

***Feminist Research Methods:
Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences
Edited by Joyce Mc Carl Nielsen
Green Springs, Colorado: Westside Press, 1990.***

Why is the methodology of feminist research the dominant theme of this book? Because it is problematic. Because it cannot adopt traditional research methods without doing injustice to its main purpose: to study the life-world of women: their knowledge, attitudes, values, actions, and to understand and explain these. It is claimed that traditional research techniques are male oriented; its criteria are not applicable to the study of women.

Methods in research are widely understood to be the scientific method the criteria of which are objectivity, observability, and measurability. It involves empirical data as the basis for logical interpretation and explanation. These two tendencies: rationalism and empiricism, have served research well for a long time, disclosing and creating new knowledge. But do the techniques of the scientific method reveal all possible knowledge? Do the facts disclosed by scientific research explain all phenomena? More to the point, do such techniques serve feminist research adequately?

These are some of the questions addressed in this book. Not all of them, however, are answered fully, leaving room for continuing doubt and self-questioning.

Is it possible to arrive at indubitable knowledge? Descartes and his successors assumed that there is some objective world that is knowable. This is the foundation of empiricism. On the other hand there are the relativists who assert that all knowledge is culture-bound, theory-bound and/or historically specific. We know reality only through our interpretation of it — we cannot know it directly. Thus the common view of reality is that it is actually a social construction, a collective of shared meanings. This position is sometimes known as phenomenology.

There are unstated assumptions shared by social scientists who adopt a naturalistic approach to social phenomena. First, the social world is knowable. This is the "objectivity" assumption. Second, the subjective knower and the object-to-be-known world are two different things — the subject-object separation. Third, verification of one's claims about the social world should be based on the use of the senses. We observe through our sense. Fourth, there is order in the social world; social life is patterned in a predominantly cause-and-effect form. Finally, there is a unity of the sciences (in-

cluding the social sciences) insofar as they all share the same method of going about the world, and this method is the best, if not the only, legitimate way to ground knowledge.

But feminist research challenges these assumptions: accepted assumptions about intervening, about researcher detachment from topic and subject, among others. Feminist inquiry is contextual, inclusive, experimental, involved, socially relevant, multimethodical, complete but not necessarily replicable, open to the environment and inclusive of events and emotions as experienced. These are heretical claims for research but it is also claimed that without them feminist research would be shallow and superficial, and not feminist.

There is today a post-empirical crisis in knowledge. Philosophers of science realize that the scientific test is not the ultimate test of knowledge or basis for claims to truth that we once thought it was. Two traditions of thought in social science have contributed to this skepticism: the interpretive and the critical.

The interpretive or hermeneutic tradition is a theory and method of interpreting meaningful human action. Those who work in this tradition are concerned with the importance of meaning in social interaction; they argue that limiting research to observable human action misses the most important part of the human story. To explain and understand any human social behavior we need to know the meaning attached to it by the participants themselves. One method used here is participant observation.

Critical theorists (known as the Frankfurt School) argue against the wholesale use of a scientific model for social inquiry. Criticism in this tradition refers to the more positive act of detecting existing forms of beliefs that restrict or limit human freedom.

It may be said that the positivists' goal is to predict and control; the hermeneutics' is to understand, and the critical theorists' approach is to emancipate — to uncover ideologies that maintain the status quo by restricting or limiting groups' access to the means of gaining knowledge. In brief, knowledge is socially constructed.

This leads to standpoint epistemology which assumes that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others precisely because of their disadvantaged position.

The poor know more about poverty than the rich and women know more about women and men; the knowledge of the latter allows them to survive because they are a subordinate species.

The main idea of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of the Scientific Revolution* is that science itself operates on a paradigm that works for many until anomalies arise which do not fit a popular paradigm. If an alternative paradigm is proposed and shown to

work, then it is adopted until the next crisis in the search for knowledge. In short, even scientific knowledge has a social foundation.

Then came quantum physics whose unit of analysis is relationships, not isolated material observable objects. Quantum physics introduced a new view of physical reality described as organic, holistic, ecological, systematic and indivisible, replacing an older, more mechanistic world view that underlies Newtonian physics and traditional scientific methods.

More important, in quantum mechanics an observer is necessary to reveal the properties of subatomic phenomena; the decision about how to observe these phenomena will determine the electron's properties to some extent. The sharp division between mind and matter; observer and observed can no longer be maintained.

The impact of Kuhn's work and developments in quantum physics have led to the questioning of the subject-object distinction. This would be even more relevant to the social sciences. Kuhn's work made it clear that data (facts) do not speak for themselves. The interpretation of facts depends on the substantive content of theory which in turn depends on one's social location, social identity, and research purposes.

Feminist work has contributed to the knowledge crisis. In a sense it is a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense. Its focus is on the distinctive experience of women, of regarding women as subject matter and creators of knowledge. Thus feminist research methods are still developing, although the specificity of subject matter tends to favor participant observation, personal questions in interviews, extended and unstructured observations and oral history. In brief it leans toward qualitative research methods.

The book includes feminist studies that are implicitly or explicitly critical. Feminist research continues to be empirical but not wholly so. Feminist inquiry transcends facts, seeks the meanings of such facts. In the end it is still knowledge that is sought, answers to such questions as "what do we need to know in order to survive." This is a question that leads to issues of nuclear power and ecology.

Only the continuing development of feminist inquiry will prove the efficacy of the research standpoint exemplified in this book. In any case it proposes a refreshing departure from the dreary studies-replete with facts but devoid of meaningful interpretations to which end-users and/or consumers of "research" have been subjected.

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