

FEMINIST RESEARCH

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Key Ideas

- Feminist research seeks to create new knowledge, challenge beliefs and practices that limit human potential, explore the lives of women and other marginalized groups, and facilitate social critique and action to reduce inequities.
- Feminist approaches to research emerged during the 1960s as part of a vibrant period of women’s activism and critical questioning in academia.
- Feminist methodologists have offered critiques of traditional approaches to research and have developed innovative approaches to investigate, analyze, and represent the complexity of the social world.
- Feminist researchers argue that all research approaches reflect and strengthen certain agendas and knowledge claims over others and are therefore political by nature.
- There is no one “feminist” methodology; how researchers use methods, conduct research, and embrace certain goals determine whether research is feminist.
- Feminist approaches can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods; can use varied theories and strategies; and can address diverse topics. Qualitative inquiry is a common approach feminists use to study the lived experiences of marginalized groups and the forces that limit human potential.
- Feminist research follows general “guiding principles” (Fonow & Cook, 1991, 2005).

Feminist approaches to qualitative research encompass a wide range of theories, practices, and methods used to generate knowledge about the social and physical world; to challenge oppressive forces and beliefs (for example, racism, homophobia, sexism, ethnocentrism); and to spur social change that improves the lives of women and other disadvantaged groups—and, by extension, all human lives. In contrast to traditional research approaches that seek to create knowledge about a given phenomenon, feminist research is concerned with knowledge, critique, *and* action. Some feminist researchers consider critique a form of action; for others, action might refer to policy changes, program reform, or group empowerment. Feminist research is potentially emancipatory in nature, providing a vehicle to critique common theories and assumptions and to offer voice and visibility to marginalized groups.

The general principles that guide feminist research include a spirit of critique; a challenge to claims of objectivity in research; consciousness of gender as a force that organizes social life and thought; ethical and equitable research practices; and an action orientation focused on personal, institutional, theoretical, and social transformation (Fonow & Cook, 1991, 2005). The questions that drive feminist projects often emerge from women's lived experiences, such as childbearing or sexual harassment, from revisiting common assumptions and practices through the lens of gender, and from considering the perspectives of diverse groups rendered invisible in history and research. Just as **feminism**, the quest for gender equity, involves diverse groups, beliefs, and practices, feminist research involves diverse researchers, beliefs, and practices. This chapter will describe the historical roots of feminist research, introduce key components of this rich field of inquiry, and provide examples of researchers' use of qualitative methods from a feminist perspective.

Historical Roots of Feminist Research

The roots of feminism and feminist approaches to research stretch back over a century to the origins of the American women's movement, a social movement to advance women's rights that activists launched in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Hundreds of men and women gathered to protest the limited legal, educational, and social rights women held in a democracy founded on the principle that "all men are created equal." Activists recognized that sex and gender were central to organizing law, religion, economics, and social life. From laws that stripped married women of their earnings, property, and children, to limited educational access, to strictures on public speaking, women in diverse circumstances faced profound limitations to their human potential. These reformers

boldly proposed a series of resolutions to challenge exclusionary laws and to expand women's opportunities, launching what became the first wave of the women's movement.

The spirit of critique and hope that fueled these early visionaries to protest inequities and act on behalf of the disenfranchised also prompted activists and scholars during the 1960s and 1970s (the second wave of the women's movement) to question conventional approaches to research, critique the knowledge such methodologies generated, and develop a range of feminist practices for studying the social world. Contemporary feminist research approaches emerged during this vibrant period of social critique and activism. Unlike many other approaches to research, feminist methodologies are overtly political and emancipatory in aim.

One significant force shaping the development of feminist inquiry and the development of qualitative research methods is the critique of positivism (see Chapters One and Four). Since the nineteenth century, scientific research has primarily proceeded from a research **paradigm** (a theory of knowledge; how we come to know what we know) called positivism. Paradigms reflect and delineate a set of beliefs about how to investigate phenomena. They shape how researchers conduct inquiry, what researchers and audiences recognize as knowledge, and who is considered a legitimate knower. Although positivist research is rarely identified as such, the majority of research conducted today falls under this paradigm, and it wields significant power in shaping the production of knowledge and legitimizing what counts as good science.

Positivism holds that one true reality exists that trained, objective researchers can discover through the use of appropriate procedures. It relies on **empiricism**, or sensory experience—what one can taste, feel, see, and hear—as the basis for building knowledge claims. One might trek in the field to collect leaves, observe children in a playground, or measure changes in blood chemistry to pursue a given research question. Research guided by this paradigm is generally oriented to discover facts, predict patterns, refine knowledge, and provide information for use in controlling aspects of the social and physical world.

Feminist researchers' gendered critiques of positivist assumptions and approaches prompted the development of a range of creative and emancipatory approaches aligned with feminist aims. During the 1960s and 1970s those agitating for reproductive rights, educational equity, equal pay, and other social issues recognized that gender not only shaped social life but also shaped how scholars conducted research and created knowledge. As with the democratic laws and practices that Seneca Falls activists challenged as patriarchal and exclusionary, scholars noted contradictions between positivist claims of objectivity and **universality** (findings applicable to all) and certain **androcentric** (male-centered)

assumptions that guided research practice. For example, philosophical and religious beliefs in women's inferiority permeated Western science for centuries (Hubbard, 1990; Schiebinger, 1993; Tuana, 1993), from Aristotle's claim in the fourth century B.C. that women were "misbegotten men" to physician Edward H. Clarke's research (1873) that "found" that women's pursuit of higher education endangered their reproductive health. Such findings reflected particular beliefs about women and men, mind and body, emotion and rationality, weakness and strength—all produced by male researchers of European ancestry in positions of social power that inevitably shaped their perceptions of the world.

Further, researchers often excluded women and disadvantaged groups (groups who have historically held little social power) as collaborators and participants or deemed their concerns too insignificant to study. Scholars studying "work" ignored women's domestic labor. Biographers narrated the "successful" lives of politicians and military leaders while women who had been restricted from visible public roles evaporated into the historical ether. Historians detailed soldiers' triumphs and military leaders' conquests and overlooked women's efforts to nurse soldiers, provide war supplies, and sustain the home front in the wake of men's absence. Psychologists studying moral development evaluated female participants as less moral than males without considering how gendered assumptions shaped their use of the concept or how different experiences based on race, gender, and class might forge diverse conceptions of morality.

Feminist scholars noted that such research practices did not reflect universal knowledge because they excluded women and people of color as researchers, participants, or subjects and applied concepts that appeared neutral (such as work, morality, or success) in gendered ways that rendered women's lives and experiences invisible. On a more fundamental level, these research approaches proceeded from particular assumptions about the social world, the topics deemed valuable to study, and the questions researchers should ask—all of which shaped the knowledge they generated. Research practices were often based on men's experiences, presented in the guise of *objectivity* and used to generate *universal* truths (Bailey, 2007).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the components of positivism?
2. How is the history of research gendered?
3. How are all research practices political and acts of power?
4. If, historically, women's experiences had been the foundation of research, how might this difference shape our knowledge about the social and physical world?

