
Feminist Methods in Social Research

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with the assistance of

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Conclusions

The emphasis on diversity in approaches to knowledge must carry with it *the responsibility for offering modes of integration* of the results of such inquiries.¹

Psychologist Charlene Depner's opening remark stresses the importance of integration for studies such as this book that focus on "diversity in approaches to knowledge." But can one integrate and still reflect variety and disagreement? Bettina Aptheker's *Tapestries of Life* provides an answer:

The point . . . is not to find the lowest common denominator . . . not so much to unite as to congeal—each element retaining its integrity and value, stuck together for a particular purpose, each of us using our skills to shift and relate, adjust and integrate.²

I start with the definition I presented in the first chapter, that feminist methodology is the sum of feminist research methods. This concluding chapter offers a meta-induction, i.e., an inductive definition of feminist methodology that arises from the collection of the previous chapters, just as each chapter offered an inductive analysis of a particular method.

Using this approach, I have identified ten themes as follows:

1. Feminism is a perspective, not a research method.
2. Feminists use a multiplicity of research methods.
3. Feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of nonfeminist scholarship.
4. Feminist research is guided by feminist theory.
5. Feminist research may be transdisciplinary.
6. Feminist research aims to create social change.
7. Feminist research strives to represent human diversity.
8. Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person.
9. Feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the people studied (in interactive research).
10. Feminist research frequently defines a special relation with the reader.

Although I focus on these themes, I also discuss exceptions and controversies in this chapter. In this way I hope to illustrate the dialectical process of feminist research whereby former solutions become current problems.³ These controversies

suggest that feminist researchers develop ideas by criticizing the status quo, then criticize the critique, then criticize that critique, or search for a synthesis that will itself be criticized.⁴ To write a conflict-free meta-induction would be artificial and inconsistent, just as each chapter contained many dilemmas, contradictions and controversies.

Another writer whose ideas I turned to in preparing this conclusion is Belgian-American classicist and women's studies scholar, Andrée Collard. Her posthumous book, *Rape of the Wild*, offers a definition of the word "ecology" that serves as a metaphor for the relation among the parts of this chapter.

Ecology is woman-based almost by definition. Eco means house, logos means word, speech, thought. Thus ecology is the language of the house. Defined more formally, ecology is the study of the interconnectedness between all organisms and their surroundings—the house.⁵

In the context of feminist research methodology, "ecology" suggests that feminist research is housed in various contexts. Most feminist researchers acknowledge that they are housed in particular academic disciplines and theories, and in criticism of the disciplines.⁶ They are likewise connected to feminist scholarship and to the women's movement, and they live in the house of their body and personal relationships. After reading Andrée Collard's book, I came to see that what I had previously thought was separate items, was actually an ecological system of people, institutions, and ideas, connected to each other in complex ways.

Feminism Is a Perspective, Not a Method

The materials covered in the preceding chapters suggest that feminist researchers do not consider feminism to be a method. Rather they consider it to be a perspective on an existing method in a given field of inquiry or a perspective that can be used to develop an innovative method. The fact that there are multiple definitions of feminism means that there are multiple feminist perspectives on social research methods. One shared radical tenet underlying feminist research is that women's lives are important. Feminist researchers do not cynically "put" women into their scholarship so as to avoid appearing sexist. Rather, for feminist researchers females are worth examining as individuals and as people whose experience is interwoven with other women. In other words, feminists are interested in women as individuals and as a social category.

An exception to the idea of feminism being a perspective rather than a method is in an essay by Susan Leigh Star who writes:

feminism is, in essence, a *method*—a method of strategic heresy—a method for understanding, from a marginal or boundary-dwelling perspective, one's *own* participation in socially constructed realities, both politically and personally, both socially and cognitively. . . . feminism, viewed methodologically, is an emergent scientific method—one which begins with the death of the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy and which involves questioning the very bases of socialization and perception.⁷

Although she calls feminism a method, I believe she actually is referring to a perspective. If this is so, her statement helps define an important property of feminist perspectives on research. Her description of "strategic heresy" coincides with Catharine MacKinnon's "rational skepticism of handed-down doctrine,"⁸ Marge DeVault's "strategic imprecision,"⁹ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza's "hermeneutics of suspicion,"¹⁰ Judith Fetterley's "resistant reading,"¹¹ Celia Kitzinger's "resisting the discipline,"¹² and my own discussion of "feminist distrust."¹³ These terms refer to cognitive/emotional frameworks or *attitudes*, rather than to a set of guidelines for conducting research. Susan Star writes that "heresy is a generic term, meaning that which differs cognitively from the central assumptions of a given society or system." To adopt the perspective of strategic heresy is to engage in deliberate cognitive deviance. To be a heretic is to be purposively different. In her view, feminism is

historically heretical, challenging the prevailing power structures and assumptions of androcentrism in science and society; feminism is also processually, directionally heretical. . . . "strategic" indicates that this cognitive difference is not simply de facto or arbitrary, but that there is a direction, a strategy, a self-consciousness, which emerges both against the forms of control of the dominant society and from the heretical vision of the possible.¹⁴

Heresy is a religious concept. It implies that nonfeminist scholarship is a religion with rituals, priests, taboos, and canons.

Criticizing this idea, sociologist Ellen Stone tries to create a different feminist perspective for research, an alternative to distrust, heresy, imprecision, and suspicion. Following a dialectic model, she is working on "feminist belief." In her view, we need to operate with *both* feminist distrust and feminist belief, a more complex perspective:

We need a different stance in relation to the voices of subordinated cultures—one I call, for the moment, "feminist belief." Feminist belief means putting aside our conditioned responses and allowing ourselves to experience total receptivity to "the other." It means before subjecting previously silenced voices to our critical faculties, we need to take them in to find out how they resonate and what their truth might mean for us.¹⁵

Several of the projects reviewed in the previous chapters wavered between distrust and belief, an important tension in feminist research methods. Belief is the attitude of the oral historian who wants to "give voice to the voiceless" and the interviewer who believes the interviewee. For example, white U.S. sociologist Kathleen McCourt studied working-class women because they "have been without organized voice and . . . have been absent from the consideration of those who make public and corporate policy."¹⁶ When she found that many of these women were prejudiced against blacks, however, her distrust was invoked. Her book struggles with the tension between the two as she attempts to coordinate material about class, race, and gender.

Feminist social research—whether conducted from a position of distrust, belief, or a tension between them—is research that requires a method supplied by the disciplines (e.g., experimentation, ethnography, survey research, content analysis)

or created by the researcher (e.g., drama, genealogy, group diaries). That method is not supplied by feminism itself. The researcher has to learn the disciplinary methods, rules of logic, statistical procedures, procedures for "writing up" research projects, and whatever else is relevant to the field in which she wishes to work. She may learn them only to criticize them, but she has to learn them nonetheless. My chapter on action research referred to Liz Stanley and Sue Wise's analysis of Nancy Kleiber and Linda Light's work. Their analysis is a good example of this point. They write that Kleiber and Light rejected objectivity without rejecting "basic standards" of research; they utilized "very traditional" methods but formulated a new role for "the researched" as recipients and users of feminist research.¹⁷

Feminism supplies the perspective and the disciplines supply the method. The feminist researcher exists at their intersection—feeling like she has a second shift or double burden, or feeling her research will benefit from the tension. Her feminist perspective is continuously elaborated in the light of a changing world and accumulating feminist scholarship. Feminist research, thus, is grounded in two worlds—the world of the discipline, academy, or funder, and the world of feminist scholarship. This two-world position is another reason that feminist researchers have to operate both with distrust and belief, or as discussed in the chapter on surveys, with dual vision.

Feminists Use a Multiplicity of Research Methods

The materials analyzed in this book demonstrate that social research has many feminist voices. Clearly, there is no single "feminist way" to do research. There is little "methodological elitism" or definition of "methodological correctness" in feminist research. Rather there is a lot of individual creativity and variety. There is even creativity about the labels feminist researchers apply to their research projects, a characteristic particularly prominent in interviewing and oral history research.

Feminists demonstrate creativity in the choice of metaphors to characterize research—everything from science to journey to play. Feminist research is amoeba-like; it goes everywhere, in every direction. It reaches into all the disciplines and uses all the methods, sometimes singly and sometimes in combinations. The amoeba is fed by the women's movement. The women's movement, in turn, is fed by women's outrage and hope.

In certain cases, feminist researchers adopt the methods of their discipline without any major modification. They use a discipline for its power, turning its power to feminist ends. In feminist experimental research, for example, although feminist psychologists voiced a great deal of self-criticism, there was little actual modification of experimental design except in terms of the sex of the subjects and the definition of comparison groups. In other instances, feminist researchers found that a method must be modified to meet the demands of feminist research. An example was Vicky Randall's case¹⁸ of using unconventional data about women's political participation in order to undermine the system of male dominance (de-

scribed in the chapter on cross-cultural research). In other instances, researchers confront major challenges in the work they want to do, and respond by creating what they experience as "original methods" or effective "action research." To develop "original" methods, the feminist researcher needs to free her imagination as she strives to find methods that meet her research questions.

