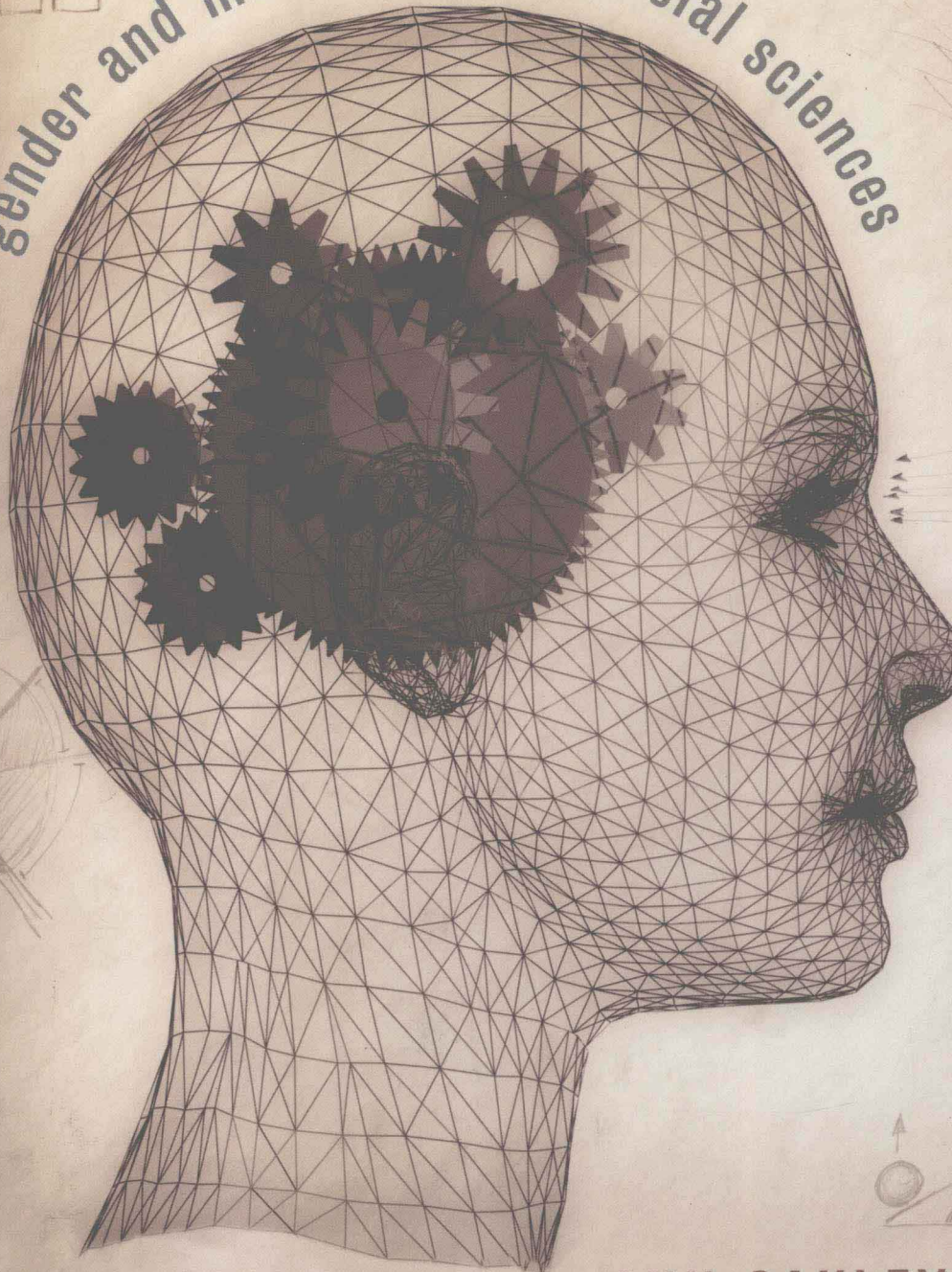


experiments in knowing

gender and method in the social sciences



ANN OAKLEY

Experiments in Knowing

*Gender and Method in the
Social Sciences*

Ann Oakley

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Ann Oakley

Author's Note

Figures in the tables have been rounded up, so percentages may not equal 100 percent in all cases.

