FEMINIST RESEARCH

M96MC
Exploring ‘feminist approaches’

Feminism’s Enlightenment inheritance

Challenges to science and reason

Value of feminist research – research as praxis

Messy feminist approaches in the ‘post’
OUTCOMES:

- Be able to appreciate the epistemological assumptions of feminist research;
- Demonstrate a critical perspective on some of the debates in this area;
- Show an understanding of the difference between approaches and methods;
- Understand the need for and value of feminist research
INTRODUCTION

- Why feminist approaches?
- Why not? Part of ethics and morals of being a researcher
- Approach to research that incorporates other perspectives
- Been leading and groundbreaking in relation to methodology
- ‘Feminist research...consists of no single set of agreed upon research guidelines or methods. Nor have feminists agreed upon one definition of feminist research’ (Maguire, 1987, p. 74)
Research techniques/practices – e.g. Discourse analysis, ethnography, survey, interview (choice of approach)

Theories of how research is conducted – e.g. qualitative or quantitative (approach in action)

Theory of knowledge – (reflection on the outcomes of research)

What makes research ‘feminist’ is the methodology and epistemology, not the method...
POINTS OF VIEW
Spend 5 minutes writing down your thoughts on the following statements. What might it mean to take such perspective? In what ways do you agree or disagree with this point of view? What would it mean for your research process?

1. Men cannot represent the lives of women, nor can they take a feminist perspective

2. Without a concept of 'women', feminist research cannot be emancipatory

3. Doing feminist research means doing qualitative research

4. If we want to interpret women’s worlds, then we necessarily objectify them
ACTIVITY:

- Spend 5 minutes with the person next to you, discussing your initial responses to the statements.

- At either end of the room are signs for agree and disagree. Assuming the space between is a continuum, place yourself somewhere on the scale for each statement.
Enlightenment period from mid-C18th

Belief in rational & fixed self (e.g. psychology’s historical roots in enlightenment thinking of 1850’s), in knowledge as a ‘march of progress’, and in ability to reflect world around us

Humanism views people as agentic, human nature is essential, freedom, and can use reason to discover truth

Both Enlightenment thinking and humanism still dominant around the late C19th and early C20th
FEMINIST SCIENCE

- Enlightenment and humanistic thinking offered concepts such as progress, emancipation and freedom
- ‘Anything you can do, we can do better’
- Has had huge effect on changing social policy and the law, e.g. Marital rape statistics, content analysis of media
CHALLENGING REASON: CAN IT REALLY WORK?
The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house? (Lorde, 1984)

Positivistic, quantitative methods and methodologies are male-centric, male-stream; knowledge produced by white, middle-class, European men

They reproduce dualistic thinking about the nature of knowledge:
- Nature/science
- Irrational/rational
- Body/mind
- Intuition/logic
- Women/men
WHAT IS ‘TRUTH’?

I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

Ursula LeGuin
‘Objective’ science has ‘proven’ that...

- Women have smaller brains, and so shouldn’t be educated
- ‘Hysteria’ (or feminist beliefs!) can be cured by leaching a woman’s genitals
- A woman on her period is more likely to commit homicide
- Scientific knowledge is produced in particular historical settings and upholds certain ideological views of the world; it cannot be objective, nor can it be ‘truthful’ (see Foucault, 2002)
CONSEQUENCES:

- Male defined ways of knowing
- Authorized knowledge
- Expected behavior
- Position in social world

Feeling bad / anxious / guilty (Letherby 2003)
Resistance!
Always battling against
FEMINIST RESEARCH AND ‘POST’ APPROACHES
‘Feminist work isn’t distinct because of having specific methods and methodologies, or even epistemologies. Feminists can be found working within positivist, structuralist and interpretativist paradigms, using randomised control experimentation, ethnography or semiotics. Rather, feminist research is characterised by asking questions in a specific topic area and with a specific emancipatory political agenda’ (Leonard 2001:191)

Feminist concerns:
- To understand the world – to change it
- Trying to better circumstances of a group
- Ethics, politics and power (researcher, beyond..)
- Research process
- Commitment to the research, researched and social transformation
- It’s a calling, a voice, shouting about what moves you
- Sensitivity to difference
- Being careful to how data is re-presented
- Embracing your biasness allows objectivity through reflexivity

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGtF_C_r1HE
What is truth

- Truth is what we look for
- Truth is a structure
- Truth is an illusion

What’s this got to do with feminist research?