Unfortunately, essays about feminist methodology do not always reflect the multiplicity of feminist research methods, and thus sometimes are at odds with what feminist researchers actually do.¹⁹ Feminist researchers adopt strict conventional methods when they want to utilize "the most rigorous, scientifically sound methodology,"²⁰ as Diana Russell and Ronnie Steinberg explained. They modify conventional methods when they want to introduce specific feminist elements, such as in the work of Ann Oakley, Meredith Gould, and Sheryl Ruzek. And they create innovative methods if they find conventional methods to be inadequate, as in the work of Jane Addams, Ximena Bunster, Kathleen Barry, Frances Kellor, Patti Lather, Liz Stanley, and others.

Since feminism is a large movement without official leaders,²¹ it is not surprising that we lack a single definition of how to do feminist research. In fact, since we value working in all the disciplines and using all the methods, there has been interest in expanding the feminist reach as much as possible, not in narrowing it. We are likely to protest if any particular method receives short shrift in the name of feminism. This demand for openness led U.S. sociologists Nancy Chodorow and Barrie Thorne to protest what they saw as the potentially narrow editorial position of the journal *Gender & Society*. They wrote that they were "troubled by a tendency in feminist sociology . . . to narrow our methods and theories."²² In response, the editor reaffirmed a pluralist approach.

The emphasis on multiplicity has revived less frequently used social research methods, such as oral history, case studies, and content analysis. Because feminists value inclusiveness more than orthodoxy, we allow room for creativity in all aspects of the research process, including terminology. Even among users of one particular method, there is a variety of approaches, which in turn leads to controversy, as seen in discussions about self-disclosure in interviewing.

This emphasis on inclusiveness in feminist research methods has been productive and has contributed to what Jessie Bernard calls the Female Renaissance or Feminist Enlightenment.²³ Clearly, the empowering impact of the women's movement has led to a massive outpouring of scholarly feminist literature and to the creation of new vehicles for the publication of feminist research. At the same time the United Nations Decade for Women contributed to global consciousness-raising, which fostered responsibility for producing knowledge. Similarly, nineteenth-century U.S. women's protest against discrimination in higher education had an impact on social research. In that case, as we have seen, women initiated the use of interviews, social surveys, and statistics to challenge and invalidate misperceptions about women. The current Feminist Renaissance is rooted in this earlier period.²⁴

Multiplicity of methods allows us to study the greatest possible range of subject matters and reach a broad set of goals. Feminist interview and oral history research enable us to hear women's experiences; feminist case studies, cross-cultural

research, and ethnography let us understand women in their contexts; feminist surveys allow us to understand variations within and among populations; and feminist experiments make it possible to measure behaviors and attitudes without contextual distractions, to mention only a few.

My finding of methodological multiplicity coincides with several scholars' belief that there have been stages of feminist scholarship.²⁵ I agree with people such as Gerda Lerner and Cheri Register who write that multiplicity is the hallmark of the current stage, which Cheri Register calls "stage 4." Using literary studies as her example, she writes that in the first stage, we insisted that "there had been great female writers, naming the tokens the critical establishment had already selected." In the second stage, "we looked for pejorative images of women in men's literature and for proof of victimization in women's." In the third stage, "we sought out writers who were socially conscious and angry." And now in the fourth stage, "we tolerate multiple feminist readings of a single work, allowing them all some claim to ideological validity."²⁶

Revising Cheri Register's model, I suggest that we are accumulating stages rather than leaving any behind. This is an important distinction, because "stage theories" imply that the present is better than the past, an implication I wish to avoid. Stage theories inadvertently downplay the possibility that people in past generations carried out what people today believe they are inventing. They also create a false homogeneity to describe the work of a given historic period. I found instead that *all* the stages exist simultaneously, and that a woman may go through multiple stages even while working on a single project.

Elaine Hobby wrote about this experience in her work on a book of English women's writings (1649–88):

When I started this project, in 1979, I "simply" wanted to find out about forgotten women writers, because studying English literature had meant almost solely studying men's writing. I just wanted to know what was there, and wanted to share what I discovered with other women. . . . As the work continued, my perspective shifted. . . . When I began this study, I was working on "forgotten women." By time it was finished, I was concerned with the problem of what happens to subordinate groups living under reactionary regimes, and what happens to radicals when they lose their vision, their sense of purpose.²⁷

Just as Elaine Hobby developed different feminist approaches as her project evolved, so too, I found that individual feminist researchers demonstrated different perspectives in various projects. Some people are competent in numerous methods and utilize different feminist perspectives in each project. Valuing multiplicity also underpins the use of multiple methods in a single project.

Multiplicity of perspectives is not a new characteristic of feminist research. Feminists have long done research without consensus.²⁸ Over time, we have simply exhibited increasing diversity. For this reason, we have fewer guidelines for conducting feminist research than for avoiding sexist methods. My overview of feminist research coincides with a similar statement by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern:

Much feminist discourse is constructed in a plural way. Arguments are juxtaposed, many voices solicited, in the way that feminists speak about their own

scholarship. There are no central texts, no definitive techniques; the deliberate transdisciplinary enterprise plays with context. Perspectives from different disciplines are held to illumine one another; historical or literary or anthropological insights are juxtaposed by writers at once conscious of the different contexts of these disciplines and refusing to take any single context as an organizing frame.²⁹

Because of this disdain for "central texts" or "definitive techniques," discussions of feminist research methods usually do not rely on exemplars.³⁰ More important is the critique from which research arose in the first place. Perhaps this is why we so frequently reprint articles critical of mainstream methods.

Feminist research's multiplicity does not make it idiosyncratic. On the contrary, it is strikingly cumulative. Research projects build on each other in order to obtain increasingly accurate, imaginative, and useful answers to persistent problems. Theories developed in one country are explored in another. Feminists do case histories to investigate exceptions or key events that other feminist researchers have delineated. Thus the pronounced multiplicity of feminist research includes our looking to each other for concepts, research designs, theories, and inspiration.

Feminist research voices are not free-standing. Rather they are rooted in and draw on many mainstream and critical theoretical traditions.³¹ For example, anthropologist Gayle Rubin connects feminist research to Marxist theory,³² Nancy Chodorow develops feminist research from object relations theory,³³ Louise Levesque-Lopman from phenomenology,³⁴ Zillah Eisenstein from postpositivism,³⁵ Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill from symbolic interactionism,³⁶ Susan Volentine and Stanley Brodsky from "personal construct" theory,³⁷ Sarah Fenstermaker Berk from the New Home Economics,³⁸ Laura Olson from economic and gerontological theory,³⁹ Wendy McKenna and Sarah Kessler from ethnomethodological theory,⁴⁰ and so on.

Just as is true with researchers who are not feminist, feminist researchers use theory in three different relations to data: to explain data, to generate theory, and to test theory. Psychologists Abigail Stewart and David Winter, for example, studied the causes of female oppression (they use the term "suppression") by applying "psychological techniques of data analysis . . . to broader fields of inquiry," thereby "answering theoretical controversy."⁴¹ Feminist researchers frequently do case studies to test theory or use ethnographic research methods to generate theory. Feminist political science research deals with theories of citizen participation, and feminist psychology with theories of psychosocial or moral development. Theories that originate in the disciplines constitute one of the ecological systems in which feminist research lives. Feminist researchers cleverly devise ways of combining aspects of mainstream theory in a larger feminist framework. Feminist research, I believe, contributes to the disciplines, draws from the disciplines, and reacts against the disciplines in terms of data, methods, and theory.

I do not want to paint an overly rosy picture, however. The overwhelming multiplicity of feminist research approaches may still silence voices on the margins. Despite the fact that we may be witnessing a Female Renaissance, most women are still "excluded from the production of forms of thought, images and

symbols in which their experience and social relations are expressed and ordered.”⁴² Moreover, the most innovative voices of feminist research are probably hampered by journal and book editors, and by constraints of space, time, money, and work. It is possible that the truly radical voices are driven out of the academy because, as Jo Freeman wrote, “[The academic] world does not look favorably upon serious dissidents from the status quo—especially if such dissidents are brash enough to live their beliefs (as feminism requires).”⁴³

While Jo Freeman is undoubtedly correct, it is also true that the tenure system protects some women who are “not looked upon favorably.” This feature of university organization protects radical voices if they have passed over the tenure hurdle in the first place. One of the important objectives of U.S. feminist activities of the previous generation was to enable the current generation to jump over that hurdle. The ability of contemporary lesbian and straight, radical and liberal, black and white, old and young feminists to speak, write, and teach is a gift from our foremothers,⁴⁴ not simply a reflection of our individual talents or current policies.

Ongoing Criticism of Nonfeminist Scholarship

Despite this multiplicity, feminism is not open to everything. Rather, since feminist researchers are critics, we constantly are on the look-out for what we perceive to be nonfeminist consciousness. “Feminist distrust” prevents us from accepting uncritically the conventions of any academic discipline. Sometimes, when we do not criticize mainstream methods, we explain why this is so, pointing out that in order to create policy changes we must use the most widely accepted definition of scientific method. Thus in the chapter on experiments I found that feminist psychologists criticized the method, but also defended it for its potential to create policies beneficial to women.