Guiding Principles of Feminist Research

Critiques of positivism prompted feminist scholars to develop alternative paradigms or ways of knowing, different conceptual frameworks to explain phenomena (**theories**), different rationales and approaches to direct how research should proceed (**methodologies**), new techniques for gathering data (**methods**), and innovative forms to disseminate knowledge (**representation**). Feminist researchers pose varied questions about the social world and mobilize diverse philosophies, theories, methodologies, and methods to gather information and create knowledge.

Across these diverse approaches, feminist researchers generally share a philosophical stance that differs fundamentally from that of positivists: feminists hold that the conduct of research and the knowledge it generates are not—and cannot be—neutral or objective; indeed, such research goals are illusory and counterproductive. All researchers (including those who employ feminist approaches) inevitably absorb the theories, beliefs, and discourses within their social and historical contexts. Researchers' historical context, social location, training, and life experiences shape how they think about the world. Thus, in ways that both complicate and enrich the research process, researchers are inevitably linked to, not outside of and objective toward, the phenomena they study. For many, qualitative research seemed an ideal feminist response to centuries of exploitative and marginalizing research practices. The inclusive in-depth, face-to-face methods provide opportunities to sensitively explore diverse experiences, honor the experience and knowledge of both researcher and participants, and facilitate collaborative relationships.

Despite the affinities between qualitative research and feminist goals, no given framework or technique is inherently feminist. In any research endeavor—whether traditional or critical, quantitative or qualitative—research purpose drives design and methodology. How researchers conceptualize their research and use methods determines whether research is feminist. For example, a research approach used to objectify rather than empower contradicts the principles of feminist methodology. Researchers can conduct survey research, experimental studies, historical research (see Chapter Six), ethnography (see Chapter Seven), or other forms of research from a feminist perspective. Similarly, feminists also use various methods to elicit information. They might conduct interviews, analyze documents, observe interactions, examine photographs, moderate focus groups, distribute surveys, or burrow in archives for traces of women's historical presence.

What distinguishes feminist from conventional research approaches are a general series of **guiding principles** (Fonow & Cook, 1991, 2005) that overlap

and vary in practice and continue to evolve as methodology grows increasingly complex. These principles relate to researchers' purpose, theoretical allegiances, and approach to the conduct of inquiry.

Nonobjectivity of Research Practices

First, various scholars, including feminists, scholars of color, and advocates of indigenous approaches to research, argue that research practice is laden with cultural values and subjective beliefs. All researchers occupy particular social roles that shape their experiences, values, and practices. All research practices reflect the cultural beliefs and systems of thought in which they are produced. This inevitability can both enhance and distort research practice. For example, complex systems of racism, colonialism, and sexism have shaped Western thought and research practice historically (see also Chapters Seven, Fourteen, Fifteen, and Seventeen). As a result, the history of science is riddled with researchers' ethnocentric assumptions about the superiority of Western science and racist and sexist assumptions about the presumed inferiority of women and people of color. Researchers in advantaged social positions measured skulls, tracked menstrual cycles, and scrutinized the bodies of women and people of color in search of the physical locus of their presumed inferiority. They then used scientific findings to justify restrictions on their social roles.

These examples underscore the pressing need to cast critical light on *all* research practices: whether findings are laudatory or limiting, they have concrete effects on human lives. Accepting beliefs about particular groups' inferiority as fact, using research to justify their exclusion from higher education where they might contribute to the creation of knowledge, and generalizing research findings from one group to another are not objective practices. They are value-laden acts of power based on particular beliefs about, in this case, race and sex and gender that influence the research undertaken and the knowledge generated.

Some feminists suggest that formulating questions and pursuing research from specific social locations can also enhance research pursuits. For example, feminist **standpoint** theory (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991, 2004; Hartsock, 1998, 2003) posits that research grounded in the perspectives of those who have been marginalized (women and men of color, gays and lesbians, the impoverished) has potential to offer certain insights and advantages that research grounded in dominant perspectives cannot. Such perspectives, or standpoints, born of particular experiences in socially marginalized locations, can provide a fuller, richer portrait of human experience than researchers working within dominant paradigms have provided historically.

Gender

Second, feminist researchers view gender and its intersections with race, sexuality, (dis)ability, ethnicity, and nationality as factors structuring social life in often unequal ways that merit research scrutiny. From this perspective, such descriptors do not simply refer to whether one is, for example, a male or female, a citizen of a certain nation, or a member of a particular racial group. Rather, the terms refer to socially constructed notions of people and groups that structure research, occupations, families, law, and the intricacies of people's daily lives in a given culture. For example, the category of "intersex" reflects the limits of previously taken-for-granted categories of "male" and "female" to capture the diversity of human biology. Further, whether a shirt buttons on the left or on the right, or where men and women keep their wallets, are not biologically determined; they are gendered social practices that structure men's and women's movement and experience in minute and almost imperceptible ways. Similarly, what is considered a (dis)ability varies in history and context.

On a broader level, the profession of nursing is gendered as *feminine* not simply because women constitute the majority of nurses today but because many consider the caring and compassionate characteristics of the profession feminine whether men or women display them. As one male nurse phrased it in a feminist qualitative study, nursing has "never really been considered a manly thing to do" (Sayman, 2009, p. 150). Gender thus structures men's and women's occupational choices, the experiences of male nurses, messages about nursing in media and textbooks, and the value society accords the profession. Feminist research enacts a critical stance that casts gendered analytic light on significant processes that influence human lives.

Researcher Reflexivity

Feminist methodology is also characterized by varied expressions of researcher **reflexivity**. This concept, which is shared with some other qualitative traditions (see, for example, Chapters Seven, Nine, and Fifteen), refers to researchers' intentional reflections on their research practices. The goal of reflexivity is not to reduce bias; such a goal presumes an objective view is attainable. Rather, in a paradigm that holds that the knower is connected to what is known, reflexivity is a tool for researchers to consider how their assumptions, investments, and decisions shape—often in nourishing and productive ways—the research process. Accordingly, researchers analyze their role in creating knowledge as a standard aspect of inquiry. Reflexivity might include researchers' reflection on their epistemologies and methods; how their identities,

standpoint, or training shapes inquiry; or potential audience responses to the research.

Consider this reflection from Mendoza-Denton (2008), a cultural anthropologist who has used sociolinguistics, ethnography, and feminist theory to study cultural practice among Latina gangs. She writes,

It is a responsibility of anthropologists to explain ourselves, who we are and where we come from . . . given the history of anthropology: deep ethnocentrism; involvement in colonial administration; **anthropometry** (the practice of measuring the human body, historically applied to the sorting of gangsters and criminals, that fueled the foundation of scientific racism); and participation in the practice of display of human beings. . . . We have indeed a sordid story behind us. For these reasons it is essential to clearly set out as much as possible anthropologists' backgrounds, our assumptions, [and] our overt and hidden agendas . . . in order not to repeat some of our past mistakes. (p. 43)

In this reflection, which is relevant to a variety of critical and feminist projects, Mendoza-Denton notes that damaging racist, sexist, and ethnocentric practices have been commonplace in Western research traditions historically. Such traditions obligate researchers to reflect on and render visible how their standpoints, assumptions, and practices shape their research (see, for example, Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen).

