

FEMINIST FIELDWORK ANALYSIS

Sherryl Kleinman

QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH
METHODS
SERIES
51

A SAGE
UNIVERSITY PAPER



FEMINIST FIELDWORK ANALYSIS

SHERRYL KLEINMAN

Qualitative Research Methods
Volume 51

SAGE Publications 
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

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1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

Sage Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kleinman, Sherryl.

Feminist fieldwork analysis / Sherryl Kleinman.

p. cm.— (Qualitative research methods; v. 51)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-0549-7 (pbk.)

1. Social sciences—Field work. 2. Sociology—Field work.
3. Feminist theory. 4. Sexism. 5. Equality. I. Title.

H62.K586 2007

300.72—dc22

2006034728

Printed on acid-free paper.

07 08 09 10 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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<i>Typesetter:</i>	C&M Digital (P) Ltd.
<i>Marketing Manager:</i>	Stephanie Adams

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I came to feminism by reading authors I've never met and talking to people I have been lucky enough to know. The bibliography of this book provides a list of many of the works that influenced my fieldwork and thinking. When I was preparing to teach my first course in Race, Class, and Gender, I came across the writings of Marilyn Frye, Sandra Bartky, Alison Jaggar, and bell hooks. These authors (among others) helped me not only teach, but finish a fieldwork project that had been lingering.

For feminist conversations, insights, humor, and emotional support over the years, I thank Karen Booth, Martha Copp, Elyse Crystall, Jessica Fields, and Martha McMahon. Matt Ezzell and Krista McQueeney read parts of the manuscript and offered helpful comments and strong encouragement. John Van Maanen, one of the editors of this series, sent me more comments than I wanted to handle, but the manuscript is immeasurably improved because of them. I am thankful for his close reading. Current and former graduate students in my fieldwork classes and other seminars, including Stacey Cutbush, Marianne Cutler, Natalia Deeb-Sossa, Heather Kane, and Ken Kolb, provided motivation and support.

Michael Schwalbe and I talked through intellectual and emotional snags, and he provided invaluable comments on each draft. Our feminist partnership continues to sustain me through the ups and downs of the writing process, and so much more.

SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork, as one of only a few canonical methods of social study, is a messy business placing the researcher deep within the everyday lives of those studied. How sense is made within this buzzing social world is an analytic task highly dependent on the intellectual resources, moral groundings, and cultivated curiosities the researcher carries to (and from) the scene. What is sought, seen, heard, remembered, recorded, and ultimately reported requires a point of view or a stance as to what is of most importance, concern, and value in the examined setting—both to the researcher and to the researched. Values and moral precepts guide our work as surely as they guide our actions beyond research activities but how they do so—and with what results—remain rather unexamined despite a good deal of conversation as to what values and moral precepts best serve a given research community.

Into this conversation comes Sherryl Kleinman's lucid and concrete exploration of how feminist principles can (and should) inform fieldwork and interview-based studies concerned particularly—but not exclusively—with how and why gender inequality in the workplace, at home, and in social interaction is produced and sustained. *Feminist Fieldwork Analysis*, the 51st volume in the Sage Series on Qualitative Research Methods, outlines five useful principles to guide studies of power, gender, and injustice. The writing is personal but care is taken to generalize from the author's own extensive fieldwork experiences to the work of others. The examples are vivid and persuasive. Underpinning the monograph is an engaging narrative that tells how the author gradually moved from a "qualitative researcher to a feminist fieldworker" by learning that overlooking one's own political perspectives and moral imperatives may well have negative consequences on the quality, logic, and reach of the work produced.

