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Critical Social Research

- To introduce readers to emancipatory approaches to social research
- To consider the implications that critical theory might have for the goals of social research
- To investigate the rationale for, and characteristics of, feminist approaches to social research
- To encourage readers to reflect on relationships of power within the research process
- To emphasise the role of politics and values within the research process

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Introduction

In Chapter 1 we addressed the two central questions of ‘What is social research?’ and ‘Why do we carry out social research?’ In looking at these questions, we discussed the ideas associated with the two major social research perspectives – positivism and interpretivism. The views of these two approaches are summarised in Review boxes 2.1 and 2.2.

It was also noted in Chapter 1 that there is a third approach to social research – that which is broadly called critical social research. Those researchers who come from a critical school reject both the positivist and interpretivist approaches to social research. They argue that the aim of social research should be to change society for the better. Drawing their inspiration from ideas of critical theory, as developed by the Frankfurt School of Social Research, critical social researchers contend that social research ought to have political goals.

In this chapter we are going to look at the characteristics of a critical approach to social research by focusing on one of its most clearly developed variants – feminist methodology. We shall start by locating the case for a feminist methodology within the tradition of critical social research, before going on to examine the main features that distinguish a feminist approach to research. Other social researchers who have this critical view of society share many of these characteristics. Within this chapter, we shall also review some of the problems and issues that the case for a distinctly feminist methodology have raised, and we shall review the general methodological implications that are drawn from this debate.

Review box 2.1 Positivism

The positivist approach is based on an application of the scientific method used in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, and so on). As such, social scientists carry out their research with a firm commitment to objectivity, concerning themselves only with those phenomena that are tangible/measurable. Positivism is associated with predominately quantitative approaches (surveys, experiments, and so on) that stress reliability and generalisability. The purpose of social research is to establish the scientific laws of society (i.e. causal relationships) which are arrived at by testing research hypotheses.
Interpretivism holds that to explain human behaviour, social researchers need to understand the meanings and interpretations that people attach to phenomena in the social world. Thus social research cannot proceed by simply applying the methods that are used in the natural sciences. Rather, research is designed to explore the motivations, perceptions, and experiences of social actors. Interpretivism is associated with predominately qualitative methods (depth interviews, observation studies, and so on) that place a high emphasis on validity. The purpose of social research is to build an understanding of the motives and intentions that underpin social behaviour.

The origins of critical social research

In comparison to those who come from a positivist or interpretivist tradition, critical social researchers make up just a small proportion of the social research community. However, their numbers have grown steadily in recent years, and they now form a significant minority.

The theoretical framework for critical social research lies within the critical theory of society developed by thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research such as Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Fromm (Crotty 1998). These thinkers attacked the dominant ideas that were associated with positivism, most significantly the idea of value neutrality, and brought concepts such as power into the process of social scientific enquiry.

The Frankfurt School was chiefly concerned with issues relating to social class, basing their analysis on a Marxist view of society. As such, they attacked what they perceived to be the inherent class bias of orthodox social enquiry which, they argued, benefited the ruling capitalist class. Critical social research is often associated with conflict theory, feminist researchers, and radical psychotherapy, and has been adopted by a variety of political organisations and social movements. Critical social researchers who draw their inspiration from the Frankfurt School argue that it is the responsibility of social researchers to generate knowledge that aims to challenge and transform unequal power relationships (Humphries 1997). For these researchers, the purpose of social research is to ask critical questions with a view to changing society for the better.
False consciousness

The concept of false consciousness is central to the ideas of critical social research. This suggests that contrary to its immediate appearance, society is not as it seems: behind an immediate and misleading surface manifestation lie deep structures and unobservable mechanisms. These underlying structures maintain and perpetuate an unequal distribution of resources and power, resulting in the exploitation and oppression of the majority by an elite minority. Critical social researchers argue that the purpose of social research ought to be to uncover the fundamental nature of social reality by revealing these underlying mechanisms and structures with which capitalism has successfully persuaded the vast majority of people to act (mistakenly) against their own best interests. Neuman (2000, p.76), therefore, defines critical social science as:

A critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves.

Thus, critical social researchers object to both the positivist and interpretivist approaches to research, which they see as both amoral and passive. For critical social researchers, research is a moral–political activity, not an academic pursuit, and the researcher’s skills in the field of knowledge creation should be used to advance political goals. Furthermore, it is argued that social researchers have a responsibility to place themselves in relation to those struggles that characterise such conflictual societies. This view is typified by Humphries (1997, 2.6), who says that the point of social research is ‘to understand the world in order to change it’. For example, social research can become a powerful vehicle in challenging the existence of racial prejudice, campaigning for the removal of gender inequalities, and fighting for the emancipation of the working class.

The origins and goals of feminist methodology

With the rise of the women’s movement in the 1970s, many feminist scholars argued that traditional social science reflected a deep-rooted male bias that defined society and science in terms of male values, knowledge, and experience (Stanley and Wise 1983, Mies 1993). University and other research institutions were seen to be largely male domains, resulting in the systematic privileging of male interests and an exclusion and marginalisation of women. In arguing that traditional social research had been carried out by men and for men, feminists agreed on several key points:
• That the traditional social research establishment had used overwhelmingly male points of reference, and had therefore overgeneralised from men’s experience of the family, employment, and society in general, to the experience of all people.
• Many feminists pointed out that knowledge that had only been tested against men’s experiences and observations could not be very good knowledge given that half of the population had been passed over (Ramazanoglu 1992).
• By assuming traditional (unbalanced and exploitative) gender roles, social scientific enquiry was guilty of maintaining unequal gender relations, most specifically in relation to women’s role in the family and society. While this may have been an unconscious thing, male researchers were nevertheless guilty of perpetuating the subordination of women by providing a cloak behind which unequal status between men and women was justified.
• Traditional social scientific enquiry focused on the problems of the social world as identified by men. Thus, issues that were important to the women’s movement (such as rape and domestic violence) were largely invisible in the research community:

Because the social world has been studied from the perspective of a male universe, this has had a profound influence on what has been regarded as significant for study and how it has been structured and ordered. (Maynard 1998, p.121)

• Male social science had underplayed gender as a fundamental social division. As a significant social concept, gender had been given a peripheral role in understanding society in comparison to the weight assigned, for example, to social class.
• Women’s contribution to society was barely recorded in the history books of the time. Rather, women had been assigned overwhelmingly passive roles within a broad discussion about human nature, and were only studied as wives and mothers, not as people in their own right. As a result, women’s contribution to social and cultural life had been downplayed and marginalised:

Men become the people of action in the public realm, while women are subordinated to the private realm of the family and their status determined accordingly. (May 2001, p.12)

In summary, many feminists felt that they were steered towards a feminist methodology by the realities of the social science that preceded feminism, in which women were invisible and ‘the voice of science is a masculine one’ (Harding 1987, pp.3–4).

Empowerment and emancipation

Given the male bias that was inherent in the world of social research, many feminists felt that it was not possible to realise their goals of liberation and emancipation
by modifying the traditional tools of social research and using them in a different way. Rather, these feminists held that it was necessary to develop a new methodological approach that would be consistent with the political goals of the women’s movement. In this respect the development of a distinctly feminist methodology was seen as ‘a search for ways of knowing which avoid subordination’ (Ramazanoglu 1992, p.210).

For these feminists, the goal of feminist social research becomes the empowerment and emancipation of women. They argue that without a conscious effort to facilitate change, traditional social science models would only replicate unequal and exploitative gender relations in society (Harding 1987).

Thus, the overriding purpose of social research from a feminist perspective is to critique and transform gender relations; to reveal the inequalities in gender relations and the implications that these inequalities have in relation to power in society. Feminist researchers who come from a tradition of critical social research seek to provide women with a resource that will help them understand and change their world for the better. Harding (1987) argues that both positivists and interpretivists are guilty of a detached approach to research – one that is at fault for studying the world rather than acting on it.

Feminists, such as Mies (1993, pp.68–9), argue that the goal of feminist knowledge should not be the production of knowledge per se, but to ‘serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups, particularly women’. Mies likens this to replacing the ‘view from above’ with the ‘view from below’. For Harding (1987, p.8), the only legitimate goal of feminist research is to ‘win, defeat or neutralise those forces that are arrayed against its emancipation, growth or development’. In that its starting point is that which appears problematic from the perspective of women’s experiences, feminist researchers argued for an approach to research in which their research would be designed for women. Kelly et al. (1994, p.25) argue that for feminists, the purpose of social research should be ‘to create useful knowledge, knowledge which can be used by ourselves and others to “make a difference”’.

Objectivity/subjectivity in social research

For feminist researchers, the conscious adoption of political research goals acknowledges the intrinsically subjective character of all knowledge creation. This is held to be in contrast to the traditional positivist view of social research, which suggests that it is possible to separate the values of the researcher from the objectives of the research which they carry out. Haraway (1991) likens this view of science as a ‘God-trick’ because it proposes to see everything from nowhere, as value free and omnipresent. In contrast, the feminist way of knowing is akin to vision; it always looks from somewhere. For feminist researchers, as with all critical social researchers, research is a moral–political activity that requires the researcher to commit to a value position: value freedom is a myth.
Feminist researchers reject what they see as an ‘objectivist’ stance that attempts to make the researcher’s cultural beliefs and practices invisible. By recognising the humanity of the researchers and putting their subjective expression up-front, feminists argue that they have increased the objectivity of their research. In being explicit about the emancipatory goals of their research, feminists say that they are able to practise what they see as ‘honest politics’. Traditional science is accused of using ‘objectivism’ as a means of perpetuating the oppression of women. In claiming to be able to produce neutral knowledge, the male-dominated, social research community acts to conceal its vested interests.

Mies (1993, p.68), therefore, argues that feminist objectivity is akin to a ‘conscious partiality’. This idea is further elaborated by Reinharz (1992, p.263) who disputes the value of research conducted by those researchers who claim to be impartial:

I for one, feel most satisfied by a stance that acknowledges the researcher’s position right up front, and that does not think of objectivity and subjectivity as warring with each other. I have feminist distrust for research reports that include no statement about the researcher’s experience. Reading such reports, I feel that the researcher is hiding from me or does not know how important personal experience is. Such reports seem woefully incomplete and even dishonest.

In Stanley and Wise’s view (1983, p.169), the male research orthodoxy has used the objectivism of traditional science as a means of perpetuating the oppression of women. This use of ‘objectivism’ is seen as:

An excuse for a power relationship every bit as obscene as the power relationship that leads women to be sexually assaulted, murdered and otherwise treated as mere objects. The assault on our minds, the removal from existence of our experiences as valid and true, is every bit as objectionable.

The role of experience within feminist methodology

Central to the argument for a distinctive feminist methodology is the placing of women’s experiences at the heart of the research. In that feminist research generates problematics from the perspectives of women’s experiences, it uses these experiences as a significant indicator of the ‘reality’ against which hypotheses are tested. Thus, there is a shift from the ‘context of justification’ (the importance that traditional social research places on the validity and reliability of research methods) to the ‘context of discovery’ that enables feminist researchers to address women’s lives and experiences in their own terms. In this respect, feminist researchers say that they adopt a feminist standpoint from which they see the world and assess the value of research.
How does one determine whether an explanation is true or false?

Positivists test theories by deducing a research hypothesis (or hypotheses), collecting empirical data in an objective and scientific manner, and then attempt to confirm or deny their hypothesis using a variety of predominantly statistical tests to establish association and correlation. Interpretivist researchers collect support for their theories by seeing whether the meaning system and rules of behaviour make sense to those being studied.

A good theory for feminists is one that is capable of being tested against women’s experiences. These experiences are seen to be equally as important as the adherence to methodological validity and reliability that is emphasised by traditional schools of research; a feminist methodology is one that at its heart has a commitment to producing valid knowledge that is based on women’s experiences. Oakley (1999) suggests that many feminist researchers do not discuss the validity and reliability of the various research methods that they use, but rather the trustworthiness of their research (Definition 2.1).

The feminist standpoint

For feminists, the adoption of a feminist standpoint reveals the existence of forms of human relationships that are not visible from the perspective of the ruling (male) gender (Stanley and Wise 1983). Gelsthorpe (1992, p.215), for example, says that ‘women have uniquely valid insights from their vantage point as women’.

Definition 2.1 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness

The debate concerning the knowledge claims of different research methods is usually structured in terms of validity and reliability:

Validity – the generation of ‘real’, ‘rich’, and ‘deep’ data. Qualitative research is held to be high on validity.

Reliability – the generation of ‘hard’ data that is replicable by other researchers. Quantitative researchers champion the reliability of their research.

Trustworthiness – feminists contend that it is more important to ask whether the results of a research project can be believed with reference to who carried out the research and in what manner it was conducted. Given that feminist research is carried out by women, for women, and is based on women’s experience, feminists assert that it is this credibility and authenticity that should be emphasised.
Simply being a woman, however, is not sufficient for a woman to claim to hold a feminist standpoint. Rather, many feminists contest that feminist researchers must be actively engaged in the struggle against male domination:

It is through feminist struggles against male domination that women’s experience can be made to yield up a truer (or less false) image of social reality than that available only from the social experience of men, of the ruling classes and races. Thus a feminist standpoint is not something anyone can have by claiming it, but an achievement. To achieve a feminist standpoint, one must engage in the intellectual and political struggles necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women’s social experiences instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the ‘ruling gender’ experience of men. (Harding 1987, p.185)

**Is feminist knowledge superior to non-feminist knowledge?**

To some feminists, feminist knowledge that is generated from a feminist standpoint is superior to non-feminist knowledge because it originates in, and is tested against, a more complete and less distorted kind of social experience (Harding 1987). It is also a knowledge that has drawn both strength and superiority through its struggle against oppression:

As objects of oppression [women] are forced out of self preservation to know the motives of their oppressors. At the same time they have experience in their own psyche and bodies how oppression and exploitation feel to the victims, who must constantly respond to demands made on them ... men often do not have this experiential knowledge, and therefore lack empathy, the ability for identification, and because of this they also lack social and sociological imagination. (Mies 1983, pp. 121–2)

Consequently, it is argued by some feminists that research that is based on women’s experiences yields ‘empirically preferable results’ (Harding 1987, p.185), and that this research forms the basis for a more holistic, integrative, connected knowledge – a ‘successor science’ (Millen 1997, 7.2).

Feminists who are sympathetic to these arguments assert that feminist knowledge maintains a ‘superior position to traditional inquiry with its spurious claims to objectivity and value freedom’ (Gillespie 1994, p.23).

This is not a view that is shared by all feminist researchers, however. Gelsthorpe (1992), for example, while fully supportive of the case for a distinctly feminist methodology, does not consider the knowledge that is generated from a feminist standpoint to result in a knowledge that is better than that created by men.

**Can men conduct feminist research?**

Of course, standpoint feminism raises the obvious question of who can conduct feminist research. Is this an activity that can only be carried out by women?
are differing views on this issue: some authors contend that men can adopt a perspective that is sympathetic to the feminist standpoint (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993), while others contend that only women can carry out feminist research (Stanley and Wise 1983). Cain (1990) argues that men can participate in feminist research, providing they remain ‘gendered’ throughout the research process, exhibiting a high level of consciousness and sympathy for the feminist cause. Others who are sympathetic to the aims of feminism (Smart 1984) are critical of those standpoint feminists who they say are too rigid and inflexible, thus being guilty of dismissing sympathetic research that has been carried out by men.

The nature of research relationships

In seeking to break down the traditional hierarchies that structure research relationships, feminist researchers oppose what they see as unhealthy barriers that exist between researcher and researched in the research process. Instead, they work towards the establishment of more reciprocal research relationships that are ‘derived from authentic relations’ (Reinharz 1983, p.186). Gelsthorpe (1992, p.192) calls this an ‘interactive methodology’, and Romm (1997, 6.4) talks of the development of a ‘more collaborative knowledge-construction process’. At a very minimum, feminists suggest that this approach to research means treating people as people, rather than exploiting them as information giving beings, as they say traditional social research has tended to do.

Feminist researchers argue that, as researchers, we ought to learn how to listen more and talk less. They also suggest that social researchers should seek to humanise the research process wherever possible by forming personal relationships with those who participate in social research. This they see as being in sharp contrast to the traditional male approach to research which has emphasised that research should be conducted with a clear detachment from those who are being researched. Oakley (1981, p.41) describes such traditional research relationships as ‘morally indefensible’, seeing them as exploitative. For Maynard (1998, p.130), such an approach to research is incompatible with the political goals of feminism:

A central issue has been the structural relationship between researcher and researched and the extent to which these might be minimised. It is argued that it is hypocritical, and undermining of the knowledge produced, for feminists to replicate, during their research, the kind of power relations of which they are critical elsewhere.

However, there is much more to the feminist approach to research than simply striving towards the establishment of non-hierarchical research relationships. For those women who are committed to a feminist methodology, their goal is to combine experiences from their own personal lives with their work as a researcher. In bringing their own lives into the research process, it is argued that they will be better able
to comprehend the experiences of their research participants, while sharing their own feelings and experiences.

For Harding (1987, p.8), distinctive feminist research insists that the researcher be placed ‘in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter’. To do so is to recognise your own personal, cultural, political, and social biography, and its role in shaping your research.

For example, Oakley (1981) discusses how she shared with her interviewees her own experiences of childbirth, and the transformative effect that this had on her research. She argues that by exploring her own experiences, and incorporating these into her research, the relationships she established with her research participants were transformed, and thus led to better research. Oakley argues that the social rapport that was established between herself and her research participants, and the manner in which they opened up to her in their interviews, was a direct consequence of her decision to reveal such personal details about her own life.

As well as adopting a non-hierarchical research style, some feminists seek to negotiate actively the boundaries of their research with their research participants. In practice, this involves:

- telling their research participants fully about the purpose of the research;
- informing them of the possible uses of the research findings; and
- answering whatever questions the research participants may have about the study or the general issue area discussed.

These issues are explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

**Which methods can or should be used by feminists?**

**Should feminists use quantitative research methods?**

Traditionally, many feminists have argued against the use of quantitative research methods because such methods are seen to be inconsistent with the goals of the feminist movement. Oakley (1999), for example, suggests that quantitative methods, in the form of surveys and experiments, manipulate the people who are 'used' for the purposes of the research simply as information-rich units, available for exploitation by the researcher. This view sees the people who take part in our research as *subjects*, rather than participants.

Feminist researchers, however, argue that women are not simply disembodied sources of data, but rather that their humanity should be emphasised in the process of carrying out research. They hold that the ideal of disengagement, as embodied in the process of quantitative research, is rooted in masculinist assumptions that involve the separation of reason and emotion. Such research cannot be said to contribute towards emancipatory social research because it is based on unequal and exploitative research relationships.
Conventionally, many feminists have tended to favour those methods of research that have been associated with the generation of qualitative data, such as case studies, life histories, ethnographic studies, and depth interviews (Mies 1993). These types of methods, they argue, allow for more meaningful relationships to be developed in the process of research because of the nature of the method itself.

It is commonly suggested that women (not just feminists) have a natural affinity with qualitative research methods (Brunskell 1998) for a number of reasons that relate to a rather typical view of women’s strengths and characteristics:

- Qualitative research allows for an exploration and understanding of the lives of people as they are really lived:

  Qualitative studies maximise understandings of women’s activities and beliefs and the process through which these are structured. Such research tends to be oriented towards the interior of women’s lives, focusing on the meanings and interpretations of those being researched. (Maynard 1998, p.128)

- In qualitative research, there is a closer degree of involvement with those who participate in the research, and consequently a greater sensitivity to the rights of participants as people, rather than as objects of research.

- Women are seen to be more sensitised to many of the features of a qualitative style of research – an understanding of interaction, context, experience, and so on. Douglas (1976, p.214), a leading authority on qualitative research, says that this is the case because women are ‘sociability specialists’, who possess an intuitive ability to relate to people through the traditional tools of qualitative research. Smart (1984, p.155) also agrees with this view, suggesting that the job of qualitative interviewing is ‘intrinsically feminine’, in that women are natural facilitators of conversation.

However, while the view that feminists should use qualitative rather than quantitative methods prevails in much of the literature on feminist methodology, this is not universally the case. Jayaratne (1993), for example, argues that, given that it is usually the results of quantitative research that influence public policy, such research should be used by feminists in their quest to challenge and change exploitative social structures. For example, the results of surveys addressing women’s experiences of domestic violence, or uncovering the reality of discrimination in employment, may make a more significant impact on public policy than interview-based qualitative studies. Others (Maynard 1994) also suggest that feminists should use a plurality of methods rather than simply relying on one particular style or approach.

Problems and issues with feminist methodology

The case that has been made in favour of a feminist methodology has raised a number of issues that have been discussed and criticised by a number of social
researchers. Some of these issues relate to the ways in which feminists can develop a methodology that best meets the political objectives of feminism. On the other hand, there have been a number of criticisms from researchers who are generally hostile to the development of a feminist methodology.

The nature of research relationships

Some feminists (Millen 1997, Kelly et al. 1994), while being sympathetic to the development of less hierarchical and structured research relationships, have drawn attention to the essential differences that exist between those women who conduct social research and those who are usually the focus of such research. Thus, Kelly et al. (1994, p.37) argue that given that social researchers are part of an academic community, with very highly developed knowledge and skills, while they may not be superior to their research participants, they will always be seen as different:

It is an illusion to think that ... participants can have anything approaching ‘equal’ knowledge to the researcher.

Similarly, Millen (1997, 3.4) says that she is unwilling to ‘disclaim her privilege’ as a researcher, feeling justified in both her theoretical knowledge and research expertise.

Martyn Hammersley, a leading critic of the case for a distinctly feminist methodology, argues that for feminist researchers to suggest that they are no better or different to their research participants demonstrates an immaturity and lack of realism by those who refute their own intellectual authority. Hammersley (1992a, pp.200–1) asserts that it is in everyone’s best interests that some people (researchers) have expertise in knowledge production as ‘successful action depends on accurate information’, good knowledge is reliably produced by people who really know what they are doing, and good knowledge is better than bad knowledge.

For Hammersley, the way in which researchers go about their research, the relationships they form in the field, and their attention to ethically sound principles are most definitely to be scrutinised. But that does not mean that it is unreasonable for the researcher to define the research question, select the method of data collection, carry out the analysis, and write up the research report without consultation with the research participants. While Hammersley (1992a, p.199) has a degree of sympathy for a more personal approach to research, he states that:

The proper relationship between researcher and researched is not something that can be legislated by methodology, feminist or otherwise, but will be determined by the specifics of each particular case.

Relations of power cannot be presupposed – they are extraordinarily complex and can only be settled empirically for given instances rather than beforehand by epistemological diktat.
Hammersley (1992a, p.201) also argues against a stark choice between hierarchical and egalitarian/democratic forms of relationship, suggesting that such an unsophisticated dichotomy fails to capture the complexity and depth of human relationships:

Even feminists are not able to implement non-hierarchical relationships in all their research because this is at odds with the nature of the surrounding society.

Much of the debate in this area relates to situations in which researchers find they are ‘studying down’ – in situations in which power is skewed towards the researcher who is conducting research on relatively powerless and vulnerable groups. Some feminists highlight some of the problems that arise wherever feminists find themselves ‘studying up’. Smart’s (1984) research into the economic dependence of women within marriage highlights some of the problems that arise wherever feminists find themselves ‘studying up’. Conducting research among powerful men in the legal profession, she discusses how she constantly needed to re-enforce her authority:

Half an hour spent with a bossy solicitor or pompous magistrate was enough to disabuse me of the belief, if I ever held it, that I was in a relatively [more] powerful position than those I interviewed. (Smart 1984, p.157)

The primacy of gender

While agreeing that feminism has played a positive role in redressing the exclusion of women’s experiences within the social sciences, Hammersley (1992a, p.192) rejects the notion that gender, or any other factor, be given ‘pre-established priority over other variables’. He rejects the notion that the world is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups as simplistic:

As slogans they may be appealing, but as analytical concepts they are problematic. (Hammersley 1992a, p.200)

In considering the complex relationships of gender, class, ethnicity, and other such characteristics, Hammersley (1992a, p.203) poses the question of how one untangles the complexities of real relationships to construct a hierarchy of oppression:

Given this, we find that many people will be classed as both oppressors and oppressed from different points of view.

A variety of writers have sought to address these points that are made by Hammersley, in an attempt to discuss the relation of gender to other divisions in society such as age, race, social class, and so on.

Warren (1981), for example, offers a thoughtful reflection on the complexities of gender roles for women and men around the world. She gives an extensive review
of the differential impact of gender in a variety of cultural locations, questioning many western feminist conceptions of sex and gender. She provides a number of illuminating examples where, for example:

- it was vital for the researcher to be seen as part of a family with children (Sudan);
- where race was an issue, but gender was not (Nigeria); and
- where the researcher eventually gained access to a research site that was initially denied to her, on returning at a later date when pregnant (Kenya).

Many other feminists have also acknowledged the complex nature of the relationships that exist between gender, race, social class, and so on. Humphries (1998), for example, agrees with the emphasis that Hammersley places on the complexity of the social world. However, Humphries argues that if this (or any other real-world complexity) were to deter social researchers, no social research would ever be carried out. Rather, she suggests that the essence of good research of any nature lies in the researcher’s quest to capture the complexity of social reality. Furthermore, the recognition that gender is part of a complicated matrix of social ‘variables’ does not necessarily weaken feminists’ resolve for the prime role that their analysis affords gender (Humphries 1998).

Millen (1997) also argues that in certain cases the adoption of a consciously feminist methodology can be counter-productive. Her own experience is derived from interviewing relatively powerful women scientists who were unsympathetic to feminism and the feminist construction of gender; to these women ‘feminist’ meant ‘bra burner, lesbian, hippie and troublemaker’ (Millen 1997, 5.9). The majority of her women interviewees did not share her feminist interpretation of the interviews, and did not analyse their own relationships in terms of patriarchy. In struggling with the question of how to do feminist research with those whom she has very little common ground, Millen concludes that there are some situations where a feminist may need to abandon feminist methodology in order to advance the broader agenda of feminist research.

Finally, it should also be noted that there is a very lively and meaningful debate among feminists about what it means to use the label ‘feminist’, and a recognition that feminism itself is not homogeneous, but highly differentiated and complex:

Although feminism has a lot to contribute to our understanding of how we should know the social world, feminist thinking in this regard is not some kind of uniform and linear affair. There are healthy and vibrant disputes between feminists about these matters, just as there are between other philosophers, social theorists, methodologists and empirical researchers. (Maynard 1998, p.120)

**Motivated bias**

Hammersley (1992a, p.192) argues that feminists who adopt political goals and who discount the search for objectivity in their research are guilty of abrogating the
responsibilities of the science, given that the essence of science is a ‘communal questioning of assumptions’.

Hammersley rejects the accusation that he is consciously privileging the interests of dominant groups within the established scientific community. Rather, he argues that his preference for the model of science used in the natural sciences (such as biology, physics, and chemistry) is because ‘natural science still represents by far the most successful from of inquiry’ (Hammersley 1997, 1.4).

Silverman (1993, p.154) shares Hammersley’s view, stressing that knowledge should be produced outside of the values of those who produce it – ‘the first goal of scientific research is valid knowledge’. Silverman claims that how the knowledge is used is a legitimate political question, but not how it was generated.

Furthermore, Hammersley and Gomm (1997, 1.7) argue that by bringing political objectives to the fore and adopting emancipatory goals, feminist researchers are guilty of introducing motivated bias into the research process. They define motivated bias as systematic error:

- deriving from a conscious or unconscious tendency on the part of the researcher to produce data, and/or interpret and present them, in a way as to favour false results that are in line with their pre-judgements and political or practical commitments. This may consist of a positive tendency towards a particular, but false, conclusion. Equally, it may involve the exclusion from consideration of some set of possible conclusions that happen to include the truth.

They hold that while ‘there are all sorts of reasons why people become researchers ... truth is the only value that constitutes the goal of research’ (Hammersley and Gomm 1997, 4.12), and that:

- ‘The community of researchers have a responsibility to do their utmost to find and keep to the path which leads towards knowledge rather than error’ (Hammersley and Gomm 1997, 4.3).

**SUMMARY**

In comparison to those who come from a positivist or interpretivist tradition, critical social researchers make up just a small proportion of the social research community. However, their numbers have grown steadily in recent years, and they now form a significant minority of those who are conducting research.

Within the broad school of critical social research, feminists have been one of the most vociferous groups, championing the need for a distinctively feminist methodology. In their critique of both positivist and interpretivist approaches to research, feminists have laid claim to carry out their research in new and different ways.

Within this chapter we have reviewed the key features of a feminist methodology – characteristics that are consistent with a broader emancipatory approach to research:
The role afforded to gender vis-à-vis social class, race, age, disability, and so on.

The nature of the relationships that researchers tend to form with their research participants.

The methods that are most appropriate for feminists to use.

The adoption of political goals consistent with those of feminism.

For those feminists who are committed to a critical approach to social research, the debate and discussion around these issues has provided the basis for the continued development of a feminist methodology.

However, for those who are opposed to critical social research in general, and the development of feminist methodology in particular, the approach that feminists have taken is seen to have erroneous consequences for the scientific nature of social enquiry. Most importantly, the adoption of emancipatory political goals and the discarding of objectivity as a central pillar of social research are seen as dangerous moves that negate the value of their research.

While the debate that has taken place concerning feminist methodology has, at times, tended towards an ill-tempered ‘discourse of derision’ (Humphries 1997, 2.5), many important issues have been raised that are of value to all social researchers. At the very least, this debate has led to the recognition of a politicised framework for the understanding of knowledge, and has charged ‘all researchers, male and female, to examine the role of sex and gender in society’ (Millen 1997, 9.3) and in their own research.

Chapter research task

(The following scenario is based on an article by Hamner and Hearn (1993), entitled ‘Gendered Research and Researching Gender: Women, Men and Violence’.)

Imagine you are to carry out a research project which looks at the area of violence against women by men who are known to them.

The aim of the project is to gain an understanding of the experiences of violence from the perspectives of both men and women, and to try and identify what ‘violence’ means to both groups. In addition to this, the project seeks to understand the relationship various agencies have with the victims and perpetrators of violence, and the social role they play. As such, it is hoped that the project will provide rich data upon which social policy can be reviewed and perhaps updated.

Women are to be accessed through a women’s refuge which offers support to women who have been victims of violence. Men are
to be accessed through a variety of different agencies, to include: the police; probation services; prison services; social services; counselling groups. (You may want to consult the section in Chapter 4 which discusses vulnerable groups and external agencies.)

In thinking about how you would carry out this project, consider the theoretical, methodological, practical, and ethical issues for feminists in the area of violence against women.

You may want to reflect on some of the following questions:

What is the purpose of conducting research?
Should social science be used to empower people?
What does it mean to carry out research ‘objectively’?
Can men have access to ‘the truth’?
Is it possible for sympathetic men to do ‘feminist research’?
What is the character of knowledge that is generated by men? Is it of a lesser quality than that generated by feminist researchers?
Are the methods and techniques of research inherently gendered?
Is the experience that the research is grounded more important than the methodological validity/reliability of the research methods that are used? Is feminist knowledge superior to non-feminist knowledge?
How much of yourself should you reveal to your research participants?
Should you adopt a different style for researching different people/groups?

RECOMMENDED READING


