

**REVISITING FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES:**

**A WORKING PAPER**

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# REVISITING FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: A WORKING PAPER

## Introduction

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The present document is based on a workshop presentation given by the author to members of the Research Division of Status of Women Canada in February 2000. The main goal of the workshop was to provide resources to members of the Division involved in evaluating research proposals submitted to the Policy Research Fund. By drawing on recent debates about research methods in social science, and in particular on developments in the debate about what constitutes “feminist research methods”, the presentation aimed to help determine whether the research methodologies and techniques proposed in grant proposals were appropriate to the topic of the research and compatible with the policy-oriented nature of the research programme.

The presentation was far from exhaustive. It focussed on *five major themes* that reflect some of the most common methodological issues that have arisen in the proposals submitted to Status of Women Canada in the past couple of years:

- ⌘ How has the debate around the use of quantitative and qualitative methods moved on since the days when feminist researchers tended to reject quantitative methods, and how can we decide the circumstances under which one or the other may be more appropriate?
- ⌘ Recourse to focus groups as an interviewing technique has been gaining in popularity in social science research in general and in feminist research in particular: what, then, are the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups as compared with individual interviews, and to what extent can focus groups be considered a “feminist method”?
- ⌘ Feminist researchers have historically tended to be advocates of using “insiders” for interviewing in order to minimize distance and power inequities between the researcher and the researched and to ensure that the subject’s views are accurately reflected: but how has this standpoint evolved in recent years and to what extent do the notions that researchers are positioned either as “insiders” or “outsiders” and that “insider” research is always preferable hold up to scrutiny?
- ⌘ Feminist research projects have quite often set out to be “participatory”, actively involving the subjects of the research in shaping the research agenda and strategy: but what has experience taught us about how “participatory research” turns out in practice, and what does this mean for the feminist ideal of democratizing research processes?
- ⌘ Finally – and most importantly – given the increasing popularity of qualitative methods, and the growing acceptability of their use for research that is to inform policy-making, how do we assess the validity of these methods and

ascertain that they are carried out in a rigorous way, with “quality control” at all stages of the process?

In the course of the workshop discussions it became increasingly clear that it would be useful to share these reflections with a wider audience, in order both to foster further exchanges and debates on these questions, and provide a resource tool for individuals and groups working on the development of research proposals from a feminist perspective. Consequently, it was decided to produce a revised and extended version of the workshop document in a published form, together with an updated bibliography. As far as possible, the document is written in a way that should make it quite accessible to non-specialists. Nevertheless, methodological questions frequently do not have clear-cut answers and feminist researchers form a diverse community as regards research strategies, as in other respects. Those looking for “recipes” for feminist research proposals for policy-oriented research will not find them in these pages!

It is important to note that this is a *working paper*...and a work-in-progress. It makes no claims to being exhaustive, nor is it intended to substitute for the excellent manuals and handbooks that have been published in recent years and which cover various research methods and techniques in detail, often taking into account (at least to some extent) arguments about epistemology and method made by feminist researchers.

Similarly, the annexed thematic bibliography, although up-to-date at the time of writing, should not be considered to be an exhaustive resource. It draws in the first instance on sources that the author of this document – a social geographer by training – has found useful in teaching research methods courses, in supervising graduate students, in evaluating research proposals and in developing methodologies for her own research.<sup>1</sup> These sources are complemented by journal articles from a variety of social science disciplines, as well as edited books.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the contributions to my thinking made over recent years by my colleague Michel Trépanier, with whom I have frequently team-taught research methods courses, and by Nathalie Chicoine, who taught her thesis supervisor a great deal about rigour in qualitative research. The usual disclaimers apply.

## I. Quantitative versus qualitative methods? The state of the debate

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### Overview

Qualitative and quantitative methodologies are still widely considered in the research methods literature to be two distinct research traditions. There is a long tradition of positing major “dualisms” (meaning rigid oppositions between two categories or two positions believed to be bipolar and mutually exclusive) between qualitative and quantitative methods (Table 1). Underlying this dualistic model is the notion that these methods are deeply rooted in different epistemological positions, that is to say different conceptions of what is knowledge, what is science, how do we come to know things.

Table 1: Traditional bipolar representation of differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies	
<i>QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY</i>	<i>QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY</i>
<i>searches for general laws, empirical regularities</i>	<i>searches for meanings in specific social/cultural contexts; possibility of theoretical generalization</i>
<i>adoption of natural science (objectivity as ideal)</i>	<i>rejection of natural science (subjectivity is valued)</i>
<i>try to simulate experimental situation</i>	<i>natural settings</i>
<i>explanation = prediction of events, behaviour, attitudes (“statistical causality”)</i>	<i>explanation = understanding, interpreting reasons for observable behaviour, sense given to actions (“historical causality”)</i>
<i>large-scale studies (extensive research); random sampling</i>	<i>studies of small groups; case studies (intensive research); purposive sampling</i>
<i>deduction</i>	<i>induction or grounded theory</i>
<i>survey instruments with predetermined response categories based on theoretical framework (questionnaire)</i>	<i>open-ended research instruments (semi-structured intensive interview, life history, focus group, observation...) from which theoretical categories (may) emerge</i>
<i>numbers (measurement)</i>	<i>words (“thick description”)</i>
<i>adoption of natural science (objectivity as ideal)</i>	<i>rejection of natural science (subjectivity is valued)</i>

Qualitative methods have gained a great deal of ground over the past couple of decades. They are much more accepted today than they were in the period dating from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, a period known as that of the “quantitative revolution” in many branches of social science.