Ethical and Equitable Practices

A fourth aspect of feminist research is vigilance to **ethical and equitable research** conduct, which can range in practice from ensuring researchers follow federally mandated **informed consent** protocol (making sure participants understand the procedures to which they are consenting; see also Chapter Two) to involving participants in shaping research design. Feminists work against the legacy of exploiting research subjects and strive to conduct research *with* people (humanizing stance) rather than *on* people (objectifying stance). A detached stance runs counter to feminist principles of **collaboration** and connection, muffles the emotional elements of lived experience, and obscures the human and social dynamics of research.

Like other qualitative approaches, feminist methodologies include such ethical practices as protecting the identities of participants and ensuring research poses no risks or harm beyond that participants might face in their everyday lives. Like other emancipatory approaches (see Chapters Fourteen, Fifteen, and Seventeen), feminist research attends to power inequities in society and in the

research process. For example, researchers typically control the direction and outcome of research and often occupy higher social status or possess greater resources than participants. Thus, to minimize power imbalances, feminists might collaborate with participants in research design or data analysis (see Chapter Eighteen). To honor participants' time and energy, researchers might offer gift certificates or assistance with child care. To interrupt researcher authority, they might invite participants to critique their findings.

Like other critical approaches, inquiry conducted from a feminist perspective is also concerned with the **politics of representation**. This phrase highlights the ethical weight of portraying research subjects and findings that have implications for human lives. Research is used to understand human behavior, to develop theories, and to create policy. Accordingly, researchers must consider how they speak for and with their subjects, how they present their work, and how others might interpret or use their findings. For example, researchers examining the experiences of undocumented workers or women activists who live in regions suffused with ethnic and religious conflict must take extreme care in how they collect, preserve, and represent data from women whose safety could be threatened if identified (Gluck, 1991).

Other implications relate to the power of knowledge claims. For example, early feminist research focused narrowly on gender at the expense of other aspects of lived experience (for example, race, class, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and the intersections among these entities). Its findings captured white, Western, middle-class women's experiences and ignored significant differences *among* women. Researchers' failure to theorize their own social locations and critique their race-, class-, or heterosexual-based assumptions perpetuated partial and limited knowledge claims and research injustices at odds with researchers' feminist mission. Indeed, scholars of color and postcolonial critics have emphasized that various aspects of women's intersecting identities and social locations (language, class, race, religion, citizenship status) can hold greater significance than sex or gender for shaping women's lives.

Action Orientation

A final guiding principle is an **action orientation**. Like other critical research approaches, feminist inquiry proceeds from the assumption that research is a political and potentially emancipatory enterprise. The mission is not simply to explore, explain, or predict. Although one might *explore* a young woman's experience with eating problems or *explain* the effectiveness of a rape prevention program, the ultimate goal of feminist research is to produce findings that heighten consciousness about injustice, that empower disadvantaged groups, and that transform social institutions, practices, and theories to create a more

equitable world. In this view, fundamental social inequities demand the attention of researchers.

Action can take many forms, including critiquing common assumptions, posing alternative views, or developing policies that advance rights. Thus some view critique and theorizing as forms of action. Some research is explicitly **action research** (the purpose of which is to contribute to change in a particular setting; see also Chapter Twelve), whereas some research provides information that others can use to better human lives.

To reflect these principles, feminist researchers have developed innovative forms to portray their research findings. For example, some have found academic conventions inadequate for capturing nuances in lived experience and the complexity of the social world. Standardized reports that require clinical language and tidy formatting can constrain what researchers convey. Some suggest they can also dehumanize participants. Researchers have used poetry (Richardson, 1997) and drama (Visweswaran, 1994) as alternatives to capture emotion simmering in qualitative data and to challenge positivist norms; combined participant voices to convey the collaborative nature of meaning-making; and created messy **multivocal texts** (texts with multiple writers, images, and styles) to challenge easy readings. These forms, which Lather (1991) calls “empowering research designs,” challenge traditional ideas of what science can look like.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are feminist scholars’ primary critiques of the positivist paradigm?
2. What are the guiding principles of feminist inquiry?
3. How does feminist inquiry differ from other approaches?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using innovative forms to share research findings?

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 1

WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS—HIGHLIGHTING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

The following snapshot of a qualitative study demonstrates the guiding principles of feminist inquiry in action. For *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, Lather and Smithies (1997) conducted a multiyear study using qualitative methods

to explore women's experiences living with HIV/AIDS. The stigma and pain of living with the virus made a humanizing, dialogic, and collaborative approach imperative. As Linda B., who is HIV positive, expressed, "Statistics are human beings with the tears wiped off" (p. xxvi).

Short History

Initially the medical community identified HIV/AIDS as a male disease. Experts were slow to recognize women's vulnerability to the virus and its differing warning signs and consequences for men and women. As a result, women were nearly invisible in the social and research landscape. Few resources were available to women negotiating the practical issues and stigma that accompanied the disease, and most reports were fatalistic.

Chris Smithies, a psychologist, and Patti Lather, a feminist methodologist, identified a pressing need for research that took gender into account. Smithies, who conducted support groups for women living with HIV/AIDS, recognized that women's struggles to find meaning in a devastating disease offered a significant form of knowledge that could help others better understand this invisible population.

Purpose

The purpose of the Lather and Smithies study was multilayered. It included exploring women's experiences *living* with (rather than dying from) a highly stigmatized disease, facilitating the empowerment of those who participated in the study, providing a text that would serve as a resource to others, and increasing awareness of and compassion for those living with the virus. As the researchers expressed, the topic of AIDS "is not so much a story about 'some others' as it is a story of how AIDS shapes our everyday lives, whether we be 'positives' or 'negatives' in terms of HIV status" (p. xiv). The researchers challenged categories of us and them, researcher and participant, and HIV-positive status and HIV-negative status to emphasize that HIV/AIDS affects all of us.

Participants

The twenty-five participants ranged in age from twenty-three to forty-nine. Sixteen of the women were white, and nine were women of color. Reflecting the diversity of women living with HIV/AIDS, many women were mothers or grandmothers; they had varied education levels; one had lost a child to the disease; the majority worked outside the home; and some were "out" to their families, whereas others kept the virus secret. Women attended the support groups as their health

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RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 1

WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS—HIGHLIGHTING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH (Continued)

and circumstances dictated. Between initial data collection and the final printing of the book, four of the women died.

Methodology

The researchers intended to interview the women to capture their perspectives in depth. As the study unfolded they realized that the support group format facilitated a level of community, dialogue, and energy among the women that individual interviews could not have produced. Support group meetings became their primary data source. (This change in intended research methodology reflects emergent flexible design, a characteristic of qualitative inquiry in which the researcher maintains an open and flexible approach throughout the conduct of research as circumstances and the study demand, as discussed in Chapters Seven and Ten, for example.) They also used observations, interviews, participant-produced documents (e-mails, poetry, and letters), statistics, and activist art. They drew excerpts from their field logs in which they reflected on the research process.

