

Feminist Geography in Practice

Research and Methods

Edited by
Pamela Moss



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Feminist Geography in Practice

Research and Methods

Edited by Patricia A. Jones



*For the feminist geographers – students,
colleagues, and friends – whom I've worked
with and learned from over the years.*



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Feminist Pedagogy Working Group in Victoria, BC, Canada: Kathleen Gabelmann, Jenny Kerber, Andrea Lloyd, Pamela Moss, Denise Pritchard, Amy Zidulka, Joy Beauchamp, Melissa Belfry, Kimberlee Chambers, Tamara Koltermann-Hernandez, Erin Quigley, Cristal Scheer. We came together with a shared interest in feminist research in geography and a desire to explore the relationship between theory and practice. Over the course of nearly a year, we discussed our diverse experiences as feminists, as students, and as researchers. We agreed to produce material that supports feminist research pedagogy. Sharing an enthusiasm about working through the challenges and possibilities of feminist research, we drew upon both the contributors' and our own questions, dilemmas, and ideas about how to take on, think about, and do feminist research in geography. In our contribution, we provide a glimpse into our own process of working through the material in the book. We hope that our work, while not intended to be prescriptive, promotes discussion and enriches your learning.

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Taking on, Thinking about, and Doing Feminist Research in Geography

Pamela Moss

What makes research in geography *feminist*? If you're a feminist, do you *have to* do feminist research? And, if you're *not* a feminist, can you do *feminist* research? What sorts of things do you *need* to know about in order to *do* feminist research? How do you go about *making* a conventional method *feminist*? Can the *practice* of geography research actually *ever* be feminist?

I began thinking about this book with this seemingly endless list of questions in mind, questions with definitive answers nowhere in sight. Then, I wondered about wanting definitive answers. I thought what a treat it would be to know when I had one and how suitably impressed I would be when I saw one. Yet I'm content not to know. In fact, I revel in not knowing – not knowing for sure. I'm comfortable asking questions about research that have no “right” answers, to talk endlessly about how feminism influences research in geography with whomever has similar inclinations. I've been interested in feminist geography research for what seems like ages now, as an undergraduate stealing glances of *Antipode* for special projects, research papers, and for any chance I could get. I eventually figured out that the path to being an academic – studying, obtaining degrees, and landing a tenure-track position at a university – seemed to be a worthwhile path to follow so that I could continue being a feminist while being employed. All these years later, after having undertaken various types of feminist research projects in geography and teaching feminist methodologies in a number of contexts, I decided that I wanted to pull together a collection of works that was organized around issues that I found useful in undertaking feminist research in geography. For me, and I would anticipate that for others this might also be the case, it makes sense to sort feminist research into processes that we engage in when putting feminist geography into practice: taking on, thinking about, and doing feminist research. And,

to be sure, these processes only make sense in the context of the history of methodological work within feminist geography.

Even though developing a feminist analysis was an issue early on in the radical movement in geography, methodological concerns began appearing in print only in the 1990s (see for example McDowell, 1992a, 1993a, 1993b; *Canadian Geographer*, 1993). It wasn't that feminists in geography weren't interested in doing feminist research; rather, feminists weren't publishing their thoughts on feminist methodologies. It soon became important however to refine feminist concepts in geography, including those concepts associated with doing feminist research – method, methodology, and epistemology (Moss, 1993, pp. 48–9). These early methodological works were heavily influenced by feminist work done in the early and mid-1980s (see for example Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Roberts, 1981; Bowles and Klein, 1983; Harding, 1986, 1987a; Hartsock, 1984). In fact, Sandra Harding's (1987b, pp. 2–3) definitions of *method* as techniques used in gathering evidence, *methodology* as a theory and analysis of how research should proceed, and *epistemology* as a theory of knowledge, are still powerful beginning points in understanding processes involved in undertaking feminist research. As debates unfolded within and outside geography throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminists worked out more sophisticated definitions, especially as they related to racialized and sexualized relations within feminist scholarship (see for example Sedgwick, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Collins, 1998). The crux of these concepts remained the same – method has to do with *doing* research, methodology had to do with *approaching* research, and epistemology had to do with *knowledge associated with doing and approaching research*.

Attention to methodological issues in feminist geography coincided with the increased publication of debates in collections of works focusing on a specific aspect of feminist methodology in women's studies, sociology, and anthropology (see for example Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Nielson, 1990; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Gluck and Patai, 1991) and of more generalized handbooks or "how-to" books (see for example Eichler, 1988; Kirby and McKenna, 1989; Smith, 1990a, 1990b; Reinhartz, 1992). In geography, these feminist debates manifested in collections of journal articles (see *Canadian Geographer*, 1993; *Professional Geographer*, 1994, 1995; *Antipode*, 1995), sections of books on feminist geography (see Jones, Nast and Roberts, 1997a; WGSF, 1997; McDowell, 1999), and single articles appearing in wide variety of feminist and non-feminist geography journals (see for example Pratt, 1993, 2000; Katz, 1996; Moss and Matwychuk, 1996, 2000; Domosh, 1997; Rose, 1997; Nairn, 1999).

This interest in methodology among feminist geographers was not only a part of how feminism shapes feminist research in geography but also, as Susan Hanson (1997, p. 122) points out, part of how geography shapes

feminist approaches to research. Feminist geographers took up topics that were specific to the discipline: spatializing the constitution of identities, contextualizing meanings of places in relation to gender, and demonstrating how gender as a social construction intersects with other socially constructed categories within particular spatialities, among many other topics. Being able to work through these types of interests has had an impact on the way feminists approach research within geography ranging from approaching research as a feminist, through integrating spatial conceptualizations into a feminist research framework, to choosing feminist methods for collecting and analyzing information. The maturity of the methodological arguments developed by so many feminists within the past several years makes feminist geography a rich field from which to draw out specific research practices. Being a feminist matters when taking on research in geography in that a feminist politics – whether it be based on pro-woman, anti-oppression, or based on social justice – influences all aspects of the research process. Thinking about feminist research tends to sharpen an approach to a project in that understanding power and knowledge brings into focus the varied contexts within which research takes place. Doing feminist research means actually undertaking the task of collecting and analyzing information while engaging a feminist politics. By including pieces written by different feminists with different perspectives on research and methods, I am able to offer a collage of ideas, thoughts, and arguments about the *practice* of feminist geography. Instead of reiterating the arguments about method, methodology, and epistemology by way of introducing these works, I turn the kaleidoscope just a bit and focus on sets of issues that have arisen out of those discussions. As a way to make my way through these issues, I first discuss taking on, thinking about, and doing feminist research in turn and through the discussion offer a possible framework for understanding specific practices in feminist research in geography.

Taking on Feminist Research

Taking on feminist research entails close scrutiny and (re)politicization of all aspects of the research process – from choosing a research topic to selecting data collection methods, from setting a research question to conceptualizing theoretical constructs, and from designing a research project to presenting and circulating analyses. Working with the variegated contours of the infusions, interfaces, and articulations of feminism and research is a first step in taking on feminist research in geography. Placing feminist work as well as placing yourself as a feminist researcher in the context of research in geography and in feminism – contextualizing your