**Indicators of the growing acceptance of qualitative research methods:**

- # *they are widely taught in research methods courses, from junior college level to PhD programs*
- # *they are accepted in proposals to major granting agencies - even for applied research (Lecompte et al. 1992; Walker 1985)*
- # *they have specialized journals and study groups in professional associations devoted to them*
- # *research based on qualitative methods is published in the top-ranked "mainstream" journals in most social sciences disciplines*

***Evolving perspectives on quantitative/qualitative differences***

In recent years, however, growing numbers of scholars have argued that this type of dichotomous perspective is too simplistic and may be counterproductive. While epistemological differences are real, and do lead to different types of questions being asked in relation to the same broad research topic, many of the standard dichotomies become quite blurred when placed under closer investigation. This opens up the possibility of developing research strategies that recognize the potential complementarity of certain quantitative and qualitative techniques. For instance, they might be used to shed light on different aspects of the research topic being studied.

In what ways do some of these quantitative/qualitative distinctions seem to be breaking down or blurring, and in relation to this, in what ways are feminist researchers rethinking the quantitative/qualitative divide, and how have perspectives evolved as regards suitable roles for quantitative methods in feminist research strategies? We can explore the evolution of thinking on these issues by reviewing a series of eight differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches identified in the most comprehensive study of the quantitative/qualitative debate ever published, although it is now slightly dated (Bryman 1988, Table 5.1).

**1. THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS IN A RESEARCH STRATEGY – CENTRAL OR ADJUNCT?**

Within the quantitative tradition, qualitative methods have always been acceptable “at the margins” – as preparatory tools for a quantitative-based project, for example, conducting a focus group as a means for identifying hypotheses to be tested through quantitative techniques. Qualitative methods were not deemed to be legitimate “stand alone” research tools because they used non-representative samples and seemingly non-structured data, which were presumed to be anecdotal (Winchester 1999).

By contrast, in the qualitative tradition, qualitative research was deemed to be an end in itself, not an adjunct to a “more important, more scientific” strategy; researchers in this tradition argued for the importance of studying meanings and making interpretations through stand-alone qualitative research tools. Today this position has more widespread legitimacy than in the past, even among those who mainly practice quantitative methods. Qualitative studies usually also include more quantitative questions as an adjunct,

enabling the researcher to, for instance, characterize the interviewee in terms of her position with respect to certain measurable dimensions (such as education, income etc) thought to be significant in explaining variations in findings between one interviewee and another.

Feminist researchers have turned the traditional “quantitavist” view of qualitative methods on its head. Many would now argue that there is definitely a place for quantitative methods in feminist research but that quantitative survey instruments cannot be stand-alone research tools; they must *always* be informed by prior qualitative research. Questionnaire survey instruments, for example, need to reflect a sophisticated qualitative understanding of the attitudes and experiences they are designed to document and measure (Armstrong & Armstrong 1983).

## 2. THE RELATION BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND SUBJECT – PERSONAL OR IMPERSONAL?

Quantitative research strategies are usually grounded in “positivist” epistemology, meaning a conception of knowledge in which objective reality is believed to exist independently of people’s experience of that reality. In the positivist logic, this subject-object distinction must be maintained through the research process; consequently, positivist researchers argue that the relation between researcher and subject should be a distant one. Minimizing contact leads to minimizing response bias due to “interviewer effect” and interpretation bias due to excessive empathy with the world of the respondent. In contrast, the qualitative perspective holds that closer contact is essential, otherwise the researcher cannot begin to comprehend the world through the eyes of those she is studying. Nevertheless, the degree of closeness between researcher and subject varies according to the type of interview or observation and the position of the researcher along the “insider/outsider” continuum (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

Feminist researchers usually find the impersonal aspect of survey research abhorrent in terms of human relations – particularly so in telephone surveys which often give the impression of objectification of the respondent, in that he is seen as a commodity to be discarded once the interview is over (O’Neill 1995: 333). (In this respect mail surveys are sometimes considered less problematic because the personal space of the respondent has not been “invaded” to the same extent as in a telephone survey.) This problem can be overcome if telephone interviewers are known to be associated with an organization likely to be respected and trusted by the respondents: Kim (1997) gives the example of a woman’s advocacy organization conducting interviews to measure the effects of a job training program which targeted women on social assistance.

## 3. THE RESEARCHER’S STANCE IN RELATION TO SUBJECT – OUTSIDER OR INSIDER?

Traditionally, in quantitative methodologies the researcher is seen as an “outsider” and therefore capable of being “objective”, a prerequisite to being “scientific”, whereas in qualitative methodologies it has long been considered perfectly legitimate for the researcher to take on the role of “insider” so as to share in the subjectivity of those being researched, as in the case of full participant observation. (We return to the “insider/outsider” debate in Section IV of this document).