The study was in part naturalistic in the sense that researchers collected data in settings in which women “naturally” experienced living with HIV/AIDS: support groups, retreats, birthday parties, funerals, camping trips. Yet they also shaped the direction of support group conversations through prompts: “What keeps you going?” (p. 8), “What is a really bad day?” (p. 13), “What does that hope look like?” (p. 10), “How do you make sense of this?” (p. 131).

The researchers engaged in collaborative and participatory, rather than objectifying, research practices. They laughed, cried, and disagreed with the women. They celebrated birthdays and mourned deaths. They requested feedback on their findings. They responded to participants’ need for visibility and voice. For example, Linda B. asked the researchers, “When are you guys going to publish? Some of us are on deadline, you know” (epigraph). Aware that time takes on different meaning in a study of women with uncertain futures, the researchers published a desktop version of their text to make it available as soon as possible. Rather than adopting the traditional role of research experts, they described their role as “witnesses . . . bearing the responsibility” of telling the women’s stories (p. xvi). They also donated a percentage of the book royalties to HIV/AIDS organizations.

In the book, Lather and Smithies reflect on the limits of any researcher’s capacity to connect with and understand participant experiences through the concept of **insider/outsider status** (how we are part of or different from the groups we study). Consider this interaction about hiding HIV status:

Chris Smithies (researcher): What's it like to live with such a secret? (p. 5)
 Linda B. (participant): It's a double life, it's an absolute double life. You cannot imagine ever in your whole life what it's like. Somebody has cancer, you go and tell them you have cancer, it's oh you poor thing. You say you have AIDS . . . and they can't jump backwards fast enough or far enough. (p. 6)

This excerpt suggests that those who do not negotiate the emotional labor of hiding HIV-positive status on a daily basis cannot fully comprehend the experiences of those who do. Lather and Smithies may have shared a compassionate stance, gender, and often race with participants, yet their HIV-negative status limited their understanding. In fact, participants often felt compelled to teach the researchers their embodied knowledge, reversing the traditional research dynamic of researchers as experts and participants as passive subjects. For example, one participant told Lather as the research progressed, "You've grown so much and gotten a lot smarter than when I first met you" (epigraph).

Analysis

In contrast to traditional approaches in which the researcher's voice is dominant, for this study pages of support group transcripts were included to highlight women's voices. The researchers organized women's narratives into five general themes: life after diagnosis, relationships, making meaning, living/dying with AIDS, and support groups. Their narratives reflect the complexity of women's experiences.

Joanna: It's OK to be a positive woman. (epigraph)
 Rosemary: I'm gonna die from stress, not HIV. (p. 11)
 Amber: And I didn't even pay my income taxes. (p. 39)
 Rita: I'd probably be dead if it wasn't for HIV. (p. 135)
 Lisa: I don't have fifty years to be a mother. (p. 79)

The vibrancy of women's *lived* experiences crystallizes against a backdrop of social stigma, and reveals a fuller portrait of the complex phenomenon of HIV/AIDS.

Form

Lather and Smithies shared their findings in an innovative form: a messy, multi-layered text intended to reflect the complexity of meaning-making and of living with HIV/AIDS. The text is brimming with information, fact boxes, activist art, poetry, data, and song lyrics. Its split-text format displays transcripts along the top of the page and running commentary from the researchers' field logs along

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RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 1

WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS—HIGHLIGHTING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH (Continued)

the bottom. It forces the reader's eye up and down, back and forth, choosing what to read. This challenging and confusing form is consistent with the researchers' goals. As Lather expressed, not only is AIDS an unsettling issue but "we *should* be uncomfortable with . . . telling other people's stories" (p. 9).

Summary

This study reflects the broad principles guiding feminist research. It highlights how researchers' perceptions about the social world shape the questions they ask and the research they conduct. It demonstrates the concrete effects of research for human lives. It reveals how gender and gender inequities (as well as class, sexuality, and race) organize social life, including experiences with a deadly virus that might seem, at first glance, a gender-neutral physiological phenomenon.

It also demonstrates research as a potential avenue for self-determination for marginalized groups—an outlet for women to define their experiences in their terms, to teach others, and to agitate for humane responses to a crisis that affects us all. In contrast to traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches in which the researcher adopts a detached stance, Lather and Smithies developed close relationships with the women. They intended to facilitate women's empowerment, to highlight the gendered structure of HIV/AIDS, and to provide readers with resources that better women's lives. These methodological choices are explicitly feminist.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How is this research design "feminist"? How does it differ from other emancipatory approaches?
2. In what ways was the topic of HIV/AIDS appropriate to study using feminist qualitative methodology?
3. How might a researcher using autoethnography, case study research, or another qualitative design approach this topic? What would be different?

Feminist Approaches

There is no single research model guiding feminist research. Feminist practices are diverse, **interdisciplinary** (drawing from different academic traditions), and driven by research purpose. For example, some researchers focus on law, policy, and curriculum as vehicles to advance women's status; others study how economic forces produce gender, race, and class inequities; and others consider the role of language and systems of thought in creating, and recreating, categories people inhabit, such as "woman" and "sexuality." Each focus reflects different theoretical approaches to formulating and conducting research.

This section will first describe several approaches to developing research questions and then provide examples of two qualitative approaches to feminist inquiry: oral history and ethnography. Oral history seeks to capture individual experiences within their social and cultural contexts; ethnography focuses on cultural practices (see Chapters Six and Seven).

Developing Research Questions

Research begins from any number of philosophical and practical questions about the social world. Questions might arise from the lived experiences of marginalized groups, a concrete problem in a program or community, particular gaps in knowledge about underrepresented groups, or critiques of sexist, heterosexist, or racist assumptions that have shaped knowledge.

Lived Experience

Research questions can emerge from the perspectives and standpoints of disadvantaged groups. Proceeding from the belief that everyone occupies a particular standpoint based on his or her social position, researchers inhabiting social roles with greater advantages might try to step outside the frameworks they assume are universal and consider the issue from the perspective of a disadvantaged person or group. A question to nourish this shift in perspective might be, What would a food program developed from the perspective of our most vulnerable citizens look like? Schmitt and Martin's case study (1999) of activist methods in a rape crisis center reflects this spirit when activists assert, "All we do comes from victims" (p. 364).

Researchers' assumptions shape the questions they formulate, the data they collect to answer their questions, and the knowledge they generate—which in turn shapes human lives and thought. Thus beginning from the standpoint of vulnerable people invites different kinds of questions for examining phenomena.

Concrete Issues

Research might also arise from a concrete issue that merits scrutiny. Perhaps a researcher has noted that a battered women's shelter is underused or a female administrator has advanced more rapidly than her peers. To understand why the women's shelter is underused or how the administrator has advanced, researchers might design an *instrumental* case study to explore each case in depth and *theorize* how they might use findings to improve services or advance other women administrators (see also Chapter Ten).

In the case of the shelter researchers might consider: Who is the center designed to serve? What are the characteristics of the community? How close or collaborative are relations between shelter employees and community residents?

Data collection to answer these questions might include long-term immersion in the setting through doing volunteer work and conducting participant observations. It might include informal interviews with stakeholders, employees, and community members. It might include reviewing shelter documents and police reports to determine how the shelter is used.

