Feminist Psychology
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Feminist psychology has always been a field in transition, and tensions have often existed within feminist research circles, especially with regard to the most appropriate methods to use. A sampling of qualitative methods within the major theoretical approaches are briefly described below.

Feminist Qualitative Research in Historical Perspective: 1865 to 1965

As with all other sciences, women were not allowed to participate as fully functioning researchers until the end of the 19th Century. Even then, they were few in number, marginalized as students and as researchers, and often deprived of the right to receive advanced degrees, publish in prestigious journals, or even to claim ownership of their ideas (Bohan, 1992; Furumoto & Scarborough, 1986). In terms of methods, the field of psychology in the late 19th century was fomenting with various forms competing for primacy. Qualitative methods, including introspection, were commonplace in early psychology. Despite the turn to experimentation and quantitative methods in the 1920’s, especially in the United States, one of the first feminist psychologists, Mary Calkins, at Wellesley College, used qualitative methods in a study of social selves in interaction. Until today, the notion of relationship is a keystone of feminist research (Palmieri, 1983).

The “Second Wave of Feminism”

The flowering of feminist research, particularly in North America, Western Europe, and the British Commonwealth countries began with the so-called “Second Wave of Feminism,” following by forty years, the “First Wave,” the era of Suffragettes. Sparked by the publication of The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, (1949/1972) and Betty Friedan’s (1963) The Feminist Mystique, energized by the civil rights movement, and supported by the huge influx of women into higher education, feminist researchers in North America found a ground swell of support for the development of their discipline. One facet of their work was aimed at criticizing the
positivist, empiricism of mainstream psychology. As Carolyn Sherif said, “The orthodox methods of studying and interpreting sex differences were capable of delivering only mischievous and misleading trivia” (1987, pg. 38). Feminists argued against research that had advantaged men and supported stereotypic notions of women and femininity. (Weisstein, 1971). Other criticisms of traditional experimental and statistical research emphasized the claim that scientists could conduct research without being in a relationship with those who were being studied, and that research could be value-neutral (Gergen, 1988; McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986). The outcome of the resurgence of feminism as a political movement in the 1970’s and beyond provided a strong beginning for the shift in methods that followed.

The Turn Toward Qualitative Methods in Feminist Research

By the 1970’s the quantitative approach was hegemonic in much of psychology. Feminist researchers tended to adapt these methods to feminist issues in part to protect themselves from being rejected from powerful publication domains and academic jobs (Lykes & Stewart, 1986). Despite this career pressure, some feminist psychologists, throughout the 1980’s, took up qualitative methods; in the U. S., they often published outside the mainstream, in their own books and in private periodicals, such as the Stone Center Papers at Wellesley College (cf. Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, et al, 1986; Jack, 1991). Until today, the majority of feminist research psychologists in the U. S. do quantitative work. For many, however, the corset of the quantitative distorts the body of inquiry, and much that is produced suffers from the constraints of the methods used. As a result, in recent years, qualitative research designs have begun to flourish in the United States.

Many factors – social, political, and scientific - played a role in the transformation. Beginning in the 1980’s, the “French invasion” of postmodernism, which included the influence of French feminism, sparked interest in many new ideas, unsettled past philosophical assumptions, and enhanced the desirability of qualitative methods (Moi, 1987). The influences of French feminism on feminist psychology are, however, beyond the scope of this paper. More directly, the British and Commonwealth psychologists, less under the control of a dominating paradigm than North Americans, demonstrated forms of research that escaped the confines of traditional methods and advanced feminist ideals and practices (cf., Henriques, et al, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987; Squire, 1989; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Walkerdine, 1985; Wilkinson, 1986).
In addition the founding of *Feminism & Psychology* in 1991 provided a journal that strongly supported qualitative work. Overtime, feminist critiques of the dominant perspective seemed to have infiltrated the more mainstream scientific domains. Researchers wanting to explore relational topics were looking to escape, and qualitative means provided the key… Also the increasing presence of electronic journals has widened publishing opportunities for non-traditional articles (c.f. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, or Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung, archived at www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/rubriken-e.htm).

