allen 1973, Combahee River Collective 1982). Whether caucusing within established organizations or building new connections, women who became feminists began to see an alternative basis for knowledge and authority in a newly discovered community of women and "women's experience." Subsequent developments would reveal the complex fragilities and resiliencies of this construction, which Donna Haraway characterizes as "a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind" (1985:65).

Though the women's movement began outside the university, feminists in nearly every discipline soon began to apply its methods to their context and work, embarking on a collective project of critique and transformation. They pointed to the omission and distortion of women's experiences in mainstream social science, the tendency to universalize the experience of men (and relatively privileged women), and the use of science to control women, whether through medicine and psychiatry, or through social scientific theories of family, work, sexuality, and deviance (Glazer-Malbin & Waehrer 1971, Millman & Kanter 1975). Scholars of African descent produced a complementary literature on racist and gender bias in scholarship during this period (Ladner 1971, Jackson 1973)—stimulated in part by "expert" opinion that blamed women for the ostensible deficiencies of African-American families.

Over the last 25 years, academic feminists have created new cross-disciplinary audiences for work based on these feminist critiques as well as new curricula, journals, conferences, and organizations to support and disseminate the work (Kramarae & Spender 1992, McDermott 1994). Referring to this history is the beginning of my answer to questions about the distinctiveness of feminist writings on research methodology. I mean to suggest that learning the history of feminist scholarship—and recognizing its roots in the women's movement—are key to understanding it.

Feminist sociologists are committed to both feminism and social science, and they use the tools of the discipline to "talk back" to sociology in a spirited critique aimed at improving the ways we know society. In the discussion that follows, I characterize feminist methodology as a field of inquiry united by membership in these overlapping research communities—bound together not by agreement about answers but by shared commitments to questions. Then I examine recent work and questions currently on the agenda for feminist methodologists. I focus on sociological work, but I also draw from other disciplines where these have been especially influential in sociology.

FEMINISM, FEMINIST RESEARCH, AND FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

"Feminism" is a movement, and a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been subordinated through men's greater power, variously expressed in different arenas. They value women's lives and concerns, and work to improve women's status. While this kind of definition is broadly inclusive, it is also misleadingly simple. There are many feminisms, with different emphases and aims. Jane Mansbridge (1995) suggests that despite this variation, feminists are united by a sense of accountability to a movement that is best conceived as a changing and contested discourse. In any occupation or organization, feminists make decisions about how to respond to institutional contexts that sometimes welcome and sometimes resist feminist insights; they consider how to use their resources (both material and intellectual) to further their feminist goals, and which demands of their institution should be resisted in the name of feminism. Thus, feminist methodology will not be found in some stable orthodoxy but in an evolving dialogue.

I wish to draw a distinction in this essay between "feminist research" and "feminist methodology." I understand "feminist research" as a broader category including any empirical study that incorporates or develops the insights of feminism. Feminist studies may use standard research methods, or they may involve explicit attention to methodological critique and innovation. I would like to reserve the term "feminist methodology" for explicitly methodological discussion that emerges from the feminist critique. I follow philosopher Sandra Harding's (1987) suggestion that we distinguish between "methods" (i.e., particular tools for research), "methodology" (theorizing about research practice), and "epistemology" (the study of how and what we can know). For the most part, feminist researchers have modified, rather than invented, research methods; however, feminist researchers have produced a distinctive body of writing about research practice and epistemology, and that is where I locate "feminist methodology."

SECOND-WAVE WRITING ON METHODOLOGY

Feminist sociologists of the second wave began immediately to think skeptically about existing research methods (see Reinharz 1985 on "feminist distrust") and to search for alternatives. By 1983, there was a substantial body of literature (Reinharz, Bombyk & Wright 1983). The focus on methodology gained momentum during that decade, and when philosopher Sandra Harding edited an interdisciplinary anthology (1987) that illustrated feminist methods with exemplary work, sociologists were well represented; as authors of four of ten substantive chapters, they included Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Joyce Ladner, Dorothy E Smith, and Bonnie Thornton Dill.