The materials in this book demonstrate that over time we have *not* lost interest in uncovering patriarchal bias in social science. With freshness and urgency current students and long-established scholars continue to criticize the influence of patriarchy on social research. Studying women’s experience in social context provides feminist researchers with a new perspective on information derived from the study of men, the male world or androcentric research. Sociologist Sharon Mast, for example, reports on “discussions of the methodology appropriate to feminist research . . . in New Zealand journals and professional meetings”⁴⁵ in the last five years. Having discovered that the material we once relied on is not sufficiently nourishing, we have turned to feminist scholarship to satisfy our hunger for knowledge.

Around the globe we continue to work on questions raised more than two decades ago concerning the relation between feminism and social research. We continue to write essays about the possible affinity between gender and research methods. We continue to discover ways in which previously gathered information has been distorted by androcentrism. And we continue to identify topics that have been male-centered and need to be rethought in terms of women’s experiences.

This rethinking views all social, psychological, and economic phenomena as gendered and embedded in power relations.

There is no reason to expect that this work of "undistorting" will wane, given the vast feminist project to reevaluate and reform knowledge. Rather, the opposite is true: the greater the development of feminist consciousness, the greater the ability to detect problems of sexism. Improvement in communication technology and the steady flow of feminists into research positions increase the scope and volume of feminist research.

I do not wish to give the impression, however, that the continuing critique always leads to neat resolutions. Feminist researchers have also identified problems in conventional frameworks without being able to rectify them. Some examples are the problem of defining a woman's social class independent of her husband's, if she is married,⁴⁶ naming relations to children for the purpose of studying lesbian family life, naming women's community activity as a form of political participation although it may be outside conventional political party structures,⁴⁷ defining historical periods to reflect women's lives,⁴⁸ and developing a concept of career that fits women's work experience. A recent book by Helena Lopata, Cheryl Miller, and Debra Barnewolt illustrates this point. In a study of careers, their finding that the women's definition was sharply at variance with "what even disagreeing sociologists have in mind" led them to use "the concept of career as understood by the women in the sample."⁴⁹

Much feminist research claims to name new topics, to examine the invisible, to study the unstudied, and to ask why it had been ignored. Carolyn Sachs is one of many researchers who expressed concern that "facts are so often overlooked," in her case, facts about women farmers.⁵⁰ Similarly, Jean Reith Schroedel "demanded to know where the working-class women were in literature."⁵¹ Since she did not receive a satisfactory answer, she produced an oral history collection. In the same spirit, Ellen Stone and I compiled a reader with the title *Looking at Invisible Women: An Exercise in Feminist Pedagogy*, based on the work of undergraduates who studied "invisible" female sociologists. Working together, we are developing a feminist perspective on the history of sociology⁵² that I call the "sociology of the lack of knowledge." This perspective contrasts with the conventional "sociology of knowledge," which studies how knowledge, information, science, and scholarship reflect the social class position or other interests of its producers. A "sociology of the lack of knowledge" examines how and why knowledge is not produced, is obliterated, or is not incorporated into a canon. In my view, feminist researchers have made an enormous contribution to "the sociology of the lack of knowledge." We have demonstrated how certain people are ignored, their words discounted, and their place in history overlooked. We have shown how certain things are not studied and other things are not even named.

Making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men—all continue to be elements of feminist research. Looking at the world through women's eyes and seeing how the lack of knowledge is constructed are themes running through

feminist research. They reflect the fact that feminist research is grounded both in the disciplines and in a critique of them.

Feminist Research Is Guided by Feminist Theory

Empirical feminist research is guided by feminist theory, and sometimes by critical and mainstream disciplinary theory as mentioned above. For example, Linda Valli's study of women's work and education, as described in the chapter on feminist ethnography,⁵³ combines disciplinary and feminist theories. She draws on sociological, economic, and psychological literatures concerning stratification, education, and remunerated labor, and on feminist theory about the definition of work, access to work, and the relation between work, gender, and family. Feminist researchers almost always utilize feminist theory to frame questions and interpret their data. Frequently, in feminist research, gender or femaleness is the variable and power/experience/action the relation under investigation.⁵⁴ Feminist social research utilizes feminist theory in part because other theoretical traditions ignore or downplay the interaction of gender and power. Some feminist researchers write that data in feminist research projects *must be* explained by feminist theory.

British sociologist Sylvia Walby and U.S. sociologist Rosabeth Kanter find feminist theory essential because mainstream sociology minimizes gender relations in favor of class.⁵⁵ Feminist research concerning incest, to take another example, frames questions in terms of the gender and power of offenders and victims. In contrast, mainstream literature frames its questions in terms of sexuality, deviance, or mental illness. At the conclusion of their study of incest, for example, Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman wrote that "a frankly feminist perspective [male supremacy/female oppression] offers the best explanation of the existing data," because otherwise one cannot understand "why the vast majority of perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and fathers) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters, and daughters) are female." Only a feminist analysis can explain

why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement, or why the recent apologists for incest have been popular men's magazines and the closely allied, all-male Institute for Sex Research.⁵⁶

Similarly, sociologist Terry Arendell wrote forcefully about the necessity of utilizing feminist theory to understand data concerning divorce because "divorce is a socially structured experience that reflects the gender-based organization of our society, with all its related inequities."⁵⁷ Using feminist theory, feminist researchers attempt to demonstrate the reach of the political into areas typically assumed to be personal, in addition to areas always thought of as political. A feminist

perspective means being able to see and analyze gender politics and gender conflict.

Openness to Being Transdisciplinary

In 1978 sociologist Judith Long wrote that feminist scholarship was always interdisciplinary.⁵⁸ Four years later psychologist Carolyn Sherif argued that when feminist methodology emerged, it would be cross-disciplinary. She predicted we would use the term "feminist methodology" when we "recognize the need for cross-disciplinary inquiry and the coordination of findings from historical, sociocultural, political, economic, sociopsychological, and bio-psychological analyses in the study of specific problems of human experience and action."⁵⁹

Whether feminist research always has been, is currently, or will be cross-disciplinary seems less important than the fact of an affinity between feminist research and cross-disciplinary work. Feminist research thus not only stretches methodological norms, it also reaches across disciplinary boundaries. As a post-modern phenomenon, it blurs genres by blurring disciplines.⁶⁰ It draws on ideas in different disciplines or as U.S. sociologist Mary Ann Campbell put it, it "subsumes a discipline,"⁶¹ rather than the other way around. Psychologist Carol Nagy Jacklin is one of many who enthusiastically endorses cross-disciplinary work. She supports "truly interdisciplinary exchange" and real controversy as "a new academic 'voice,' a break from the male-dominated tradition of confrontational debate."⁶² Sometimes feminist research considers its only true home to be the inter- or transdisciplinary field of women's studies.

Feminists seem particularly drawn to work on the borders of, and outside, their fields. As "connected knowers," we live in two worlds and find ways of bridging or blending disciplines.⁶³ Feminists seem not to feel alienated from fields other than the one(s) in which we have been educated. Sociologist Marcia Westkott, for example, studied the writings of a psychoanalyst [Karen Horney] "to develop a social psychology of women,"⁶⁴ while Nancy Chodorow used psychoanalytic theory to develop a new conception of early childhood gender identification. Sociologist Sondra Farganis analyzed a work of fiction—Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*⁶⁵—and Kathleen Barry, Mary Jo Deegan, Karen Hansen, Michael R. Hill, Judith Long, and I, among many others, have reached from sociology into feminist biography and history. Liz Stanley even insists that feminism *requires* that we move from sociology into history in order to understand and "act upon our present."⁶⁶ Other feminist sociologists have worked in literary criticism, philosophy, and legal studies. The ability to connect different disciplines may also reflect the general sense of connectedness that Carol Gilligan found to be the hallmark of female moral reasoning.⁶⁷ As Carolyn Sherif predicted, venturing beyond one's formal discipline has indeed become a hallmark of much feminist research. Being open to a cross-disciplinary framework does not mean, however, that *all* feminist research has been, is, or will be cross-disciplinary.

Given this openness to other disciplines, I find it surprising that few feminist researchers seem to know much about women of the past who have contributed to

their own disciplines. In my search for feminist research literature, I found little acknowledgment of the continuity between the work of nineteenth-century feminist social scientists and of the current period. I hope my efforts raise the historical consciousness of feminist researchers concerning their disciplines.