At issue in this monograph is not simply the appropriateness of a feminist perspective for understanding gender inequalities but, of equal importance, how a researcher might systematically note, mark, and reflect on the many ways gender inequality is expressed and experienced. A partly tongue-in-cheek tool introduced (and put to use) is the "twinge-ometer," a measured feeling that something isn't quite right in a given situation and anchored typically (and structurally) by inequality and powerlessness. The sensitizing role personal feelings play in research endeavors is a topic Sherryl Kleinman (and Martha Copp) explored in *Emotions and Fieldwork*, (volume 28 of the Sage Series on Qualitative Research Methods) and is

revisited and amplified in this work. The earlier monograph is about extending the alertness and sensitivity of fieldworkers to data they might otherwise miss or ignore. This monograph concerns itself largely with putting together a focused, coherent, and appropriate interpretation of data gathered in the field based on a set of sturdy feminist principles and understandings. In the end, the analytic framework developed and illustrated here can help all of us better understand—and thus expose and perhaps alter—the hidden and not-so-hidden workings and costs of inequality.

John Van Maanen

Peter K. Manning

Marc L. Miller

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FEMINIST FIELDWORK ANALYSIS

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1. WHAT'S ON THE AGENDA?

If one admits . . . that social position greatly influences social perspective and if one cannot frame a question without also thereby expressing a perspective, then all science, knowingly or ignorantly, expresses a perspective.

—Sherry Gorelick,
Gender/Body/Knowledge

My mentors in sociology in the 1970s did not teach me a naive view of social science. Fieldworkers, I was told, are never blank slates; our views of the world are always shaped by our identities, group memberships, and values. Thus, to do good fieldwork, we have to know ourselves, including our expectations for and feelings about the people we're studying. We are the "instruments" of research, I was taught, so we had better know ourselves well.

Along with qualitative methods, I learned the perspective of symbolic interactionism. According to Herbert Blumer (1969; see also Mead, 1934)—the scholar who coined the term "symbolic interactionism"—people are not automatons programmed by social forces. Sociohistorical circumstances and situational exigencies shape us, but we can also act back upon them. And action can include everything from resistance to resignation. Blumer's (1969) critique of the application of science to the understanding of human beings also called for close engagement with people rather than distant observation:

To try to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called “objective” observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism—the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his [or her] own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (p. 86)

As a symbolic interactionist fieldworker, I learned to notice patterns of speech, interaction, identity, meanings, and so on. As I became a feminist fieldworker, I did not leave behind interactionist concerns, but linked them to what I had come to care about: the reproduction of inequality, including sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class inequality (see Schwalbe et al., 2000; Thomas, 1993). And analyzing my feelings, in the field or at the desk, began to reveal what Alison Jaggar (1989) calls “outlaw emotions”: “our ‘gut-level’ awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger” (p. 161). For many years I had joked with friends about my “twinge-ometer” (Kleinman, 1998), an alarm that would go off when I sensed that something wasn’t quite right in a situation. But I had not thought of my twinge-ometer as anchored to injustice until I read Jaggar’s work and began to link feminist feelings to the daily experience of inequality.

My move from qualitative researcher to feminist fieldworker was not an easy one. Calling oneself a feminist implies that one has a moral imperative. One is supposedly no longer a researcher looking for truth, however provisional it is and however honest one is about the self that produced the account. As nonfeminist colleagues told me, doing feminist research means that the researcher “has an agenda.” It also implies that other researchers do not.

As Sherry Gorelick put it in the epigraph to this chapter, “all science, knowingly or ignorantly, expresses a perspective.” Lots of qualitative interactionists would agree with that statement. Interactionism is rooted philosophically in pragmatism, whose key proponents (Dewey, 1929/1984; James, 2000; Mead, 1938) held that knowledge is perspectival. But fieldwork accounts that begin with the word “feminist” or “critical” presumably are less trustworthy than those that do not, implying that only “regular” field studies come close to reaching the highest (scientific) standards.

Because I did not define my earlier work as anything other than symbolic interactionist fieldwork, I felt that my developing feminist analyses were some kind of betrayal to my mentors. I knew I had an agenda: I wanted to understand inequality in order to get rid of it. What I still failed to grasp was that in my previous work I had simply *overlooked* my (not well worked out) political assumptions.

I did not become a feminist fieldworker by participating in consciousness-raising groups, taking women’s studies courses, or finding feminist friends.

I wish I had; this might have brought me sooner to a feminist critique, provided support, and made my transition smoother. I came to feminist analysis through the strange route of writer's block, or what I like to call analysis block. Through the long process of picking up and putting down my field notes, analytic memos, and halfhearted drafts about a wellness center I studied when I moved in 1980 to my first job at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I learned to develop a feminist analysis.