Two overviews of feminist research methods that have been especially influential in sociology (Cook & Fonow 1986, Reinharz 1992) also adopted the strategy of collecting exemplars of feminist research and looking for common features. These writers drew on the work of scholars who had been developing particular feminist approaches in some detail. These included adaptations of survey and experimental methods (Eichler 1988), interview research (Oakley 1981), inductive fieldwork (Reinharz 1983), marxist and ethnomethodological approaches (Smith 1987, Stanley & Wise 1983/93), phenomenology (Leveque-Lopman 1988), action/participatory research (Mies 1983, Maguire 1987), oral history (Personal Narratives Group 1989, Gluck & Patai 1991), and others. More recent additions to the list include feminist versions of experimental ethnography (*Inscriptions* 1988), and methods based on poststructuralist insights (Lather 1991, Game 1991, Ingraham 1994).

The range of approaches mentioned here reflects the fact that feminist researchers are located throughout the discipline. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) holds that feminists have used (and modified) every available research method; and her comprehensive review includes studies across the full range. The pluralism in this kind of definition is attractive to many feminists for several reasons, not least of which is a well-developed sense of the dangers of "ranking," whether of oppressions or methods. By insisting on diversity, this approach avoids needless division and leaves open the future strategies that feminist researchers might want to adopt. But the continuing proliferation of writing on feminist methodology suggests a strongly felt sense of difference from standard practice.

WHAT IS FEMINIST METHODOLOGY?

I locate the distinctiveness of feminist methodology in shared commitment to three goals:

1. Feminists seek a methodology that will do the work of "excavation," shifting the focus of standard practice from men's concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women. The aim of much feminist research has been to "bring women in," that is, to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible. A key method for doing so—drawn in part from the legacy of consciousness raising—

has involved work with the personal testimony of individual women (Anderson et al 1990). However, it would be misleading to equate feminist responses to this methodological demand with qualitative methods, for two reasons. First, some feminists argue that quantitative techniques can also perform the work of "making visible" and are sometimes necessary or more compelling than personal testimony (Sprague & Zimmerman 1993). In addition, qualitative methods practiced in nonfeminist ways can easily reproduce the mainstream failure to notice women and their concerns. What makes a qualitative or a quantitative approach feminist is a commitment to finding women and their concerns. The point is not only to know about women, but to provide a fuller and more accurate account of society by including them (Nielsen 1990).

Often, feminist researchers use this strategy to find "voices" for themselves, or for women who share experiences that have been meaningful for them (Stanley & Wise 1979). But the commitment to excavation and inclusion makes feminist researchers accountable for considering women whose experiences are different as well. Negotiating the tension between investigating experiences with intense personal meaning and casting wider nets has been a continuing challenge. Western, Euro-American feminists have been roundly criticized (rightly, I believe) for too often presenting investigations of particular groups of women's lives in terms that are falsely universalized (Dill 1979, Baca Zinn et al 1986). But the call for excavation makes feminist researchers accountable to recognize and correct such mistakes, and one strand in feminist methodological work involves sustained attempts to move beyond these incomplete and limiting analyses.

2. Feminists seek a science that minimizes harm and control in the research process. In response to the observation that researchers have often exploited or harmed women participants, and that scientific knowledge has sustained systematic oppressions of women, feminist methodologists have searched for practices that will minimize harm to women and limit negative consequences (Nebraska Feminist Collective 1983, 1988). Such concerns enter nonfeminist research discussions as well. What marks the feminist discourse is not only a particular concern for women's welfare, but particular sources for research strategies. Feminist researchers have drawn, more or less consciously, on the work of grass-roots and professional women's organizations to develop inclusive procedures and less hierarchical structures (Strobel 1995). Feminists have written of many experiments in leveling hierarchies of power and control in research relations, and they continue to debate whether and when such leveling is possible and how much should be demanded of feminist researchers.

3. Feminists seek a methodology that will support research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women. This criterion for

feminist research is mentioned in virtually every discussion; by implication, authors point to many kinds of change that could satisfy this call, from changing theory or bringing new topics into the discipline, to consciousness raising or decolonization (for the researcher, the reader, or participants in the research), to producing data that will stimulate or support political action or policy decisions. The concern with change, like the call for research that does no harm, is shared by researchers working in other critical traditions. What makes practice distinctively feminist is its relevance to change in women's lives or in the systems of social organization that control women. Reviewing accounts of change accomplished through participatory research studies, Patricia Maguire (1987) notes that inequities in the benefits of projects are often obscured by gender-neutral language. Researchers had reported, for example, that "villagers" had increased access to resources when closer inspection revealed that male villagers had been the primary beneficiaries and the women left out.

