



# Research made simple: an introduction to feminist research

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Writing an article for 'Research Made Simple' on feminist research may at first appear slightly oxymoronic, given that there is no agreed definition of feminist research, let alone a single definition of feminism. The literature that examines the historical and philosophical roots of feminism(s) and feminist research is vast, extends over several decades and reaches across an expanse of varying disciplines. Trying to navigate the literature can be daunting and may, at first, appear impenetrable to those new to feminist research.

There is no 'How To' in feminist research. Although feminists tend to share the same common goals, their interests, values and perspectives can be quite disparate. Depending on the philosophical position they hold, feminist researchers will draw on differing epistemologies (ways of knowing), ask different questions, be guided by different methodologies and employ different methods. Within the confines of space, this article will briefly outline some of the principles of feminist research. It will then turn to discuss three established epistemologies that can guide feminist research (although there are many others): feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism.

## What makes feminist research feminist?

Feminist research is grounded in a commitment to equality and social justice, and is cognisant of the gendered, historical and political processes involved in the production of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> It also strives to explore and illuminate the diversity of the experiences of women and other marginalised groups, thereby creating opportunities that increase awareness of how social hierarchies impact on and influence oppression.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the differentiation between feminist and non-feminist research, Skeggs asserts that 'feminist research begins from the premise that the nature of reality in western society is unequal and hierarchical' Skeggs<sup>3</sup> p77; therefore, feminist research may also be viewed as having both academic and political concerns.

Feminist scholars assert that there are multiple and diverse routes to producing scientific knowledge, just as there are multiple ideas about truth.<sup>4</sup> However, there is no specific feminist epistemology, methodology or method.<sup>5,6</sup> What makes the research feminist is the way that feminist principles are integrated throughout the entire process—from development of the question, the data collection and analysis, the writing up and the dissemination. The approaches in feminist research that unify feminist perspectives are an insistence of approaches that are collaborative, non-hierarchical and reflexive.<sup>7</sup> Although most commonly associated with qualitative methods, feminist researchers make use of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Letherby argues that it is not the methods used in feminist research but how those methods are used in pursuit of feminist goals that makes it feminist.<sup>8</sup> Of significant

importance in feminist research is the location of the researcher throughout the whole research endeavour.

## Reflexivity

The practice of reflexivity is considered a hallmark of feminist research. It invites the researcher to engage in a 'disciplined self-reflection' Wilkinson<sup>9</sup> p93. This includes consideration of the extent to which their research fulfils feminist principles. Reflexivity can be divided into three discrete forms: personal, functional and disciplinary.<sup>9</sup> Personal reflexivity invites the researcher to contemplate their role in the research and construction of knowledge by examining the ways in which their own values, beliefs, interests, emotions, biography and social location, have influenced the research process and the outcomes (personal reflexivity).<sup>10</sup> By stating their position rather than concealing it, feminist researchers use reflexivity to add context to their claims. Functional reflexivity pays attention to the influence that the chosen research tools and processes may have had on the research. Disciplinary reflexivity is about analysing the influence of approaching a topic from a specific disciplinary field.

## Feminist empiricism

Feminist empiricism is underpinned by foundationalist principles that believes in a single true social reality with truth existing entirely independent of the knower (researcher).<sup>8</sup> Building on the premise that feminist researchers pay attention to how methods are used, feminist empiricist researchers set out to use androcentric positivist scientific methods 'more appropriately'.<sup>8</sup> They argue that feminist principles can legitimately be applied to empirical inquiry if the masculine bias inherent in scientific research is removed. This is achieved through application of rigorous, objective, value-free scientific methods. Methods used include experimental, quasi-experimental and survey. Feminist empiricists employ traditional positivist methodology while being cognisant of the sex and gender biases. What makes the research endeavour feminist is the attentiveness in identifying potential sources of gendered bias.<sup>11</sup>

## Feminist standpoint

In a similar way to feminist empiricism, standpoint feminism—also known as 'women's experience epistemology' Letherby<sup>8</sup> p44—holds firm the position that traditional science is androcentric and is therefore bad science. This is predicated on the belief that traditional science only produces masculine forms of knowledge thus excluding women's perspectives and experiences. Feminist standpoint epistemology takes issue with the masculinised definition of women's experience and argue it holds little relevance for women. Feminist standpoint epistemology therefore operates on the assumption that knowledge emanates from social position and foregrounds the voices of women and their experiences

of oppression to generate knowledge about their lives that would otherwise have remained hidden.<sup>12</sup> Feminist standpoint epistemology maintains that women, as the oppressed or disadvantaged, may have an epistemological advantage over the dominant groups by virtue of their ability to understand their own experience and struggles against oppression, while also by being attuned to the experience and culture of their oppressors.<sup>11</sup> This gives women's experience a valid basis for knowledge production that both reflects women's oppression and resistance.<sup>13</sup>

Feminist standpoint epistemology works on the premise that there is no single reality,<sup>11</sup> thus disrupting the empiricist notion that research must be objective and value-free.<sup>12</sup> To shed light on the experiences of the oppressed, feminist standpoint researchers use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to see the world through the eyes of their research participants and understand how their positions shape their experiences within the social world. In addition, the researchers are expected to engage in strong reflexivity and reflect on, and acknowledge in their writing, how their own attributes and social location may impact on interpretation of their data.<sup>14</sup>

### Feminist postmodernism

Feminist postmodernism is a branch of feminism that embraces feminist and postmodernist thought. Feminist postmodernists reject the notion of an objective truth and a single reality. They maintain that truths are relative, multiple, and dependent on social contexts.<sup>15</sup> The theory is marked by the rejection of the feminist ideology that seeks a single explanation for oppression of women. Feminist postmodernists argue that women experience oppression because of social and political marginalisation rather than their biological difference to men, concluding that gender is a social construct.<sup>16</sup>

Feminist postmodernists eschew phallogocentric masculine thought (expressed through words and language) that leads to binary opposition. They are particularly concerned with the man/woman dyad, but also other binary oppositions of race, gender and class.<sup>17</sup> Feminist postmodernist scholars believe that knowledge is constructed by language and that language gives meaning to everything—it does not portray reality, rather it constructs it.<sup>11</sup> A key feature of feminist postmodernist research is the attempt to deconstruct the binary opposition through reflecting on existing assumptions, questioning how ways of thinking have been socially constructed and challenging the taken-for-granted.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

This article has provided a brief overview of feminist research. It should be considered more of a taster that introduces readers to the complex but fascinating world of feminist research. Readers who have developed an appetite for a more comprehensive examination are

guided to a useful and accessible text on feminist theories and concepts in healthcare written by Kay Aranda.<sup>1</sup>

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