

# GENDER AND RESEARCH

VOLUME III

SAGE BENCHMARKS IN  
SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

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VOLUME 3  
Feminist methods

Sara Delamont and Paul Atkinson



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# **GENDER AND RESEARCH**

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# Contents

## VOLUME 3 Feminist Methods

### FEMINIST METHODS AND POSTMODERNISM

41. Feminist Research, Feminist Consciousness and Experiences of Sexism <i>Liz Stanley and Sue Wise</i>	3
42. Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences <i>Hilary Rose</i>	23
43. Feminist Methodology – Fact or Fiction? <i>Sue Clegg</i>	39
44. The Value of Quantitative Methodology for Feminist Research <i>Toby Epstein Jayaratne</i>	54
45. Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research <i>Mary Maynard</i>	71
46. The New Feminist Scholarship: Some Precursors and Polemics <i>Mirra Komarovsky</i>	91
47. Is There an Association between Gender and Methods in Sociological Research? <i>Linaa Grant, Kathryn B. Ward and Xue Lan Rong</i>	104
48. Locked in Uneasy Sisterhood: Reflections on Feminist Methodology and Research Relations <i>Leslie Rebecca Bloom</i>	116
49. The Progressive Verification Method: Toward a Feminist Methodology for Studying Women Cross-Culturally <i>Janet Mancini Billson</i>	127
50. Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Methodology <i>Karen McCarthy Brown</i>	148
51. Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research <i>Judith A. Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow</i>	155

52. Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History <i>Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack and Judith Wittner</i>	180
53. Quality and Quantity: Reconstructing Feminist Methodology <i>Joey Sprague and Mary K. Zimmerman</i>	199
54. Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis <i>Marjorie L. Devault</i>	216
55. "Claims and Disclaimers: Knowledge, Reflexivity and Representation in Feminist Research" <i>Gayle Letherby</i>	243
56. The Unhappy Relationship of Feminism and Postmodernism in Anthropology <i>Deborah A. Gordon</i>	262
57. Science, Gender, and Women's Liberation: An Argument against Postmodernism <i>Ann Oakley</i>	277
58. Feminism, Epistemology and Postmodernism: Reflections on Current Ambivalence <i>Gregor McLennan</i>	298
59. Confessions of a Ragpicker <i>Sara Delamont</i>	317
60. Feminism, Sociology of Scientific Knowledge and Postmodernism: Politics, Theory and Me <i>Vicky Singleton</i>	330
61. Drawing the Line at Angels: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography <i>Patti Lather</i>	351
62. Doing Feminist Educational Theory: A Post-Modernist Perspective <i>Sue Middleton</i>	376
63. Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory <i>Jane Flax</i>	392
64. Kinship between Judith Butler and Anthropology? A Review Essay <i>Thomas Strong</i>	414

# FEMINIST METHODS AND POSTMODERNISM

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# Feminist Research, Feminist Consciousness and Experiences of Sexism<sup>1,2</sup>

*Liz Stanley and Sue Wise*

## Introduction

Descriptions of the research process in the social sciences often suggest that the motivation for carrying out substantive work lies in theoretical concerns: recognition of a problem or interest leads to research being conducted, based on a series of hypotheses expressing the problem or interest to be investigated (Galtung, 1967; Blalock, 1971; Ferman and Levin, 1976). An alternative mode of research to the positivist or 'scientific model' just outlined is that described as 'grounded theory', 'emergent theory' or as 'naturalistic sociology' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968; Blumer, 1969; Matza, 1971; Manis and Meltzer, 1972; Mehan and Wood, 1975). In this alternative approach theory is said to be derived from material collected during the research process, rather than a specific problem or series of hypotheses directing the focus of the research. Within this 'naturalistic' approach the 'theory' so derived may be that of the investigator, or attempts may be made to present the theories of the research population themselves (Pollner, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967).

Many research reports are presented in terms suggested by these simple linear models. That is, data and discussion are organized around a schema implicit within the model chosen; and this organization is not 'realistic', in the sense that it does not seek to describe what happened and when and how it happened. Such reports present an abstraction from events within a pre-chosen framework.