Accomplishing change through feminist research and assessing whether it has occurred are, of course, quite difficult, and relatively little writing addresses these problems. (For some notable exceptions, however, see accounts of feminist participatory research in Maguire 1987, Mies 1983, 1991; of policy-oriented work in Spalter-Roth & Hartmann 1991; and of activist work in Gordon 1993.) Too often, I believe, the call for change functions as a slogan in writing on feminist methodology, and authors make assumptions about change without sufficient examination of their own implicit theories of social change.

Together, these criteria for feminist methodology provide the outline for a possible alternative to the distanced, distorting, and dispassionately objective procedures of much social research. Whether the goals implied in these criteria are fully achievable is debatable (Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983) but probably less important than whether they are useful in redirecting research practice to produce better knowledge. My intention in this section has been to claim a distinctiveness for feminist methodology without giving it a fixed definition: I mean to suggest that it must always have an open and "provisional" character (Mohanty 1991:15), but that it is nonetheless a "strikingly cumulative" (Reinharz 1992:246) discourse, held together by core commitments to addressing particular problems in the standard practice of social research and by a common history of learning through activism that provides much of its energy and insight.

RECENT EMPHASES IN FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

The 1990s have been a period of energy and growth in feminist methodology. Discussions have ranged through technical, ethical, and representational issues to the fundamental questions of how and what researchers claim to know.

The Great Divide: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Like outsiders to this body of writing, feminist methodologists themselves often rely on competing or simply unarticulated assumptions about what does (or should) hold this body of work together, and those working to develop feminist methodology sometimes seem to write at cross-purposes. This seems especially true in writing on feminist uses of "qualitative" and "quantitative" methods (see, for example, Cancian 1992, Risman, Sprague & Howard 1993, Cancian 1993). Like scholars in the discipline at large, feminist methodologists sometimes have difficulty communicating across this rather artificial distinction.

Many feminist researchers suggest that qualitative methods fit especially well with feminist goals. Indeed, some feminist researchers who work with qualitative methods seem to claim that these methods are more feminist than others (Mies 1991, Cancian 1993, and Kasper 1994 are possible examples), and some autobiographical accounts (longer ones such as Reinharz 1979 as well as brief asides, as in Stacey 1988 or Gorelick 1989) fuel this notion by recounting frustrations with training in dominant methods and subsequent uses of qualitative approaches.

However, Joey Sprague and Mary Zimmerman (1993) suggest that feminists have made major contributions by finding concepts and practices that resist "dualisms," and they urge resistance to the qualitative-quantitative division. Similarly, Mary Maynard and June Purvis, editors of a recent British anthology (1994), decry the tendency to associate feminist research so strongly with qualitative tools. Implicitly invoking the importance of uncovering hidden experiences, Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton, and Linda Regan (1994) question the presumption that women who participate in research will be more likely to share sensitive material in face-to-face interviews than via less personal survey techniques. Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Marianne LA Leung (1988) point out that small-scale qualitative projects may be more likely than quantitative studies to reproduce race and class biases of the discipline by including only participants who are relatively available to researchers. Others emphasize the consequences of research in urging that feminists not give up quantitative methods and their positivist foundations. Those focusing on policy issues point out that "hard" data are often most convincing outside the university (Spalter-Roth & Hartmann 1991). And Uma Narayan (1989) points out, from the perspective of a nonwestern feminist, that positivism is not always a problem, and certainly not the only one, in research in nonwestern nations. Religion and cultural tradition often contribute to women's oppression, and positivist science can be a force for liberation (and this seems true for western societies as well).

Still, research methods seem to be labeled feminist more often by researchers working in interpretive traditions of sociology. Those working with survey techniques or doing secondary analysis of large data sets, though they may label their projects feminist, are more likely to stress that their methods are those of a rigorous and mostly conventional social science. Explicit discussion of how feminism might modify quantitative practice seems relatively difficult to find.

One common approach to feminist quantitative work involves correcting gender and other cultural biases in standard procedure. Christine Oppong's (1982) work on household studies in nonwestern societies and Margrit Eichler's handbook *Nonsexist Research Methods* (1988) serve as relatively early examples. Both authors point to the many ways that standard survey techniques build in unnoticed assumptions about gender and culture. Those working with survey data have begun to alter survey design and analytic procedures to lessen or eliminate these sources of bias. However, attention to sexism in research procedure probably often depends on the presence of feminists within research teams, where they are usually more likely than others to call attention to these biases. In addition, these refinements are typically discussed as technical responses to social changes, so that connections to feminist theorizing and activism are obscured. One recent exception is Michael D Smith's (1994) discussion of feminist strategies for improving survey data on violence against women; he notes that while these improvements have begun to appear in other projects, they originated and have been most consistently implemented in feminist studies.

