

Feminist Methodology

Challenges and Choices



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Caroline Ramazanoğlu with Janet Holland



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Introduction

There are many possible approaches to feminist methodology. We start from the problems that arise when feminist social researchers set out to tell 'better stories' of gendered social realities than others. We examine the methodological challenges and choices that they face on the way. We do not prescribe what feminist methods must be, or specify how feminist researchers should proceed. Rather, we want to consider how feminist approaches to social research have been shaped by some of the concerns of western philosophy and epistemology, how feminist responses to these concerns have struck out in differing directions through a variety of methodological problems and solutions, and whether, despite this diversity, there is any sense in which feminist methodology is feminist, and the struggles have been worthwhile.

Methodology is not generally taken to be an exciting area, and those involved in researching gender may well wonder why they should take an interest in

methodological problems rather than just getting on with the job. But any researcher who sets out to understand gender relations and grasp their impact on people's lives has to consider: how (or whether) social reality can be understood; why conceptions of sexuality and gender have some meanings rather than others; how people make sense of their experiences; and how power inhabits knowledge production. In seeking knowledge of gender through social research, feminists make decisions about how to produce and justify their knowledge, whether they do so intentionally or not, and we argue that these decisions matter. They affect what can be known and what gets to count as authoritative knowledge. Decisions about methodology are particularly powerful in the politics and practices of knowledge production.

Feminists (like all other social researchers) have to establish and defend their claims to knowledge of social life, because there is no certain or absolute knowledge against which the truth of everything can be measured. If feminist knowledge is to be believed, it has to be made believable, but there is more than one way of making and justifying knowledge claims (and many ways of failing). There are taken-for-granted distinctions in western thought, for example, between the authority of knowledge produced through scientific procedures, and that of knowledge produced in literature, horoscopes or dreams. It is easy to class feminist knowledge as unscientific, biased and lacking in authority. But the problems raised by feminist methodology are not peculiar to feminism: they are also problems for social research more generally.

We do not attempt to review the full range of feminist adventures in methodology or all areas of feminist expertise, since these are now extensive. Instead, three themes run through the book. The first thread of our argument is that debates on feminist methodology are framed by disagreements in western philosophy over how ideas about the social world can possibly be related to people's experiences of social life, and to actual social realities. These preoccupations mean that the feminist approaches to social research currently debated in western universities can be very different from other ways of thinking about producing knowledge. Anne Seller (who has taught philosophy in the UK and the USA) says that taking her feminist ideas and debating tradition to the Mother Theresa Women's University in India confronted her with her own cultural specificity as a philosopher (Seller 1994). She found that her tools for thinking with were characteristically western: 'the more abstract and theoretical our formulations, the more culturally specific they become' (Seller 1994: 243). Feminist approaches to methodology entail choices between different strategies for specifying connections between ideas, experience and reality, or for claiming the impossibility or irrelevance of specifying such connections.

Second, we argue that feminist responses to these debates have led to methodological dispute and diversity within feminism. It is problematic that knowledge of gendered lives (like any other claims to knowledge of social reality) cannot be claimed as simply and generally true (in the sense that this knowledge directly and accurately describes an actual reality). Feminists have to find ways of making their knowledge believable, and for evaluating competing knowledge claims, but there is more than one way of connecting feminist ideas with women's experiences and with particular conceptions of reality.¹

Third, despite this divergence, feminist research is imbued with particular

theoretical, political and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive. Feminist knowledge is grounded in experiences of gendered social life, but is also dependent on judgements about the justice of social relationships, on theories of power and on the morality of social investigation. Feminist researchers are not necessarily in agreement on the meanings and consequences of experience, justice, power, relationships, differences and morality but, despite this divergence, they can potentially negotiate common moral and political positions.

The intertwining of these three themes illuminates critical contradictions in feminist efforts to produce and justify authoritative knowledge of gendered social life across a range of approaches to social research. It follows that this book is an argument *for* methodology since it is not possible to produce a neutral text *on* methodology, or to resolve feminism's inherent contradictions. It is also an argument for the importance of practical, empirical investigation in producing knowledge of gendered social life.

Three challenges to feminist methodology

Feminists have made a range of claims about the position of women in relation to men, and about male domination of social theory. As a result, recent feminism and its claims to knowledge have confronted three rather different sources of criticism.