The Effort to Create Social Change

In addition to the connection with theory, much feminist research is connected to social change and social policy questions. In *Good and Mad Women*, for example, Australian historian Jill Matthews proposes "to understand the lives of Australian women in order that we might change our condition of subordination."⁶⁸ Even when a feminist conducts so-called basic research she might conclude with suggestions about how readers can use the findings. Explicit policy recommendations are typical in feminist research. For example, sociologist Barbara Reskin concluded a study of the continuing wage gap between women and men by asking "how can we bring about change?" and answering "increasing the costs men pay to maintain the status quo or rewarding men for dividing resources more equitably may reduce their resistance."⁶⁹ The international feminist community remains concerned that social research both contribute to the welfare of women and contribute to knowledge. This is the dual vision⁷⁰—or dual responsibility—that many feminist researchers see as part of their multiple responsibilities. It is part of the general burden on women to satisfy multiple constituencies (including themselves) simultaneously.

For many feminists, research is obligated to contribute to social change through consciousness-raising or specific policy recommendations. In a paper delivered at the 1981 meeting of the American Psychological Association, for example, psychologist Gloria Levin urged feminist researchers to anticipate policy shifts and to conduct studies that policy makers could use. She encouraged feminist researchers to forge direct links with policy makers, the media, and policy-relevant organizations.⁷¹ Although lamenting the fact that feminist researchers have not yet adequately done so, she expected they could. The gradual emergence of women's research centers and policy institutes provides structural support for this kind of work.

An example of the way feminist researchers feed their work directly to policy makers occurred at a meeting in spring 1990 organized in Washington, D.C., by the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC).

Over a hundred NWPC National Steering Committee members came to town . . . and joined representatives of other women's groups to hear the "experts" as they presented summaries of their analyses, case studies, and future projections. Political analyst Celinda Lake started . . . with an overview of women's particular voting habits. Roberta Spalter-Roth outlined single mothers' wages and also looked at the economic loss suffered by families without a job-guaranteed family leave policy. Rachel Gold presented hot-off-the-press facts about abortion and women's health. NWPC members used these statistics when they visited their Congress members later in the day, including the fact that 75% of the girls under

16 include parents in an abortion decision and that only one pharmaceutical company continues to manufacture birth control products.⁷²

On the local level, feminists conduct surveys of local problems in communities and workplaces to rectify social problems.

This connection to social change makes much feminist research practical as well as scholarly. The practical side is evident in books and articles containing suggestions for direct action that could be taken. In the words of U.S. sociologist Margaret Andersen,

feminist studies in sociology are not intended to construct abstract empirical analyses of gender, nor to develop grand theories that have no relevance to the lives of actual human beings. . . . [rather] their purpose is the transformation of gender relations and the society in which we live.⁷³

I believe feminist social research does all of the above—it constructs abstract empirical analysis of gender, it develops grand theory, *and* it attempts to transform gender relations and the societies in which we live. Cases in point are Nancy Chodorow's theoretical work on gender and family relations that concludes with her advocacy of "equal parenting,"⁷⁴ Lenore Weitzman's study of "no-fault divorce" that concludes with a discussion of laws that could promote "fair divorce,"⁷⁵ and Susan Yeandle's discussion of the relation between women's paid employment and household responsibilities that concludes with a discussion of theoretical and policy implications.⁷⁶ So too, political scientist Jane Mansbridge ends her theoretical and empirical analysis of the failure of the ERA campaign with a recommendation that the campaign not be revived,⁷⁷ and Kristin Luker ends her discussion of the pro-life and pro-choice movements with strategic recommendations for the pro-choice movement.⁷⁸

Feminist Research Strives to Recognize Diversity

Feminism acknowledges the paradox that women are all alike in some ways and dissimilar in others. Females include people (and animals) whose ages range from birth to death and who live in all geographic areas. Our economic situation ranges from poor to wealthy. Our sexual orientations range from celibate, to homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or any combination of these at various times in our lives. Our reproductive status varies and we believe in the whole gamut of religions or do not believe at all. Some of us are prisoners, others are jailers, lawyers, judges, jurors, and victims. Some of us are sick, disabled, healthy, or dying. We have the full range of political persuasions or no political consciousness at all. We belong to every race and ethnicity.

Feminists take pride in recognizing women's diversity. For example, psychologist Joanna Rohrbach writes that recognition of women's diversity is the single undeniable impact that feminism has had on psychology.⁷⁹ Feminists also criticize mainstream research in all the disciplines for its blindness to women's diversity. For example, Irish historian Hasia R. Diner writes:

That immigrant women have not been studied is not because the material was not there. That poor, working-class women have not been studied is not because they were "inarticulate." It may be more accurate to say that historians, with their own biases of gender, class, and culture, have been basically deaf to the voices of such women and have assumed that they could not be studied.⁸⁰

Diversity has become a new criterion for feminist research excellence. Susan Geiger, for example, wrote that oral histories can fulfill their potential only if they "reach out to study the greatest possible diversity among women."⁸¹ Arlene Kaplan Daniels, discussed in the chapter on cross-cultural research, wrote that feminists too often

write about the problems of white women in America (sic) as though they were generic to womankind. Maybe they are, sometimes, but we need the consciousness of examining issues, always and everywhere, with an eye to how widely they apply.⁸²

Survey researchers Graham Staines, Carol Tavis, and Toby Epstein Jayaratne wrote that "diversity of women, of many occupations and philosophies" is necessary for even a preliminary empirical look at the Queen Bee syndrome,⁸³ the phenomenon they were studying.

In Jill Matthews' view, we also have to recognize the diversity within the individual woman:

Women are both different among themselves, and different from men, and such diversity must be accommodated in any women's history. . . . Beyond acknowledgment of diversity among the groups of women, there is the need to acknowledge the diversity of each individual woman. There are neither heroines nor villains who are exclusively that.⁸⁴

In feminist hands, affirmative action to alter social institutions has become affirmative action to alter research projects. For example the study by Mary Belenky and her colleagues of women's cognitive styles, included women from nine different academic institutions and "invisible colleges" and from three different family agencies, one of which was in an extremely isolated, impoverished rural area. As they put it, "Bringing together people of such diverse ages, circumstances and outlooks departs from common practice in psychological research."⁸⁵ Historian Gerda Lerner, to give another example, "sought . . . documentary selections as representative as the available sources would permit, reflecting variations as to age, economic class, race, religion, and ethnicity."⁸⁶ The feminist research goal seems to have changed from Gerda Lerner's earlier "reflecting variations" (of race, class, age, etc.) to the current goal of "showing intersections" (of race, class, age, etc.) An example of the latter is Jacklyn Cock's case study that examines the intersection of race, gender, and class through the specific relationship of the white "madam" and black "maid" in South Africa.⁸⁷ Another example is the oral history project that alternated life stories of white Southern female employers and their black female domestics.⁸⁸

In the words of psychologists such as Naomi Weisstein⁸⁹ and Sue Cox,⁹⁰ feminists first showed psychology that it knew nothing about women; now it can show

psychology and other disciplines that they have "similarly been biased from the point of view of white, middle-class, and heterosexual values." They can do this, however, only if feminist psychologists study race, class, and sexual preference in addition to gender. In Margaret Andersen's words: "Because feminist analysis seeks to understand the commonalities and the differences in women's experiences, sound feminist scholarship must entail an understanding of race, class, and heterosexual relations."⁹¹ Having tackled the problem of sexist bias, feminist researchers strive to address racism and heterosexism in their research.⁹²

Feminists affirm the belief that diversified samples or case studies improve research quality by allowing more precise conceptualization. For example, in her dissertation concerning eating problems, white U.S. sociologist Becky Thompson argues that the conventional linking of eating problems to white, young, single, heterosexual, middle-class women may reflect the fact that other groups have not been studied. Thus her dissertation examines the meaning of eating problems among blacks, Latinas, and whites, of different ages, some of whom are lesbian and others of whom are heterosexual. Information from this range of women enables her to better understand the etiology of eating problems in terms of specific characteristics and women's lives generally.⁹³ According to methodologists Lynn Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Marianne Leung, however, this type of understanding is lacking in much feminist research because studies based on a small group of volunteers are likely to exclude women different from the researcher.⁹⁴

Because of the significance of the new research criterion of diversity, feminist researchers who are unable to demonstrate diversity in their sample or materials are likely to be criticized. For example, a review of a study of 24 white, 35 black, 4 Hispanic, and 1 Native American street hustlers labeled the results "important but speculative" because of the limited number of Hispanic women.⁹⁵ Similarly, the black Jamaican Sistren collective criticized "white feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. . . . who spoke about women's oppression when what they meant was their own experience of it. . . . [and] who spoke about women's history when they really meant European women's history."⁹⁶

Even before the criticism is voiced, feminists are likely to apologize for not including diverse populations. For example, U.S. historian Catherine Clinton writes that she was

unable to fill in many of the gaps [she] found in the general literature on American women [particularly] . . . on native American women, black women, and other women of color. . . . For those who are dedicated to making women visible in American history, the failure to include these forgotten women seems even more discouraging.⁹⁷