You will read more about Renewal (Kleinman, 1996) later in this book. A fuller account of how my growing feminist consciousness helped me analyze the data appears in other places (see Kleinman, 2002a; Kleinman, 2003; Kleinman & Copp, 1993). I'll provide a synopsis of the changes I went through in that study to give you a sense of where I started and where I ended up.

Renewal, a holistic health center, was constituted by six private practitioners (four white men, two white women) who were paid by individual clients and then gave a portion of their earnings, determined by the board, to the center. The payment was sometimes referred to as rent. The other (educational) part of Renewal was nonprofit and run by three or four staff members (all women) and several volunteers (almost all women). Low-cost classes and workshops were offered to the public through this part of Renewal. Staff members did the office work for the center—including taking phone messages for the practitioners—kept up the physical plant, and put the membership bulletin together. They also produced the newsletter that announced classes. Practitioners received about 30 dollars an hour (in the early 1980s) for their services as psychotherapists, nutrition therapists, massage practitioners, and stress managers. Given Renewal's financial problems (they were almost always in the red), the staff were often unpaid, and received 4 dollars an hour when they did get paid. Overlap existed between the two parts of the organization; practitioners did some volunteer work, often headed major committees, and sometimes taught workshops. Staff, volunteers, and practitioners were represented on the board.

The two key male practitioners, Ron and Jack, were the only remaining founders of Renewal. They had the most power and received the most respect and affection. Jack was chair of the board of directors. Ron headed the committee that determined which workshops and classes would be taught. The board made most of the decisions, from hiring and firing to approving all committee work; having influence on the board was no small matter.

I write this in hindsight. It was not clear to me from the start who really had power. The split structure of Renewal at first struck me as a result of the ineptness of people who had little experience in putting together an organization, not the product of people producing inequality. It took me

a long time to recognize the two-class system at Renewal. Why? Because I wanted Renewal to provide the antidote to my job in a quantitative department at a research university. Only a real alternative organization could do that for me. At the same time, I worried that I was violating Blumer's premise: I knew I was not living up to the ideal of having empathy toward participants. Even when I acknowledged the rather glaring inequalities at Renewal, I found myself feeling angry at the underpaid (and sometimes unpaid) staff women. Why weren't they angrier at the practitioners? As I wrote elsewhere (Kleinman, 2003):

As a liberal feminist at the time, I wanted to believe that women could be successful if we just tried hard enough. This was something I needed to believe as a twenty-seven-year-old female assistant professor—one of two women, both of us without tenure—in a highly ranked sociology department . . . Although I wasn't crazy about the male practitioners at Renewal and distrusted some of their psychologizing, I was preoccupied with the idea that the women were, by the standards of status, money, and influence, failures. I disidentified from them, probably because I needed to believe that I, unlike these women, could achieve the status of the successful men. (p. 218)

When I interviewed the women, I was able to develop empathy for them. At the time I was also reading books on cultural feminism, including Carol Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice* and Jean Baker Miller's (1976) *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Through these works, I came to see that the staff women at Renewal held what Gilligan calls an ethic of care. They made sacrifices for Renewal because they believed in the "cause" of holistic healing. As I (Kleinman, 2003) put it, "In a short time they [staff women] moved from weaklings to saints in my eyes" (p. 219).

Yet I did not immediately question the motives or behaviors of the male staff members, including Ron and Jack, who were held in the highest regard by everyone. Instead I developed an equal-but-different story: The women wanted a place to find friendship and work on holistic healing, and Renewal served their purposes (at least for a time); the men wanted a homey space to work in that could fulfill some of their desires for informal interactions. If everyone's needs were being met, why should I have a problem with it? Wasn't I inappropriately projecting my vision of what Renewal should look like on them?