First, challenges to feminist knowledge claims have come from dominant approaches to science, reason, progress and truth, and the situation of this thought in relation to women's experience (and to other ways of thinking, colonial and imperial history, and the uneven development of global capitalism). Feminists have been criticized for failing to produce adequately rational, scientific or unbiased knowledge (on the understanding that their critics use methodologies that are adequate in these respects). As academic feminist research developed, feminists came under increasing pressure from the wider academic community to justify their knowledge in terms of, for example, rationality, validity, rules of method, control of subjectivity and political bias. Feminist thought has been treated in many academic institutions as marginal, or as intellectually inferior to existing modes of thought (Arpad 1986; Stanley 1997). When feminists judge gender relations to be unjust and want to change them, they are implying that they have knowledge of what social relations between women and men actually are, and are expected to provide acceptable grounds for claiming that others should take this knowledge seriously. By being openly politically committed, feminists are charged with failing the test of producing generally valid and authoritative knowledge.

Second, challenges come from women's varied experiences of cultural differences, social divisions and power relations. For example, claims that patriarchal power, sexuality or reproduction are key mechanisms in the oppression of women ignore other factors (such as racism, systems of production, nationalism, heterosexism, ablebodiedism, and the complex relations between them) that shape women's lives in differing ways, and complicate relations between women (Brah 1992; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983). Western feminists have been

extensively criticized for relying on an undifferentiated category of 'women', in what Audre Lorde (1983: 99) terms the 'pathetic pretence' that differences between women do not exist.² These criticisms signal variations in personal experiences of the complex interrelations of power between women. They target the intellectual and ethical implications of producing knowledge of gender as if 'women' were a unified category of being throughout history and all over the world. They also question whether it is possible to produce knowledge of gender when gendered power relations are only one aspect of people's lives. Issues of difference fracture, politicize and personalize all approaches to understanding gender.

A third challenge has shifted English-language feminism from a long period of engagement with scientific method, liberalism and Marxism (Jaggar 1983; Maynard 1995) to close encounters with aspects of postmodern and poststructuralist thought that question the foundations of feminist knowledge and methodology (Hekman 1992; Nicholson 1990). Feminist knowledge claims are tangled in tensions between knowledge of gender relations that take the existence of women for granted, and theories that take apart the grounds of feminist claims to knowledge, and treat 'women' and 'gender' as products of ideas rather than of embodiment, patriarchy or social construction. Poststructural and postmodern thought abandons any notion of methodology as able to produce knowledge that describes actual reality.

These three sources of challenge have thrown divided feminist researchers further into dispute. Feminists are constantly rewriting feminism and its histories with some common elements, but no general consensus (see, for example, James and Busia 1993; Kumar 1989; Mohammed 1998). We consider that disentangling the resulting methodological confusion is important, both in order to clarify how knowledge of gendered lives is produced, and because different methodological challenges and responses have different epistemological, political and ethical implications. The decisions that feminist researchers make matter.

Since feminists agree on so little, and their many critics tend to oversimplify and unify diverse feminist positions, we take the rest of this chapter to sketch some points of definition that outline our concerns.

What is gender?

Feminism provides theory, language and politics for making sense of gendered lives, but no orderly position on pinning down the contradictions of 'gender'. This term can cover both how specific people experience sexuality and reproduction, masculinity and femininity, and the boundaries and interstices between them, and also variable cultural categories for conceptualizing what is lived and thought. In feminist theory, there has been considerable debate about the nature and interrelationships of sex, reproduction, identity, gender and power. We argue that sexuality, reproduction, subjectivity and gender can be taken to be interrelated – not wholly independent of embodiment, but also socially and politically constituted. Since what gets constituted and interrelated varies, gender cannot be known in general, or prior to investigation.

There are considerable differences, however, between thinking about gender in terms of: (1) what people (and their bodies) are; (2) what people do; (3) what relationships and inequalities they make; (4) what meanings all these are given; (5) what social effects ideas of gender can produce. There are also differences in conceptualizing how gender is interrelated with other ways of identifying and categorizing people, for example in racialized relationships and categories of analysis. Rather than any agreed feminist position, there are deeply felt disputes.

For the purposes of this book, we discuss feminist methodology with reference to social research on gendered lives (rather than, say, 'women', 'sex/gender' or 'sexual difference'). *We take gender to include: sexuality and reproduction; sexual difference, embodiment, the social constitution of male, female, intersexual, other; masculinity and femininity; ideas, discourses, practices, subjectivities and social relationships.* While gender can be analysed from differing perspectives and with differing assumptions, we argue that feminist knowledge of gender should include practical social investigation of gendered lives, experiences, relationships and inequalities. We see the investigation of the similarities and differences across the diversity of gendered lives as a potentially radical and emancipatory project that the term 'gender' can serve.

