Differences between Feminist and Mainstream Approaches to Social Science, Most Notably in Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology and History

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Abstract - It is widely accepted among feminists that feminism implies a distinctive approach to inquiry. And for some this is not just a matter of the grounds on which topics are selected for investigation, or even of the theoretical ideas that are treated as relevant. Rather, feminism is taken to carry distinctive methodological and epistemological implications (Hammersley, 1995: 45). In this paper I want to assess the arguments for a distinctively feminist methodology. My first task, though, is to provide some detail about what this is taken to entail. There are, of course, important differences among feminists who have written on this topic, and in the course of the discussion I will highlight some of these. I certainly do not want to suggest that what I am assessing is a single position, nor am I claiming to represent the basis on which most feminists actually do research. My main concern here is solely with feminist writing about methodology.

Keywords: feminism, methodology, epistemology, feminists research.
INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, feminist scholars have become increasingly more reflective with regard to the research process: in addition to undertaking studies related to women and gender, they have offered numerous perspectives on the nature of feminist research itself. More specifically, in their efforts to identify new questions – or to approach traditional topics in novel ways – they have outlined a range of differences between feminist and mainstream approaches to social science, most notably in sociology, political science, anthropology, and history. [...] At the same time, however, many also argue that there is a common feminist methodology, in the sense that feminists share a similar philosophy about the means and ends of social investigation, even when they employ a wide range of research tools. (Krook, 2007: 2)

FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

Feminists writing on research methods have thought extensively about what constitutes a feminist research project. Although many assume that feminist research involves female scholars writing on issues of women and gender, most do not limit their scope to these kinds of studies. Rather, they focus on how the means and ends of the research process might be made more or less ‘feminist.’ Despite variations in their arguments, they generally identify the same key features, which include paying attention to the importance of gender as a central element of social life, challenging the norm of objectivity to incorporate subjectivity into research, avoiding the exploitation of women as goals that are usually informed by extensive reflexivity throughout the research process, subjects and objects of knowledge, and empowering women through social research. As these goals are sufficiently broad, they argue, many different research techniques may be employed in a manner consistent with feminist values. Indeed, many note, a particular strength of feminist research is its largely ‘problem-driven’ nature: feminists as a group experiment with various types of methods when seeking to answer certain types of questions, and as individuals select different methods as they take on new research topics. (Krook, 2007: 5)

[...] scholars argue that feminists may employ many different research techniques in their quest for evidence (=no feminist methods), but nonetheless share a common core approach in their research (=a shared feminist methodology). This feminist methodology, they propose, “is distinctive [from mainstream research] to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics, and ethics and is grounded in women’s experience.” (Krook, 2007: 6)

Despite variations in their arguments, they generally identify the same key features, which include paying attention to the importance of gender as a central element of social life, challenging the norm of objectivity to incorporate subjectivity into research, avoiding the exploitation of women as goals that are usually informed by extensive reflexivity throughout the research process, subjects and objects of knowledge, and empowering women through social research. As these goals are sufficiently broad, they argue, many different research techniques may be employed in a manner consistent with feminist values. Indeed, many note, a particular strength of feminist research is its largely ‘problem-driven’ nature: feminists work as a group experiment with various types of methods when seeking to answer certain types of questions, and as individuals select different methods as they take on new research topics. For this reason, they insist that feminist work can and should utilize both quantitative and qualitative techniques, even though many associate qualitative methods more closely with feminist research. (Krook, 2007: 5)

At a practical level, feminists use many of the same methods as other researchers, but adapt them in ways that make them more consistent with feminist concerns. Although relatively few of these scholars reflect explicitly on their methods and methodologies, many experiment with existing techniques as they try to answer specific research questions. In many instances, this involves adjusting the content and implementation of particular methods to incorporate gender, privilege subjectivity, avoid exploitation, and empower women. In the use of interview techniques, for example, feminists have often been careful to involve research subjects in the construction of data about their lives. In the process, they have become conscious of particular challenges inherent in generating feminist insights – or simply remaining consistent with feminist goals – when interviewing across age, race, class, gender, and political differences. (Krook, 2007: 7)

Feminists are critical about the way the sociological researches gather data. Oakley (1981) for example argued that a typical non-structured interview would not include pre-coded questions; it however cannot preclude the emotional detachment of researcher from those being researched and in controlling the situation. The researcher acts as a ‘sponge’ soaking up of information, whereas the subjects are ‘passive givers of information’ (Maynard, 1994:15).