But my twinge-ometer kept going off as I reread drafts of this version of the story. I felt more empathetic to both parties (practitioners and staff), but I didn't trust the analysis. Fortunately, the acting director of the Curriculum in Women's Studies talked me into developing a new course in Race, Class,

and Gender. To prepare for the course, I read the works of Marilyn Frye, bell hooks, Sandra Bartky, and Alison Jaggar (among others). I had never met them, but I heard their voices in stage whispers when I returned to the manuscript, telling me that a better story could be told, one that took power and inequality into account. As I (Kleinman, 2003) wrote later:

That the women found it acceptable to receive [little money or] no money at all while the practitioners received their pay regularly from clients did not render it fair. That the men benefited much more from the arrangements at Renewal—materially, symbolically, and emotionally—than the women held true whether participants acknowledged it or not. (p. 220)

Reading these authors freed me to write a story that fit with the feminist I had become. Or perhaps I should say that these authors turned me into a better and more systematic feminist. In my analysis of Renewal I came to ask: How did these women and men, with good intentions, manage not to see the ways they contradicted their own ideals? How did they manage to maintain a belief in themselves as good people—those committed to “alternative” ideals—despite their unfair behaviors and hierarchical organizational structure?

Feminist Fieldwork Analysis is a book I would have liked to have read—indeed, needed to read—as I came to write the story of Renewal (see Kleinman, 1996). I hope it will help researchers who share a feminist sensibility but are unsure what to keep in mind as they go about their fieldwork and especially as they write feminist analyses. As feminist researchers, we should be clear about what we mean by “feminist.” Knowing one’s perspective as a feminist and learning about what other feminist qualitative researchers have written may help researchers make decisions about what to ask and where to look, as well as how to make sense of what we’ve seen and heard.

The kind of feminist analysis I am talking about is grounded in the ideas of feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye (1983), who uses the term “oppression” to describe the position of women in U.S. society. She conceptualizes the oppression of women as a “birdcage” with systematically related “wires”:

Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in a birdcage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There

is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you see it in a moment. It is perfectly *obvious* that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (p. 4)

Frye offers a metaphor, or what social scientists might call a hypothesis. Sociologists and other social scientists have provided the data that document the existence of the wires: sexist language (Hofstadter, 1985; Kleinman, 2002b; Richardson, 2004); the wage gap (Hartmann, Gault, & Williams, 2005; Murphy & Graff, 2005; Reskin, 1988); men's violence against women (Catalana, 2005; Katz, 2006); women's second shift of housework and childcare in the heterosexual home (Deutsch, 2004; Hochschild, 1989b; Tichenor, 2005); women's "third shift" (as I call it) of caring for others (Rubin, 1983; Sattel, 1976); the sexual double standard (Tolman, 2002); women taking their husband's family name; the continual struggle for access to reproductive rights, particularly for poor women and women of color (Davis 1981; Silliman, Fried, Ross, & Gutierrez, 2004); and the list goes on (see Rhode, 1997). Some of these wires are harder to see than others. They are part of what J. Harvey (1999) calls "civilized oppression" (p. 1), whereby physical violence and the enforcement of law are absent.

The flip side of systematic inequality for one group is systematic advantage—or privilege—for the other. As Allan Johnson (2005), a white sociologist, came to recognize in his relationship with an African-American female colleague:

Her misfortune is connected to my fortune. The reality of her having to deal with racism and sexism every day is connected to the reality that I *don't*. I didn't have to do anything wrong for this to be true and neither did she. But there it is just the same.

All of that sits in the middle of the table like the proverbial elephant that everyone pretends not to notice. (p. 7)

It's the feminist analyst's job to recognize and analyze the elephant.

Cataloging systematic inequalities for the oppressed group and the corresponding privileges for the advantaged group is not enough. A list is not an analysis; it fails to tell us *how* people live out inequalities. This is where

the qualitative feminist's work comes in. Feminist researchers can study hidden inequalities and how the powerful act in ways that mask those inequalities. We can study how women and members of other oppressed groups reinforce the wires of the birdcage. As Sylvia Walby (1990) put it, the experiences of women in everyday life can be "contaminated by patriarchal notions" (p. 18); so can our theories. (More, soon, on patriarchy.)