Analyzing the data for themes and patterns might reveal gaps between shelter services and community needs. For example, researchers might discover that many community members speak a different language than police officers and shelter employees, that the shelter restricts services to women with very young children, or that some lesbians and women of color feel hesitant to report abuse because it might cast further stigma on their communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Identifying key issues allows researchers to strategize about how to better meet diverse women's needs.

Knowledge Gaps

Researchers might also focus on gaps in knowledge that linger from researchers' disproportionate attention to privileged groups historically. Researchers have worked to sculpt more textured understandings of human lives and social processes on an array of topics: domestic work, sex education, welfare-to-work programs, teaching, letter writing, postpartum depression, midwifery, quilting, reading practices, sex work, cocktail waitressing, and homelessness, to name a few. Such knowledge is not relevant only to women; it benefits us all.

For example, Fonow (2003) examined women's roles in the steel industry and male-dominated labor movement using statistics, historical records, observations, and interviews with women in the United Steelworkers Union. Her study revealed that women's activism helps to forge a collective identity ("Women of Steel"), decrease marginalization in unions, and challenge global changes in manufacturing—powerful forces that affect all workers.

Critique and Revision

Researchers might also question common, taken-for-granted assumptions that shape perspectives and policy. For example, Pillow (2004) challenged the assumption that teen pregnancy is a “crisis” in the United States. She used statistics, media images, and fieldwork in schools to trace sources of negative attitudes toward pregnant and mothering teens, to highlight the racial undercurrents animating the issue, and to explore young women’s experiences. In particular, her research revealed schools’ failures to meet the mandates of federal policy (Title IX) that since 1972 has explicitly protected the rights of pregnant and mothering students to receive an education equal to that of their peers.

Similarly, researchers have critiqued the trivialization of women’s roles and sought to take their labor, activities, and roles seriously. For example, Adams and Bettis (2003) used a feminist lens to analyze cheerleading—a highly feminized activity many dismiss as unimportant. Yet this activity garners significant revenue and endures in popularity; as a giddy twelve-year-old joining a squad phrased it, “I’ve been waiting for this all of my life” (p. 24). The researchers interviewed cheerleaders in a range of contexts, observed in schools, and analyzed popular films, newspaper reports, and policies. Their data revealed that an activity that the public (and many feminists) see as trivial is suffused with complex racial politics, economic issues, sexual dynamics, and gender messages. Moreover, some girls experienced cheerleading as empowering.

Revisiting common assumptions and topics from a feminist perspective offers new and potentially transformative insights. Audiences can use findings from such studies to reconsider the past, better understand complex social issues, heighten consciousness about discriminatory practices, and develop strategies to combat them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What types of questions might lend themselves to a feminist perspective?
2. Why is developing questions an important part of the research process?
3. What makes feminist questions different from other qualitative questions?

Feminist Applications of Qualitative Approaches

Research purpose determines which approaches and methods are appropriate for a given topic, and varied research approaches lend themselves to feminist purposes. Researchers can conduct surveys to capture a broad portrait of social

phenomena, study history (Chapter Six), conduct ethnography in which they study particular cultural groups in depth (Chapter Seven), or pursue many other forms of research from a feminist perspective.

Those interested in questions about power or activism in school curricula, in films, on the Internet, in video games, or in newspapers can use content analysis to trace patterns in ideas over time or contradictions in cultural meanings. Others interested in the implications of particular policies for marginalized groups can use feminist policy analysis (Campbell, 2000; Pillow, 2004) to examine how dominant ideas about gender, race, and sexuality shape the policymaking process or how policies might fuel inequities. Those seeking to explore women's lives that do not map onto traditional ideas of success can use oral history. Those interested in gender and cultural processes can use ethnography. Examples of conducting oral history and ethnography from a feminist perspective follow.

Feminist Oral History

Oral history is both a qualitative approach researchers can use to preserve firsthand accounts of people's lives and the final story that is preserved. There are many different ways to conduct oral history and different theories that govern these approaches. Whereas oral history was traditionally used to record the memories of elite leaders or citizens in unique positions in their communities, oral histories conducted from a feminist perspective have often sought to understand the everyday lives of women and other community members. Since the 1970s feminist researchers have used oral history to preserve women's accounts of their lives in their own words and, significantly, to link experiences that feel deeply personal with their broader social and historical context (see Research Snapshot 2). Oral history honors storytelling in everyday language, oral traditions as a method of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, and in-depth exploration of important events and individual experiences.

From this perspective, oral histories are potentially emancipatory. All members of societies do not have equal opportunities for expression, for literacy (to read and write), or for occupying social roles with sufficient status to enable voice. Literacy itself is historically, culturally, and geographically specific. Thus oral history can provide voice and visibility to varied groups and convey how marginalized people make meaning of their experiences within dominant discourses. In this view, stories are versions—rather than mirrors—of lives; broader context, norms, and audiences always mediate the stories people sculpt.

Methodology

A narrator's (that is, the person telling his or her own oral history) use of language and her rapport with the researcher are key methodological aspects of oral histories. The primary method researchers use to collect data are in-depth interviews. Researchers traditionally use audiotapes to record interviews, although some may also use video or photography. Rather than using a traditional, structured interview protocol, a researcher might collect an oral history with only a few themes and biographical notes. For example, Middleton (1993) interviewed New Zealand teachers using a three-part, open-ended question. She asked, "I would like you to tell me how and why you became an educator, how and why you came to identify yourself as a feminist, and how your feminism influences your work and activities in education" (p. 70). With prompts from the researcher, participants talked for as long as three hours in the first interview.

Although traditional approaches to oral history often position the researcher as a vehicle for capturing and conveying an individual's story, feminist approaches more often consider oral histories as coconstructed between narrator and researcher. A researcher's questions, prompts, and body language can subtly shape the narrator's account. To attempt to dominate an interview, to impose the researcher's agenda too heavily on a narrator, runs counter to feminist goals of collaborative inquiry. Oral historians must thus balance their research agendas with active listening (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Active listening involves being receptive to varied aspects of communication, including body language, speaking style, silences, and emotion. For example, a narrator's shedding tears when discussing childhood or changing the subject when discussing race may indicate painful or taboo topics. In turn, these communicative forms can shed light on cultural norms and dynamics that shape the narrator's experiences.

Analysis

Conducting oral history from a feminist perspective includes contemplating how such forces as gender, race, and sexuality both shape life experience and structure communication. For example, a woman's devaluing of her domestic labor may reflect her absorption of cultural dismissals of its value. Cultural norms and power dynamics can also shape how narrators tell their stories and what they share. Indigenous women who believe questioning their elders is disrespectful might hesitate to interrupt or clarify responses. Some men might downplay feelings of sadness because social norms link masculinity with rationality and control. Some female narrators might avoid taking charge of an interview, even when encouraged to do this, so as not to appear aggressive or self-aggrandizing.

The theory and purpose of the specific inquiry project shape how researchers analyze oral history data. Some may emphasize memories of key events. Some may link experiences to broader contextual forces, such as a natural disaster, social activism, or community identity. Others may pay particular attention to the intersections among gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity shaping women's lives. Other oral historians may consider *how* a story is told and what it means to the narrator to be as important as the events detailed. What stories does the narrator share, and what meaning do they hold for her or him? What role does the narrator play in the story? (Is she or he a heroine, a victim, a figure hovering on the margins?) When is she or he silent? What might such silences reveal about the narrator's experiences as well as the social norms governing speech? These questions can help guide the researcher's analysis and interpretation.