What is feminism in the twenty-first century?

Feminism covers a diversity of beliefs, practices and politics, and these overlap and interact with other beliefs, practices and politics. For every generalization that one can make about feminism it is possible to find 'feminists' who do not fit, or who do not want to fit. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term 'feminism' in the English-speaking world generally indicated the advocacy of women's rights. In the UK and the USA, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were actively campaigning around education, political representation, working conditions, health, sexuality, motherhood and legal rights, as well as on more specific local issues. But these were not necessarily campaigns for all women (for example, in the UK, there were campaigns to gain access to the professions for middle-class women and access to contraception for working-class, married mothers). These and other campaigns were also marked by various forms of radical feminist consciousness that targeted male power over women's minds, bodies, sexuality or labour, but this was not generally respectable or politically acceptable (Bland 1995). Other countries produced diverse campaigns around both general and specific interests and concerns, often connected with struggles for national independence, civil rights, democracy and modernization.

By the end of the twentieth century, feminism referred both more specifically and more generally to theories of male dominance that took relations between women and men to be political, and feminist struggles to be political activity on behalf of women in general. Feminism, therefore, entails some theory of power relations. Feminist conceptions of gendered power have been a critical factor in developing distinctive feminist theories and practices, but there is no unified theory of power, and feminists have drawn on a variety of ways of thinking

about how to conceptualize power, the exercise and effects of power, and what can be done to change specific power relations and practices. As our concern here is with methodology, rather than the range of theory, we have not pursued variations in feminist conceptions of power. What these theories have in common is a concern that different knowledges of gender relations have different political and ethical implications. In these theories, any claim that all women are similarly subordinated, and so can and should act collectively, rubs up against actual experiences of differences between women, and different ways of conceptualizing power (Sanday 1981).

The feminism that developed in the last 30 years or so still attracts criticisms for its supposedly powerful consensus, and its tyranny in imposing hatred of men and denying fun and femininity to women (Gill 1997).³ In practice, late twentieth-century feminism developed, alongside many other political movements and activities, as an unstable intellectual, political and practical activity grounded in a sense of women having some common political interests across their social divisions, and so having some potential interest in acting together to transform unjust gender relations. Feminist notions of liberation, emancipation and social transformation imply freedom from oppression and freedom to live differently, but this is a slippery area of debate, difference and disagreement, rather than one of agreed concepts, aims or strategies (Ahmed et al. 2000).

Feminist notions of social transformation are rooted in varied experiences of gender subordination, expressed in varied theories of gender and power, and incorporate a range of moral and political judgements on what constitutes injustice. If the subordination of women is taken to be unjust, then it is unjust wherever it occurs, and strategies for tackling particular injustices imply some general notion of justice. This gives feminism a problematic relationship to women-in-general. Feminism depends critically on establishing: first, that a category of women (female persons, clearly differentiated from male persons) exists; second, that women do have some common conditions of gendered existence, despite the social and cultural divisions between them, and despite the interests that women can share with men; and, third, that there are universal criteria of justice/injustice. Feminism in this cloak of well-meaning universalism has been unmasked as a form of western cultural imperialism seeking to incorporate all women into a particular set of western values and categories (Mohanty 1988). Challenges to feminist universalism mark a central contradiction in feminist politics. There is a critical difference between building limited generalizations about women's social existence (based on specific histories, experiences, cultures, localities and relationships) and making universal generalizations about 'women' (based on prior theory).

The characteristics of feminism remain open to dispute since women's movements have developed at different periods, in different languages and cultures, and in differing ways. The diversity of women's struggles around the world constitutes a challenge to claims that feminism is a western invention. All over the world women are occupied in struggles for more humane and just societies through action on 'women's issues', which takes various forms and adopts various cultural expressions. The extent and limits of common experiences, visions of alliances and social divisions are well exemplified in the global women's conferences organized periodically by the United Nations (see, for

example, Basu 1995; Brah 1992; Sum 2000). There has never been a shared theory of gender oppression or male dominance; a unified vision of justice and liberation; a common approach to the production of knowledge; agreed knowledge of the extent of women's differences; or a consensus on truths about gender.

Any definition of feminism can, therefore, be contested. But a review of developments in western feminism since the nineteenth century, and of the activities of women's movements around the world that are in critical tension with western feminism, suggests the following key characteristics of the feminism that is the focus of this book.