Today these lines have become much more blurred. Developments in quantum physics have established that even in natural science there is no such thing as “pure” observation uninfluenced by the observer (Nielsen 1990). There is growing consensus that all data (quantitative or qualitative) are “constructed”, in that they are shaped by the categories the researcher uses in order to gather the data and to interpret it, and – in the case of human subjects – by the way the research subject interprets and decides to react to what is being asked. In a large-scale survey questionnaire, this “social construction” (so called because of the influence of broad social norms on how we think about data) occurs largely at the moment of questionnaire design. In contrast, in an intensive interview the data are constructed in the interview dialogue process itself – the words spoken become a “discourse” influenced by the interpersonal dynamics and power relations inherent in the interview situation, however much the researcher claims to be giving complete unmediated “voice” to her subjects.

In consequence, claims for validity based on researcher/research object separations have less credence than previously, and with this evolution in the epistemological debate has come calls for *greater transparency* in the presentation of both quantitative and qualitative research strategies to show what values underly the research and how the data are constructed (we return to this with regard to qualitative methods in the discussion about validity and rigour in Section V of the present document). In this respect it is noteworthy that feminists who do quantitative research seem to be in forefront among those who are calling for more transparency about values and the social construction of data in quantitative methods. They argue that we need to redefine “objectivity” in terms of the need to make one’s position known rather than invisible, and by limiting claims to universal applicability of findings – whether these stem from quantitative or qualitative research (Mattingly & Falconer-Al-Hindi 1995: 428-429).

#### 4. DOES EMPIRICAL RESEARCH CONFIRM THEORIES AND CONCEPTS OR HELP THEM EMERGE?

Quantitative research strategies are traditionally said to be “deductive” or driven by prior theory, which they seek to confirm or disprove (hypothesis-testing). Qualitative strategies, on the other hand, are said to be “inductive”, oriented toward discovering theory out of categories that emerge from research. In this way, qualitative methods are seen as giving credence to the subject’s own categories, whatever she sees as being important, whereas in quantitative research, analytical categories are predetermined (as in the case of the closed questionnaire), and they may not necessarily be those that would make sense to the subject, but he is restricted by them anyway.

In actual fact, however, much quantitative research is much less theory-driven than the classic dichotomy suggests: it is often “data-driven” by available data collected according to the preoccupations and theoretical constructs of those who define census and other government surveys. Quantitative research may also be self-consciously exploratory, theory coming into play late in the process.

Qualitative research, meanwhile, is rarely purely inductive. It is much more likely to occupy an intermediate position between induction and deduction – as evidenced by the great popularity of Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) “grounded theory” approach. In the

latter, theory gives some initial orientation to the research and is later modified through discovery of new theoretical categories in the course of the research. Moreover, qualitative case studies are usually chosen on theoretical grounds, the goal of the case study often being to test a theory (Walton 1992).

In contrast to quantitative survey questionnaires, qualitative interview guides can be adapted en route; this flexibility offers scope for making one's organizing frameworks sensitive to the meanings and issues raised by the interviewee. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers also use analytical grids (both in interview design and in data analysis) that may not fully correspond not to the subject's frame of reference.

Feminist researchers have brought further nuance to this debate. Some argue, for instance, that in certain circumstances one *should* impose analytical categories that don't immediately have meaning to the subject. A set of options offered in a closed questionnaire may even challenge respondents' ways of thinking in a way that could be consciousness-raising.

#### **The closed questionnaire as consciousness-raising tool?**

*Greaves et al. (1995) report on a structured "intake survey" used for many years by an organization for battered women. This survey gave an exhaustive list of all possible types of abuse (the list was based on cumulative experience of centre workers over the years) and asked women to check off what had ever happened to them. Included on the list were incidents that some of the women would not have necessarily identified as being "abuse" if they had been asked about abuse in an open-ended survey question. So the questionnaire helped these women set their experiences in a wider context and made it easier for them to talk with other abused women and/or centre workers and come to appreciate the commonality of their experiences.*

Nevertheless, the question of to what extent researchers should try to analyse and interpret the discourse of interviewees using *categories that do not spring directly from the data* remains a matter of considerable controversy in feminist research. We will return to this issue under point 7 of the present section ("Image of social reality").

#### **5. THE RESEARCH STRATEGY – STRUCTURED OR UNSTRUCTURED?**

Quantitative methodologies are often said to be *structured* because the techniques used (sampling frame, closed questionnaire...) will predetermine what aspects of phenomenon will be studied and analysed. In other words, what is deemed "important" is decided in advance. Qualitative methodologies are seen as less structured and consequently more *flexible*: for example, as mentioned above, the researcher can modify the interview process to explore in more depth aspects deemed important by the interviewee, which means that any and all of the data collected can be considered important even if this does not correspond to initial "hunches" of the researcher. Feminist standpoint theorists tend to be more favourably disposed toward qualitative methods because, in principle, they

allow women to be “experts” about their own experiences and to “correct” the researcher whose questions are on the wrong tack.

The “flexibility” question remains a major distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods. However, in qualitative methodology today there is a much stricter questioning than previously about how this flexibility can be combined with the goals of transparency and rigour in the analysis phase of the research process (we return to this issue in Section II of the present document).