There are many instances of feminist researchers castigating themselves in this way.⁹⁸ White, middle-class, heterosexual philosopher Linda LeMoncheck criticized herself for choosing a topic (sex objectification) that may not be considered a pressing feminist issue for "members of other races, classes, or sexual orientations" and for "probably failing to identify some of its features" that are unique to these groups of women.⁹⁹ Ann Bristow and Jody Esper criticize themselves for heterosexism, as

pointed out by a lesbian rape survivor. We had constructed questions on changing patterns of heterosexual dating following a rape. A lesbian participant stated that she could only answer the questions if we changed the referent to women. Ironically, these questions had been constructed by a lesbian researcher.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Elaine Hobby notes that in her "next project" she will attempt to include black women's writings and will tackle her own homophobia.¹⁰¹

Producing research that is inadequately diversified with regard to race, age, ethnicity, and sexual preference has become a sign of methodological weakness and moral failure, an impermissible reflection of a lack of effort and unwitting prejudice. A norm has developed that when a researcher does not live up to the standard, she atones with an apology in the publication itself. Lesbian British researcher Celia Kitzinger criticizes her own study of the social construction of lesbianism for its lack of diversity. Even though she had 120 interviewees, she used a snowball technique that began with her friends. This procedure did not lead her to many women different from herself despite the fact that she "expected to find considerable diversity among them." She was able to interview only four black women, 20 self-defined "working-class" women, and two Jewish lesbians. Moreover,

the politically conscious black lesbians . . . refused to be interviewed by a white woman, and radical working-class women declined to cooperate with the work of a hierarchical academic system from whose benefits they are systematically excluded. My own obvious whiteness and middle-classness (and self-definition as non-Jewish) severely limited the extent to which I could be perceived as an "insider" by some women. . . . [T]heir absence is an important loss: the various different identity constructions of white middle-class gentile women are not invalidated or made untrue by my inability to tap the constructions of politically engaged black, working-class, or Jewish lesbians, but they are revealed as a limited and partial selection of the many different visions of the world and of themselves that lesbians as a whole have constructed.

Her discussion raises the dilemma that "lack of diversity" reflects societal distrust rather than the researcher's failings.

In this particular study, many such lesbians chose to align themselves with non-lesbian people and to exclude themselves from my research. While, as a middle-class white, I acknowledge and respect the political imperatives that guided this choice, as a woman and a lesbian I deeply regret the resultant loss to my understanding and description of the full richness of lesbians' experience, identities and ideologies. . . . There are also relatively few very young and very old lesbians in this study. . . . [M]y failure to reach many younger and older women should be seen as indicative of the ageism . . . that prevents these women from identifying themselves as lesbians. . . . Some other women refused to be interviewed, including some secretive, closeted lesbians who feared disclosure, and some radical lesbians by whom I, like a black interviewer in another study, was perceived as "selling my people down the river for a few pieces of silver" . . . ; many radical feminist lesbians were unconvinced as to the political utility of my decision to pursue an academic career.¹⁰²

While stressing the importance of studying only those people who volunteer, she recognizes that volunteers are themselves a self-selecting group, adding to the white, middle-class bias already inherent in her sample.

In general, feminists have found it difficult to gain access to diversified samples. U.S. sociologist Laurel Richardson is one of many white sociologists who attempts to generate a diversified sample of women and discovers that she has a diversified sample of white women.¹⁰³ White U.S. anthropologist Emily Martin wrote:

The women represented in this book are self-selected rather than randomly sampled. We found women who were willing to participate by explaining the project to them in small groups (exercise classes, school classrooms, childbirth education classes, senior citizen programs, churches, community organizations, health clinics) and asking for volunteers. In this way and by pursuing other women suggested by the volunteers, we built up the numbers. . . . Overall, 43% were working class and 57% middle class. Of all these, 28% were members of Baltimore's (and the nation's) largest ethnic minority, black Americans. . . . By and large, we tried to match interviewer and interviewee. . . . My affiliation with Johns Hopkins University was usually an advantage. . . . Not always, though. One black woman declined to be interviewed because she did not like studies that Johns Hopkins' medical school had done in the poor populations surrounding the university in the inner city, and one administrator in a predominantly black high school located near Johns Hopkins Hospital refused me access to the students, saying, "We do not want to get involved in any study. This high school has been interviewed and interviewed and interviewed."¹⁰⁴

Another white woman, British literary scholar Elaine Hobby, criticized her own book for being "a white woman's book." She acknowledges that the "prominence and anger of Black people" taught her that saying she "would have written about race had there been Black writers," was not a valid excuse. In poignant words, she explains that she has learned about the parallelism between sexism and racism:

Just as feminists are becoming tired of explaining to men that studies of writing or history must include an exploration of the problem of gender, whether the people studied are male or female, Black people (I believe) are weary of trying to make white people think through the implications of race in the work that we do. I cannot pretend that I know yet how this change in my consciousness will affect my future work.¹⁰⁵

U.S. psychologists Rosalind Barnett and Grace Baruch apologized that "the greater part" of their material deals with white, middle-class women, but they explained that as white middle-class women themselves, they were "not well-equipped to address the situation of black women, who so often play the role of economic provider and whose lives are shaped by many forces that diverge greatly from those influencing whites."¹⁰⁶

Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg wrote in the Introduction to the second edition of *Feminist Frameworks* that they added a section entitled "Feminism and Women of Color" after debating how best to include the voices of black women

who have "contributed to feminist discourse." Their decision to include a separate section stems from their view of the "separation between the white feminist movement on the one hand and feminists of color on the other." Putting their argument very powerfully, Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg write that feminist frameworks that do not take account of the experience of women of color, are not only incomplete; they are racially biased.¹⁰⁷ As Sara Karon mentioned in the quotation from her work in the chapter on cross-cultural research, black feminists who write black history tend to ignore black lesbian history. They thus contribute to the problem of lesbian erasure just as white heterosexual feminists do.¹⁰⁸

Thus, feminist researchers face possible accusations of racism despite the intention of avoiding racism, or of homophobia without an awareness of being homophobic. When not vigilant about diversity and successful in its implementation as part of a research plan, feminist research may be racist, homophobic, ageist, and ethnocentric.¹⁰⁹ Given this possibility, feminist researchers may feel paralyzed by anticipatory condemnation. Marilyn Frye's comment that follows is an example of a feminist philosopher struggling with this problem:

To readers who might be able to overlook the ways in which my thought is limited by race- and class-bound imagination: I have to ask you to take absolutely seriously both the warning and the invitation implicit in my occasional reminders that there exists a vast variety of women and women's lives which I know just enough about to point to but which I cannot speak from or for. To readers who could never overlook these limitations because of the insult to what you know: I not only invite your criticism but also ask that you use your own creativity and insight to make the best of mine, to carry out the translations and codification which will make this work as useful to you as it can be.¹¹⁰

It is important to recognize that feminist researchers may be stigmatized by mainstream society for studying stigmatized groups,¹¹¹ and may be further stigmatized by feminist researchers for studying homogeneous groups.

Despite the overwhelming endorsement of methodological diversity as a means to combat racism and homophobia, I have also noticed a few arguments *against* such an approach. As noted above, Celia Kitzinger and Emily Martin recognize that some women rightfully refuse to participate in a research project, and their autonomy to act in their own self-interest should be validated. In light of that consideration, a researcher's search "for diversity" could actually be a form of colonialism, manipulation, or exploitation. Black feminists such as bell hooks, for example, ask why white women should study black women in the first place. She notices with irony that "white women are given grant money to do research on black women but I can find no instances where black women have received funds to research white women's history." She also wonders out loud if "scholars are motivated by a sincere interest in the history of black women or are merely responding to an available market."¹¹²

Lynn Davidman implies that the *inattentiveness* of white, middle-class feminist scholars to certain populations has been one impetus for these groups to engage in scholarship of their own. She writes that "blacks . . . and members of other minority groups are developing new forms of scholarship, predicated upon the

assumption that the picture of them presented by mainstream writers is necessarily different from their own self-presentation as expressed in their own voices."¹¹³

Notwithstanding bell hooks' skepticism, the motivation of white women to study black women, as expressed in writing, seems to stem from a sincere appreciation of the difficulties of living with sexism and racism in society. As white U.S. sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein wrote:

The experiences of the three black lawyers who had been in my original sample led me to do a study of black professional women in 1972. . . . [I then wrote an article about the] problems black women professionals faced because of their double negative status, as well as the special treatment accorded to them as a result of their situation. . . .¹¹⁴

Clearly, homophobic, ableist,¹¹⁵ classist, and ageist assumptions continue to be blindspots in much feminist research. At the same time, feminist sensitivity to issues of diversity has raised many questions. How much of the diversified world of women should be included in a particular research project? When is a group actually diverse? Do members of different subgroups speak only for themselves? Do Western feminists have a right to criticize or must they accept culturally rooted practices in other cultures that seem detrimental to women, as discussed in the chapter on cross-cultural research? A quotation from Charlene Depner summarizes some of these dilemmas: "A feminist research standard of maximum diversity is perhaps logically and practically impossible while desirable as an ideal type".¹¹⁶

The Involvement of the Researcher as a Person

The previous chapters have shown that feminist researchers generally consider personal experiences to be a valuable asset for feminist research. To the extent that this is *not* the case in mainstream research, utilizing the researcher's personal experience is a distinguishing feature of feminist research. Personal experience typically is irrelevant in mainstream research, or is thought to contaminate a project's objectivity. In feminist research, by contrast, it is relevant and repairs the project's pseudo-objectivity. Whereas feminist researchers frequently present their research in their own voice, researchers publishing in mainstream journals typically are forbidden to use the first person singular voice.