- 1 *Feminism is diverse and decentred.* There is no political centre to provide an authoritative definition of common goals and strategies for liberation. So there is no ruling on what does or does not constitute feminist methodology.
- 2 *Feminism is exclusionary.* Despite its diversity, any definition of feminism excludes 'non-feminism', or 'not-quite-feminism', thus exposing fragmentation among feminists and divisions between women. This leaves as problematic who (if anyone) has the power to define boundaries for whom, and whether, or how, feminists can speak for 'women'.
- 3 *Feminism implies a unified subject.* Women can only constitute the subject of feminism if they share a gendered social position. Feminism, therefore, requires some concept of a community of women who really exist. This raises the question of whether 'women' (and so 'men') are a real collectivity with political interests in common, rather than a variable social category.
- 4 *Feminism entails some claim to common interests between women.* Attempts to define feminism and its goals in some neutral way encounter real divisions of political interest, and so differing experiences of power, inequality and injustice between women. Any specific goals of social transformation can be very actively contested. Gender cannot be separated in practice from other social relationships, including those that empower and privilege some women over others. Nevertheless, feminism addresses women across their social differences, on the grounds that common interests can be found wherever gender relations are unjust. If women really have nothing in common, and no gendered inequalities or injustices exist, the rationale of feminism disappears.
- 5 *Feminism implies a case for emancipation.* Feminism can only be justified where gender relations are unjust/oppressive, and people are able to choose to change them. Feminist claims to knowledge of gendered lives carry dreams of resistance, agency and emancipation across social divisions and the complexities of social existence. But emancipation also raises numerous problems about how change for the better is conceived, by whom, for whom and why.

Are feminists women?

Any notion of 'we' implies either universal humanity (all of us human beings) or requires some specification and justification of the boundaries of the particular category of being in question. (Which of us human beings does this particular

'we' refer to?) Feminists cannot speak for 'we humans', 'we women' or 'we feminists' without specifying the nature and boundaries of the collectivity or category they speak for. The notion that women are a community with a shared social position whose lives can be investigated by women researchers who share this common position has been extensively criticized. In this book, we use 'we' to refer to us, the authors addressing you, the reader, unless we specify otherwise.

As an alternative to assuming that there are always two rigid, natural categories, 'women' and 'men' (which could clearly identify feminists as women speaking on behalf of women), 'women' and 'men' can be seen as socially constituted, and so variable, gender categories. There is no certain knowledge, though, on what aspects of gender identities exist at birth, the consequences of genetic variation, or of variable interaction with environments. It does seem increasingly likely that what is innately gendered, what develops in interaction with specific environments, and what is learned interact in ways that are both variable and not fully understood. Gender categories can operate differently in different periods and cultures in identifying what some people share with those like themselves and do not share with those unlike themselves, with particular reference to sexuality and reproduction. What people with male/female labels share in any given instance cannot be known in advance and so needs investigation.

Confusions about the significance of embodied differences, and their relation to social identities, arise because there can be political struggles around what sense is made of sexual and reproductive difference. There are not in practice two mutually exclusive, wholly natural, gender categories, and official attempts to classify international athletes as definitively male or female have made clear the impracticality of drawing clear boundaries around individual bodies. Instead, there is an area of intersexuality, normative confusion and social regulation, where differing cultures draw, disrupt and regulate their gender boundaries differently (Sawhney 1995).

The UK, for example, has only two gender categories (male/female). Newborn babies whose genitals do not mark them as clearly fitting into either category are assigned a gender that is recorded on their birth certificate and may not legally be changed. Such babies may be deemed to require surgery, or other medical intervention, to 'improve' the fit with their assigned gender. Other ways of conceptualizing gender can allow more than two gender categories or different or more flexible boundary systems (Sawhney 1995). Intersexuals and transsexuals in the UK, as in the USA, may support existing gender boundaries by seeking clear assignment as either man or woman. Alternatively, they may disrupt rigid boundaries by asserting their difference and refusing to 'fit' (Hird 2000).

Once it is established that what it means to be woman/man/neither-woman-nor-man, can be different within different ways of knowing and being, feminist researchers cannot simply take 'women' as the subject of feminism, and cannot assume that the feminist is simply a woman. If a feminist methodology has distinctive rules, a politically sympathetic man should (in theory) be able to use them. If only women can do feminist research, where does this leave intersexual or transsexual researchers? (Problems can arise in

practice if a researcher's claim to share feminist politics or have knowledge of women's experience is disputed.) Since understanding power relations is central to feminist research, investigation of gendered lives by feminists includes the study of men and masculinity (Holland et al. 1998; McKee and O'Brien 1983; Sharpe 1994). The more male-oriented field of men's studies is also informed by feminist theory and politics (Ramazanoğlu 1992a).