Also at issue here is what research methods specialists refer to as “*intersubjective transmissibility*”. Quantitative researchers and some qualitative researchers argue that different observers of the same data must be capable of reaching the same conclusion about what the data say (within the limits of the ways that observers themselves choose to see what they want to see...) (O’Neill 1995). They argue that this is integral to the practice of transparency in the research process. In structured quantitative survey research this tends to be done by making survey instrument available and documenting decisions made about coding problems, at the same time as making the data themselves available to other researchers for verification through secondary analysis. In qualitative research this is more problematic: for instance, the process of making observations in natural settings obviously cannot be made available to other researchers, and interview transcriptions normally have to remain confidential because of the possibility of breaching anonymity. However the analytical process of qualitative studies can certainly be made transparent to other researchers by careful documentation of the different steps involved.

## 6. SCOPE OF FINDINGS – IN WHAT WAY IS THE RESEARCH GENERALIZABLE?

The question of generalization of research findings still causes much division and misunderstanding between those trained in quantitative and qualitative research traditions. These differences are rooted in significant epistemological differences about what constitutes an “explanation” and about how theory and empirical work should relate to one another.

By and large, quantitative researchers try to construct their studies in such a way that their empirical findings can be generalized to a larger population or applied to a different population from the one that they studied. The methods of probability sampling and the concept of statistical representativity are very important to this process. Nevertheless, findings may not be universally generalizable: for example, the findings of a statistically representative study done in one community should not be assumed to apply to another community unless the researcher can prove that the communities are similar on the theoretically-important dimensions.

Qualitative researchers do not make these kinds of claims about the empirical generalizability of their findings. Usually, they do “purposive” sampling for “information-rich” cases. The sample size is, ideally, determined by the need to tap into a sufficient number of situations and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied until little or no new information or significant variations are discovered by adding more people into the sample (this is called “reaching the point of saturation”). The results of the research are assumed to apply empirically only to the group, the time and the place

studied. Because there is no claim to statistical representativity, the empirical generalizability to a larger population or to other groups is difficult to evaluate.

There is still a certain degree of confusion among qualitative researchers as to what type of generalization they should be aiming for. But increasingly, qualitative researchers agree that empirical generalization of the findings to a wider population is not the proper objective of qualitative research. In any case it can probably never be achieved unless sample sizes become so large and case studies repeated in so many different sites that a large degree of standardization and... quantification become necessary; this would mean that qualitative methods would have to adopt significant aspects of quantitative techniques, thus losing their *raison d'être*.

The objective of qualitative research should more correctly be considered to be “theoretical generalization”. Simply put, this means that qualitative researchers are not only documenting the experiences of a group of people for their own sake (however interesting or important they may be considered to be), but also because they hope that their case study will contribute to theory development. In “grounded theory” the goal is to use a concrete and delimited situation to better understand the broader social processes which structure it, and how they are mediated by the specifics of the situation. Case studies can be used to develop a theoretical model, and then to see if this model applies to cases that have some structural similarity but are different in details.

Since this notion of theoretical generalization is difficult to grasp in the abstract, an example may be helpful. If a researcher was interested in the settlement, adaptation and social integration of immigrant women she could conduct retrospective qualitative interviews with women from one ethno-cultural group in one city over a particular time period. She could try to identify the *range* of factors that affect their pathways to social integration, by interview enough women until no new information emerges about the possible factors. No attempt would be made to quantify the frequency of occurrence of these factors because the sample is not statistically representative. The researcher would also not impose her own conceptions of what “social integration” means but would try to glean the subjects’ point of view. This small case study could then be used, in conjunction with other data sources (previous research, statistical data, literature...) to try to improve on existing theories about what helps or impedes the social integration of immigrant women. Subsequently, the study could be repeated with other groups of immigrant women (varying the characteristics of the group according to theorizations about what contextual factors might be important e.g. size of same-ethnic community in the city, immigration category). One might then have the makings of a more general theory.

### How a case study can enhance theory:

*“[T]he data gained from a particular study provide theoretical insights which possess a sufficient degree of generality or universality to allow their projection to other contexts or situations which are comparable to that of the original study. The researcher recognizes parallels, at a conceptual and theoretical level, between the case or situation studied, and another case or situation, which may well differ considerably in terms of the attributes or variables it exhibits. In other words, the comparability required between the two contexts is a logical or conceptual one, not one based on statistical representativeness” (Sim 1998: 350).*

When small-scale qualitative studies fail to “deliver the goods” it is not because of the small size of the sample as such. It is usually because the research issue is multi-faceted and the sample too heterogeneous in terms of factors that – on the basis of theory - could be expected to affect the findings (e.g. age group, presence/absence of children, ethno-cultural identity, social class). Consequently, not all possible experiences and situations are uncovered (the point of saturation is not reached), the research becomes anecdotal and cannot be used to advance theoretical understandings that could help in policy development.

### 7. IMAGES OF SOCIAL REALITY REFLECTED BY THE RESEARCH – STATIC AND “EXTERNAL” TO THE RESEARCH SUBJECT, OR DYNAMIC AND SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED BY THE RESEARCH SUBJECT?

Traditionally, one of the criticisms levelled at quantitative research was its “snapshot” character, making it difficult to use to study the dynamics of social change. The interest in prediction and in statistical association of variables at a single point in time was contrasted with the attention to process and “historical causality” in qualitative research.

Today, this bipolar perspective is breaking down with the growth of quantitative techniques such as event history analysis, which enable complex longitudinal studies to be conducted, documenting the historical sequencing of life-course events in such a way as to infer causal relations. Event history analysis is a biographical approach, although it differs from qualitative biographical-based research in that it is still concerned with prediction of the statistical probabilities of a particular event generating a particular action (e.g. a teenage pregnancy leading to leaving the parental home), whereas qualitative approaches would try to interpret the sequencing of these two events by interviewing the parties concerned.