Of course, quantitative research always involves interpretation, and many researchers bring feminist theoretical insights to bear on quantitative research design and findings (Risman 1993). Some have begun to write more explicitly about how they have used feminist interpretive frameworks. Roberta Spalter-Roth and Heidi I Hartmann (1991), for example, argue that effective feminist policy research requires a feminist standpoint as well as conventional tools such as cost-benefit analysis. They reject "hegemonic views that see *only one* public interest" (44, emphasis in original), and they adapt the tools of policy research to evaluate the costs and benefits of various policies for women. (See also Steinberg, as cited in Reinharz 1992:91–92.)

Many feminists advocate combining quantitative and qualitative tools, often through collaboration with other researchers. Several European scholars have written about feminist cross-national studies, which often required that participants consider varying national histories of social research and different perspectives on the value of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Windebank 1992, Cockburn 1992, Millar 1992). Susan Greenhalgh and Jiali Li (1995) argue for combining demography with ethnography, in an examination of imbalanced sex ratios that point to generations of "missing girls" in several Chinese villages. They advocate collaboration on political as well as intellectual grounds, suggesting that feminist critique may have negative consequences for demographers, who need continuing access to large data sets controlled by nations and organizations that often seek to deflect criticism. They believe feminists working in other traditions have much to contribute theoretically and often have "more political space" (605) in which to offer critical interpretations of demographic findings.

One further possible bridge between the qualitative and quantitative "branches" of feminist methodology may lie in analyses of statistics as they are constructed and used in particular organizational settings. Dorothy Smith (1990a) suggests examining statistics as textual parts of a "ruling apparatus" that coordinates social relations. She examines data on gender and mental illness, for example, not as evidence of "real" differences, but as pointers toward the management of gendered responses to stress through different social services (see also Waring 1988, Dixon-Mueller 1991, and Hill 1993 on statistical accounts of women's work). Several chapters in Liz Stanley's collection of research conducted at Manchester University (1990a) provide suggestive examples of work based on a similar strategy (Farran 1990, Pugh 1990, Stanley 1990b). While quantitative researchers are surely aware of these underpinnings of their data, the technical practices of that research community require at some point a suspension of discussion of these issues. Analyses that hold them in view offer possibilities for bringing feminist issues more fully into the quantitative traditions of the discipline.

Research Relations: Possibilities and Problems

Feminists have been attracted to interview and ethnographic research partly because these methods offer possibilities for direct interaction with participants. Because these methods have been so widely used, there is now a great deal of feminist writing that documents in increasing detail the various ways that women (and less frequently, men—see Stanko 1994) interact in field research situations. Much of the earlier writing was based on the idea that women's shared interests and concerns would provide resources for dismantling the hierarchies, fictions, and avoidances of research based on positivist frameworks; the argument was that women could talk together more freely and reciprocally, using shared experience as a resource for interpretation (e.g. Oakley 1981, DeVault 1990). More recent writing has provided correctives to early statements that may have mistakenly portrayed feminist research as "rather comfortable and cosy" (Maynard & Purvis 1994). Some researchers have critiqued the notion that women enjoy the advantages of "insiders" when they study other women: Catherine Kohler Riessman (1987) argues that "gender is not enough" to produce easy rapport, and Josephine Beoku-Betts (1994) shows that "Black is not enough" in a discussion of fieldwork among Gullah women in the Sea Islands of the southeastern United States (see also Zavella 1993 on "insider dilemmas" in research with Chicana informants, Phoenix 1994, DeVault 1995). Diane Reay (1995) discusses "the fallacy of easy access," and Pamela Cotterill (1992) complains that the feminist literature celebrating woman-to-woman interviewing did not prepare her for difficult questions regarding the boundaries between research and friendship relations.

Writing on interview research and ethnography has also focused on ethical issues and the potential for misrepresentation. The close relations that are possible seem to pose heightened dangers of exploitation, which led Judith Stacey to ask, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" (1988), and much writing has been focused on the "dilemmas" of feminist fieldwork (Frontiers 1993). Reay and Cotterill both question the ethics of aggressively pursuing participation in interview research, and ethnographers are much concerned with "imbalances of power" (Scanlon 1993).