Many feminist researchers describe how their projects stem from, and are part of, their own lives, as we saw earlier, for example, in Sara Ruddick's discussion of the continuity between her current research and her childhood concerns. In addition to describing the personal origins of a research question, the feminist researcher is likely to describe the actual research process as a lived experience, and she is likely to reflect on what she learned in the process. I believe in the value of this approach and thus I have written in the first person singular, have discussed the origins of my interest in the book's topic, and have mentioned aspects of my experience while working on this book.

Feminists have produced accounts of their experiences as alienated or

"orgasmic"¹¹⁷ researchers in order to correct false images of passionless objectivity.¹¹⁸ They frequently integrate personal accounts into the report of the project itself, including, in particular, reports of the pain they suffered doing research on women's traumatic experiences. In some cases, feminists reintroduce passion, with its possible enthusiasm, anger, and nastiness, its first-person voice, and its identification with the research "subject." This is the voice of people such as Susan Griffin, whose work I discussed briefly in the chapter on original research methods. She explained that she wrote "associatively and went underneath logic."¹¹⁹ Passion is a disruption of conventional research etiquette. It requires courage to violate the norms of dispassionate research. Political scientist Jean Bethke Elsh-tain, for example, wrote about starting her book many times, each time trying to work up greater courage "to be more provocative and less abstracted from the wellsprings of my own thought and action."¹²⁰ Feminist research then reads as partly informal, engagingly personal, and even confessional.

While some feminist social researchers have written full autobiographies¹²¹ or have written full reports about their experiences as researchers of women,¹²² more commonly the researcher adds a preface or postscript that contains an explanation of her relation to the subject matter at hand. She may also explicitly study a phenomenon that concerns her in her "personal" life.¹²³ By doing this, she merges the "public" and "private." Joyce Leland is one of many feminists who includes a discussion of her motives as part of her research text. She writes that her motive for studying the masculinity of gay men stems from her being the mother of one such young man as well as the mother of a straight son. She identifies with both of her sons and is angered by homophobia. As a sociologist she is trying to convert her anger into research that might show that gay men are ordinary members of society.¹²⁴ Writing such as this is not a confession of "bias" as it would undoubtedly be labeled in a positivist framework. Rather it is an explanation of "the researcher's standpoint" in a feminist framework.

The connection between the research project and the researcher's self frequently takes the form of "starting with one's own experience," particularly when the study concerns a disturbing experience. "Starting from one's own experience" is a way the researcher assures herself that she is "starting from the standpoint of women." Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, a major advocate of doing sociology from the standpoint of women, begins with her experience when doing research. She writes:

The work of inquiry in which I am engaged proceeds by taking this experience of mine, this experience of other women . . . and asking how it is organized, how it is determined, what the social relations are which generate it.¹²⁵

She explicitly rejects the idea that inquiry begins with the concerns of her discipline. It must, instead, begin with her experience.

Feminist researchers use the strategy of "starting from one's own experience" for many purposes. It defines our research questions, leads us to sources of useful data, gains the trust of others in doing the research, and enables us to partially test our findings. Feminist researchers frequently start with an issue that bothers them personally and then use everything they can get hold of to study it. In fem-

inist research, then, the "problem" is frequently a blend of an intellectual question and a personal trouble.

Many feminist researchers draw on personal experience to *do* their research. One example of many discussed in this book is Janet Kahn and Patricia Gozema's study of a lesbian bar, described in the chapter on interviewing. Sometimes the personal experience is simply a recollection that helps her understand an interviewee's response. For example, Marjorie DeVault wrote that while interviewing women about food they prepare for their families, she heard an oddly contradictory phrase but did not know what to make of it. Upon later reflection, she remembered a time in her own life when she thought she could save her marriage by making better salads. With this memory available to her, she began to find this kind of thinking expressed by other people she interviewed.¹²⁶ She included this story in her report.

Personal experience can be the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions, and the source for finding people to study. Athena Theodore poignantly acknowledges this in her study discussed in the chapter on multiple methods. As part of her background, Athena Theodore had the experience of fighting to retain her job as a tenured associate professor in a women's college. In the process, she writes that her consciousness was raised because she had never before considered that what was happening to her stemmed from being a woman. Shaken by this insight, she began to discuss her experiences with other academic women and gradually shaped her research project: "documenting in some systematic fashion the experiences of all academic women who were fighting discrimination, using the tools and methods of my discipline."¹²⁷

As we have seen, feminist authors and researchers frequently begin their writing with the "personal connection" they have to the research topic. Adrienne Rich drew on her connection to motherhood,¹²⁸ I discussed my experience of miscarriage,¹²⁹ Ruth Harriet Jacobs discussed her own aging,¹³⁰ Susan Borg and Judith Lasker discussed their connection to failed pregnancy,¹³¹ Judith Arcana discussed her experience as a daughter, Marcia Millman used her experience to understand being overweight,¹³² and Lillian Rubin used her experience to study what it means to be a working-class woman, to name only a few.¹³³ Suzanne Arms explained that her book about childbirth in the United States "is a statement that grew out of my need to understand and explain my own birth experience."¹³⁴

All of these feminists found that their troubling or puzzling experience became a "need to know." Being an insider of the experience enabled them to understand what [some] women have to "say in a way that no 'outsider' could."¹³⁵ Researchers who adopt this view draw on a new "epistemology of insiderness" that sees life and work as intertwined. Because of the widespread acceptance of the personal starting point for feminist research, some people have come to almost expect a link between the personal experience of the researcher and the research project in which she is engaged.

Transferred to the international level, feminist researchers argue that studies of women in a particular country should be done by women of that country. For these people, an author is an authority insofar as she is also the subject about

which she speaks. These researchers adopt the view that even an empathic outsider cannot know women the way women know themselves, a view linked to a more general critique of the concept of objectivity.¹³⁶ Del Martin and Phillis Lyon, for example, write that it is impossible to be definitive or objective about lesbians.¹³⁷ But, it is possible to be knowledgeable. In their case, they argue that their expertise is the fact that they are lesbians, have lived together as lovers for 19 years, helped found the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, have been deeply involved in the homophile movement, and have talked to, counseled, and been friends with thousands of lesbians.¹³⁸

"Starting from one's own experience" is an idea that developed in reaction to androcentric social science. While useful in resisting the distortion of androcentrism, the position of "starting from one's own experience" has its limitations, particularly in the sense that it can lay the groundwork for solipsism or projection. Most feminists doing cross-cultural research do not advocate the position because "starting from one's experience" could easily verge into ethnocentrism.

Feminists have typically not converted the "epistemology of insiderness" into the principle that women should study *only* their own experience. As women we are entitled and able to study anything. Nor must we have a personal experience of something in order to study it. But as we study women's experiences we think we do not share, we sometimes find that we actually do share it in some way. Susan Brownmiller has written eloquently on this topic concerning her discovery that rape affects all women. She had initially thought that neither she nor the women's movement had anything to do with women who had been raped. As she wrote: "I wrote this book because I am a woman who changed her mind about rape."¹³⁹

"Starting from one's own experience" violates the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and "value neutral." In 1971 British sociologist Ann Oakley had already written that these approaches were themselves not "value neutral" but rather were "often simply a cover for patriarchy."¹⁴⁰ Other feminist scholars challenge the concept of objectivity, concurring instead with biologist Ruth Hubbard, that what passes for "objective" is actually the position of privileged white males. She writes that the only way to actually achieve what "the mythology of science asserts" (i.e., that science is conducted objectively) is to have a truly diversified set of women and men doing science from all sorts of different cultural and social backgrounds "with very different ideologies and interests." Were this to be the case, the personal bias that each person brings would cancel out the bias of another person. But Ruth Hubbard writes that most of the bias runs in a single direction, "predominantly university trained white males from privileged social backgrounds," thus revealing "more about the investigator than about the subject being researched."¹⁴¹ Similarly, philosopher Linda LeMoncheck writes that as

a white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual woman and feminist, it would be naive to profess any kind of so-called objectivity to the analysis below; indeed, I do not think such a perspective exists, since as inquiring subject one must assume a perspective from which to launch the inquiry.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, some feminist researchers consider "value-free" research to be desirable. They claim that being a member of the group one studies creates more problems than opportunities. U.S. sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, for example, wrote that social scientists have the power to influence public opinion and therefore must be very careful about the biases they bring to research concerning sex and gender differences. She feels that as members of society, feminist researchers are themselves "contaminated by or invested in a sexual division of the social order," yet they are still able to do research in an objective way.¹⁴³

While some feminist researchers strive for "objectivity" and others believe that "objectivity" is itself the biased stance of privileged white males, still others experience the tension between the two stances. In the introduction to her interview-based study of 500 lesbians in England, for example, sociologist Elizabeth Ettore wrote about the conflict "between the social scientific notion of 'objectivity' which demands detachment, distance, and removal from what I was studying in order to be value-free, and the subjective experience of being a woman and a lesbian, which I am." She writes that the reader jumps back and forth as she thinks of the "researcher as both insider and outsider in the lesbian experience." The reader thinks of the researcher's bias in terms of what the researcher emphasizes, seeing her "more as a woman than as a lesbian sociologist, a sociologist of lesbianism," or however else the reader sees her.¹⁴⁴ Regardless of the reader's view, Elizabeth Ettore, for one, believes that as a researcher she can blend these views and offer facts.