Further, this organization of events presents material in a 'logico-temporal' manner: events are unfolded in a way based on logic and argument, not as they occurred in temporal reality. Obviously not all research is always so presented – certainly many naturalistic methods centre on the attempt to present material in terms of what happened and when and how it happened. However, we suggest that, firstly, a large body of research material makes no such attempt, whether 'positivistic' or 'naturalistic' in emphasis. Secondly, more abstract accounts of the research process do present such simple linear models as descriptions of what 'doing research' is like (Duverger, 1964; Simon, 1969; Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976).

One effect of such presentations is that the research process appears a very orderly and coherent process indeed – what we would term 'hygienic research'. And the point at which realization occurs that this is 'research as it is described' and not 'research as experienced' tends to be the point at which one is seeking to present research to academic colleagues. Pressures to present research material as though order, neatness and so on had prevailed are very strong, partly because of the increasing use of publications as a criterion of academic standing and achievement (Berger, 1966), and partly because comparatively few examples of other approaches exist. That is, there is always the possibility that lack of neatness, order and so on is the result of one's failure to do research 'properly'.

Although many people working in the social sciences privately discuss the idiosyncracies, quirks and problems of doing research, public discussions and written accounts remain rare. The personal tends to be carefully removed from public statements: these are full of rational argument, careful discussion of academic points of dispute and frequently empty of any feeling of what the research process was actually like. As we have already suggested, more realistic accounts do exist (Morgan, 1972; Fletcher, 1974; Platt, 1976; Bell and Newby, 1977), particularly in relation to naturalistic approaches. However, these are exceptional even in relation to naturalism, and are even more rare elsewhere in the social sciences.

We argue that feminist research, coming from within a tradition which expressly supports self-examination and sharing, should reflect these two qualities. But apart from this rather abstract and moral reasoning, we also suggest that a recognition of the importance of the personal is fundamental to feminist philosophy. That is, accounts of the personal constitute, not only a realm for examination and discussion, but also the subject-matter of feminist theory and thus the basis of feminist political activity. 'The personal', for feminist researchers, therefore includes research experiences as well as all other experiences. In addition to this, as Mills has emphasized (Mills, 1963), the personal is not only the political, it is also the frequently invisible yet crucial variable present in any attempt to 'do research'. We emphasize that it should not be absent from 'doing feminist research'.

However, much present feminist thinking and research appears to reject all things sociological or else to concentrate on structural approaches to the analysis of women's oppression. While having considerable sympathy for many of the

criticisms of sociology's unnecessary use of jargon, its pseudo-scientific stance and its sexist biases, we also feel that a blanket reaction to it is mistaken, as is this emphasis on social structural approaches. By 'mistaken' we mean that approaches other than the structural are important and therefore should be accepted as a valid contribution to this analysis, rather than dismissed as the study of false consciousness. Sociology is not a monolithic discipline and contains much that accords with feminist thinking, especially in relation to its emphasis on personal experience. We feel that the phenomenological approach and its many variations, such as phenomenology, inter-actionism, ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, is that part of sociology most in accord with this emphasis. It is therefore unfortunate that phenomenological research and analysis are largely absent from feminist research.

The research experience which forms the starting point for our discussion of feminist consciousness demonstrates very clearly the importance of the personal in carrying out research. This research experience involved a complex interaction between the 'research phenomenon', 'feminist theory' and 'feminist consciousness' and demonstrated to us that 'Idiosyncracies of person and circumstance are at the heart not the periphery of the scientific enterprise' (Johnson, 1975; quoted in Bell and Newby, 1977; p. 9). There are a number of important points involved in this complex interaction and we now briefly outline these.

Inevitably, 'theory' precedes research, if we interpret and use the notion of theory as in ethnomethodological discussion (Pollner, 1974; Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970). That is, all people derive 'theory' or 'second order constructs' from 'experience' or 'first order constructs' (Ryan, 1970; p. 4). We reject the idea that only social scientists, and not 'people' produce general accounts of social reality in this way (Denzin, 1972; p. 80). In this sense, it is possible to argue that all research is 'grounded', because no researcher can separate herself from personhood and thus from deriving second order constructs from experience. Following on from this, we also argue that the research experience itself will be subject to on-going 'theorizings'. In relation to our own research on obscene phone calls, which we discuss in more detail later, we found that our experience of this research phenomenon affected the basis of our relationships with men other than the 'researched', with other feminists, and also involved the development of our increasingly negative feelings about and towards the obscene phone callers themselves. In addition, we also found that this experience both became a part of and an outcome of a major shift in our perception of women's oppression. This, in its turn, influenced perception of both current and previous events connected either directly or indirectly with the research phenomenon. And eventually, our experience of the research led to a range of responses to the obscene phone callers – both expressed and constrained – which led to the end of the research period proper.