These writings have certainly put to rest the myth of "hygienic research" (Stanley & Wise 1983/93:114-15) by discussing in some detail the complexity of face-to-face research encounters. Strategies for confronting these dilemmas have been developed at several levels, through revisions of practice, choices based on ethical considerations, and experiments with representation. At the level of fieldwork practice, for example, Rosalind Edwards (1990) argues for acknowledging racial differences quite explicitly in order to facilitate more honest disclosure, and others have advocated methods for reviewing data with informants in order to resolve—or highlight—disagreements and contradictions (Billson 1991, Personal Narratives Group 1989, Gluck & Patai 1991, Bauer 1993, Skeggs 1994). Some writers, emphasizing the moral dilemmas of the fieldworker's relative freedom and control, have suggested that feminist fieldwork should include special efforts to give something back to participants (Scanlon 1993), or strategies for working with local groups to make change (Park 1992, Gordon 1993). A Lynn Bolles (1993) suggests that one valuable role for western feminists working in other parts of the world is to support indigenous research. Some feminist researchers argue that representational questions pose fundamental moral/ethical dilemmas; they seek solutions in writing strategies (Opie 1992; Rofel 1993; Wheatley 1994a,b, and response by Stacey 1994).

Feminists have written extensively on these dilemmas as they arise in face-to-face research methods, but of course concerns about exploitation and misrepresentation come into play whenever data come from human informants, no matter how distant the process of collection may be from analysis. Some wonder if feminists have overemphasized potential problems of power, producing "excessive demands" (Reinharz 1993) on feminist researchers. The focus on problems of exploitation has produced an association of qualitative feminist methodology with special ethical demands that sometimes seems to obscure other aspects of its distinctiveness. Although these discussions have been lively and productive, one risk is that they may require a moral purity in feminist (or perhaps in women's) qualitative research that is simply unattainable, while leaving similar questions relatively unnoticed in discussions of other research traditions.

Knowledge Claims: Feminist Epistemology

Although the initial feminist critique focused primarily on bias in the application of dominant methods, philosopher Sandra Harding (1986) contends that even this "empiricist" critique tends to subvert the notion of objectivity, since it points to knowledge as social product, and to influences of the knower on what is produced. Moving beyond this kind of critique has brought new questions. If the ground for feminist work is not the distance and dispassion of "objectivity," what will be the basis for legitimate authority? Part of the answer has been to embrace the apparent opposite, subjectivity, and to center inquiry around women's experiences and feelings (Jaggar 1989). However, the turn to subjectivity has been only part of the answer feminists have begun to develop (though it is sometimes mistakenly taken as the defining characteristic of feminist method). As Loraine Gelsthorpe (1992) points out, feminist methodologists have refused to choose between subjectivity and analytic rigor; they seek methods that can incorporate, or at least do not deny, subjectivity. Thus, for those working on feminist methodologies, theorizing links between experience and knowledge has been a central concern.

Many sociologists have taken up some version of what have come to be called "standpoint" approaches (e.g. Reinharz 1983, Stanley & Wise 1983–1993, Smith 1987, Collins 1990). Dorothy Smith's is probably the most widely known and fully developed version of this project within sociology. Her writings over two decades (collected in Smith 1987, 1990a,b) record a long struggle to change a positivist sociology that is organized not only by men's concerns but by the demands of "ruling." (Ramazanoglu 1989 recounts a similar struggle.) Smith's aim is not merely to uncover or give testimony about experience but to make a place for it in analysis that will be focused differently and serve different interests. The feminist sociologist, in her formulation, must refuse to put aside her experience and, indeed, must make her bodily existence and activity a "starting point" for inquiry. From this beginning, the inquiry points toward an analysis of the social context for experience, the relations of ruling that organize daily life and connect all members of a society in systematic interactions.

Smith developed the approach primarily through examples from her life as a single mother, showing how she moved between the grounded activities of raising children and the abstractions of her academic work. She suggests that most women live some version of this movement between particularity and the extra-local projects of management and administration, whether through work as caregivers or in other subordinate positions in the social division of labor. Further, she argues that these positions—where social life is being "put together" from actual, embodied activity—provide a point of entry to investigation that is superior to the starting points derived from abstract theorizing. The argument is not that women know better by virtue of occupying these positions, but that the work accomplished there must be part of any adequate account of social organization.