References in the text to modern editions of early works mainly cite the modern date, with the date of original publication given in the bibliography.

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Part I

Modern Problems

1

Who Knows?

Every book that has ever been written proceeds on at least two levels. The first is that of the ideas which are presented. The second level pertains to the developmental process.

Bakan, *The Duality of Human Existence*

Oakley makes sense only to Oakley.

Pawson, *A Measure for Measures*

This is a book about the history and sociology of different ways of knowing. It is also about the manner in which gender – the cultural construction of femininity and masculinity – has intersected with these processes. My main argument goes as follows: that in the methodological literature today, the ‘quantitative’/‘qualitative’ dichotomy functions chiefly as a gendered ideological representation; that within this gendering of methodology, experimental methods are seen as the most ‘quantitative’ and therefore as the most masculine; that these processes of methodological development and gendering cannot be separated from the ways in which both science and social science developed, and the social relations in which they were embedded; and that the goal of an emancipatory (social) science calls for us to abandon sterile word-games and concentrate on the business in hand, which is how to develop the most reliable and democratic ways of knowing, both in order to bridge the gap between ourselves and others, and to ensure that those who intervene in other people’s lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm.

This issue of the basis on which such interventions are made, the claims that surround them, and the consequences which flow from them is a particularly critical one in terms of the genesis of this book. We live in a world full of ‘experts’ – doctors, teachers, social workers, politicians, economists, health educators, psychotherapists, lawyers, etc., not to mention a huge range of voluntary organizations and other groups – who all claim to know how to improve our lives. Some of them may do, but how do we (or they) know? This

question is, I believe, one which receives far too little attention. Feminist social science has been a particularly important recent strand in the critique of experimental and ‘quantitative’ ways of knowing. But it seems to me that women and feminism need the service of these methods (and, indeed, depend on them in crucial ways in their everyday lives).

What is true of feminism and women is, of course, true of people generally. An alternative way to frame this is to suggest that the goal of would-be knowers is the elimination of as much bias or distortion as is possible in what it is that counts as knowledge. This means a meticulous, systematic, transparent, sensitive striving for descriptions of ‘reality’ that satisfy not primarily knowers’ needs for professional and scientific recognition, but the much more generous task of helping human beings to make informed decisions about how best to lead their lives.

The book follows the dictate of the original positivist Auguste Comte, who advised that, ‘It is true that a science cannot be completely understood without a knowledge of how it arose’ (Comte 1853:24). What it presents is a discussion of how the definition of ways of knowing has constantly been interlaced with who is doing the defining, and about how the patterning of all of this has followed certain fundamental divisions existing in the wider culture. One of the implications of this argument is that some ways of knowing have traditionally occupied spaces at the edge of the dominant vision, the same kinds of spaces as are filled by the lives and experiences of the socially marginalized, including women. Thus, neither methods nor methodology can be understood *except* in the context of gendered social relations. Understanding this involves a mapping of how gender, women, nature and knowledge have been constructed both inside and outside all forms of science.

This first chapter takes a step back from the rest of the book and sets its project in its own social context – of the circumstances in which the book came to be conceived and written.

The project of the book

Experiments in Knowing was conceived in early 1997, when I had the good fortune to be the guest for several months of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences. SCASSS is an exhilarating institution, set up in 1985 with Swedish government money to bring together groups of academics from within Scandinavia and further afield to share for a term or so at a time a life of thinking and writing free from other distractions. It was difficult to know how to make the best use of my Swedish opportunity. What I decided is that I would spend my time trying to find out why in the world of science and social science today research methods – ways of knowing – tend to be described in different and opposed ways as ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’.¹

Much has been written about this debate, but, as Martyn Hammersley (1989:4) observes, its history is strikingly neglected. The *oppositional* use of the terms ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ is relatively modern. It is, moreover, a use

which seems to engender a great deal of emotion, with the two words flagging whole sets of associations, only some of which generally have anything directly to do with the topic being discussed. 'Quantitative' also includes 'experimental'; 'experimentation' is 'at the far end of the quantitative scale' (McKie 1996:7), and it, too, is a concept that seems to provoke considerable indignation. One of the 'founding fathers' of sociology, Herbert Spencer, put it well when he wrote in his *Autobiography*: 'While words are necessary aids to all thoughts save very simple ones, they are impediments to correct thinking. Every word carries with it a cluster of associations determined by its most familiar uses, and these associations, often inappropriate to the particular case in which the word is being used, distort more or less the image it calls up' (Spencer 1904:300). Since the modern 'paradigm war' between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methods is the starting-point for this book, the next chapter takes a closer look at some of its manifestations, at how the proponents of the two positions align themselves, and what the essence of the dispute might reasonably be considered to be.