Frequently researchers are counselled not to allow the occurrence of the kind of involvement we have just outlined (Whyte, 1960; Miller, 1969; Dean and Whyte, 1969). That is, emotional involvement is seen to detract from a

professionally-correct detachment for sociologists as it is for prostitutes and for social workers. In contrast, we argue that such involvements cannot be 'controlled' by mere effort of will; and, if they could, the effects of such control would themselves constitute an important factor in the research process. More importantly perhaps, we also suggest that such involvements and consequent possible changes in consciousness must be welcomed for the insights that they may bring – for the 'transformation of reality' (Bartky, 1977) that can occur.

Also, of course, emotional involvement is not exclusive to the researchers. Nevertheless, much research literature tends to treat the researched simply as repositories of information waiting to be emptied into questionnaires, tapes of interviews and so on (Illersic, 1964; Moser and Kalton, 1971; Galtung, 1967). More plausibly, the researched too are actively involved in the research in hand. They may like, dislike, sexually desire, despise the researcher (Wise, 1978). They will almost certainly construct their own theory about both the research topic and the theory held by the researcher and supply information accordingly (Bruch, 1974). They may seek to preserve face or to present themselves differently to the researcher than to others (Plant, 1975). All these and other activities by the researched will affect, not only the presentation of self to the researcher, but also how the researcher feels about given events, situations and personalities, interprets what has and is occurring, and views the general social context in which the interaction between researched and researcher occurs.

The feelings of the researched to the researchers form the basis of our research, although these feelings were expressed towards us as 'women-who-had-a-phone-who-were-lesbians-whose-number-was-known' and not as social scientists. It was also apparent to us that these feelings and the events of the research produced specific responses and more generally contributed to our changing consciousness as feminists. Also, of course, our feelings about and our actual reactions to the callers, have affected the form and content of the 'research process' as we experienced it. And so what we now do is to discuss why and how the obscene phone calls occurred, briefly outline the content of the calls, and discuss the effects that the calls had on us.

### **Experiences of Sexism**

The focus of this paper is the nature of the relationship between researcher and researched, and feminist consciousness and changes in consciousness. The basis of this discussion is our experience of obscene phone calls. Although analyses of this have been presented elsewhere (Stanley, 1976a,b; Wise, 1978; Wise and Stanley, 1979), we nevertheless feel it necessary here to outline what occurred during this research. This is because our past experience of presenting reports of it suggest that its effects on us are incomprehensible to others without doing so. In addition to this, we have found that the content of these phone calls is outside most people's experiences of, or theorizings about, obscene phone calls.

To us the quality of the call content and the effects the calls had on us, are rationally and understandably linked. But as we report later, most other people, whether feminists or not, see our reactions as essentially irrational.

The obscene phone calls did not occur, and were not produced, as part of any academic enterprise. Their occurrence was linked to our involvement in the gay movement in this country. Between 1971 and about 1976 our home telephone number was a contact number for several local gay groups. For most of this time the contact number was specifically for a lesbian group. The function of a contact number is to provide information and advice and to refer isolated gay people to gay groups and organizations. It was advertised explicitly in these terms. However, we received obscene phone calls from the time the number was originally advertised in 1971, but increasingly so when our forenames were advertised with the telephone number in an attempt to encourage more gay women to ring. For a period of time in 1975 and 1976 our number was widely advertised on posters and also in newspaper small ads throughout the area. The research occurred during a 7-week period in 1976 in which all obscene calls were recorded verbatim and all other calls connected with the public use of our private number were logged. Before going on to discuss the content of the obscene calls, we think it useful to outline a number of important points about our involvement in 'doing research' on the calls.