Quantitative and qualitative researchers have also traditionally held different perspectives on the relationship of the individual to society. This raises very complex epistemological issues, but broadly speaking, quantitative methodologies have tended to assume that social reality exists above and beyond the individual and her perception and construction of that reality (nature is exterior to the subject), whereas qualitative researchers are somewhat divided on this question. Some believe that social reality is

entirely constructed by individuals and does not exist over and beyond them, while others hold that there are underlying structures that give rise to the observable realities?

Although it might at first sight seem to be an arcane philosophical debate, this issue has very important in the decisions we make around how to conduct and write up our research. Whether or not we believe that there are realities over and above the discourse of informants/participants affects how we present our data and to what extent we feel it legitimate to impose our own interpretations or rework the categories suggested by our informants. Consequently, in discussions of how qualitative data is going to be handled and interpreted in a research project these epistemological stances need to be made explicit. Since this debate is a matter of some controversy within feminist qualitative research, we shall return to it in the context of a discussion about “validity” in Section V of the present document.

#### 8. THE NATURE OF THE DATA – “HARD AND RELIABLE” OR “SOFT, RICH AND DEEP”

The terms traditionally used to distinguish the type of data obtained in quantitative and qualitative methods – “hard” versus “soft” research – are not only rich in imagery but, by the same token, pejorative with respect to qualitative methods. The traditional feminist rebuttal – “dry” versus “wet” research – scores a point but does not advance debate about the merits and limitations of different techniques! The “reliability” of quantification is also frequently contrasted with the “richness” of qualitative methods. Here too, however, researchers are increasingly accepting that the distinctions are not so clear in practice: quantitative data may be subject to various reliability problems whereas qualitative sources can be very reliable when corroboration is available from multiple sources. Quantitative data can also be “rich and deep” in its own way (as in the case of longitudinal “event history” approaches) while qualitative data can be shallow when elicited by a poorly-trained interviewer.

Nevertheless, the distinction between trying to produce broadly-based knowledge and trying to produce a detailed understanding of a particular situation remains a useful one in help us to work out what type of research questions can be answered by quantitative or qualitative methods. Qualitative research can be very useful in *policy development* because it can enhance understanding of complex causes of problems that policies are designed to remedy. However, it cannot substitute for quantitative research in *measuring the extent* of the problem – and here, feminist quantitative researchers have played an exemplary role in putting issues such as harassment, abuse and labour market segregation (to name but a few) squarely on the public policy agenda (see Reinharz 1992: 79-86 for a variety of examples).

Hostility toward quantitative methods seems, then, to be fading among feminist researchers. In disciplines such as economics, psychology and geography such hostility never really existed and indeed, feminist work initially gained ground and respect by showing that gender-blind analyses of quantitative data-bases were not only unjust. they could lead to misleading conclusions – “bad science”. Growing numbers of feminist researchers have argued for the importance of “Counting for Women” (McLafferty 1995; see also Jayaratne 1983) and have demonstrated the value of quantitative methods in “making visible the invisible”, in research on subjects ranging all the way from the time

spent by women and men on unpaid work, through the measurement of gender and class-based inequalities of access to specialized health services (caused by location decisions and transportation problems), to the prevalence of the fear of urban crime and how this restricts women's access to public spaces and the demonstration that abused women come from all social classes and ethnic groups.

***On the possibilities and problems of complementarity between quantitative and qualitative research methods***

Reflecting the increasingly nuanced perspectives outlined above, feminist research has latterly moved in the direction of “experimental” methodological pluralism (Code 1995). There is a – cautious – acceptance of the view that it is possible to adopt quantitative techniques (i.e. *methods* in the narrow sense) without buying into all of the tenets of positivist epistemology associated with quantitative research *methodology* in the large sense (Rose 1993). The same technique can be used in different research traditions to do very different things (Graham 1999: 84): compare, for example, a consumer marketing survey with the example given earlier of the battered women's shelter intake survey questionnaire, used not only as a measurement instrument but as a kind of “c.r.” tool used to help the woman open up about her traumatizing experiences.

Doubtless under the influence of post-modernism's rebuttal of methodological (as well as theoretical) orthodoxies, there is a growing sense that no single research method can provide a complete understanding of a phenomenon; each one imposes limits to the type of understanding that can be gleaned.

This tendency toward pluralism also reflects the fact that strong versions of “feminist standpoint theory” (to which we return in Section II) have lost ground. There is a growing recognition of the necessity for research to be both faithful to women's experiences, and to subject them to critical scrutiny. An important way to do this is through careful contextualization of experiences, which often requires recourse to quantitative data sources documenting social and economic conditions.

Not only in feminist research but also in social research more generally, there has been a mushrooming of debates about the importance and value of mixing research methods within a research project. Some researchers have argued convincingly that while our epistemological positions influence the questions we ask and inform the decisions we make about method, the methods themselves are independent of epistemology (McKendrick 1999; see Table 2). These debates are couched not so much in terms of “triangulation” (which means using different methods or sources to obtain information on the same topic, so as to cross-check for errors) as in terms of an increasing recognition of the interdependency of question and method. Different methods lend themselves to different questions about the same phenomenon (Maxwell 1996: 20). At least in part, “the question shall determine the method” (Elliott 1999).