We can also examine how people resist oppression, individually or collectively. The point of understanding systematic inequality is to learn how to undo it, whether in small or big ways. This raises the question: How do women and male allies resist, and what happens when they do?

As a feminist analyst I also recognize that there are "wires" constraining people of color, people with few economic resources, queer people, people with disabilities, and so on. There are, in fact, many birdcages. Men can't be oppressed *as men*, but they can be oppressed because of their race, class, sexual orientation, and so on (Carbado, 1999; Frye, 1983; Johnson, 2005). A working-class man, for example, may find it difficult to attain the benefits associated with being male. If he has trouble getting a decent job,

... he may have a hard time feeling like a "real man" bonded to other men in their superiority to women. The privileged social category "male" still exists, and he belongs to it, but his social-class position gets in the way of his enjoying the unearned advantages that go with it. (Johnson, 2005, p. 50)

Johnson's statement raises empirical questions for feminist researchers: What happens when members of an advantaged category are denied some of those advantages? Do they try to compensate for their lack of full advantage? Do they question the system as a whole? Having an awareness of multiple systems of oppression is only the start. As Michael Schwalbe (2000) states, "After saying that race, class, and gender are 'systems of oppression,' we are still left to wonder who does what to whom, and how they do it, to keep these systems going" (p. 776).

Analyzing field data within a feminist framework means that we pay attention to inequality. Gender is not a benign set of differing social expectations put on men and on women. Rather, gender is part of a stratification system, and "gender difference can serve as an all-purpose rationalization for gender roles and gender hierarchy" (Rhode, 1997, p. 40). As Judith Lorber (2004; see also Lorber, 2005) put it:

Gender inequality—the devaluation of "women" and the social domination of "men"—... is not the result of sex, procreation, physiology, anatomy, hormones, or genetic predispositions. It is produced and maintained by

identifiable social processes, and built into the general social structure and individual identities . . . The continuing purpose of gender as a modern social category is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group. (p. 47)

To rephrase Lorber, we live in a society whose members have inherited patriarchal ideas and practices (Johnson, 2005) and in which men receive a “patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 1995, p. 79). Johnson (2005) argues that patriarchy is societal, “and a society is more than a collection of people. . . . Patriarchy doesn’t refer to me or any other man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate” (p. 5).

The term “patriarchy” has become unpopular for a variety of reasons (see Bennett, 2006), including a misinterpretation of the word as one describing individual men rather than gendered patterns within a society, and its association with a view of women as victims. But as feminist historian Judith Bennett (1989) wrote:

This division between women as victims and women as agents is a false one: women have always been both victims and agents. To emphasize either one without the other, creates an unbalanced history. Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy; they have also colluded in, undermined, and survived patriarchy. But neither have women been free agents; they have always faced ideological, institutional, and practical barriers to equitable association with men (and indeed with other women). (p. 262)

Perhaps some readers hear the word as a reification, as if patriarchy were a Thing that is present or absent. But patriarchy is complex, and, as Johnson (2005) suggests in the title of his book, patriarchy can be “unraveled.” Walby (1990) argues that patriarchy can change in *degree* or in *form*. For example, more women now attend institutions of higher education, and this finding could be interpreted as less patriarchy (a change in degree). But new forms of patriarchy might be established to lessen the benefits that women derive from that change. In 2004, the median annual income for women with college degrees was still only about as much as the median annual income for men with high school diplomas (United States Census Bureau, n.d.)—which suggests that a corresponding change in patriarchal form has managed to keep women from translating schooling into better jobs and income.

Barbara Reskin (1988) has shown that as women have gained access to opportunities previously held by men, men have devised new rules to keep women from gaining power. These “new rules” can be seen as a form of institutional backlash against reductions in the degree of patriarchy.

What, then, does patriarchy mean? Johnson (2005) offers a definition: Patriarchal societies—including our own—are male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered. By “male-dominated,” he means that “positions of authority . . . are generally reserved for men” (p. 5). Patriarchal societies are “male-identified” in that “core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (pp. 5–6). “Male-centeredness” means that within patriarchal societies “the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do” (p. 10). These aspects of patriarchy can be studied, including how they differ in degree and form.