Most research is voluntary, in the sense that both the research and the experiences which constitute it are synonymous and voluntarily engaged in. For us, to be involved in this research was voluntary, but our experience of it was not. That is, our intent in advertising the number was not to receive obscene phone calls and we had much rather that they had not occurred. In addition, there was no way that we could prevent obscene phone callers from calling us short of changing the telephone number. Most research also occurs in specific places and at specific times: the researcher can choose to become involved in these events or not. We could not: the specific place this phenomenon occurred was in our home; the specific time was that chosen by the callers as and when they, individually, decided to ring the number. In a sense, our decision to 'do research' was one means of coping with what proved to be a constant and massive assault on us.

During the research period, a total of 286 calls were received which derived from the 'public use' of our number; private calls from family, friends and so on were not logged. Out of this total of 286 calls, 105 were defined by us as obscene. Here we make no attempt to define or justify our idea of what constitutes an obscene call: this and other matters specific to the research are discussed elsewhere.

In describing the content of some of the obscene calls we do not wish to give the impression that we thereby feel that it is possible to classify calls under any series of discrete headings. Many, or at least a number, of 'themes' or preoccupations or concerns can be discerned in each of the calls that we present. That is, most of the calls were multi-dimensional and offered complex mixtures of these 'themes' and also of obscenity and ordinariness. The calls that are included here are sequences extracted from total calls – each sequence complete in itself, but

either the beginning or the end of the call may be omitted. C signifies the caller and R the recipient.

### *1. Violence*

Violent utterances usually consist of threats or descriptions of violence often, but not invariably, expressed towards us personally. Although sexual imagery and behaviours may be used in such utterances, we feel that their intent is not particularly sexual – their sexual content is a vehicle for the expression of violence.

R: Hullo, it's Liz.

C: It won't be for long cos I'm going to get you, tonight or tomorrow night ... I know where you live, I work in the Post Office and I've found out ... You'll come out the door and I'll be there. I'll drag you back inside and I'll fuck you like the lesy whore you are ...

R: Were you ringing about anything in particular?

C: I'm ringing about your wet cunt and me fucking you til you're fucked rigid ... I'll do you with a bottle then anything else that's around but not my cock even when you beg for it ... Then it'll be the turn of a nice sharp knife and my initials in your tits you whore ...' (Transcript 15)

### *2. Anti-Lesbian Violence*

These utterances consist of threats or descriptions of violence made towards either us as lesbians or lesbians as a group. Sometimes 'final solutions' are offered to the 'problem' of lesbianism; sometimes more personal 'revenges' are outlined.

R: Hullo, it's Liz.

C: Liz the les is it?

R: I beg your pardon?

C: So you should ... you need whipping and then stringing up in public as an example.

R: An example of what?

C: Of what happens to degenerates in a decent society.

R: Do decent societies publicly hang people then?

C: They do where there are people like you ... you're too sick to know what decent means ... you need making an example of, flaunting yourself and perverting normal women with your sexual practices ...' (Transcript 27)

### *3. Sexual Violence*

Such utterances concern the infliction of violence on us personally; these descriptions are not directed at us as lesbians nor do they appear to be using sexual



description to convey violent intent. Rather, their intent appears to concern the caller's masturbatory activity while making the call. That is, the caller uses descriptions of sexual violence as a means of arousal and of achieving orgasm/ejaculation.

'R: Hello, it's Sue.

C: Talk to me while I jerk off, Sue.

R: No, thank you.

C: ... you're still there I know you've not put the phone down ... I'll talk to you anyway ... I've got a big dick and it's getting bigger right now ... is that turning you on? I'd like to come into your room and shove it up from behind, right up your arse ... I'd bite you too, you'd scream and you'd love it too ... you're all fucking mattresses you are, just lie there and take it don't you and love every minute ... I'll be coming in a bit, it's really big and it's oozing spunk ...

R: I'm putting the phone down now.

C: Ohhh ... it's too late I've come now ... that was good, thanks.'  
(Transcript 44)

#### *4. Lesbianism as a Turn-On*

Utterances of this kind focus on lesbian sexual conduct or, rather, what the caller perceives this to be. The caller either talks about sexual acts involving lesbians or else requests that we should do so. Frequently the caller masturbates while this occurs. Typically, these utterances are directed at us personally; but an alternative approach is where the caller presents a series of requests for information, and these are used as sexual stimulation.