However, “multi-method” strategies, while increasingly popular, are not all alike. There may still be one predominant question guiding the whole research project, and if so, one type of method is still likely to predominate (see the boldfaced examples in Table 2, from McKendrick 1999). This may mean that the hoped-for complementarity between the different parts of a project is hard to establish in practice, and/or that questions

requiring qualitative strategies are once again marginalized, especially when parts of the project generate large-scale quantitative data (for an example, see Winchester 1999).

In other cases the research goal is to both broaden and deepen understanding of a particular theme, so that a project is comprised of a number of different sub-questions, where each of the questions is amenable to a particular research method but none of the questions are considered inherently more central to the study. The findings for one question help to interpret or to contextualize the findings of the other. A good example, and one which manages to avoid a “power hierarchy” between the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research, is Hanson & Pratt’s (1996) study of gender, work and space in Worcester, Massachusetts: the authors combine census data, questionnaire survey and intensive interviews so as to weave together an understanding of the links between the broader contours of occupational segmentation by gender in the local labour market, domestic responsibilities and the decisions women make about employment and residential location based on their own “strategizing” but within the context of a relatively limited range of options.

**Table 2**

<i><b>Research Tradition</b></i>	<i><b>Objectives</b></i>	<i><b>Migration Example</b></i>
Positivist	Establish empirical regularities which are assumed to be of general (universal) significance	Patterns, Reasons for, and Outcomes arising from Counter-urbanization (i.e. out-migration from Census Metropolitan Areas to small towns and rural areas)
Humanistic	Valorize human experience and seek to understand the meaning, value and human significance of events	'Return' migration of 'American' Jewish families to Israel
Realist	Identify the structures which generate outcomes via mechanisms (necessary causal powers) under specific contingent (context-dependent) conditions	Migration associated with decentralization of Government ministries from Toronto to other parts of Ontario
(Feminist) Standpoint Theory	Knowledge is socially constructed. Establish a 'successor science' in which unprivileged knowledge (i.e. women's) is recognised and valorized	Migration experiences of women partners of male company executives
Postmodernist	Establish that the multiple positioning of the author (or reader) has influenced the production (or interpretation) of the narrative	Migration of elite 'third world' women

How epistemology informs, rather than precludes, methodological strategy: Examples from migration studies

<i>Methods and Application</i>			
<b>Survey / Questionnaire</b>	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Fieldwork</b>	<b>Non-reactive</b>
<b>Mathematical modelling of census migration data to provide a national overview and trend projection.</b>	Content analysis of responses to a structured interview to establish why households decided to migrate	Fieldwork survey in urban fringe to identify suitable sites for 'migrant' residential developments (based on interview?)	Comparative systematic analysis of migrant and non-migrant children's writing about what they like most about their (new) home.
Detailed social attitudes questionnaire to establish and understand the personal context of (non-functional reasons for) this migration	In-depth interview to explore the meaning of this migration experience to each individual migrant	<b>Ethnographic, participant observation to share the emotions, experiences and significance of this particular migration</b>	Analysis of reported accounts (autobiography, speeches, magazine articles) of return migration, to situate the personal significance of the act in its wider socio-political context.
<b>Expansion method data modelling which, being attentive to context, enables the specificities of each department's migration to be isolated from the general experience.</b>	In-depth interview with senior civil servants to uncover the underlying processes behind these departmental migrations	Participant observation within the circle of decision-makers to establish the processes that contrive to produce the resultant migration.	Interpretation of a series of internal Departmental briefing papers to chart the temporal development (life course) of the processes at work.
<b>Implementation of a survey, designed by women using their (familiar) language to generate an overview of migration experiences that they collectively deem to be important.</b>	Focus group interview to share and rationalize migration experiences among the group	Unobtrusive observation of family processes involved in these migrations, undertaken while fulfilling a service sector function (removals, real estate agency house search, mortgage lender, etc.)	Interpretation of experiences contained with letters commissioned for a women's journal on the subject of 'Me and my partner on the move'
Log-linear modelling of migration data to estimate the significance of different 'positions' on the propensity to migrate.	In-depth interview with the women to 'unpack' their rationalizations of their migrations	Unobtrusive access to migrant's experiences via a service function (e.g. labour market consultant, int. removal contractor)	<b>'Unpack' autobiographies, personal journals and/or letters of migrants that discuss the migration experience.</b>

Source: McKendrick, John H. (1999) Multi-method research: an introduction to its application in population geography. *Professional Geographer* 51 (1): 40-49, Table 1. © Blackwell Publishers; used by kind permission. Very minor changes have been made by the author of the present working paper.

## II. The role of focus groups in a research strategy

### **Overview**

Until quite recently, focus groups were most commonly used in marketing research, where they have long been an important research tool in their own right. In the social sciences this interviewing technique has tended to be seen as an adjunct to other methods: it has commonly been used to identify pertinent research issues and to generate or test the pertinence of hypotheses with members of a group that was to be targeted for a large-scale quantitative survey.