- Main truth claim of feminism is that women are oppressed – what happens when that truth is questioned?
- What happens when that truth is questioned by subordinate groups or women?
Massive contradiction in feminist thought:

- What are feminism's aims? What is feminism’s main subject?
- Can equality be sought by reproducing male/female binaries?
- Claiming that ‘woman’ is universal and essential converts discursively constructed facts into norms, difference into deviance.
- Norms e.g. female friendships and focus groups.
- Deviance e.g. self-esteem.
Science and psychology = reductive and pathologizing women
Anne Campbell (1981:36) - deviancy paradigm has produced second rate theories for the second sex

Consequence of theories being set through:

1. a male perspective
2. within the frames of gender binaries. Both of these are connected to social reforms and the preservation of clear distinctions between the sexes.
3. Difference as deviance

Explanations of human behaviour in genetic and/or biological terms = dubious
Analysis of the second sex = based on awkward positions within criminology, genetics and biology etc
‘Historically, women have felt discrepancies between how they felt and experienced the world and the ‘official definition’ of their identity. However, as many writers suggest, the history of women’s resistance is long...This resistance is practical and political as well as academic and intellectual and, indeed, the two are often related’ (Letherby 2003:42)

- 2nd wave feminism located women’s struggle within social structures
- When you know the location, you can then understand how to resist
- Challenging silence through focusing on experience

‘Feminism must begin with experience, it has been argued, since it is only from such a vantage point that it is possible to see the extent to which women’s worlds are organized in ways which differ from men’s’ (Maynard 1994:14)
‘A standpoint is not an empiricist appeal to or by ‘the oppressed’ but a cognitive, psychological, and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the nonessentialist, historically contingent, situated standards of strong objectivity. Such a standpoint is the always fraught but necessary fruit of the practice of oppositional and differential consciousness (Haraway 1997:198-9)
Smith’s knowing society from within

Social worlds are constructed as either male or female

Female experience of these worlds needs to be privileged

Collins’ marginal voices

Hartsock on duality of levels of reality
“Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out...we understood both” (hooks 1984, vii)

- Haraway’s situated knowledge
- Knowledge is partial and situated in social worlds
- View from below avoids ‘god trick’
To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women’s social experiences instead of from the 

**partial** and **pervasive** perspective available from the ‘ruling gender’ experience of men.’

(Harding 1991:185)
Interrogating limits of feminist practice
Issue of a folding-in-on-itself
to not stagnate but to shake up and re-engage
Necessary tensions – fertile ground / new practices

‘By creating new spaces on the edge of the intelligible, projects are put at risk rather than set up for accommodational inclusion or positioned to claim a ‘better’ vantage point. Work is situated as ruined from the start, a symptomatic site of the limits of our knowledge.’

(Lather 2006:6-7)

Better sort of doing needed – a development of different ways of feeling?
ENGAGING SOCIAL SCIENCE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMUOOGYsCrU
Letherby (2003:43) ‘Feminist empiricism is a foundationalist approach which does not critique the norms of science itself but the way in which the scientific method has been practiced’

Outsider position and perspective allowing ‘truer’ account (Letherby 2003)

Account is richer and has more validity as it does not marginalize women’s experiences.

Women’s experience = central part

Analysis of the research process = key feature
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminist Epistemologies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal is political – in the research process, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences but shared focal point of investigating from standpoint of a woman (ie: not the trad. masculinist approach)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical examination of the research process = key feature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researchers personhood = part of research</td>
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<td>Reflexive engagement and enquiry – sounder objectivity (See Harding, Hughes and Letherby,)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not hiding the researchers values or personhood – more objective? Negotiable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues with strong objectivity?</td>
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‘To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see natural and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women’s social experiences instead of from the partial and pervasive perspective available for the ‘ruling gender’ experience of men’ (Harding 1987:185)
Theorizing experience = variety of positions, BUT;

Griffiths (1995) on common threads

1. Values and power – facts not separated from values
2. Situated character knowledge – situated to the person/knower
3. Role of theory – have to engage with theorising
4. Processional character of knowledge – ie: fluid not fixed

(Hughes 2002:155)
FEMINIST RESEARCH (AS) PRAXIS

- Theory in action
- Putting theory into practice
- Mobilizing change
- Contributing to what needs to be transforming
and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 a.m., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead.¹¹

(Lorde, 1984)
ACTIVITY: WHY DO YOU NEED FEMINISM

http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/
SUMMARY

- Looked at very complex concept of what it might mean to do feminist research

- Seen that there is no perfect way; all approaches are critiqued and contested

- But recognizing difference and developing an approach that deals with inequality across class, ethnicity and gender one way forward
YOU SHOULD NOW:

- Be able to appreciate the epistemological assumptions of feminist research;

- Demonstrate a critical perspective on some of the debates in this area;

- Show an understanding of the difference between approaches and methods