These problematic characteristics of gender, feminism and feminists both shape and constrain the development of feminist methodology. There is an enormous feminist literature on knowledge, methodology and science, but considerable confusion and contradiction within modern feminism (and in the many criticisms of feminism) about where feminists stand in relation to notions of science, reason, method and truth. In the next section we outline the context and the key characteristics of methodology that have both shaped feminist approaches to social research, and encouraged the diversity of these approaches.

What is methodology in social research?

Methodology in social research is concerned with procedures for making knowledge valid and authoritative. But questions of truth and authority are extensively disputed in western philosophy, and can be thought of in different terms in other ways of thinking. Attempts to clarify the problems and possibilities of feminist methodology range from abstracted debates on science, truth and epistemology to the details of fieldwork practices (Cook and Fonow 1990: 71).

For our purposes, different approaches to methodology in social research are different responses to how, or whether, the knowledge people produce about social life can be connected to any actual reality. Philosophers disagree on the possibilities of connections being made between:

- 1 *ideas* (theories, concepts, consciousness, knowledge, meanings) through which people imagine or make sense of reality and experience, for example in conceptions of 'family';
- 2 *experience* (how people live and make sense of the social world, and each other, in their everyday lives), for example in everyday experiences of 'family life', its meanings, relationships and practices;
- 3 *material and social realities* (things, relationships, powers, institutions, and impersonal forces that really exist and can have effects on people's lives whether people are conscious of them or not), for example relations between sexual partners, or parents and children, that actually exist independently of people's knowledge of them.

Different conceptions of 'family' clearly have different political implications, and there are also ethical issues in how knowledge of the 'family' is produced and used. The methodological choices open to feminist social researchers in connecting ideas, experience and reality provide the main theme of this book.

Connecting ideas, experience and reality

Feminist methodology is one set of approaches to the problems of producing justifiable knowledge of gender relations. Any claim to know social reality, though, is fraught with difficulty. Western philosophers disagree on what claims can be made about connections between knowledge and reality, or whether any claims are possible. Positions vary from claims that knowledge can directly describe or mirror reality, to claims that all that researchers can know is ideas, or the particular shared language through which knowledge claims are expressed.

Modern scientific method is a form of the pursuit of truth, in the sense that scientists do aim to specify connections between ideas (scientific theories), experience (what our senses and experiments tell us) and reality (what actually exists independently of human thought). Alternatively such connections can be deemed problematic or impossible. Although these concerns with making and contesting connections run through western thought, they run in different directions. There are particularly sharp disagreements over: whether social reality can exist independently of people's ideas about it; whether experience can exist independently of the ideas/language that give meaning to experiences; where ideas come from, and whether/how they are powerful. Disputes over how, or whether, connections can ever be made, and social reality ever actually known, provide the methodological context within which feminist approaches to methodology have developed.

While feminist methodology is rooted in conceptions of scientific method as the means of producing authoritative knowledge of social reality, these roots do not grow into clear pathways through debates on methodology. Feminists too are divided over where ideas come from, how people make sense of experience, whether social reality can be connected to ideas and experience, and what evidence is evidence of. Claiming connections (or being unable to specify connections) between ideas, experience and reality can be thought of as a social process of knowledge production. This requires further reflection on who is doing the knowing, the nature of mind, self and subconscious, whether individuals can produce knowledge, or whether they always do so as part of a community, and what it means to be reasonable. For feminists, this process is intrinsically political, and has ethical implications.

Further philosophical disputes about cause and effect, determinism and free will affect conceptions of human agency. Agency implies that people have the ability to choose their goals and act (more or less rationally) to achieve them, as opposed to actions and ideas being determined by one's social position, genes, subconscious, impersonal historical forces, or other factors. Western feminism has recognized that agency is difficult to establish, but has been reluctant to dispense with a notion of individual agency, however philosophically problematic. Most versions of feminism assume that people have some power to make choices and act on them (unless forcibly rendered totally helpless) and so can be held morally responsible for their actions. But this notion of individuality and agency is not common to all cultures, and is never a simple one to defend.

Methodology in social research entails:

- 1 a social and political process of knowledge production;