

Feminist Approaches to Data Collection

Session for Faculty Development Programme on
“Engendering Research with Feminist Research Methods”

organised by

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Research and knowledge creation has been the domain of those in privileged positions

Few decades ago there was little research on women, by women, or on concerns that might question gender norms

This is now challenged by Feminist Research

Feminist Research recognizes the importance of **women's lived experience.**

The aim: to unearth **subjugated knowledge of the marginalized** in particular

Feminist Research therefore
links science or knowledge creation with
feminism, activism and women's everyday lives

How does feminist research or a feminist approach to research differ from research that is gender-sensitive?

Gender-sensitive research tries to capture similarities and differences in experiences of men and women

Feminist research tries to capture the diversity of women's experience, explore and understand gendered manifestations of power and questions the operation of patriarchy or any oppressive power that disadvantages women or any other group of people - MORE CRITICAL

**A feminist approach to research
requires a new feminist lens or feminist perspective**

What does this mean?

There is a need for transformative politics and practice in research – bell hooks

Challenging
power and
hierarchies
about who and
what should we
study
And also the
HOW

Beyond binaries
of male/female
also
acknowledging
that women is
not a
homogenous
category

Awareness
about the
context or
location of the
group that is
being studied
and that of the
researcher

Embracing
pluralism and
intersectionality

Making all labour VISIBLE

Elevating emotion – participants
experience and, perceptions
about that experience are
important

To adopt a Feminist Approach in Research would then mean...

Asking new questions that place women's lives
and those of other marginalized groups at
the centre of social inquiry

Feminist Standpoint Theorists argue:

*Starting off research from women's lives will generate less
partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also
of men's lives and of the whole social order*

- Sandra Harding

Given that background to feminist approach to research, what data collection methods would be most suited?

The **subject** of the research project will determine the data that is required and therefore also the method of data collection.

It is not the use of a particular method or methods which characterizes a researcher or a research project as feminist, but the perspectives that are employed in the use of that/those method(s)

In feminist research we might use quantitative or qualitative data (both or any one)

All data collection methods in social science may be used in feminist research

Quantitative methods are usually described as rational, objective, reliable, replicable, scientific – masculine values

Qualitative methods are seen as soft, subjective, holistic, deep and intuitive - feminine values

This does not necessarily have to be so

A feminist perspective and ethics are necessary

Some data collection methods

Surveys: Information needed from a defined population group or from a large number of sources

Interviews:

- a) Structured (set list of questions)
- b) Semi-structured (interview guide listing a set of issues to be explored)
- c) Unstructured (spontaneous questions guided by conversation)

Observation: to learn how a service or program actually operates

Data collection methods more common in feminist research

Participant observation/Feminist Ethnography:

Observational research conducted over time

Case Studies

Key informant – personal experiences

Sample informant: from whom you want representative data

Life histories/ Oral histories/Narratives: Feminist rewriting of histories. You want to understand particular dynamics or circumstances (either individual or structural) and their development over a life course

Data collection methods more common in feminist research

Focus group discussions:

Various views on a particular topic

In-depth information from a group about a specific issue

Using unconventional sources and doing content analyses of diaries, letters, photographs etc

These tools can explore key questions, change over time or may be used to empower participants (by putting tools in their hands), to remedy power imbalances in the research

The employment of a variety of data collection methods is seen as a strength in feminist research

Other Data Collection Methods

Auto-ethnography: Use of self-reflection to connect personal experience with wider cultural, political, and social concerns

You might also choose to study existing data sources

- Archival material from official or private libraries or archives
- Statistics collected by other agencies

Can men be feminist researchers?

Of course they can.

Feminism is a perspective that goes beyond the binaries of sex. It is about the lens by which one views realities.

However one has to understand and be sensitive to the respondents comfort with a person of the opposite sex just as a researcher (male or female) needs to be sensitive to the respondents comfort with the subject of the research

Are qualitative methods too subjective What about neutrality in feminist research?

Research/knowledge making is a political enterprise

It engages one in an intellectual & interactive process

Neutrality in feminist research is neither possible nor even desirable

Objectivity and value-neutrality might be a myth rather than a reality in research.

Our social location will influence our understanding of reality and to take care of this self reflexivity is important

Donna Haraway, 1988. Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599.

Feminist Standpoint Theorists argue that 'knowledge is socially situated'

1. Our social position and personal identity shapes our understanding of a particular event, process, or thing.
2. There is a real, material world, of which multiple truthful accounts are possible which will always be situated accounts.
3. All knowledge is explicitly partial, located, and yet accountable.

What are some of the hurdles you might face in researching women's lived experiences

1. Locating respondents
2. Women not left alone to be respondent (family member becomes the spokesperson).
3. Subject of study might pose a physical risk to respondent (violence from partner).
4. Cause psychological distress (experiences of assault)
5. Additional concerns in studying a culture different from our own

Important Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- Informed consent
- Maintaining confidentiality, privacy
- Research integrity: Make sure you are not invested in a particular research outcome

Don't

- Cause any harm to participants in the research process

All the best in your research

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