It should also be mentioned that a great many research projects are highly complex, with an intermingling of qualitative and quantitative methods (cf. Fine, et al, 2003). These are called “mixed methods” and are more popular with traditional researchers in psychology than those that are exclusively qualitative.

*The Feminist Standpoint Position(s)*

The vast majority of feminist qualitative researchers share the notion that there is no “God’s eye view” from which to observe and describe reality; there is no neutral point from which a scientist can describe nature. Instead, all descriptions of experience and reality are made from a particular standpoint position (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Naples, 2003). Although there are diverse subgroups among them, for many of these researchers, the concrete experiences of women – as mothers, housewives, and gardeners - become the grounds for discovering the nature of knowledge and the real. As Dana Crowley Jack (1991) wrote with reference to her longitudinal study of 12 depressed women, “They are the ones best situated to provide a clear picture of the intersection of female personality with culture…. Let us view depressed women as informants from women’s sphere … trusting them to locate and describe the stresses that render them vulnerable to depression (pg. 25).

A predominant feature of feminist research, especially from the standpoint position, has been an intense focus on girls’ and women’s bodies. Researchers have examined topics such as eating disorders, sexuality, violence, childbirth; menopause, and the objectification of the body by a patriarchal society. (i.e., Baker, et al. 2005; Tilmann-Healy, 1996). Each of these topics expands out into a massive array of qualitative research projects, most often executed by using in-depth interviews with women who have been involved with a particular experience. For standpoint feminists the differences in embodiment between women and men figure prominently
in theorizing gender. This view is in contrast to much of the research from the quantitative empiricist approach, in which gender/sex differences tend to be minimized, in part, to support the value of equality between the sexes (Hyde & Linn, 1986).

**Resistance to the “Experience Story” as Truth from within the Standpoint Position**

The notion that the experiences of individuals should be the basis for discovering woman’s truth has been challenged from within the standpoint position as well as from without. Nancy Naples (2003), for example has argued that the feminist standpoint position is one that is acquired through communal discourse among women; it is not an individual’s story, but one created by a group. Marie Mies (1991) has agreed, writing “Many women [researchers] remain mired in the describing of experiences. … The reason for this lies not in intellectual laziness, but in a superficial, individualistic, and deterministic concept of experience.” Mies argues that experience “denotes the sum of processes which individuals or groups have gone through in the production of their lives; it denotes their reality, their history.” (pg. 66). This notion of a communal story, which qualitative research should uncover, is shrouded in mystery, however. How does a researcher discover this story? How does an integration of individual and group stories take place?

The tensions registered above raise questions about the value of experiential reports and the possibility of creating joint stories. Whose stories are used and whose are disqualified? What methods are used to create the synthesis? These are difficult questions to answer and produce conflicting methodological choices within the standpoint position.

**The Minority Group Challenges to the Standpoint Position**

After the development of the standpoint position in the 1980’s came a powerful backlash from women of color, who were offended by various trends within the feminist research community (hooks, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981). The major criticism was that the “woman’s standpoint” tended to represent white, middle-class, able bodied, academic women, who were controlling theory, research and publications, and thus the woman’s standpoint position. This criticism fragmented the unity of the feminist movement, and it undermined the standpoint approach that had at its core an image of womanness as a coherent entity. Instead of
being the oppressed, white women, especially middle class academics, became the oppressors. Thrown into question were the methods that had been used, the samples that had been selected, and the voices that had been heard (Cannon, Higginbotham & Leung, 1988).