Today, gender-aware researchers often try to adapt this idea of focus groups being a preliminary to larger-scale research, to take into account a key feminist principle – that research subjects should be given the opportunity at the outset of the research to provide nuances, reinterpretations and challenges to the concepts that shape research hypotheses or policy considerations. For instance, in the case of one study in the economics of developing countries in Africa, the focus group process led the researcher to rethink in a fundamental way the notion that individual economic independence (contrasted to state support or dependency on others) was a goal around which there was consensus, even among women. It became clearer that this concept – a cornerstone of development aid policy – was being used in too “rarefied” a fashion without regard to the complexities of women’s lives and the centrality of values of caring and collective support in women’s lives (van Staveren 1997).

The focus group seems to be gaining in popularity among qualitative researchers in a variety of social science fields including policy-oriented research, with focus group interviews either being used as a stand-alone research method or as a complement to individual interviews. Those involved in evaluating research projects sometimes have the distinct impression that focus groups are being proposed more as a way of saving time and money compared to doing individual interviews than because of any intrinsic advantages for the research question at hand. Yet focus groups don’t yield the same kinds of information as individual interviews.

Also, there is a recent and significant strand of thought among feminist researchers that the focus group method can be a very appropriate way of doing feminist research, because of its empowering possibilities. In this perspective, focus groups are seen as compatible with the ideals and principles of participatory research.

It is for these reasons that the present document will now embark on a fairly substantial – although provisional and far from exhaustive – discussion of issues surrounding the focus group method.

### ***Differences from individual interviews in type of information obtained***

A classic, and influential, textbook on focus groups (Krueger 1994) touts the “economical” aspect of the focus group method is touted as one of its main advantages. In this perspective, group interviews are a “shortcut” compared to individual interviews, a way to glean information faster – hence the temptation to substitute focus group for individual interview in low-budget research projects.

However, this pragmatic perspective has been strongly criticized. Sim (1998), whose arguments are based on a comprehensive review of use of focus groups in health-related research, is one of a number of researchers who insist that “focus groups tap a different realm of social reality” (Sim 1998: 350) from that uncovered by one-on-one research instruments. Notably, consensual positions emerging from focus groups reflect the group dynamic - “an emergent property of the group context” (Sim 1998: 348) - rather than the aggregate of views of each participant. In this sense, focus group narratives are the product of a particular context of *group* interaction just as individual interview narratives are products of a different particular context of *individual* interaction. In this way, focus groups “excel at uncovering why participants think as they do” (Morgan 1997: 25).

Focus groups *explore collective and not individual* experiences. They allow for the sharing of individual experiences as represented in the group setting; members arrive at collective rationalizations for their beliefs or their actions through the process of observing and commenting on their similarities and differences. In contrast – to take the case of studies about international migration presented by McKendrick (1999 – *see Table 1*), only individual interviews can “tease out the personal significance of the migration act from the collective rationalization” of it (McKendrick 1999, p. 42). Thus, in analyzing focus group data, the goal should not be to uncover an accurate reflection of individual experiences but rather to establish “the group point of view” (Agar & MacDonald 1995: 81).

#### **Focus groups versus individual interviews**

*“The point is not whether the data are likely to be more objective and accurate [in group or individual interviews] but rather that the goals and kinds of data obtained are very different in each” (Montell 1999: 66).*

#### ***The issue of homogeneity of participants***

Generally, in order to uncover a group viewpoint, each focus group should be quite *homogeneous* with respect to the factors that the researcher believes to be likely to affect the attitudes expressed or types of experiences recounted (factors such as gender, age, social class, ethnocultural identity). To this end a written or phone questionnaire, to obtain basic socio-demographic information and some attitudinal indicators, is often used as a recruitment tool.

Why is homogeneity considered important? In a homogeneous group, participants are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and confident that other members will understand each other at a basic level and not shoot down their ideas. This sense of confidence may also facilitate expression of emotive or politically sensitive issues which the participant might not feel comfortable expressing in an individual interview. This can work especially well for highly marginalized groups (e.g. refugee women; see Israelite et al. 1999). Nevertheless, the reticence to discuss private matters or controversial attitudes in a group setting may make the recruitment process very difficult

(unless the researcher can tap into existing organized groups who feel comfortable with each other).

If the group lacks homogeneity it will obviously be impossible to tease out a group point of view, so that the whole purpose of doing the focus group is defeated! Moreover, if the group is heterogeneous in terms of social class or power differentials, members may feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions for fear that other members might shoot down their ideas. Also, members who sense that they are “different” may feel they have to “represent” their social category (e.g. age group, ethnocultural identity, sexual orientation...), which may lead to putting forward extreme points of view.

### ***Is a “group viewpoint” attainable?***

However, even with a homogeneous focus group it is important to be aware that the notion of a “group point of view” may be a somewhat artificial construction, as Sim (1998), for example, has shown. In general, the very dynamics of group interaction can create an artificial impression of consensus and conformity if some members feel unable to offer nuances or to express their dissent. For example, it can happen that most group members express viewpoints that are clearly at one end of a continuum of attitudes. This can lead to a dynamic in which the strength of opinions at this one extreme is magnified; dissenters then feel they must remain silent, leading to serious problems of interpretation. The more homogeneous the group (for example, in terms of political affiliation or ethnocultural identity), the more likely this problem is to arise due to pressure to conform to a group culture and respect its norms of behaviour for fear of being judged inadequate or unworthy of belonging to the group (Holbrook & Jackson 1996).