Form

Oral historians must also consider the politics of representation in the final story they present. A traditional method of preserving oral histories is to preserve the audiotape, or a transcription of the history typed word for word. Others arrange the accounts in themes or time periods significant to the narrator, organization, or community. These choices require subtle interpretive decisions. Perhaps the narrator uses slang or a dialect that readers might judge harshly. How will the researcher represent the style and speech of the respondent authentically and respectfully? Perhaps the narrator shares private information. What should the researcher include in the final account? Perhaps the oral historian and narrator interpret the story differently (Borland, 1991). Who owns the story? There are no straightforward answers to these questions; considering them carefully is foundational to feminist research.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 2

FEMINIST ORAL HISTORY—GRANDMOTHER GOES TO THE RACETRACK

The following excerpt from Borland's interview (1991) with her grandmother Beatrice captures the flavor of first-person accounts in which narrators reflect on significant events. It also provides an example of the distinction between traditional and feminist approaches to oral history. In the excerpt Beatrice recounts a

day she accompanied her father to the racetrack and placed a bet on a horse against his wishes.

If I could find a *horse* that right pleased me, and a driver that pleased me . . . *there* would be my choice, you see? So, this particular afternoon . . . I *found* that. Now that didn't happen all the time, by any means, but I found . . . perfection, as far as I was concerned, and I was absolutely *convinced* that *that* horse was going to win. [Her father disapproved of Beatrice's choice, and she responded.] "I am *betting on my horse* and I am betting *ten bucks* on that horse. It's gonna win!"

Father had a fit. *He* had a fit. And he tells everybody three miles around in the grandstand what a fool I am too. . . . [And then the horse won.] I threw my pocketbook in one direction, and I threw my gloves in another direction, and my score book went in another direction and I jumped up and I hollered, to everyone, "you see what know-it-all said! *That's my father!*" (pp. 65, 67).

One distinction between traditional and feminist oral histories becomes evident in Borland's analysis of her grandmother's narrative. To Borland, this story is not simply a textured moment in an individual life. Even the facts of the story—which horse was involved, how much money Beatrice placed on the horse, how her father reacted—are not necessarily important.

The significance lies instead in how Beatrice recounts the tale, the meaning it holds for her, and the glimpses it provides into systems of power shaping her experience as a woman in a particular place and time. Beatrice is the central character in the story. Her recipe for choosing a horse, her resistance to her father's criticism, and her celebration of the horse's win take center stage in the story as a triumphant expression of female autonomy in a male-dominated context. This feminist oral history preserves the account.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How might feminists use oral histories differently than other researchers?
2. What might an "action orientation" look like in feminist oral history?
3. How would you go about conducting an oral history from a feminist perspective?

Feminist Ethnography

There is no definitive approach to feminist ethnography; it is a flexible methodology researchers use to study culture in detail and depth. The need for feminist ethnographic practices emerged from anthropologists' recognition in the 1970s that the primary focus of ethnography—culture—often dealt solely with male roles. As a result, women often seemed bereft of culture rather than active agents in its creation. Debates continue as to whether ethnography can shake the vestiges of its inequitable origins to embrace truly feminist and emancipatory practices (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Stacey, 1991; Visweswaran, 1994). Indeed, Stacey characterizes the relationship between feminism and ethnography as “unavoidably ambiguous” (p.117).

Ethnography (*writing* culture) is both a research *approach* used to explore the practices and worldviews in a given culture and a *product* of research (the presentation of findings from conducting ethnography). As discussed in Chapter Seven, ethnography relies as much as possible on researchers' direct observations of daily life and practices in the culture of interest. Researchers both participate in and observe the intricacies of cultural practice through long-term immersion in the field. In contemporary ethnography, various groups and settings can constitute cultures: a beauty salon, a mining community, a gang, or a home-schooling organization.

In contrast to traditional ethnography, feminist ethnography generally includes attention to the gendered aspects of culture, the cultural forces that limit women's opportunities, women's roles in their cultural context, and women's agency as cultural actors. For example, ethnographers have studied women's economic activities in Thailand (Wilson, 2004); the work of Latina maids in California (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001); African American and white women's experiences with the culture of romance in college (Holland & Eisenhart, 1992); sex education in a New York high school (Fine, 1988); and the moral issues pregnant women face during fetal testing for genetic anomalies and their decisions about whether to continue or terminate their pregnancies (Rapp, 2000).

Methodology

The experiential and dynamic aspects of ethnography lend themselves to feminist inquiry; they offer opportunities to consider the intricacies of daily lives in context, to explore the intersections between gender and culture, and to examine systems of power that constrain women's opportunities. For example, Riemer's research (2001) in workplaces employing former welfare recipients offers insights

into the beliefs and organizational practices that shaped the women's ability to thrive in new employment.

Immersion in local culture allows researchers both to hear what people say and to observe what they do in their natural settings—multiple data sources that in concert offer richer, more potentially contradictory, and more substantive information than single data sources can provide. Clifford (1997) has termed this day-to-day immersion in the local as “deep hanging out” (p. 90). The ethnographer's gaze focuses on understanding the worldviews and practices of cultural insiders. Methods must be context-, topic-, and often gender-specific; for example, women may use letter and journal writing more frequently than men; some women may prefer interactive conversation to formal methods; and participants in some cultures, such as in Thailand, may view formal interviews as hierarchical. Thus researchers need to consider gender- and culture-appropriate methods to elicit data. In addition to **jot-tings** (brief notations of events or terms) and developed field notes (see Chapter Seven) about women's activities, researchers might view social networking Web pages, collect photographs, and examine cultural artifacts to understand cultural processes.

Access and Entry

Researchers must consider how their identities and assumptions can shape ethnographic practice, from developing study questions to accessing a research site, to navigating the field, to writing up accounts. Feminist ethnography, like critical ethnography (see Chapter Fifteen), is concerned with systems of power that shape culture and research. For example, accessing a site can require significant time and resources. As an American anthropologist writes of her fieldwork in Thailand, “There is the bare fact that the United States' great financial and political power underwrites U.S. citizens' ability to conduct research in less wealthy nations such as Thailand. Relatedly, my white identity situated me in a privileged position” (Wilson, 2004, p.27). Researching female refugees, prisoners, graffiti artists, white supremacists, or schoolgirls involves different systems of power, research sites, and preparation.

Conducting ethnography in some settings also requires a degree of freedom to leave family and other work behind for extended periods, a condition that is impossible to meet for some working-class researchers or parents of young children. It requires financial support, specialized training, and sometimes mastery of an additional language, an educational nexus available to few. It may require a researcher to consider safety issues, which face all ethnographers but which may have particular implications for women, sexual minorities (lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and transgender individuals), and people with mobility impairments. These factors shape who conducts research and in what ways.