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) for one, was vocal in calling for a position that would clarify a standpoint of and for Black women exclusively. For Collins, Black women possessed a unique communal standpoint; the role of the Black female intellectual was to clarify the standpoint for the Black women. What was important was self-definition, self-valuation and Black female-centered analysis. This argument suggested that the relationship of white women to minority women paralleled the patriarchal oppression of which feminists had complained, a view also promulgated by Barbara Smith (1983). In a more positive and recent vein, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) with colleagues and students at Harvard University engaged in creating a qualitative method called “portraiture,” in which they creatively explored the lives of important women in Black history. As a bridge between social science and art, portraiture is the integration of a series of images of a particular person or place created through multiple means, including archival work, field studies, interviews, conversations, and reflexive examination. Researchers, as artists, are concerned with creating a textual portrait. Here a standpoint position is developed by the research team as they combine together their various perspectives. Striving for unity, “the research portraitist, like a Spiderwoman, is weaving elements into a vibrant multifaceted whole.” (Davies, 2003, pg. 215).

Oral narrative history, a method of collecting the stories told by women in minority groups, has been vividly presented in a volume edited by Kim Marie Vaz (1997). Each of the chapters describes how oral histories were created with Africana women as participants and researchers, the form of their interactions, the mode of analysis and the ethical issues of doing this research (Obbo, 1997; Green-Powell, 1997). In Georgia Brown’s (1997) oral history project with the women of New Orleans, various goals were undertaken, which required special methods of inquiry. For example, to examine the culture’s traditional images of black women in Louisiana, it was necessary to study the historical context of these women’s lives, including uncovering local discriminatory practices, employment options, and social norms. Within the interviews, participants were often shown old family photographs to elicit stories of the past. In Brown’s chapter, suggested questions for an oral history are included as well as a transcript of an interview. Angela Gillem’s (2001) research on the struggles of identity formation for biracial Black/White people, suggests that there are multiple facets to voice, even within one person.
Within other racial groups, similar issues of voice, identity, polyvocality and story have been studied as standpoint issues (Kaw, 2003; Odeh, 1997). Work involving Latina feminism can be found in the *Handbook of U. S. Latino Psychology*. Many Latina feminist psychologists have adopted the theory of borderland of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2012.) to expand the concept of intersectionality to include stigmatized social categories. This theory is helpful in building coalitions and social action. According to her, there are no absolute sides in conflict, and adversaries are contingent. Any group can be oppressive in certain circumstances, and victims in others. She speaks of the mestizo consciousness, a form of social constructionism, of being able to see multiple realities at the same time. Other research involving Latina women include work by Comas-Diaz, 1988; Comas-Diaz, Lykes, & Alarcon, 1998; Fregoso, 2003; and Huraldo, 2000, 2003.

Other groups who have felt excluded from the dominant standpoint position have also laid claim to the value of their voices. Among the most vocal are disabled people, Lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered people, and the elderly. The dominant theme of these groups has been that oppression comes in many forms, not just for gender discrimination alone, but additionally for sexual, age, and disability discrimination (Kessler, 1998; Russell, 2000; Tannenbaum, Nasmith, & Mayo, 2003). Recently the combination of various forms of oppression is referred to as intersectionality. The idea is that being a minority group member, for example, as well as old, and poor, must be seen as a cumulative experience, not as three separate issues (Fine, et al., 2003).

*The Postmodern/Social Constructionist Position in Feminist Inquiry*

For the Social Constructionist, or postmodern feminists who do qualitative research, a new world is opened, one that contains many fascinating and perhaps dangerous methodological and theoretical implications. (Burr, 1995; K. Gergen, 2001; Gergen & Gergen, 2004). The first important step in defining this approach is to acknowledge that the nature of the reality being explored by researchers is socially constructed, that is, it is dependent upon the shared linguistic endeavors of relevant communities (Wetherell, 1986). This approach calls into question the objective world, which is the basis of empiricist research, as well as the subjective world of the standpoint position. The “real” world is not observed nor is it perceived, according to social constructionists. What is attended to as the “real” is dependent upon the relational
processes of groups in naming, defining and acting it. This is indeed a radical position that undermined the certainty of all research projects, including those from the social constructionist position. This approach also changes the nature of research. The most common reframing is to study the discourses and actions in which people engage and the relational processes in social groups rather than analyzing individual scores on scales measuring traits such as femininity, as empiricists might do, or inner feelings and “experiences” as feminist standpoint researchers might do. Because of the loss of foundations that this position implies and the openness to various possibilities for doing research, the value orientations of the researchers play an important role in what is studied, what terms are used to describe the research, and the political consequences of a particular stance (Hepburn, 2000). These criteria strongly encourage the creation of innovative qualitative methods.