Many others have taken up the notion of attention to women's experience (though not all have followed Smith's call to look beyond experience in the analysis), and this work has stimulated much discussion of the concepts of "standpoint" and "experience." The notion that some positions provide a "better view" of social organization or a preferred site from which to "start thought" (Harding 1991) seems to accord some knowers an "epistemic privilege" associated with their identities. However, critics point out that identity is not automatically associated with superior insight, and the sociological literature on insider-outsider dynamics certainly calls into question any easy assumption about the consequences for research of particular identities, which are always relative, crosscut by other differences, and often situational and contingent. Another view emphasizes how taking a standpoint invokes the particular experiences associated with some location in society; critics suggest that the idea of "women's standpoint" puts in place an account of experience that fits for only some women. They argue that analyses like Smith's risk emphasizing concerns of white (Collins 1992) or heterosexual women (Ingraham 1994). Smith responds (1992) that theorizing standpoint in either of these ways misses her intention: Rather than calling up a particular identity or set of experiences, the injunction to start inquiry from women's experience is a way of pointing the feminist researcher to material sites where people live their lives, so that "anyone's experience, however various, could become a beginning-place [for] inquiry" (90).

The notion of "women's experience" has been productive for feminist scholars, but it has also become a richly contested concept. Some critics of the emphasis on experience—often those feminists working in quantitative or marxist traditions—point out that individual views are always partial and often distorted by ideology, so that a woman's own testimony may simply reflect the biases of the larger society (Gorelick 1991, Risman 1993). Those influenced by poststructuralist theory argue further that experience always arises in language and discourse (Scott 1991), and that women's testimony will always be marked by language and desire (Clough 1993; see also reply by Smith 1993 and Clough's response).

Those working empirically with approaches that make room for experience address these points in several different ways. Smith contends that women's "bifurcated" consciousness encompasses both the knowledge required to participate in social relations, organized largely through ideological processes, and the often incompletely articulated knowledge that comes from activity. She calls for explicit analysis of how women's activities are connected to the interests of "ruling" (especially Smith 1990a), and how the ideological processes of ruling shape, without fully determining, women's accounts of their experience.[2] Frigga Haug and her colleagues (1987) use "memory-work"—the collective, critical analysis of written memories—to investigate the social and ideological underpinnings of subjectivity in a somewhat different way, more focused on the societal construction of gendered selves. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) develops an epistemology that builds on processes of knowledge creation in African-American communities, where dialogue, caring, and personal accountability are central. She emphasizes that perspectives are always located and claims only a "partial truth" for the knowledge produced from a particular standpoint; she points out that knowledge that is admittedly partial is more trustworthy than partial knowledge presented as generally true. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983/93) also suggest that different standpoints will produce different knowledges, and they accept as a consequence that knowledge claims will be based on a "fractured foundationalism."

These different stances among researchers working in different ways with women's perspectives point to varying epistemological ambitions across the range of feminist methodology. Like other scholars, feminists are considering the consequences for empirical work of the postmodern challenge to objectivity and a science based on a single narrative. Some have embraced a postmodern position that welcomes multiple versions of truth, and these have begun to write about alternative bases for assessing knowledge claims (Richardson 1993, Lather 1993). Others hold that empirical investigation should provide accurate accounts of a social world that can be known in common and should be assessed on that basis (these include feminist empiricists like Risman 1993; those following Smith 1992, whose investigations focus on "actual" social practices; and some who seek an intermediate position).

Kum-Kum Bhavnani (1993) suggests that researchers can strive for what she calls "feminist objectivity." She draws on the writings of feminist philosophers of science who propose replacing traditional constructions of objectivity with more durable claims to "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988) or a "strong"

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[2] Studies following Smith in this line of work are collected in Campbell & Manicom 1995.

(Harding 1992) or “dynamic” (Keller 1985) objectivity. Moving the suggestions of these writers to the terrain of empirical work, Bhavnani proposes that the process of producing knowledge should always be visible; the feminist researcher should find ways of recognizing and revealing to audiences the micropolitics of the research situation and should take responsibility for representing those who participate in ways that do not reproduce harmful stereotypes. In addition, researchers claiming feminist objectivity must be attentive to differences and to the limits of their knowledge claims. Echoing some of these themes, Collins (1990) proposes that a feminist Afro-centric epistemology would measure knowledge against concrete experience, test it through dialogue, and judge it in relation to an ethic of personal accountability.