Navigating the Setting

Like traditional ethnographers, feminist researchers must navigate insider/outsider status and power relations within the culture of interest. For some feminist topics, shared experience with key insiders may facilitate rapport and connection—indeed, researchers may be members of the community under study. For example, Rapp (2000) found that having experienced amniocentesis facilitated rapport with women she interviewed in the same situation. Participants considered her an insider. For Bhavnani and Davis (2000), who studied women prisoner's experiences, the researchers' status as nonprisoners and their racial and national identities (which made them outsiders) seemed to evoke less interest than their roles as prison activists and scholars. Navigating different subcultures within the same setting may require careful strategizing, particularly if groups do not get along. Researchers' interactions with one group may jeopardize their access to another group. Such tensions and hierarchies can shape researchers' access to information and the knowledge generated.

Mendoza-Denton (2008) describes her gradual immersion among Latina youth that facilitated her understanding of group culture. Like the participants who educated Lather and Smithies (1997) in the HIV/AIDS study, Latina youth taught Mendoza-Denton specific lessons, such as how to dress, apply makeup, and style hair in line with their cultural codes. As her study unfolded, she reflected,

The way I dressed changed gradually . . . little side-long glances were flashed in my direction, tactful suggestions were made about relaxing and wearing jeans . . . shopping expeditions were organized . . . sometimes, if we were driving somewhere, the girls would make me pull over on the side of the road and apply makeup so that I could be “presentable.” And so gradually people began to treat me differently, and some senior scholars, much to my surprise, complained from just a little eyeliner that I was “going native.” (p. 54–55)

Practices of participant observation can be age-, race-, and gender-specific as ethnographers adjust to different cultural norms. Navigating insider/outsider status and nuanced dynamics in a given setting can require strategizing and skill.

Narrative Practices

All ethnographers strive to produce lush descriptions in which details and interactions in the setting under study spring to life. Using empirical data—the sights,

sounds, scents, and texture of a setting—the researcher works to capture an insider glimpse of culture. However, the narrative basis of ethnography lends itself to feminist researchers' use of innovative writing forms (drama, autobiographical reflections, multivocal texts) to challenge positivist conventions for research reporting (formal, crisp, authoritative).

Some ethnographers' narrative choices diverge strikingly from traditional ethnographic forms. First, some accounts provide a foreground to the researcher's, rather than the participant's, experience in the field. For example, St. Pierre (2000) has often chosen to narrate methodological reflections of her research among older women rather than represent the women and their words directly. Her choices are theoretically driven and, among other purposes, shift attention to the process rather than the product of inquiry. Some first-person accounts weave the researcher's experiences with accounts of the culture under study to demonstrate the coconstruction of knowledge.

Other texts blend fictional, poetic, and empirical elements. Hurston, a folklorist and novelist, produced a variety of novels that drew from her observations of Southern African American culture (for example, her 1935 collection of folklore, *Mules and Men*). She also incorporated autobiographical narrative into her ethnographic accounts. Richardson (1997) has explored her work through poems, and Visweswaran (1994) has used drama to question dominant conventions and explore ethnographic practice.

Although some dismiss such forms as unscientific, feminist researchers view these methods as important vehicles for exploring experiential knowledge and alternatives to dominant positivist conventions (Visweswaran, 1994). Such techniques are contested; some researchers are concerned that blending autobiographical, novelistic, and dramatic elements with fieldwork may undermine the professional and scientific boundaries of ethnography because these practices blur empirical science and fiction.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 3

FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY—A RELUCTANT AVON LADY

The following snapshot illustrates elements of a feminist approach to ethnography. It is drawn from Wilson's study (2004) of commercial spaces in Bangkok, Thailand.

(Continued)

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 3

FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY—A RELUCTANT AVON LADY (Continued)

Purpose

Wilson's research explored how globalization shapes identities, relationships, and economic practices in new and complex ways. Her study emerged from interests in women's labor in developing nations and the often unrecognized connections between economic systems and private life.

Setting

For several years, Wilson conducted what is referred to as a multi-sited ethnography. She examined social relationships and economic practices in department stores, go-go bars, shopping complexes, a cable TV marketing office, and direct sales, such as for Avon and Amway.

Methodology

Wilson immersed herself as a participant observer in multiple settings, gathering background information, using such textual sources as popular culture and material artifacts, working part-time in a marketing office, translating English documents, participating in activism on behalf of local women's rights, and conducting informal interviews in both Thai and English. She developed relationships with diverse Thai people.

In this excerpt, Wilson describes a "reluctant Avon lady" (p. 168) who began to sell Avon products. Avon established sales in Thailand in the 1960s. It is a commercial enterprise that attracts diverse Thai vendors, many of them women. Through catalogues, Avon markets a white and American form of femininity internationally. Wilson writes,

A more unlikely Avon lady than Sila would be hard to find. She had a degree from a leading university with a progressive reputation and was a long term organizer and activist. . . . Sila was called (and sometimes called herself) a tom [representing a Thai gender practice in which females dress and behave in masculine ways, similar to what Americans call "tomboy"]. . . . At Sila's first "training," the agent . . . explained their products and procedures, instructing Sila from catalogues, and offered guidance for selling: "speak nice . . . proper, sweet and polite." Though this advice could hardly have appealed to her temperament, Sila

signed on, paying the equivalent of U.S. \$14 to enroll and some more dollars for the start up kit of an Avon bag, catalog and product samples. Sila did not use the Avon bag: "It was ugly. Yellow, pink, brown-tan, colors I don't like . . ." she said, waving her cigarette at the pastel-colored wallpaper that covered my flat . . . [but] she enjoyed the catalogues and used them to sell. "The big one had color," she remembered. (p. 169)

Wilson points out that catalogues were a "critical component of sales" (p. 170) because they showed images of women wearing Avon products. Although Sila initially sold well among women in her social network, she could not identify with the catalogue images and did not know how to market cosmetics to customers. "'It's funny,' she said, 'they'd ask me, is this pretty? How do you use this? and I'd give them a catalogue saying, here look. I couldn't tell them'" (p. 169–171). Her discomfort increased from selling products that the company marketed for profit, that did not live up to their claims, and that she did not use. In fact, she could not learn about them in detail because the labels were in English. She eventually stopped selling Avon products.

Analysis

This snapshot highlights characteristics of feminist ethnography. As with traditional ethnography, Wilson immerses herself in the setting and describes it with depth and detail. Yet she focuses on the gendered aspects of global economic practices—in this example, one Thai worker's experiences within an international company that is marketing beauty products based on white femininity and profiting from direct sales to Thai women. She attends closely to women's working experiences in local contexts and diverse cultural expressions of gender (*tom*). She asks critical questions about the significance of global changes for gender, culture, and identity: "What does it mean for [Sila] . . . to learn corporate rhetoric forged in the United States?" (p. 188).

Form

Although Wilson chose a traditional academic form to represent her work, a key textual practice reflects her feminist attentiveness to the politics of representation. She chose to embed the research she conducted with women in the sex trade within the array of other economic entities she studied—Amway, Avon, department stores. This choice ensured she did not contribute to the Western sensationalism that too often characterizes accounts of exotic, illicit, or sexual practices in non-Western regions. She considered the sex trade along with Avon as part of exploring varied, complex, context-specific practices influenced by globalization.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the characteristics of feminist ethnography?
2. How do traditional ethnography and feminist ethnography differ?