Part of my Swedish project was an attempt to integrate my two interests in methodology and gender. The onset of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s injected a new awareness of bias into many disciplines (see e.g. Bowles and Duelli Klein 1983; Millman and Kanter 1975). In social science, one response was the elevation of 'qualitative' methods over others as the route to reshaping knowledge in a more egalitarian format. 'Quantitative' methods were early deemed 'hard', while 'qualitative' ones were considered 'soft' (Zelditch 1962). As this dichotomy immediately buys into a whole set of others, including 'masculinity' and 'femininity', it suggests that the division in methodology is, in some sense, just another epiphenomenon of the structural duality of male and female. But just how are ways of knowing and gendered ways of being related? What were the events and processes that connected them historically? This theme of gender runs throughout the book, although there are particular points (for example, chapters 2 and 3 on modern methodological issues, and chapters 4 and 6 on the development of social science) where it is more salient than others. In linking gender and methodology, I chose to focus on the field of women and health research. Health research presents a special case, methodologically speaking, since it bridges the two ways of knowing, with both medical and social scientists applying to it their own favoured approaches. Although the book draws on a wide literature, much of it American, some of the discussion inevitably reflects the UK scene.

Experiences and meanings

SCASSS is housed in a villa in Kåbo, a residential suburb of Uppsala. Uppsala lies north-west of Stockholm, and is the site of Sweden's oldest university, founded in 1477. The town owes its modernization to King Gustavus Adolphus (of the Thirty Years' War) and his daughter Christina in the seventeenth century; Christina reappears later in this book through her alliance with the

French philosopher René Descartes. Uppsala is dominated by the twin spires of the (originally thirteenth-century) cathedral, which can be glimpsed long before IKEA on the bus ride from the airport; equally magisterial is the huge red castle which sits on the hill looking down over the famous botanical gardens. Uppsala is where the botanist Carl Linnaeus produced his classification of the entire world of plants in terms of eighteenth-century human gender stereotypes; it is also known as an important manufacturing centre for bicycles and as the birthplace of Ingmar Bergman.

I posted 40 kilos of books ahead to myself and set off for SCASSS towards the end of January 1997. The apartment provided for me was well-sited, in central Uppsala, but the first thing I noticed was its smell. This turned out (eventually) to be due to the refrigerator defrosting itself over many years into the concrete floor, and thus setting in motion a most threatening (and offensive) form of rot. I had some problems convincing my colleagues at SCASSS that the qualitative nature of my experience of the apartment derived from something measurably real. But after they had been lured back there for champagne (a 'smell' party), consensus was happily reached that what was wrong lay outside rather than inside my head.

SCASSS lent me a bicycle with which I moved, not exactly effortlessly, between apartment, office and swimming bath. It snowed much of the time. I kept a diary. A few weeks after my arrival, I wrote:

'There's really no beginning to the day, because I wake several times in the night with the half-known fragments of dreams in a web of limbs and bedding which I at first think are not my own; and I get up to adjust the blind so I can see what the weather is doing: does the ground shine with a treacly black glaze, or is it downy with the fluff of freshly fallen snow? Will I skate or slide or fall or walk in the morning? How many clothes should I wear? What will happen to me?

Understandably, the Swedes are preoccupied by the weather. I've been here a month now, and the temperature has moved from about -5 to +5, but most of the time it hovers around zero. It's most important to quantify the weather. Mr Svensson, in whose apartment I'm living, has a thermometer fixed to the outside of his bedroom window. In the office to which I make my perilous journey each morning, there's a more modern thermometer which offers readings in both fahrenheit and celsius; Celsius was born in a house not far from here.