**Defining Gender and Sex: A Performative Perspective**

It is now commonplace in feminist literature in psychology, to see the phrase, “Gender is socially constructed.” Within most texts this means that the sex roles people play in their daily lives are formed and regulated by social conventions. Thus what it means to be a girl is defined culturally, and she “does” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As philosopher Judith Butler (1990) formulates it, one’s “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (pg. 140).

This notion of gender role as an enactment tends to produce a distancing of the qualities of sex or gender from the self. Within this perspective it is more customary to find an emphasis on multiple selves, situated selves, and the temporary blurring of self-other distinctions. This destabilization of the unit of the individual as the “subject” of research challenges traditional research designs. Rather than having substance and stability, the self slips away, only to become realized in encounters. Often social constructionists acknowledge that the people they interview for a study have been co-created through the research process itself (Gergen & Davis, 2003). Because it is possible for a researcher to work within so many constructions of the world, all value positions, from liberal to conservative, are viable; regardless of orientation, feminist postmodern researchers promote feminist ideals within diverse contexts, e.g. within the therapy context, (Hare-Mustin, 1994), health settings (Miles, 1997), and other politically charged venues (Russell, 2000).
Reflexivity as a Facet of Social Constructionist Qualitative Research

An outgrowth of the social constructionist position is an emphasis on reflexivity within research endeavors, although other feminist researchers also emphasize this concern (Morawski, 1994; Naples, 2003). One facet of reflexivity involves researchers reflecting on their constructing capacities; there could be other ways of asking the questions, interpreting the findings, and presenting it to the reader (Gergen, 2001). In some cases, the researcher describes in detail her/his own involvement in the research, what the advantages and limitations of the research design might be, how the words are chosen, what the ethical judgments have been in creating the research and what the researcher hopes will become of the analysis (Sprague, 2005). Certain researchers consider reflexivity to be related to making explicit the power relations in the research process. What advantages the researcher has vis a vis the researched.

Reflexivity is at the core of the qualitative method of autoethnography, in which the researcher uses her/his own stories within a particular situation as a means of bringing something to life. The researcher’s body, in a sense, becomes a seismograph registering the dynamics of a situation. Carolyn Ellis, (1995) for example, wrote about sharing life with her husband, who was dying from emphysema. By writing about her thoughts, feelings, and conversations with her husband in various situations, she clarifies for the reader her grieving process as she vacillates among various voices—sympathetic, self-pitying, angry, kind, loving, lonely, and resigned—within the relational tumult of this phase of her marriage.

A Sampling of Methods within Postmodern/Social Constructionist Research

While there are many possibilities for doing postmodern/social constructionist research, most are variations of methods well-known in the qualitative research realm. In the next section, several methods will be mentioned, with the aim of highlighting the feminist aspects of them.

Ethnography

In ethnographic work, the researcher becomes embedded in the social and physical world of a community that is not her/his own (Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003). Ethnography carries a reflexive aspect in that a researcher becomes intensely aware of one’s own position vis a vis the
others with whom one engages in the project. It is also reflexive in that it is possible to engage with one’s participants about the nature of one’s research, the dilemmas and conflicts of interest that might be posed by the research activities and the ways that these issues become part of the research outcomes (Crossley, 2000). Michelle Fine and her colleagues and students at City University Graduate School in New York have been involved with “critical” feminist ethnography for over two decades. Often they explored the lives of young people who are living on the borders of conventional society (Weis & Fine, 1993; 2000). Their goal has been to support and reveal the public and private spaces where marginalized youth live and their forms of sub-culture. In their approach, the researcher becomes highly integrated into a particular community, and the outcomes reveal this participation directly or indirectly. Much research goes beyond simple reporting of the researcher’s constructions of events to an emphasis on changing the community’s outcomes. Wendy Luttrell (2003), writing about her research with pregnant teens, describes it as “activist” ethnography, “which enables researchers and those who are the subjects of research to change how they see themselves and are seen by others.” (pg. 147). In Luttrell’s research, the girls created a collaborative book in which self-portraits were organized, along with their descriptions of the picture. Luttrell describes how she “curated” the girls’ art forms and stories, and the conversations they had about their transition from girlhood to motherhood. Luttrell’s conclusions are drawn from her extensive interactions with these girls. Eugenia Kaw (2003) drew on data from structured interviews with physicians and patients, as well as medical literature, newspaper articles and medical statistics to study the decision by Asian-American women to undergo cosmetic surgery for the double-eyelid operation or nose bridges. Kaw takes the position that this surgery is encouraged by gender and racial stereotypes in the culture that preferences female Caucasian facial forms.