The feminists reject this power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. They have argued that the research process should not be mere a means of collecting data; it should rather be a mean of sharing information with the personal involvement of the researcher in the research setting. Hammersley (1992:190) therefore suggested that feminists reject hierarchy on three points. First on the ethical grounds which means that feminist consider hierarchical relationship in the research process as unethical. It is believed that only non-hierarchical relationship can best reveal the true realities of women’s lives. Second point is on methodology.

It is feminist believe that the truth can only be discovered through establishing authentic relationships with the research participants. Feminist believe that structured hierarchical relationship will distort the data gathering process. And finally, if the research is to be effective in consciousness-raising, then it is important to engage the respondents into the research process (Hammersley, 1992).
Furthermore, Stanley and Wise (1983) also rejected the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the research participants and argued that it treat people as mere research objects available to the researcher to conduct research. Morally, the treatment of people as objects (research object or sex object) is unjustifiable.

Feminist are concerned about ensuring the accuracy of the information that depicts the lives and experiences of women. It is suggested that the researcher is required to take the finalized information back to the research participants for its verification because they are the real owner and experts of their personal life experiences. It is a known fact that within the traditional social science researches, the whole research process is owned by the researcher. Feminist research tries to restructure and remove the inequalities with respect to the notion of ownership of knowledge produced in the research process (Wolf, 1996).

Feminist research tries to keep the authenticity and originality of the way participants give meaning to their life experiences which is a part of the efforts for changing the power inequalities in feminist research. Hammersley (1992) argued that it is difficult to avoid the hierarchical relationship in the research process.

Practically it is impossible for the researcher to interview anyone and whenever he wants. There has to be some control over some part of the research process. Research is actually a very small and marginalized part of people’s lives. In addition, he stated that there are a number of women holding powerful positions and feminists cannot avoid hierarchical relationships in dealing with them (Hussain & Asad, 2007: 5).

Feminists argue that research for the sake of research is insufficient. The change of status quo must be the starting point of the scientific inquiry (Mies, 1983). Instead of being a tool to uphold the dominant masculine views of the world, feminist believe that research must serve the interests of women. This is not to suggest that feminist research must be an abstract free from proper investigation but instead must have the commitment for bringing social change.

Feminist research are not meant for simply seeking and presenting the data and information, it is rather aims to provide recommendations for policy change with the researcher being a part of the collective efforts involved in political activity. Therefore, feminist research is not about women but research for women to be used in changing their sexist society. The commitment of the feminist research is based on the underlying motivation that research and action cannot be separated in the research process.

In part, a commitment to bring societal changes entails a commitment to the research participants. The active involvement of women in the research process provide them opportunity and space to pose questions and critically assess their personal life experiences. It also helps in identification of the connections and links between events in their lives and connecting them to the social world. The identification and understanding of personal experience and connecting them with the social relations is important because it facilitate the analysis of personal experiences and transformation. The best way of empowering women is education and knowledge about their issues and the assertion that our personal life experiences are just a part of the larger social structure (Hussain & Asad, 2007: 5).

CONCLUSION

Hammersley (1992) argued that for many feminists, the primary goal of research is not the production of valid knowledge. For them, emancipation of women is more important to be achieved through the research process. In addition, Mies (1983) stated that the research which until now has been used as instrument for the dominant and the legitimatization of elite powers, must now serve the interests of the exploited and dominated groups, especially women.

Hammersley (1992) criticized the notion that empowerment of women should be the sole goal of feminist research. He argued that in today’s world, there are various sources of oppression like race, ethnicity, sexuality and class; it is therefore extremely difficult to build a single model of oppression. For example how can we reduce racial oppression to class oppression? Moreover, we will find many people, who would be classified both as oppressed and oppressors at the same time. For example, a black woman living in a Western society would be classified as one of the oppressors when the focus is on international exploitation of different societies (Hammersley, 1992).

Feminist research is concerned with studying the issues facing women at its starting point. It seeks to search and explore the social dynamics and relationships in patriarchal society from women’s perspective. Feminist research is not just adding women to the research equation or engaging women as researchers. Feminist research takes into account women’s viewpoint as the base of the research. Such research proceeds from a standpoint that values women’s experience, needs and ideas of the social world. Feminist research also aims at bringing changes and eliminating gender imbalances in the world. It would be wrong to suggest that feminist researchers consider feminist research as one unified research methodology. There is no agreement on what feminist research is and should be. Feminist researchers have put forward diverse methods which help in facilitating diverse knowledge about social phenomenon. Feminist reject objectivity and talk about subjectivity and the partial truth of the social world.

REFERENCES