Such emerging feminist formulations repudiate the traditional version of objectivity that requires a separation of knower and known. Out of skepticism for accounts that seem to have no grounded basis (but turn out to be anchored to dominant interests), feminists suggest making the researcher visible in any product of research. This call for visibility involves viewing the self, in Susan Krieger’s (1991) terms, as resource rather than contaminant. Precisely how to use and locate the self most effectively remains unresolved. However, the demand for accountability can be seen as the rationale for experiments with autobiographical and dialogic modes of presenting research (e.g. Orr 1990, Kondo 1990, Ellis 1993, Linden 1993) as well as a thread that connects them to projects that are more traditional in format. (The feminist practice of identifying authors by their full names—which I have followed here despite editorial policy—can also be understood as a technical modification that helps to make particular researchers more “visible” in feminist texts.)

Another theme emerging in feminist epistemology involves shifting focus from individual knowers to the perspectives of groups or communities. This shift in focus should perhaps represent a reminder rather than a new idea, since the “experience” so valued in early feminist consciousness raising was in fact a collective construction. The reminder has come from feminists too often ignored in the feminisms that are most visible; this work is discussed below.

Shifting the Center (Again)

It is ironic that writing on feminist methodology has so rarely incorporated the perspectives of women from underrepresented groups and nations (and their male allies), even as these writers have become more central to feminist theory. Though attention to racial/ethnic differences and joint strategies for combating racism have had a continuing presence in second-wave activism and writing (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981, Bulkin, Pratt & Smith 1984), these efforts have typically been contentious and difficult, and contributions of women from underrepresented groups have too often been ignored or appropriated.

Women from these groups continue to mount pointed challenges to emerging orthodoxies that ignore their perspectives.

From the beginning of the women's studies movement, African-American feminist scholars have had a keen sense of the need to establish an autonomous presence. A landmark anthology (Hull, Bell Scott & Smith 1982) stressed the precarious position of Black women in society and higher education, the knowledge gaps that result from their absence, and the importance of knowledge creation in Black women's communities; these themes continue to be central to "women of color" or "Third World" feminism. The editors predicted that Black women's studies would "come into its own" in the 1980s but noted that this movement was only beginning. They saw "far too few courses and far too few Black women employed in institutions" (xxvii-xxviii) and commented that "the majority of white women teachers and administrators have barely begun the process of self-examination which must precede productive action to change this situation" (xxviii).

The 1980s were indeed a time of putting these issues on the agenda. White feminists like Elizabeth Spelman (1982) wrote compellingly on the problems of false universalization; theorists began re-envisioning the concepts and strategies of their feminisms (e.g. Harding 1991); and feminists writing on research relations became more attentive to ethnic and cultural differences (as discussed above). More importantly, new writing from "third world feminism" combined work by social scientists and creative writers to offer new conceptualizations of identity, building more fundamental critiques of the disciplines and modeling evocative writing strategies (Anzaldúa 1990a, Mohanty, Russo & Torres 1991). Social scientists began to consider strategies for empirical investigation that could be aligned with these perspectives.

Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), while usually considered a work of theory, also treats methodological issues; the book concludes with an extended discussion of epistemology, and the entire text illustrates an approach to knowledge production that draws from and builds upon the "subjugated knowledge" shared within communities of African-American women. Chela Sandoval (1991) also draws lessons from the strategies of particular communities—the activist communities of what she calls "US third world feminism"—and finds in the everyday resistances of women of color a "method" (applicable beyond formal research, but certainly relevant there) of differential, oppositional consciousness. She advocates a "self-conscious mobility" that would allow feminists to enact opposition more fluidly, "between and among" possible identities and tactics (14). While adopting some strategies like those of Collins, Sandoval also emphasizes multiple identities and coalition across cultural communities.

Himani Bannerji (1995) extends marxist and feminist "standpoint" methods, arguing that gender, race/ethnicity, and nationality are always part of the organization of social activity, so that any adequate feminism (or marxism or anti-racism) must take account of the simultaneity of social relations that more traditional accounts have tried to separate analytically. Without naturalizing ethnic differences, she attends to embodiedness, whether writing about her own experience of teaching in Canadian universities or about the sexual harassment of a Black woman working in a Canadian factory, analyzed as the product of a pervasive "racist sexism" woven into economic relations.