'C: You're a lesbian, aren't you?

R: That's right.

C: Do you like men, I mean sexually?

R: I don't want to talk to you about that.

C: That's because you're frightened of men, of cocks, but it can be cured ... I could help you. I'm good with women, they like me to use my prick on them.

R: You think you're a good lover do you?

C: They all come off with me, you would too with a real cock up you and not one of those rubber things ... Oh Jesus you'd feel come bounce off your vagina ... I've come off now, have you come off?'  
(Transcript 16)

#### *5. Sex-Service Requests*

Sex-service requests are made during calls and appear to be based on the assumption that the number was advertised in order to provide a free sex

service for males. However, some callers assume that we are prostitutes providing a sex service, although how payment can be made is never discussed by them. All such utterances ignore, or appear to think irrelevant, the purpose for which the number was advertised – this is seen as a ‘front’ for its real purpose.

R: Hello, it . . .

C: Hello, it's Steve, when can I come round?

R: I think you must have the wrong number.

C: You Sue or Liz?

R: Yes.

C: Which one?

R: None of your business. Why are you ringing?

C: I want to come round and see you give an exhibition and wank in your panties.

R: We're not prostitutes.

C: Why else would you advertise the number, if you didn't want men ringing up for sexy talk?' (Transcript 47)

### *6. Address Attempts*

These consist of attempts to discover our address by attempting to pass as insurance salesmen, friends of parents, priests, delivery services and so on. Refusal to give the requested information and statements about our perception of the caller's intent frequently leads them to make other forms of utterance.

R: Hullo, it's Liz.

C: Good afternoon. This is – Insurance here. I wonder if you'd be interested in our endowment insurance policies?

R: Oh well, I've just got details from the – Society about their's.

C: Just give me your address and I'll send you the information so you can compare them.

R: OK . . . Oh no, you don't.

C: Pardon, what's that?

R: I'll tell you what, you give me your name and work address and I'll contact you shall I?

C: I think it would be better if you were to let me send you the information right away.

R: I think you're a dirty phone caller.

C: You're wrong.

R: No, I'm not, I recognize your voice now.

C: You think you're bloody clever, don't you? I'll get to fuck you yet you fucking les. One day I'll get my prick up you . . .' (Transcript 30)



### 7. *Heavy Breathing*

Obviously, heavy breathing calls tend to contain few verbalizations by the callers. Totally silent calls are not included under this heading; heavy breathing calls are only those which terminate in noises associated with ejaculation. Some of these calls are, in addition, terminated by utterances which confirm the nature of the call.

'R: ... I think you may be a dirty phone caller, so if you're not, if you don't say who you are, I shall have to put the phone down.

C: I've come now, thanks.' (Transcript 54)

As we have already suggested, most of the calls were multi-dimensional, and what we have outlined above are not categories of calls but a number of the themes present in them. In this sense, it is not possible to give any information about the distribution of the calls among these categories. We can merely say that most of the calls contain a number of these themes and demonstrate this by reference to the following call. In this, call content shifts from one theme to another.

'C: Liz?

R: No, it's Sue.

C: Hello, sexy.

R: Can I help you?

C: Yes, you can give me a good fuck, I get turned on by lesies.

R: No, thank you, I'm not interested.

C: That's what you need, a good fuck.

R: Why do you think that?

C: Well, it's the real thing, isn't it? It's better than going with a girl.

R: I don't agree.

C: ... I'd like to splash spunk in your face, I'd like to fuck you til the come runs down you fucking queer, you fucking cunt you.

R: Have you finished?

C: Er, well, have you anything to add then?

R: What should I want to say to you?

C: ... talk while I jerk myself off, come on sexy, do us a favour.

R: Do you think I'd do that after you've been so abusive?

C: What do you mean? ... Come on now, Sue, be nice to me, come on talk to me ...' (Transcript 78)

All the calls, with the exception of two that were unclassifiable, were made by males. Sex of caller was assigned on interpretation of voice sound based on our experience of staffing a contact telephone number over the 4- or 5-year period leading up to the research period proper. Many of the callers continued to