I watch myself as I live; observing; measuring; coding; classifying and trying to come to terms with the different meanings that emerge from this process. I am the qualitative knower, and also the quantitative one. I have swum 14 times in the central swimming bath in Uppsala: 30 lengths each time, except for the time when I felt particularly miserable and did 40 in an effort to raise some endorphins. That's 430 lengths. By the time I go in June what will it be? 2200, 3200? Is the number of lengths I do caused by my mood, or do other factors explain it – for example, the presence of alternative forms of evening entertainment or the number of anti-social male swimmers in the fast lane?

One of the surprises about Sweden is what dreadful swimmers many Swedes are. A view under the water, courtesy of my Boots goggles, reveals an awful lot of untidily arranged limbs. It's more of a cultural ritual than exercise. On the other hand, I've learnt that this qualitative indicator coexists with a real quantitative one. A lot of Swedes have awfully long legs and just as you think they've finished, they haven't, and wham, there's a Swedish foot in your face. Even the sauna isn't serious. Beautiful young Swedish bodies, tanned and blonde, with neatly tailored Vs of pubic hair, wander in and out, only staying long enough to warm up after their swim or to dry their costumes on the rail round the sauna coals. One woman was even eating an apple in the sauna the other day, and another was reading a book. It's not my idea of a sauna, but it is theirs.

I am outside myself all the time, and inside myself: the knower and the known. In the evenings I walk from my apartment to the swimming bath, alongside and across the Fyris river which streaks through Uppsala, a most welcome landmark for the spatially challenged like me. I count the bridges between the apartment and the swimming bath: 1, 2, 3, 4. The river was frozen when I came, now the ice is only patchy. Under the bridges in the dark water the ducks quack, but nobody feeds them. The melting of the snow which is, no doubt, only temporary, reveals faults in the landscape: a wine bottle on an ice floe; cracks in the surface of the road. Walking is an art – or a science. You have to look down all the time, and you must concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Each foot has to be down squarely without pushing too much, and then picked up again vertically without allowing any horizontal slippage. Of course you must have the right footwear, with enough crevices and ridges on the sole. It's no use looking round at things or engaging in conversation with yourself or someone else; distraction comes before a fall.

Then there's the observation of the ground itself. What I previously thought of as undifferentiated snow and ice isn't so any more. There are the streaks of ice that shine in the morning sunlight or the light of bicycles: they are to be avoided. Glaze is death. There are the great grey lumps of old snow and dirt which can be ridden over, like little hills. A new dusting of snow is worst, because of what it hides from view. This is why the Eskimos have multiple words for snow, and why people who live in forests can't speak only of 'green'. Being in an environment means that your concepts are shaped by it.²

So I live what I write about and I write about what I live.

When I came out of SCASSS last night, at about half past seven, it had been dark for nearly 3 hours. The sky above the pine forest held a low slung crescent moon coiled in a corona of vivid blue and pink. It made me think of a fertilized human egg sticking its tendrils into the walls of its mother's womb. I walked in the pine forest the other day, using the Swedish technique, passing several Swedish mums with heavily garbed toddlers and expansive old-fashioned pushchairs lined with sheepskins the colour of honey. I wonder what it's like to be a mother here? With the sheepskins and the daycare and the apparent absence of all those nasties we have at home – violent men and punitive welfare benefits, sexually marauding politicians and little boys with axes to grind (much the same thing).

I expect there are surveys which would answer that question for me. But there are very few surveys which can compare these issues across countries. Anne-Marie, a methodologist from Belgium, has left in my room a list of statements she wants me to score on how I think men and women would answer for five different countries. Then she'll give us the real answer at her seminar. But is there anything that will convey the texture of the experience – of being a mother and walking through the pine forest in Kåbo, Uppsala, Sweden's cathedral city, on a not-quite-snowing day in February 1997?

I got lost in the forest. I came out on a road I didn't recognize; scanning the landscape for familiar sights revealed none. But I had a map, creased and much folded in my pocket, and although not all the roads were marked on it, enough were, and so I found my way safely back to the white enclosure of my office, with its pale marine lino and the clean cut lines of its pine furniture – the chair with its rounded arms and blue cushions, the computer table with the bits that come out but aren't quite clever enough to hold all the books from which I want to take notes, the smooth (but not now so tidy) pine desk, and the office chair with its wheels so I can waltz across the floor from desk to book-shelf and back again, making my own music.