Chandra Talpede Mohanty (1991a,b), drawing on the study of colonialism and its legacy, seeks a social science that will contribute to the worldwide project of decolonization. She emphasizes multiple levels of work: consciousness raising (of both researcher and others), a reformulation of disciplines that have supported the colonial enterprise, and empirical investigations that reconstruct understandings of women's histories and contexts. Like Bannerji, she envisions a social science that encompasses the daily activities of third world women as well as the ruling relations that construct their oppression, and like Bannerji, she draws on the work of Dorothy Smith, suggesting that Smith's attention to "relations of ruling" may be especially useful in the investigation of colonial and postcolonial social organization.

Mohanty also begins to rework issues of consciousness, identity, and writing, noting that "the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness" (34). Though she links this statement to the legacy of feminist consciousness raising, she also suggests that the texts of third world women challenge the "individualist subject" of much feminist writing. She argues that the feminism of women of color calls for rethinking the idea that "the personal is political," not because starting from experience is wrong, but because of the richness of collective rather than individual stories of agency and resistance. Drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa (1990b) and echoing Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness, she points to the strategic value of a multiple or "mestiza" consciousness, attentive to borders and negotiations through multiple locations.

This kind of methodological innovation is related to philosopher Maria Lugones's (1987) use of the term "'world'-traveling" to refer to the ability to move across social boundaries that seems so central to the experiences of Black and third world women (and so foreign to the over-privileged). Lugones inspired political scientist Christine Sylvester's (1995) discussion of western encounters with African feminisms. However, these provocative discussions of fluid and shifting identities sit somewhat uneasily alongside the analyses of Collins and Bannerji, whose methods emphasize the obduracy of social categories associated with ethnicity and their significance for people's recruitment into social relations.

These writers are rarely included in discussions of "feminist methodology," but I believe they point to the next stages in the project of building more adequate research practices. Their writings, and the roots of these writings in communities of resistance, lend some credence to notions of epistemic privilege—the idea that people in subordinated locations have access to perspectives that others miss. On the other hand, these writings begin to "open up" the histories, experiences, and self-representations of such communities, so that it seems more possible, and urgent, for all knowers to attend to the perspectives of others. These writers challenge scholars to think more carefully about what is at stake in how one gains such knowledge, and how it is used.

Finally, it may be worth noting that the gender-related isolation and stress of doing research have been discussed in the writing of some non-European feminists (Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith 1982, Ramazanoglu 1989). Annecka Marshall (1994) writes poignantly of the pain and isolation she felt as a student and scholar in sexist-racist institutional contexts, giving an account of serious health problems that she tried to ignore, but ultimately had to resolve before continuing her work. I do not mean to suggest that these kinds of problems are suffered only by third world feminists, but to highlight the fact that institutional settings which may have become increasingly comfortable for white feminist academics continue to be painfully alienating for others, and to suggest that these different positionings continue to shape the work produced by feminist scholars.

CONCLUSION: FEMINISM AND SOCIOLOGY

I close, in keeping with the sociology of knowledge approach I have adopted throughout this chapter, with a brief discussion of the connections through which feminist sociologists construct and sustain a discourse on feminist methodology. Strategizing about research practice has been strongly connected to feminist theory and necessarily so: Feminist understandings drive methodological innovation. Still, theory does not translate unproblematically to the questions of empirical investigation, and those working on methodology must shape the insights of theorists to their own needs. Feminist sociologists also value connections to feminists in other disciplines, whose related projects can often provide models for experimentation. Working across disciplines also helps to reveal disciplinary power and thus aids in strategizing about how to use it well and avoid its pitfalls. Feminist scholars are always more or less directly linked to activism, by virtue of their origins, but maintaining such connections requires continuing attention; sustaining connections to policymakers who might use feminist research requires another kind of attention.

Connections to our own disciplines are among the most vexed questions that occupy feminist sociologists. Some argue convincingly for a strategic "disloyalty to the disciplines" (Stacey 1995), while others advocate strategic uses of disciplinary authority and legitimacy (Risman 1993). My approach in this essay relies on (and attempts to contribute to) a sense of distinctiveness in feminist sociological practice, and a commitment to articulating the value of disciplinary traditions. Paradoxically, but not for the first time, sociological approaches have provided tools for unmasking their own coercive power. Though feminists are in struggle with the discipline, it is the struggle of committed participants.

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