Trusting Feminist Reports

The explicitly emancipatory aim of feminist research, its divergence from traditional research approaches, and others' investments in the claim that science is an objective practice have led some to question the credibility of feminist research. Many feminist researchers continue to follow a checklist of traditional criteria to demonstrate the quality of their work. Researchers use systematic procedures and immerse themselves in the field and in data analysis to ensure they have considered the phenomenon of interest in depth. In writing up their reports, they support their findings with substantive data from interviews, observations, and documents to allow readers to understand and evaluate their interpretive processes. In addition, they might use **triangulation** (taking into account multiple data sources, methods, theories, or researchers); **audit trails** (records of data gathering and analytic procedures); and **peer debriefing** (processing findings with peers). Recording and transcribing interviews can facilitate researchers' immersion in the rhythm of and emotion in participants' speech.

Some common qualitative validity criteria lend themselves to the mission of feminist inquiry. For example, Lather and Smithies (1997) used **member checking** (asking participants to review data or findings for accuracy) to ensure participants could provide feedback on how their lives were represented. Depending on its purpose, a valid feminist study must reflect the guiding principles of feminist inquiry. Readers might begin with the following questions to consider the validity of a feminist study.

1. Do the researchers scrutinize and shed light on gendered structures of social life and research practice?
2. Do the researchers capture the voices of marginalized groups or social processes that contribute to their marginalization?
3. Do the researchers provide detailed data to substantiate their findings and interpretations that offer insights into the phenomenon of interest?

4. Do the researchers employ reflexivity and equitable and ethical research practices that are attentive to power inequities? Do the researchers consider the implications of their findings for the groups under study?
5. Does the research contribute to social critique and facilitate action against oppressive beliefs or systems?

Others use traditional criteria as critical vehicles to reflect rigorously on their data and findings. For example, one measure of validity is seeking **discrepant cases** (examples that contradict findings) in the data set. Cases that do not fit common patterns do not necessarily indicate problems with the initial analysis; rather, they invite researchers to revisit their data, tease out meaningful tensions, and ponder alternative explanations. In this sense, using traditional measures to reflect on a study serves less as an endpoint and more as a springboard to delve deeper into the phenomena of interest.

However, many critical researchers are uncomfortable with such validity checklists as that just listed because they were developed within a positivist paradigm that views the enactment of systematic procedures as an assurance that research findings are true and certain. Although some techniques can be adopted for critical purposes, numerous critical researchers argue that a “one size fits all” approach to validity is reductive because research purposes and practices are not homogenous. For example, a feminist’s assertions of validity using traditional criteria—for example, use of systematic procedures, triangulation, and audit trails—will have little meaning if the researcher dehumanizes participants or fails to engage in reflexive practices.

The diversity of contemporary qualitative research has inspired a proliferation of validity categories that transgress traditional forms. For example, some researchers use **catalytic validity**, a form of validity associated with critical research projects intended to provide catalysts for social change. Its premise is straightforward, but its actualization is more complex: if the research purpose is to improve curriculum and empower students in a given classroom, the researcher must demonstrate that curriculum was improved and students were empowered to meet catalytic validity criteria. In this view, following a rote procedural checklist cannot ensure that critical research will accomplish its purpose: to facilitate critique and change. Validity practices, like other aspects of contemporary qualitative inquiry, continue to evolve.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why are traditional validity criteria not always a fit for feminist inquiry projects?
2. How would you recognize a “good” feminist study if you encountered it?

Summary

Feminist approaches to research emerged during a period of activism and critical questioning in the 1960s and 1970s. They hold that the creation of knowledge is an inherently political and power-laden enterprise and challenge traditional inquiry approaches that proceed from the assumption that a neutral and objective stance is possible. To feminist and other critical researchers, cultural practices and systems of power always influence research practices. Feminist research is explicitly political and emancipatory in aim.

Feminist approaches have blossomed into a rich and diverse body of practices for investigating phenomena in a range of contexts. These methodologies continue to evolve as new issues emerge and scholars engage in productive debates about practices and approaches. No tool or technique is explicitly feminist; a general set of guiding principles shapes feminist methodologies, which vary widely in practice based on the specific purpose of the study and the researcher's theoretical allegiances. What remain consistent across these efforts are a spirit of critique and the conviction that research should challenge oppressive forces and contribute to tangible changes in people's lives.

Key Terms

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Further Readings and Resources

Suggested Feminist Studies

Holland, D. C., & Eisenhart, M. A. (1992). *Educated in romance: Women, achievement, and college culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This classic feminist ethnography examines African American and white college women's experiences with college culture and its norms of "romance and attractiveness" that influence their achievement.

Luttrell, W. (1997). *School-smart and mother-wise: Working-class women's identity and schooling*. New York: Routledge.

This study focuses on life stories of working-class women and their experiences with schooling as children and adults.

Lather, P., & Smithies, C. (1997). *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

This book-length study provides an innovative example of feminist inquiry and discusses many of the dilemmas in conducting feminist research.

Romero, M. (2002). *Maid in the USA*. New York: Routledge.

This classic study of Latina domestic workers sheds critical light on the structural forces and intersections of race, class, and gender that shape women's domestic labor.

Other Suggested Readings

Jaggar, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Just methods: An interdisciplinary feminist reader*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

This edited collection of over forty essays introduces different areas of feminist methodologies and the conceptual linkages feminist researchers draw between social power and the creation of knowledge.

Reinharz, S. (with Davidman, L.). (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This text provides an early introduction to different feminist research approaches, including chapters on feminist interviewing, ethnography, and discourse analysis.

St. Pierre, E., & Pillow, W. S. (2000). *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural methods in education*. New York: Routledge.

This edited collection offers a variety of essays on feminist methodology in education that are written from a theoretical perspective termed poststructuralism.

Tong, R. (2008). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

This text provides a broad introduction to feminist theories, with chapters on such topics as liberal, radical, and postmodern feminisms, which inform the practice of feminist research.

Visweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

This text offers a series of theoretical essays and reflections that foreground issues of race, nation, and gender, and that challenge contemporary feminist ethnographic practices.

Organizations and Web Sites

American Educational Research Association (AERA)—Special Interest Group on Qualitative Research (SIG #82) (www.aera.net/Default.aspx?menu_jd=208&id=772)

This special interest group is affiliated with the largest educational association in the country (AERA). It supports scholarship on qualitative methodologies from a variety of perspectives and offers yearly presentation opportunities at the annual AERA conference.

Association for Feminist Anthropology (AFA) (www.aaanet.org/sections/afa)

This organization supports the development of feminist scholarship in anthropology and promotes a variety of equity and human rights initiatives through the American Anthropological Association. The Web site has a variety of useful resources and links.

National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) (www.nwsa.org)

This organization supports feminist scholarship and the field of women's studies. In existence since 1977, NWSA hosts a yearly national conference and offers a variety of resources for scholars and activists.

Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) (www.socwomen.org/)

This is an international organization of social scientists dedicated to improving women's position in society.