**Action Research**

For feminist psychologists, action research has played an important role in storying women’s plight in various settings, and in helping to activate new social forms that improve their lives. For example, Niva Piran (2001) studied the students at a highly selective dance school using open forum meetings with the girls over a long period of time. Piran was concerned with the ways the culture of the school had evolved such that these young dancers experienced and perceived their own bodies and those of others in harshly critical ways. Through her encounters
with them Piran was able to help the girls visualize and change their feelings about their own bodies, so that they could transform certain unhealthy practices of teachers and other students. Other feminist researchers who have been influential in participatory action research (PAR) include Lois Weis and Michelle Fine and their colleagues who have studied and attempted to help women prisoners (Fine, et al., 2003). Joan Williams and M. Brinton Lykes, (2003), working with Guatemalan women, have integrated photographic work into their research in efforts at healing following 36 years of civil warfare. Calling their project PhotoVoice, they gave each woman a camera with which to take pictures of their villages and their lives; in their report the researchers discuss their successes, as well as the difficulties in creating positive social change with these women in the face of patriarchal challenges, especially from the women’s family members and husbands. Finally, Geraldine Moane (2006) created a ten week course entitled Liberation Psychology for Women, as part of a certificate in Women’s Studies offered at University College, Dublin. The aim of the research was to transform internalized oppression among Irish women into an externalized energy for political action.

**Discourse Analysis**

Feminist psychologists have been very active in endorsing discursive methods in their research. (Gavey, 1989; 2005; Hollway, 1989; Morgan & Coombes, 1991). At the heart of these research activities for feminists is the creation of a focus of attention on the gendered nature of these socially constructed realities. Nicole Gavey’s “Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape (2005) demonstrates how everyday discourse about heterosexual relations supports the double standard and unequal power relations between men and women that limits women’s choices and creates a cultural “scaffolding” that permits rape. In “I’m 15 and desperate for sex’: ‘Doing ‘and ‘undoing’ desire in letters to a teenage magazine” Sue Jackson (2005) reports on her analysis of letters to advice columns from girls. She describes how the sexual subjectivities of the girls are constituted in the letters and the identification of cultural resources drawn on within them. Promoting a feminist theme, Jackson is critical of the editorial stance of the magazine that both encourages the expression of sexual desire and then acts to suppress it. In a study that highlights feminist issues regarding identity among Asian women living in East London Woollett and colleagues, (1994) included excerpts from interviews with these women, which serve to undermine mainstream cultural psychology’s position that ethnic identity is stable; rather the research illustrates that the dualism between being an “Asian woman” and being
“westernized” should be problematized. Contrary to most methodological streams in psychology, which require a unity of self, this research supports the view that identity may be multiple, malleable and situated.

**Narrative Research**

Another prominent form of feminist research involves explorations of narratives. From the culture’s repository of narrative forms, people learn to find their place in their social groups. As people identify with stories, so do they take on meaning in their lives (Lather & Smithies, 1997)? This is especially relevant to minority and marginalized groups, who tend to be located in stories, without much involvement in the creation of that story. This becomes a feminist issue because women are often auxiliary figures within the quest narrative, the monomyth, which is largely a male-dominated story. My work on popular autobiographies looked at the differences in story forms that apply to women and men. Men’s stories follow the heroic monomyth, and women’s weave various story forms of love and achievement together in a more chaotic manner. Research on narratives of the body also illustrated the differences in import that the physical aspects of identity have for women’s accounts compared to men’s (Gergen, 2001).