I remember TS Eliot:

“There is no end, but addition: the trailing/ Consequence of further days and hours,/ While emotion takes to itself the emotionless/ Years of living among the breakage . . . / We had the experience but missed the meaning,/ And approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form, beyond any meaning/ We can assign to happiness.”

We live through experiences, rather than in them. And we can't live in anyone else's. That's the great puzzle: none of us will ever know what it's like to be anyone else. History and now and Sweden (to paraphrase TS Eliot), and this English woman sitting in a chair. Her hair is wet from swimming and she wears white trainers on her feet. She smiles as she writes. This is because writing gives her pleasure. The words slip out of her pen like the pink-gold Fyris river, freed of its ice-floes, rushing out to sea; like a child who can't wait to leave the house and play. The words fix themselves on the page and become something; they are real, really there. But how easy it is to slip between 'I' and 'she'. If I can objectify myself, what does this say about our ability to objectify others? Am I right about any of this? Who knows?

Different ways of knowing

Everybody thinks they know certain things, but debating what knowledge is and how to reach it has traditionally lain in the domain of 'experts'. Among the different ways we have of knowing about the world outside ourselves are autobiography and fiction. Autobiography can provide a startling insider view of phenomena otherwise classified in quite different terms. An example is New Zealand writer Janet Frame's account of her labelling as mentally disordered in her celebrated *An Angel at My Table*:

The six weeks I spent at Seacliff hospital in a world I'd never known among people whose existences I never thought possible, became for me a concentrated course in the horrors of insanity and the dwelling-place of those judged insane, separating me for ever from the former acceptable realities and assurances of everyday life. From my first moment there I knew that I could not turn back to my usual life or forget what I saw at Seacliff. I felt as if my life were overturned by this sudden division of people into 'ordinary' people in the street, and these 'secret' people whom few had seen or talked to but whom many spoke of with derision, laughter, fear. I saw people with their eyes staring like the eyes of hurricanes surrounded here by whirling unseen and unheard commotion . . . There was a personal geographical, even linguistic exclusiveness in this community of the insane, who yet had no legal or personal external identity – no clothes of their own to wear, no handbags, purses, no possessions but a temporary bed to sleep in with a locker beside it, and a room to sit in and stare, called the *dayroom*. (Frame 1990:193)

Once released from hospital, Frame found she needed a medical certificate in order to claim sickness benefit:

My visit to the Seacliff doctor . . . brought its own bewilderment, for the medical certificate stated: Nature of Illness; *Schizophrenia*.

At home I announced, half with pride, half with fear, 'I've got *Shizofreenier*' . . . It seemed to spell my doom, as if I had emerged from a chrysalis, the natural human state, into another kind of creature, and even if there were parts of me that were familiar to human beings, my gradual deterioration would lead me further and further away, and in the end not even my family would know me.

In the last of the shining Willowglen summer these feelings of doom came only briefly as passing clouds block the sun. I knew that I was shy, inclined to be fearful, and even more so after my six weeks of being in hospital and seeing what I had seen around me, that I was absorbed in the world of imagination, but I also knew that I was totally present in the 'real' world and whatever shadow lay over me, lay only in the writing on the medical certificate. (Frame 1990:196)

This was not Frame's only experience of being deemed insane, and she wrote another book, *Faces in the Water* (1980), which is a fictionalized account of these various mental health episodes. Fiction is another way of knowing. A book such as Marie Cardinal's *Devotion and Disorder* may tell us more about the psychological reality of drug addiction than 'quantitative' surveys or epidemiological studies of the social and risk factors involved in drug addiction. The mother in *Devotion and Disorder*, Elsa Labbé, is an academic psychologist, but she finds it impossible to write about her experiences with her drug-addicted daughter using her normal scientific language – 'That's not the kind of writing for what I want to express' (Cardinal 1991:3). She hires a ghost-writer to put together a narrative about how she discovered her daughter's addiction and helped her to overcome it. The account opens with Elsa returning from a stay in the USA to find her Paris flat reduced to a state of vomit- and syringe-strewn disorder by her daughter Laure and Laure's friends. This is the first she has known that Laure is ill: