Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences

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Introduction

Feminist research approaches are diverse in their emphasis and method. However, all feminist-oriented research consists of core features that address the ontology and epistemology of feminist theoretical frameworks. This includes the focus on and objective to critically engage women’s lived social realities with a view to changing them for the better. More recently, intersectionality as a guiding methodological and ethical framework attests to the diversity of women’s lived realities and feminist approaches more broadly. This chapter provides an overview of feminism and feminist research approaches, focusing on the interpretive and critical research paradigmatic approaches. It aims to explain what is meant by a ‘feminist’ approach in research. In doing so, the chapter aims to assess the usefulness of feminist research agendas in doing gender work. The chapter demonstrates that there is more than one feminist approach, and that these different approaches have strengths and weaknesses that can enhance research and contribute to social change more broadly. Before presenting the central tenets and principles of feminist approaches, the chapter first briefly discusses the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of feminism and feminist research, with a view to engaging why some gendered research and analysis is not feminist in approach and orientation. This distinction is important as the meanings of ‘feminist’ and ‘gender’ tend to be misleading in that they are often understood to refer to the same thing. Doing work and research on gender is not always feminist in orientation.

What constitutes feminist research?

Consider the following two narratives:

Our mothers and grandmothers taught us that circumcision is very important for women and girls. I was given pharaonic circumcision when I was eight years old living in Shendi. I still remember the operation being very painful, but to this day I believe it is necessary; and it
is more effective than the sunna that people want to follow these days. In the Sudan, our ancestors of a long time ago knew better than people these days, who do not want to keep their customs. Female circumcision is a good good custom because the removal of the external genitalia is necessary for girls. These parts, especially the clitoris, can get very big. I heard from some people that women who are not circumcised have clitorises that are as big as a little boy's penis. I haven't seen it myself, but people who told me swore that this is the case. Now, do you think a woman should allow that this happen to her daughters? I believe it because just as the rest of a girl's body parts grow when she grows up, her clitoris also grows. But these days people don't want to pay attention to that. People try to do the sunna, but the real circumcision is pharaonic because a lot of doctors and some women are trying to teach people that their ways are wrong. Circumcision is what makes one a woman, because by removing the clitoris, there is no way that her genitals will look like a man's. The woman with a big clitoris is just like a man. How can a woman carry such a long organ between her legs and pretend that things are normal? For this reason, all my daughters were given pharaonic. I continue to believe in it and I hope that people don't abandon it. This custom should not be changed because without, women's bodies are not beautiful. A woman should do everything in her power to keep her body beautiful and she should do the same for her daughters. (Saadia, 62 years old, in Abusharaf, 2001, p. 123)

And:
When I was six years old, a traditional midwife circumcised me and I suffered from pain. I remember that before my circumcision, no one told me about it, or explained why it was important. This is something people do all the time; it is part of their old customs, which do not need to be explained. It is a painful experience: you can't urinate, you can't walk, and you can't have anything to ease the pain. The nights were very long when as children we were not able to sleep because of the throb-bing pain. You have to understand why our mothers were keen to do it. They did it out of concern because they did not want to break with their tradition. Although I know it is painful, and I know it causes problems, I know that circumcision has many benefits, which are more impor-tant than its troubles. For that reason I did not object to my daughter's circumcision. I supported her circumcision because it is custom and because I wanted to be like everyone else in the neighbourhood. My daughter is now experiencing trouble; when she gets her period she can't move. I think that the problems I would face with my family would be greater and harder to deal with had I decided to abandon this custom altogether. The pressure did not come from my husband. My husband did not have any say when our young daughter was circumcised. I did not consult him. But my relatives, especially my mother and my aunts,
were the ones who wanted pharaonic. I am convinced that circumcision is painful, but our relatives do not want to do it to hurt us. They are just following their community and their families. I feel that in the name of custom my relatives did that to me, and in the name of custom, I did it to my daughters. All of these things are in my mind. I understand them, but I have no way of changing them even though other more educated women come to tell us how bad circumcision is. (Asha, 48 years old, in Abusharaf, 2001, p. 133)

These narratives can be read in many different ways, even within feminist theory and practice. Regardless, they touch on an issue that is of central concern to much feminist work: the autonomy of women’s bodies. The autonomy that women have over their own bodies and the violence that may be enacted against these bodies have inspired much theorising, research and policy framing the world over. Some of these policies have been informed by feminist research and work, while others have come under attack by many feminists for failing to consider women as autonomous subjects with particular kinds of rights. Returning to the two narratives, both participants present another bone of contestation: what makes a social practice a ‘feminist’ issue? The narratives are especially challenging for those feminists that consider such practices to embody violence against women’s bodies. What does one do, then, with a narrative by a woman who seems to actively support female circumcision? Depending on your epistemological approach, these two narratives would be read differently – both in terms of how we choose to problematise the narratives as well as in terms of what we consider to be appropriate interventions. As will be seen, researchers working within different paradigmatic approaches tend to ask very different questions about their social worlds, and consider very different interventions in these social contexts. We will return to the two narratives later in the chapter, but for the moment consider the following interview excerpt:

A taxi-driver openly described how he and his friends would cruise around at weekends, looking for a likely victim to abduct and ‘gang-bang’. His story was unselfconscious and undefended: he showed no awareness that he was describing rape, much less criminal behaviour. When the interviewer pointed out that his actions constituted rape, he was visibly astonished. What was most striking was his spontaneous and indignant response: ‘But these women, they force us to rape them!’ He followed his assertion by explaining that he and his friends picked only those women who ‘asked for it’. When asked to define what this meant, he said, ‘It’s the cheeky ones – the ones that walk around like they own the place, and look you in the eye.’ (Moffett, 2006, p. 138)

Students in my gender class have often debated the paradigmatic framing of such research as feminist given its focus on and exploration of men’s voices in understanding gendered subjectivities and violence. This is an important issue: is feminist research only ever concerned with women as subjects, and with
exploring women’s everyday experiences and social relations? Again, depending on what paradigmatic approach you adopt, the answers to this question would be very different. Given its concern with gendered sociopractice that has very real consequences for how many women and young girls may enjoy everyday social citizenship, Moffett’s (2006) study is feminist in principle. In critically interrogating problematic (re)enactments of masculinity, the study contributes significantly to feminist theorising and activism related to gendered identities and practice. Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that feminist research is primarily concerned with and focused on women’s experiences and accounts of being gendered subjects within society.

Is gender research always feminist?

The problematic of what constitutes feminist research touches at the core of a common misunderstanding of feminist theorising. Indeed, not all research on gender can be described as feminist in approach and orientation. Gender’s articulation in much psychological research has been critiqued by some feminist scholars who have argued that there is very little interrogation of the concept of gender itself, as well as little critical interrogation of how gender has been taken up in problematic ways (Palmary, Burman, Chantler & Kiguwa, 2010; Shefer, 2004; Shefer, Boonzaier & Kiguwa, 2006). Likewise, not all feminist research is exclusively about women or focused only on women, although some scholars argue otherwise (Wilkinson, 1996), preferring to prioritise feminism’s core principle of giving credence to women and the issues and experiences that affect them. I would argue that while this latter priority is important, feminism’s potential impact in influencing social change for women must encompass a much broader analysis of gender as an organising structure and lived materiality that affects all gendered subjects in society. In this regard, feminist research benefits from a broader vision of critical work on gender in society and its myriad enactments and sociopolitical formations. Critical work on masculinities, for example, can thus be enhanced through a feminist lens (Boonzaier, 2014; Lau & Stevens, 2012; Ratele, 2008, 2013).

A feminist critique of the function and articulation of gender in psychological research concerns the ways that gender as a concept has been deployed apolitically. The consequences of this are that relations of power that are configured in terms of gender remain hidden and uninterrogated. Such research engages gender purely as a variable that may tell us interesting things about the social world we live in, but completely fails to provide sociopolitical analyses of the networks of power that exist within social structures and between social beings. Left unspoken is how some subjects are actively produced as gendered subjects in very particular ways that either disempower or empower them in society. Given this, gender then is less about an ‘objective variable’ that exists in isolation from the sociopolitical framings of the society but is rather an active process of subjectification that is (re)produced in different ways and contexts by gendered subjects (Butler, 1990). Judith Butler’s (1990) work
on subjectification, for example, has been useful in feminist analyses of gendered schooling practices and how individuals within the education context become gendered subjects. This process of subjectification – becoming subjects – is interwoven in other intersecting networks of language, social practice and performances of masculinities and femininities (Davies, 2006; Hey, 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 2006).

Research on gender that fails to engage gendered subjectivity as contextualised and political in function and form has been problematic for feminist researchers for a variety of reasons. Such research tends to engage gender in organic and essentialising ways that view gender as immutable and static in form, content and performance. For this reason, much feminist research attempts to break free from the practice of engaging gender as merely a variable. Rather, gender becomes a performative re-enactment that is imbued with sociohistorical and political influences. Our gendered practice and behaviour cannot simply be read as attitudinal and sociocognitive dimensions of human personality but rather as a category that is both constructed and performed within constrained socio-political contexts. For feminist researchers, gender is not just material and personal embodiments but also a politically contested category that informs how we think about other intersecting lived materialities. For example, some feminist scholars have explored the gendered constructs of home, community and nation to demonstrate the normative ways that such everyday meanings and constructs are lived and constructed (Palmary et al., 2010). In an investigation of how gendered discourses inform individuals’ naming of some behaviours as sexual harassment within institutions of higher learning, Kiguwa and colleagues (2015) demonstrate that how certain behaviour practices and modes of performance are defined as sexually deviant will influence how some behaviours are named as constituting sexual harassment. For example, a woman who fails to comply with what is considered ‘appropriate’ dress code was constructed by the participants as inviting unwanted attention:

Participant 7 (male): Again, a woman who invites attention and then complains that it is unwanted is problematic.
Facilitator: How do they invite it?
Participant 7: You have to look at how she presents herself, the dress, the behaviour, like is she flirty, all those things.
Participant 3 (female): [nods] . . . yes, many female students in fact flirt with the lecturers. So they can’t now complain of harassment.

The excerpt illustrates how discursive constructs of gender – through constructs of respectable femininity – are deployed in justifying some acts of violation against women’s bodies as warranted, even invited by women themselves. Language is here used to justify and absolve male perpetrators from any sense of responsibility in gender-based harm and violence against women. Furthermore, the implied and false agency that is accorded to women implicitly works to render the agentic act of reporting sexual harassment as problematic. The implied passivity of male sexual subjects is simultaneously constructed through victimhood that falls prey to aggressive femininity. In this way, treating gender as a category that
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is imbued with historical, cultural and social meanings of femininity and masculinity is important. Such an analysis enables us to engage gendered practices in our everyday contexts as actively political and social in meaning, practice and outcome. Gender is actively constructed not just through language but also in our lived embodied experiences of what it means to be a man and/or woman, to be identified as embodying particular kinds of gendered bodies. Other research focused on non-normative sexualities further illustrates and makes complex this simple binary of being male and female (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015). How we read certain bodies as non-binary or how non-binary bodies present a challenge to traditional meanings of gender and sexuality highlights the politics of gender in our everyday lives. Feminist knowledge production seeks to unsettle the apolitical meanings of gender and sexuality that are evident in mainstream research, which treats gender as just another objective variable with no social and political history informing it.

General principles of feminist research

Feminism’s different strands and approaches (see Kiguwa, 2004, for an overview) informed by different paradigmatic framings mean that feminist researchers do not always agree on the core principles of feminist research. Nonetheless, some unifying and central tenets of feminist approaches are evident in much of the practice and methods of feminist research.

Firstly, as Wilkinson (1996) has noted, feminist research aims to attend to women’s marginalised and often silenced voices, not just in the social world but also in the production of knowledge (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006). Part of this emphasis on women’s knowledge is the concern over the dominance of positivist and quantitative research methods and approaches in constructing knowledge about the world and about a dominant group of people – men. As a response, early feminist research sought to address this significant gap not only by revisiting and including women’s voices and their narratives of their experiences, but also by challenging the dominance of one method in gathering and making sense of knowledge. By engaging with multiple methodological methods, feminist research aims to demonstrate the utility of understanding multiple worldviews in different ways. As a core principle then, the prioritising of women’s experiences and voices remains at the heart of much feminist research and practice. For example, Photovoice research methodologies have recently emerged as critical political tools for bringing to the fore marginalised voices and experiences of gender and sexuality. Researchers in South Africa have used Photovoice to document the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities (Cornell, Ratele & Kessi, 2016; Zway & Boonzaier, 2015). Through such visual narrative, a narrative and feminist analysis of the sociopolitics of space, institutional culture, safety and security, amongst other concerns, can be explored through the worldview of participants. Such retelling is also a powerful and effective means of inviting heteronormative society to look again at its taken-for-granted practices and cultures. In ‘Thinking Women’s Worlds’, Bradbury and Kiguwa (2012)
make use of such exploratory methodology to engage the lived realities of being differentially gendered bodies within higher education contexts.

Secondly, the adoption of a multiple methodological framework remains an important strategy of feminist research. Indeed, feminists have argued for a long time that it is impossible to have one unitary methodological method or approach (see Harding [1986] for an overview). Feminists have thus relied on both quantitative and qualitative approaches in trying to make sense of the social world and lived realities of many women. Some feminists, however, take a strong stance regarding the adoption of quantitative methodologies (Wilkinson, 1996), arguing that the very values of these methodologies are problematic in themselves, such as being male-centred (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006; Harding, 1986, 1991).

A third core principle of feminist research has been actively espoused by feminist standpoint theories that have drawn attention to the political importance of understanding and engaging differences between and amongst women (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006; Callaghan & Clark, 2006; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Lentin, 1993). Standpoint theories argue that women’s experiences of being and becoming gendered subjects must take centre stage in how we theorise and make sense of the social world. Differences between and amongst women are here understood not only to present multiple ways that we can understand the world, but also to provide insight into the different axes of power that women the world over experience and are faced with. Standpoint theories argue that it is politically important for women’s voices and experiences to speak to and about these differences, and for women to tell their own stories and become narrators of their own experiences. In so doing, standpoint theories challenge the passivity that women have been accorded in the knowledge production process. Standpoint theories have come under some criticism by scholars questioning the implied essentialism in arguing that women’s experiences take centre stage in how we make sense of and interpret the world (see Scott, 1991). Experience is here taken not as the evidence or origins from which we may theorise ourselves and our social world, but rather as the very thing that we should aim to explain and account for (Scott, 1991).

Feminist research also seeks to be reflexive in nature and practice. This fourth principle emphasises the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity in any research, arguing that by its very nature, the practice of research is political – both in conceptualisation and effect. Given sociopolitical and historical contexts in which gender is one of many complex organising tools, our very constitution as gendered subjects is political. Understanding the power complexities and nuances that are part of this constitution requires that we as researchers partake in a continuous process of reflexivity that alerts us to our biases in research, the relations and intricacies of power that exist between us and our participants, and the potential effects and unintended consequences of our research findings. Reflexivity in research also means considering the implications and myriad ways of posing research questions, framing particular issues and experiences as ‘problems’ that require intervention, the powerlessness of our participants in framing and presenting their own issues and concerns and so on. Boonzaier and Shefer (2006) go further in arguing for self-reflexivity in how our own investments
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influence particular research agendas and outcomes, and how our social identities may be implicated in the research process as a whole.

Feminist researchers working within a critical analytic paradigm have highlighted a fifth core principle of all feminist research: an exploration of the analytics of power in society and the intersecting effects on women. Feminism is thus explicitly political in orientation, conceiving of a gendered subject that is both a social and a political configuration of intersecting sociopolitical and economic systems (Callaghan & Clark, 2006). Feminism as a social movement and epistemology aims to challenge the arbitrary dichotomy between individual and social explanatory frameworks of gender. The famous slogan ‘the personal is political’ speaks to the heart of this problematic, preferring to engage the psychosocial dimensions of gendered subjectivity and practice.

In this sense then, Callaghan and Clark (2006) pose another central principle of feminist theory: an ontological view of patriarchy as a central organising principle in society. By so doing, feminist researchers challenge ahistorical and apolitical views of individuals and social relations that do not consider the inherent privilege and power of certain groups in society. Gender as an organising principle limits who people can be and what they can be in different contexts. Nonetheless, the myriad ways that subjects exercise agency and resist structures of inequality and gendered subjectification, albeit within constrained conditions, is also highlighted as important political work that feminist researchers must undertake.

Finally, the principle of intersectionality that has recently come to centre much feminist theorising and research remains a fundamental praxis for feminist work. Intersectionality’s roots in black feminist critique have also highlighted the importance of other marginalised feminisms, such as black and African feminism that aims to engage and make visible the voices and experiences of women of colour. Such an approach engages differences between women not just as a speaking-back to western feminism, but rather as new and alternative ways of reimagining gender and ways of relating to patriarchal systems that can create new resistances (Gqola, 2001, 2011). By exploring these marginalised voices and experiences of being in the world, intersectionality as a guiding principle remains a core political tool of feminism. Feminist scholarship on intersectionality is diverse (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). Some scholars have argued that intersectionality as a guiding principle has provided much-needed critical analysis of within-group conflicts and tensions (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). In so doing, intersectionality challenges much standpoint theoretical analysis that presents homogeneous constructs of gender. Such a framework makes it possible to consider how women themselves may be differentially positioned within multiple axes of power that in turn influences how they embody gender. For example, in a Photovoice narrative account, my transgendered student and I explore our different sexual and gender positionings within the tertiary institution where we work and interact. My student’s account of being a transgendered, black student living in student residences marked by hegemonic surveillance-style performative practice tells a story of oppression and self-surveillance that highlights transgendered students’ everyday confrontations.
with cisgendered and heteronormative institutional culture. This is juxtaposed with my narrative account of being a black, cisgendered, lesbian academic – with varying moments of surveillance and self-surveillance but also differential access and privilege in my interaction with the different social and structural bodies of the institution. Our joint experiences of being gender non-conforming bodies are thus marked by differences in privilege and access that are related to other intersecting categories of identity, space, academic status and so forth. Intersectionality theoretical frameworks require that we take seriously our differences as members of a marginalised community in our struggle against the broader patriarchal and heteronormative society.

Levels of analysis in feminist research

We can thus deduce that feminist research is far from unanimous in its form of analysis and interpretation of the social world. In engaging some of these differences, it is useful to frame feminist theorising within the three broad paradigmatic approaches in social scientific research (Neuman, 2002) and the corresponding levels of analysis that result from this. In elucidating these levels of analysis, we are able to see how the different strands of feminist theorising articulate different areas of emphasis in posing research questions and thinking through the social world as gendered. Feminist researchers have primarily conducted research using both interpretive and critical paradigmatic approaches, given the qualitative research designs of these paradigms. Positivist methods that tend to favour individualistic tools of inquiry have come under much criticism by feminist scholars. Table 14.1 provides a succinct summary of the core ontological differences amongst all three approaches. The rest of this section elucidates the interpretive and critical approaches for working within feminist frameworks of investigation.

The emphasis on how women experience and interpret their everyday lived realities is at the heart of the interpretive social scientific paradigmatic approach. Research conceptualised and conducted within such a paradigmatic framing tends to emphasise participants’ lived experiences as worthy of focus, with a preference for seeking to understand how participants understand their own experiences as opposed to an imposition from outside, such as from the researcher. An interpretive approach does not impose any value judgement to such an understanding, preferring to consider women’s experiences as authoritative in their own right. The approach adopts levels of analyses that also aim to understand and explore the interpersonal, situational and subjective dimensions of individuals’ lives and everyday life experiences (Foster, 2006). For example, research that attempts to understand domestic violence and women’s choices and actions to remain in abusive relationships may adopt such an interpretive level of analysis to understand subjective experiences of and feelings about the relationship. This is then used as a guiding frame of reference in exploring the choice to stay. Feminists working within a critical paradigm may be more interested in what the differential positioning of women in abusive relationships tells us about
gendered power configurations in society more generally. Poststructuralist feminists, for example, have argued for an analysis of women abuse that highlights different formations of power, through class, race, gender identity and so forth, in how women understand and respond to their situations (Boonzaier, 2006). Through language, we construct masculinities and femininities in multiple and contradictory ways that are located within specific social, historical and cultural contexts. Feminist poststructuralists thus emphasise the political underpinnings of what we may initially consider to be personal experiences and accounts.

Returning to the narrative excerpts on female circumcision that opened this chapter, the privileging of both women’s experiences and accounts of circumcision

Table 14.1 A summary of differences among the three approaches to research

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Interpretive social science</th>
<th>Critical social science</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason for research</td>
<td>To discover natural laws so people can predict and control events</td>
<td>To understand and describe meaningful social action</td>
<td>To smash myths and empower people to change society radically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of social reality</td>
<td>Stable pre-existing patterns or order that can be discovered</td>
<td>Fluid definitions of a situation created by human interaction</td>
<td>Conflict-filled and governed by hidden underlying structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of human beings</td>
<td>Self-interested and rational individuals who are shaped by external forces</td>
<td>Social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds</td>
<td>Creative, adaptive people with unrealised potential, trapped by illusion and exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of common sense</td>
<td>Clearly distinct from and less valid than science</td>
<td>Powerful everyday theories used by ordinary people</td>
<td>False beliefs that hide power and objective conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory looks like</td>
<td>A logical, deductive system of interconnected definitions, axioms and laws</td>
<td>A description of how a group’s meaning system is generated and sustained</td>
<td>A critique that reveals true conditions and helps people see the way to a better world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An explanation that is true</td>
<td>Is logically connected to laws and based on facts</td>
<td>Resonates or feels right to those who are being studied</td>
<td>Supplies people with tools needed to change the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good evidence</td>
<td>Is based on precise observations that others can repeat</td>
<td>Is embedded in the context of fluid social interactions</td>
<td>Is informed by a theory that unveils illusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place for values</td>
<td>Science is value-free, and values have no place except when choosing a topic</td>
<td>Values are an integral part of social life; no group’s values are wrong, only different</td>
<td>All science must begin with a value position; some positions are right, some are wrong</td>
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Source: Neuman (2002, p. 75)
as fundamental to their own and their daughters’ femininity would be typical of an interpretive framework. Such a method for understanding and making visible women’s marginalised voices is central to this framework and requires that the researcher create and maintain an open dialogical process that allows for the participant’s voice and accounts to emerge without fear of value imposition and judgement. The co-constructions women create as part of meaning-making are considered an important part of redressing women’s exclusion from knowledge production. The meanings that women bring to bear upon their lived realities are considered an equally important research objective in social justice work. Understanding why women would actively promote the practice of female circumcision means that these voices are not discounted as embodying ‘false consciousness’ but rather are illustrative of agency in how choices are made about bodies and women’s participation in culture. Engaging women’s narratives is thus an important aspect of such interpretive methods. African feminist scholars have argued for a theoretical lens of black African women’s experiences that does not reproduce Euro–western frames of reference in reading women’s bodies and participation in culture (Coulibaly, 2015; Gqola, 2001; Mikell, 1995). Feminist narrative analyses aim to explore women’s accounts of their everyday and social worlds with a view to understanding and making visible how women navigate sociopolitical, economic and other relational dimensions of power in society. For example, Stevens (1993) demonstrates the value of exploring how lesbians from low-income communities struggle with access to healthcare through their own narrative accounts and stories of access. In so doing, Stevens (1993) makes visible relational networks of power that exist outside of the margins of research, engaging with a marginalised community and demonstrating the structural inequalities of healthcare in real people’s lives.

Through the use of visual narrative methods, feminist researchers aim not only to make such stories and experiences visible but also to highlight women’s vulnerabilities as well as their resistances within a patriarchal system. In this sense, interpretive research is also critical in orientation in seeking to engage processes of social change. Indeed, many feminist researchers tend to work within both paradigms as more effective ways of understanding and engaging the social world. Puleng Segalo’s work on embroidery as narrative (Segalo, 2011, 2012, 2014; Segalo, Manoff & Fine, 2015) demonstrates the importance of exploring women’s narratives of self and community to understand the effects of traumatic pasts and histories in present lives. As noted, researchers working with Photovoice tools have also engaged narrative forms of enquiry to understand individuals’ lived experiences as well as their social location and positioning within networks of power. In order to highlight the influence and invisible power of embodied cultural capital in how students navigate spaces of learning in institutions of higher learning, Bradbury and Kiguwa (2012) work with visual narratives to tell stories of intersections of social categories of race, class, gender and sexuality in students’ feelings of belonging and non-belonging. Kihato (2010) uses visual methodologies to make visible migrant women’s lived experiences as migrants. She argues that such a methodology allows for traditionally passive and invisible subjects and accounts to emerge organically and reflectively in the
research process. Doing research with populations and communities that are not able to ‘speak’ their experiences because of language barriers, for example, is thus made possible. Participants create meaning in the images and are able to tell stories of their material embodiment as subjects as well as construct meanings about their social situations within the world. Feminist scholars have argued for alternative forms of data collection that are able to engage stories of trauma and survival that are not triggering, invasive and limited (Motsemme, 2004a, 2004b).

Feminist scholars utilising critical paradigmatic frameworks have emphasised the need to interrogate subjective accounts and interpretations of experience. True to the principle of making the personal political, critical feminist researchers emphasise the need to engage subjective accounts of the everyday social world as more than personal experiences. Thus, the women’s accounts of and support for a cultural practice that would seem to privilege male sexual pleasure to the detriment of women’s safety and experience of pleasure itself would be problematised. Female circumcision as such a practice would be interrogated for its legitimation of a sociopolitical, economic and cultural system that is seen to be oppressive to women. Interrogating complicit accounts of subjectification that legitimate such systems would further be critiqued. Linking these personal experiences to broader social and political structures of inequality and power networks constitutes an important layer of analysis. Similarly, the taxi driver’s accounts of gang rape would be problematised in their discursive reproductions and legitimation of gender violence. Interrogating the relational configurations of power is fundamental to how we make sense of the world with a view to changing these configurations so that they are more equitable. Critical feminist scholars working within such a framework emphasise research methods that allow for such deconstruction and critique of psychosocial configurations and networks. Critical Foucauldian and feminist scholars have indeed argued for a social analysis that engages multiple sites of practice and resistance by integrating methodological lenses (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002).

Much participatory action feminist research similarly relies on interpretive and critical frameworks in its analyses of women’s lives and experiences (Maguire, 1987). Through body-mapping projects, such visual methodologies narrate the stories of marginalised communities such as sex workers, and sexual and gender minorities (Oliveira, Meyers & Vearey, 2016; Oliveira & Vearey, 2017; Schuler, Oliveira & Vearey, 2016). In so doing, marginalised voices and experiences are not only made visible but can be instrumental in challenging current practices, structures and policies that further make invisible and oppress vulnerable communities. Zethu Matebeni’s (2011) work on intersectional citizenship and violence against sexual minorities in post-apartheid South Africa also demonstrates this integration of paradigms in telling women’s stories. Through the notion of intersectional citizenship, Moreau (2015) highlights the problem of conflating gendered experiences of oppression as homogeneous. The black lesbian body in South Africa is understood via different and multiple discursive constructs that are related to sociomaterial resources of power. This in turn has significant consequences for how such identified bodies enjoy everyday social and material citizenship.
Doing ethical feminist research

Given feminism’s central concern with the subversion of patriarchal and oppressive systems for/on women, and in spite of its diversity, the issue of ethical praxis in research remains a continuous and political project across the different strands of feminist theory. Ethics in feminist research is a political project that aims to address gaps and problems of representation in research. How women have been represented and the myriad forms of representation – such as black, queer and other marginalised positions of speaking – thus become an ethical issue for feminist researchers. The issue of ‘voice’ and who speaks in the research is closely related to this emphasis. Feminist researchers consider the passivity with which many women have been represented and spoken on behalf of to be deeply unethical. Ethical research must therefore entail continuous researcher reflexivity that includes how we represent, speak for, tell other women’s stories and create knowledge about women and their experiences (Palmary, 2006).

Another ethical issue for feminist researchers is the political project of social change through research. Given feminism’s roots in sociopolitical change for women in society, the underlying task and objective of any research concerns the need to make visible, challenge and bring about change to women’s lives and in broader society. How women experience oppression and patriarchy thus remains at the heart of feminist research, and it is considered the ethical responsibility and task of the researcher to conduct research with women with the objective of social change. This is the task that much feminist research, such as participatory action research, sets for itself: conducting research with the view to intervening and bringing about social and interpersonal action that addresses social inequality. Feminist researchers are also ethically obliged to conduct research that continually exposes the intersection of personal livelihoods and everyday meaning-making with broader sociostructural inequalities and systems. This intersecting of the personal with the political is at the core of feminist theory.

Feminist theory’s project of recovering marginalised voices and exploring possibilities for social justice for women has broader implications for the place of reflexivity as a core ethical principle in research. The research encounter is invariably marked by unequal relations of power between participants and the researcher. To what degree is it possible to recover and not appropriate the voices of the powerless? Even when we are most reflective about our positions as researchers, do we ever escape the trappings of power that these positions confer upon us? These are serious ethical dilemmas that feminists must continually grapple with and which remain impossible to answer in consistent ways.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that feminism’s roots as a political social movement have deep implications for how we conduct research and intervene in social situations that we consider oppressive to women. The chapter discussed examples of research that exemplify these different levels of analysis. Given feminism’s
multiple strands of emphasis, these methods of questioning and intervening will not always be harmonious. Nonetheless, several core principles underlie both feminist research practice as well as the ethics of research.

References


Feminist approaches: An exploration of women’s gendered experiences