Many feminist scholars find themselves trying to work out the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. Examples are Jessie Bernard and Bev James in the chapter on interviewing, Irene Dabrowski and Karen McCarthy Brown in the chapter on ethnography, and Anne Pugh in the chapter on survey research.¹⁴⁵ In this same vein, U.S. psychologist Virginia O'Leary writes that her book *Toward Understanding Women* is a "personal" book because her perspective as a feminist social psychologist and as a woman has guided her understanding and interpretation of psychological literature. Recognizing that she has a perspective does not mean that she then abandons what she considers to be objectivity. On the contrary, she believes that she can "present material objectively while guided by an explicit perspective."¹⁴⁶

While valuing the researcher's personal experience, feminist researchers are careful to differentiate their "own experience" from the experience of "other women." Virginia O'Leary, mentioned above, specifically writes that she does "not regard [her] 'female experience' as normative," and she cautions the reader against interpreting her occasional personal illustrations in the book as normative material. U.S. historian Sara Evans studied the roots of the women's movement precisely because she wanted to test what she learned *against* information derived from her own involvement. She tried hard to avoid using her experience as a substitute for information about other people, and she deliberately sought challenges to her assumptions.¹⁴⁷ She stressed the importance of *having experiences* related to her research, *while also being reflexive* about the nature of the relation between experience and research.¹⁴⁸

Despite these examples and others, psychologist Michelle Fine argues that

"the experiences of women researchers as we investigate the lives of women . . . [are a] forbidden pool of data." She says that we collaborate in keeping the pool hidden out of fear that we will be accused of "biased scholarship" or "overidentification" with respondents. She and many others such as Stephanie Riger and Margaret Gordon, discussed in the chapter on multiple methods, think that giving voice to our own experiences is absolutely necessary because otherwise we perpetuate the "historic silencing of women researchers' active and often passionate reactions to our own research."¹⁴⁹

These feminist researchers have expanded the notion that personal experience is an asset. They make it a *necessity* or a *source of legitimacy*. German sociologist, Maria Mies, for one, wrote that "feminist women must deliberately . . . integrate their repressed, unconscious female subjectivity, i.e. their own experience of oppression and discrimination into the research process."¹⁵⁰ Here we have another example of a feminist methodologist converting a property of *some* feminist researchers into a mandate for *all*.

I conclude from this section that the connection between the researcher's experience and the research project remains a matter of contention among feminist researchers. I, for one, feel most satisfied by a stance that acknowledges the researcher's position right up front, and that does not think of objectivity and subjectivity as warring with each other, but rather as serving each other. I have feminist distrust for research reports that include no statement about the researcher's experience. Reading such reports, I feel that the researcher is hiding from me or does not know how important personal experience is. Such reports seem woefully incomplete and even dishonest.

The Involvement of the People Being Studied

In those projects that involve interaction with people, feminist researchers frequently express a sense of connection to the actual people studied (as distinct from the subject matter being studied). In other forms of research, such as content analysis and experiments, interaction between "subjects" and "researcher" is not part of the data collection process and is thus irrelevant. In this section I will discuss the special properties of that interaction as feminists describe it.

In general, feminist observational or interview-based studies include a strong connection between the "researcher" and "subject" that develops during the course of the study and lasts beyond it, sometimes only in memory, sometimes in actuality. In these studies, the relationship leaves the realm of research and enters the personal lives of the individuals involved. This blurring of the distinction between formal and personal relations, just as the removal of the distinction in the previous section between the research project and the researcher's life, is a characteristic of much, though not all, feminist research. For example, Diane Bell, a white Australian anthropologist, writes about the aboriginal women she studied as her "friends and teachers." Writing in a way that demystifies research, she calls her book "a personal account of four years of [her] life."¹⁵¹ A research report or book is, thus, a personal narrative and the people in the book are her friends.

These friends sometimes used her house as a refuge from their husbands' violence. On other occasions, the women she studied met her parents, or joined her on a vacation. As with women's friendships more generally, the women gave her insight into her own life.¹⁵²

Another blurring of the distinction between the "subject's" role as subject and as human being is evident in the fact that many feminist researchers give direct assistance to the women they study, as in Christine Webb's study of women recovering from hysterectomies discussed in the chapter on interviewing. Taking this idea one step further, Audrey Bronstein considers good personal relations to be a *prerequisite* for studying women. In her Latin American study described in the chapter on feminist interview research, she states that she studied only those women with whom she already had a bond. Similarly, she wanted readers to share this bond by reading her book. She stressed that she wanted to "learn from," not just "learn about" the women she studied.

The action research examples, in particular, demonstrate the involvement of researchers in the lives of the people with whom they study. The paradigmatic example is the work of Jane Addams, who moved into an immigrant neighborhood in Chicago and subsequently did research with residents of her settlement house about the politics and social conditions of Chicago. A smaller scale contemporary example is Francesca Cancian's participatory research with the secretaries and graduate students in her department, designed to investigate problems and create social or individual change.

In some instances, the feminist researcher identifies with women at the conclusion of the project even though she regarded them with antipathy or ambivalence at the outset.¹⁵³ This compassion may develop even while the researcher is strongly identified with a competing group.¹⁵⁴ Lydia O'Donnell's work, as discussed in the chapter on interview research, illustrates how feminist researchers develop connections with the people they study and how those connections inform the researcher's changing sense of self.¹⁵⁵ She began her project looking for "constraints" and "obstacles" women face as mothers. Over the course of the study, meeting mothers and becoming a mother, she claims that she had to rethink her biases. Gradually she shifted her focus to an examination of the positive dimensions of mothering and ultimately dedicated her book to the women who taught her that she should continue to change, primarily by "slowing down and enjoying her early years of mothering." Feminist researchers such as Lydia O'Donnell learn to empathize with a broad range of women and to see them as rational actors in their contexts.

Just as in the topics discussed earlier in this chapter, there is dissensus around the issue of the feminist researcher's relation with the people she studies. Whereas Audrey Bronstein believed it was particularly appropriate to study women she already knew, Liz Kelly¹⁵⁶ and Mary K. Zimmerman¹⁵⁷ believed the opposite to be the case, as I discussed in the chapter on feminist interview research. These researchers did not study women they knew, out of respect for the women's privacy. Studying women they knew would complicate the relationships. Having relationships with the women would similarly complicate the research.

To the extent that part of the ideology of feminism is to transform the com-

petitive and exploitative relations among women into bonds of solidarity and mutuality, we expect assistance and reciprocated understanding to be part of the research/subject relation.¹⁵⁸ In addition, to the extent that a goal of feminist scholarship is to reinterpret or redefine phenomena previously defined from a masculinist perspective, the only way to have access to a new definition is to truly understand the women by way of rapport. Their interpretation of motherhood, rape, incest, sexual harassment, and other phenomena requires an openness that is thought to come only with rapport.

The requirement that feminists establish rapport stems from the ideology that women experience relationships through an ethic of care,¹⁵⁹ and that feminists, in particular, are supposed to be able to establish intimate relations with women because of our political awareness. Put even stronger, feminists are supposed to feel toward other women as if they are their sisters, the presumption being that sisters have profound positive relations and shared interests.¹⁶⁰ For example, anthropologist Marjorie Shostak, in her work discussed in the chapter on oral history, wrote that she explicitly did not use objective (i.e., random or representative) considerations when selecting informants for her study of the !Kung but rather used the criterion of "rapport." After interviewing two men, she felt she could not achieve the "same degree of intimacy with them as she could with women." Intimate relations became her methodological criterion.

The women I chose were those with whom I felt I could establish good rapport, and who represented a wide range in !Kung conditions of life. . . . In all cases, the women were talking specifically to me, as a person and as a woman.¹⁶¹

Marjorie Shostak specifically refers to Nisa as her "distant sister."

By achieving rapport, the feminist researcher reassures herself that she is treating the interviewee in a nonexploitative manner. Rapport thus validates the scholar as a feminist, as a researcher, and as a human being. It symbolizes her sisterhood, her interviewing skill, and her ethical standing. Commenting on Marjorie Shostak's work, Mary Louise Pratt highlighted the importance of "current Western conceptions of female solidarity and intimacy" that produced "cross-cultural harmony." Using words that seem to be describing romantic love, Mary Louise Pratt writes that Marjorie Shostak "and Nisa are bound together in ways that perhaps transcend culture."¹⁶² Taking such descriptions to heart, the "rapport demands" internalized by a feminist researcher, particularly a novice feminist researcher, can be overwhelming. Rapport becomes the normative, not the special, condition.