**Archival and Institutional Research**

Not all feminist qualitative research is done with the active participation of others. Research can also be rendered with data from historical records, literature, and other cultural artifacts and institutions, as well as governmental agencies (DeVault, 1999; Gergen, 1992). Aida Hurtado, (2000) for example, in “La Cultura Cura: Cultural Spaces for generating Chicana Feminist Consciousness”, studied the operation of a theatre company, and its use of Chicana actresses. Originally organized to promote the integrity and cultural values of the Chicano culture, the role of women had become limited to virgins, whores, or as the feminine macho, often portraying an abstract character, such as Death or the Devil. The analysis by Hurtado emphasized how the women involved in the theatre resisted these classifications and eventually broke the back of the sexist directors.

**Presentational Forms of Feminist Qualitative Research**
The goal of honoring the voices of participants within feminist psychology has encouraged innovations in the presentation of qualitative research. Research need not be limited by specific formats, except for those enforced by outside gatekeepers. The linguistic possibilities for presenting research are great, and there is no ultimate reason why some forms should take precedent over others. This potential for openness has lead to a great deal of creativity among feminist researchers (Gergen, 2001; Luttrell, 2003; Paget, 1990; Squire, 1991). A few examples illustrate the diversity of possibilities that have been produced.

In an exploration of sexual abuse, Karen Fox (1996) created a fictional conversation among a sex abuser in prison for molesting his granddaughter, his daughter, who was also one of his victims, and herself, the interviewer. The conversation is divided into three columns, with quotations from interviews serving as the dialogue. Across the page, the three perspectives are contrasted and compared, with each person expressing a diversity of moods and understandings. The form allows for more insight into the complexities of emotional bonds between abusers and the abused than a more didactic form could yield.

Drama is also a means of conveying feminist qualitative work. Ross Gray and Christina Sinding (2002), who used transcripts from interviews with women with breast cancer and oncologists to create a dramatic script, which they presented in many venues in Canada; they also wrote a book relating their experiences of creating this drama, which included commentary by the actresses, women with metastasized breast cancer. Here the discovery phase, interpretation, and the presentation of research were encapsulated in dramatic form, with audience involvement as part of the performance.

Using another modality for presenting her research, Glenda Russell, (2000) incorporated interview material into music. From research gathered in reaction to Colorado’s vote to limit the civil rights of homosexuals, Russell produced a professional oratorio, called Fire, which was performed by a choir in several concerts. Several performance pieces have been created to explore feminist issues including becoming an aging woman (Gergen, 2001), and developing a social therapy (Holzman & Newman).

**Issues of Ethics in Feminist Qualitative Research**

Ethical considerations are at the core of feminist research (Marecek, 2003). There are many reasons for this. In contrast to most quantitative research, relationships between
researcher and researched are usually of longer duration, are more intimate and friendly, often involve collaboration, affect families and sometimes whole communities, include a high degree of self-disclosure about intimate topics, and seem to promise more relational contact after the research project is ended than may actually be the case. There are also issues of confidentiality that become difficult to handle if, for example, participants are promised anonymity, and yet the nature of their communal involvement makes it difficult to disguise who they are. Because of all of these characteristics of research, feminist psychologists often find themselves deliberating about the “right” thing to do when faced with multiple and conflicting demands.

The Future for Feminist Qualitative Research

The future seems promising for feminist qualitative research. The call for a greater awareness of cultural diversity and issues related to globalization has also enhanced the prominence of qualitative work. Working with international partners, connecting via the internet and only rarely meeting face-to-face, expands the scope of exploration, limits quantitative options, and encourages creative collaborations around qualitative research. Most of all, qualitative research offers wonderful opportunities for exploring interesting topics in creative ways.
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