As feminist fieldworkers, we can ask: How do these three aspects of patriarchy play out in the settings we study? Are they overt or subtle? Do participants challenge them? What happens when they do? And, to use Ann Russo’s (2001) language, are the challenges revolutionary or merely rebellious?

Words like “patriarchy,” “oppression,” and “privilege” are hard-hitting. They suggest that we live in a society characterized by patterns that hurt particular categories of people and simultaneously benefit others. Years ago, bell hooks (1990) noted that scholars had come to dilute their language when writing and talking about inequality. Her words still ring true:

Other and difference are taking the place of commonly known words deemed uncool or simplistic, words like *oppression, exploitation and domination*. . . . There would be no need, however, for any unruly radical black folks to raise critical objections . . . if all this passionate focus on race were not so neatly divorced from a recognition of racism, of the continuing domination of blacks by whites, and (to use some of those out-of-date uncool terms) of the continued suffering and pain in black life. (pp. 51–52)

Unruly radical feminists need to reclaim the words that keep us in sight of patriarchal patterns. Bennett (1989; see also Bennett, 2006, chapter 2) defends the word “patriarchy”: “As our [women’s historians] language has shifted, so has our thinking As we know from our very first explorations into women’s history, what is muted is soon obscured, and what is obscured is eventually forgotten” (p. 254). Strong and precise language helps us remember.

Understanding the adaptability of patriarchy—what Bennett (2006) calls the “patriarchal equilibrium” (p. 4)—and the sometimes hidden nature of sexism and other inequalities, can also help us develop a twinge-ometer for injustice (Kleinman, 1998). Over time, we can thus become better at seeing patterns of oppression and privilege. Sometimes we sense that something is wrong before we figure out what is going on, so it’s important to take note

of our feelings throughout the research process. In *Emotions and Fieldwork* (Kleinman & Copp, 1993), Martha Copp and I wrote about connections between the researcher's self, her emotions, and qualitative analysis. (I see that earlier work as a companion volume to this book.) In *Feminist Fieldwork Analysis* I focus on the patterns we discover in the field rather than on how we might use our own emotions to analyze those patterns. I hope that this book, along with *Emotions and Fieldwork*, will help feminist fieldworkers develop trustworthy twinges as they do their research.

Feminist theorists and researchers have given us valuable principles that can guide the analysis of social reality. *Feminist Fieldwork Analysis* is organized around five of those principles. The first, "Talk Is Action" (Chapter 2), breaks down the conventional distinction between words and behavior, alerting us to the possible ideological functions and harmful consequences of language. The second, "Similarities Can Be Deceiving" (Chapter 3), highlights common false parallels, whereby people equate the experiences and actions of the oppressed with the experiences and actions of the privileged. The third, "Sexism Can Be Anywhere" (Chapter 4), opens our eyes to the reproduction of gender inequality in same-sex groups. The fourth, "The Personal Is Political" (Chapter 5), reminds us of the importance of linking participants' emotions to power relations. The fifth, "Everything Is More Than One Thing" (Chapter 6), directs us to the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

I culled these principles, mostly in an inductive way, from field studies that examine patriarchal patterns in our society. Looking back, I realize that a discussion of these principles—as applied to fieldwork practice—would have helped me in analyzing *Renewal*. And they continue to help me as I analyze injustices in my daily life and in the world, a subject I will return to in the final chapter. I have no doubt that there are other principles and hundreds of other studies I could have included in this book. I chose studies that I know best (including my own) to help me show how to put these principles to good use. In each chapter, I will discuss a feminist principle, examine several studies that employ the principle, and provide questions researchers can keep in mind—in the field or at their desks—as they work on their fieldwork projects. My hope is that feminist researchers will find here the sensitizing tools they need to ward off or relieve the kinds of analytic blocks I experienced in my own work.

Doing feminist work, particularly in "disciplines" rather than in interdisciplinary fields like women's studies, still carries a negative connotation. And feminist scholars continue to be labeled within a discipline as the (only) ones who have an agenda. Despite the years of accumulated knowledge