When feminist expectations of rapport between the researcher and the woman she is studying combine with expectations of ethnic solidarity, "rapport demands" are extreme. Sociologist Denise Connors, whose work I discussed in the chapter on feminist interview research,

decided to work with women of Irish descent and from working class backgrounds because I believed that given my own Irish ancestry and working class roots, I would be able to readily establish rapport with them.¹⁶³

Expecting to achieve "rapport," a concept that remains undefined, it is possible that the researcher will block out other emotions and reactions to the people she

is studying. She might even romanticize the women or see them in stereotypic ways, because of her focus on "achieving rapport." And if she does not "achieve rapport," she may forego the study altogether. In my view it would be unfortunate if we were to introduce self-imposed limits to our research possibilities because of the notion of rapport.

There are also structural barriers to rapport that feminist researchers would do well to recognize. First, there are class differences. Feminist researchers try to overcome these by techniques that minimize educational differences. This is the way I would interpret Ann Oakley's comment that she chose simple questions to enable "some rapport to be established between interviewer and respondent."¹⁶⁴ There are also ideological differences. To her dismay, as I discussed in the chapter on interviewing, British social psychologist Susan Condor discovered that despite her use of an open-ended questionnaire, she could not sympathize with "traditional women who support the existing roles of men and women." Despite her aim of reaching "an understanding of women in their own terms," she uncovered the "possibility that regarding individuals and social events from the perspective of feminism as a world-view may itself encourage the very tendency to objectify our 'subjects' which feminism opposes so forcefully."¹⁶⁵

The feminist demand for rapport may have led us to put on blinders compelling us to see gender as the most salient characteristic of a woman, even when the woman sees it otherwise. In this regard, U.S. sociologist Beth Hess has written about the difficulty feminists had in understanding the Portuguese-American women of New Bedford, Massachusetts who defended men of their ethnic group who raped a woman not of their group. Feminists outside New Bedford identified with the rape victim and had trouble identifying with, or achieving rapport with, the rapists' female defenders.¹⁶⁶

Sociologist Janet Billson Mancini, whose work I discussed in the chapter on cross-cultural research, struggled with this problem as well. She noted that when working in the immigrant community in Canada, her status as a woman was less important than her status as an ethnic minority member. The community made it difficult for her to achieve rapport because of its belief that "if you are a feminist then you cannot be equally concerned with issues affecting minority groups."¹⁶⁷ Her research became part of what Roxana Ng has described: an "ongoing endeavour to arrive at an understanding of the situation of immigrant women which does not negate their experience as women and as ethnic minority at the same time."¹⁶⁸

The theme of the feminist researcher's involvement in the lives of the people she studies is full of ambiguity and controversy. There seems to be a continuum of feminist positions on this topic ranging from those whose projects demand that there be *no* involvement to those whose projects allow for deep, mutually satisfying reciprocal relationships. When we discuss feminist research, it behooves us to remember the entire continuum, and to not focus only on the position of deep, lasting involvement. Many "subjects" simply do not have the time or inclination to incorporate a researcher, even a feminist researcher, into their lives. The women most likely to desire a long-lasting relation with the researcher are those who already know her, those who discover they have many shared interests with the

researcher, and those who are isolated and have few friends with whom to share their feelings and ideas.

It seems dangerous to require rapport in all feminist research. I prefer, instead, to think of research projects, researchers, and "research subjects" as varied, each deserving to be analyzed as to the most beneficial relation that could be developed. "Achieving rapport" should not become a burdensome, and sometimes inappropriate, form of "emotion work"¹⁶⁹ feminist researchers must do if they engage in research involving interaction with people. Rather, feminists who do research with people should consider rapport to be a fortunate outcome of some projects rather than a precondition of all research relationships. In general, rapport between any two people develops only with time and a sense of shared interests. To try to "achieve" rapport without these prerequisites is an arduous endeavor prone to failure.

I also believe that we can develop nonexploitative relations with the people involved in our research projects, without attempting to achieve "rapport" or "intimacy" with them. Relations of respect, shared information, openness, and clarity of communication seem like reasonable substitute goals. And there are times when feminist researchers will study people for whom they have little respect. In my view, this, too, can be done without diminishing a feminist researcher's self-esteem. Charlene Depner put this whole problem well when she wrote:

A disturbing phenomenon has emerged which I label "superwoman meets the academy." This is a model of feminist research which demands that each researcher unflaggingly avoid all pitfalls of conventional psychological research. The feminist researcher must collect endless detailed data, engage in a dialogue with her/his subjects and see that the research process benefits them personally (otherwise, the subject is regarded as exploited).¹⁷⁰

"Superman" is not a product of female culture. I see no reason to have "superwomen" as feminist research role models.

The Involvement of the Reader

A characteristic of feminist research seems to be a desire on the part of the researcher to address the reader directly and to forge a connection through her between the reader and the people studied. The innovative work with drama is one step in this direction, as discussed in the chapter on original methods. In a very blatant way, it brings the audience in for direct observation of the material the researcher wants to present. Many feminist researchers who interview include quotations from the interviews in the research product in order to give the reader a sense of these people. When the interviewees "speak for themselves" or "use their own voice," the reader is better able to understand.

In Jill Matthews' book *Good and Mad Women*, discussed in the chapter on content analysis, the web of connection between the researcher and reader is particularly strong. Jill Matthews reveals herself doing the research and builds a con-

nection with her readers as we try to understand her struggle to identify with the women she studies. She includes herself and her reader in the pronoun "our" when she writes about "our identification with a woman named Vera."¹⁷¹

Susan Yeandle's work, discussed in the chapter on interviewing, is another example of a project in which the author addresses the reader directly in the hope of sharing an "awareness of the women" with whom the researcher spoke.¹⁷² Nancy Seifer's work discussed in the chapter on oral history is an effort to have the middle-class female reader understand the working-class women who narrated their stories of political action.¹⁷³ Feminist researchers such as Pat Taylor¹⁷⁴ and Fran Buss, discussed in the chapter on oral history, reveal their background to the reader out of a sense of responsibility. Fran Buss wrote: "Because of the influence I had, it is important that readers have some knowledge of my background, beliefs, and interests."¹⁷⁵ The obligation is met through self-disclosure. And if the reader agrees with the writer's analysis, then the writer is confirmed. Similarly, in the chapter on original methods, I quote Dorothy Dinnerstein as saying, "[My] method is to appeal to the reader's own experience: if the result feels in any way enlightening, the argument is validated insofar as it can be."¹⁷⁶

The feminist researcher sometimes addresses the reader to engage her in the work of data analysis. In the chapter on content analysis, for example, Laurel Graham writes that "through deconstruction, readers can find in each text the information to construct oppositional readings."¹⁷⁷ Susan Krieger's work, discussed in the chapter on original feminist methods, contains a fully developed discussion of this topic. As I described in the chapter on original methods, she

invites the reader to join, to take part, to overhear the gossip of women in one particular subcommunity in a midwestern town, to come to know the members of this community, to share their insights and their confusions. The challenge is to adopt these women temporarily as a peer group, to muddle through their difficulties with them, and to confront one's own responses to those difficulties as they appear when articulated through the book's interplay of many voices.¹⁷⁸

Some feminist researchers address the reader in the hope of helping her to liberate herself from patriarchy. Jane Marcus believes that inclusion of direct quotes is the best route toward this goal. In her words, "The ideology of patriarchy is most effectively undercut for the woman reader by the most unmediated of the voices of female experience."¹⁷⁹ And Katherine Pope, whose work I discussed in the chapter on content analysis, wrote that "the explicit statement that accompanies the imagery helps the reader to understand her own behavior and that of others. The reader sees herself as not alone in her experiences."¹⁸⁰

Developing a connection with the reader is probably a goal of all writers, feminist or not. Perhaps unlike mainstream writers, however, there is among feminist researchers a broad range of ways in which the reader is engaged.

Final Thoughts

Feminists are creatively stretching the boundaries of what constitutes research. We are versatile, many of us having engaged in numerous methods mentioned in this

book. And, most important, we are not uniform. Some of us choose to use a personal voice, but formats are being developed for those who choose not to do so. Some of us see feminist research as self-reflexive, collaborative, attuned to process, oriented to social change, and designed to be *for* women rather than only *of* women. Some of us are concerned with racism and heterosexism (very few with ageism), some express feminist distrust, some begin with their own experience, some incorporate a critique of androcentrism, and some are concerned primarily with the empowerment of women.

I find myself convinced as I end this study that we are in a period of Feminist Culture Building, or Feminist Renaissance, and that we will be self-correcting. I end this book with a quote with which sociologist Sarah Berk opened her book:

I owe a continuing debt of gratitude to those . . . I know only through their own writings, who have (over the last decade) patiently taught me what it is—what it must be—to practice feminist scholarship. . . . Thus, whatever is of value in this work owes a great deal to the experience, knowledge, and past trials of other women.¹⁸¹