Also, although focus groups are normally constructed so that participants do not know each other, in some cases it may be useful to set up groups with people who do know each and have a common sense of identity – for example if the research interest is in local community formation, or in factors that shape group identity . In these cases researchers must be particularly sensitive to the problems of artificial consensus and silencing referred to above.

#### **A well-constructed focus group...**

J · will have sufficient homogeneity in terms of “cultural capital” (social background, education, knowing “the system”...) so that members can feel comfortable expressing opinions in front of the group

J · but not so much homogeneity that a “herd” mentality develops

In sum, researchers and focus group facilitators should seek to discern a group viewpoint while ensuring that all participants express their views. It is important to document the group dynamics through which consensus is reached.

To ensure the validity of the “group viewpoint” emerging from focus groups, the following recommendations are frequently made:

- ≠# Select groups using a strategy of “theoretical sampling” i.e. use a theoretical framework based on existing literature in order to identify groups likely to be differently positioned with respect to the issue being studied
  - For example, in a study of factors influencing people’s sense of public safety in the English countryside and on how fear affected their enjoyment of this type of recreation, Burgess (1996: 132) selected her groups “so as to represent a range of different social and cultural interests and positions in relation to crime and victimization” ♥ groups were to be homogeneous in terms of age, life-cycle, ethnicity and gender
- ≠# If possible, conduct more than one series of focus groups with same type of participants on same topic, the goal being to identify a consensus across groups as regards which issues are most relevant, even though within each group there may not be consensus on any single issue. In this way, one can:
  - identify “atypical” or extreme positions that might have resulted from the group dynamic in one particular interview.
  - “determine the point at which there seems to be consensus on the *range* of issues deemed to be relevant to the participants” (Sim 1998: 349). Once no new issues seem to be emerging, one can infer that the point of ‘saturation’ [of themes and categories] has been reached.
- ≠# Consider what type of comparisons are possible between the findings of each focus group: for instance, were the same range of views or a different set of views aired?
  - However, just as in the case of other types of qualitative research, it is very perilous to try to compare quantitatively the prevalence of a particular view or the depth of an opinion, because the focus groups are not statistically representative of a larger population.

***How to decide when focus groups are more appropriate than individual interview or observational techniques***

- ≠# Compared to observation, a larger amount of information can be obtained in a shorter time (one is not waiting for things to happen because the focus group is not a natural event)
- ≠# Focus groups are very helpful when a research project is at the exploratory stage, for generating hypotheses so as to identify the appropriate range of content for subsequent development of more structured research instruments (questionnaire; semi-structured intensive interview)
  - The focus group can elicit partial and tentative responses to very open-ended questions: the participant does not feel obliged to give a complete

answer. She feels less sense of obligation than in an individual interview; the group setting allows her or others to build on that incomplete answer later on, whereas in an individual interview the interviewer might have to be more directive in order to get any response at all, thus increasing the interviewer's influence (Montell 1999)

- ⚡ in an individual interview, when an interviewee's responses fit in with the interviewer's expectations, there is less likelihood of probing for further clarification or depth, whereas in focus group there are more likely to be divergences, leading the interviewer to prompt for more in-depth discussions
- ⚡ the "artificial", away-from-home (from husbands, in-laws...) setting of a focus group may be more appropriate for enabling members of certain groups to feel more comfortable about recounting experiences. For example, this advice was given by community groups to researchers in Toronto for a project about Somali refugee women's experiences (Israelite et al. 1999).

### ***How can focus group and other methods complement each other?***

How might focus group and individual interviews (survey or qualitative) complement each other in a research strategy? There seems to be relatively little explicit discussion about this in the research methods literature. However, we can begin to explore this issue by way of a detailed example – a multi-method study designed to find out what factors would motivate African-American women to quit smoking, reported in a journal article that explicitly reflects on the pros and cons of the methods used (Manfredi et al 1997). This study (see text box for details) showed that a follow-up focus group was much more successful than the survey that preceded it in finding out why quitting smoking was so difficult. The qualitative methodology enabled a holistic understanding how the stresses and strains of the women's daily lives reinforced smoking habits in spite of their knowledge of the risks as measured by the questionnaire survey. However, the focus groups tended to overemphasize the role of stressful times in the women's daily lives (times when it would be too difficult to reduce smoking). The researchers concluded that only by drawing from the findings of both research methods would it be possible to make realistic and useful policy recommendations.

**African-American women, environmental stress and quitting smoking:  
combining survey and focus group research**

*A large pool of African-American women participated in a survey, which was followed three years later by focus groups conducted with a small sample of the original respondents, dealing with the motivation for quitting smoking (Manfredi et al 1997). Both parts of the study had the same theoretical framework but whereas the questionnaire survey involved closed questions with pre-specified response categories, the focus group was designed to first allow for the spontaneous emergence of meanings to participants, and then narrowed down to generate discussion about specific “beliefs and utilities” that had been mentioned in the survey.*

*The authors found that while the survey showed that valuing smoking for pleasure markedly decreased motivation to quit; the focus group showed that reluctance to quit was actually due to the scarcity of other pleasures and to that fact that smoking was integral to the strategies the women used in stress management “to counteract the often bleak realities of their lives” (idem: 795). The researchers conclude that focus groups brought out “true beliefs” better than the survey: for instance, the survey indicated some recognition of lung cancer as an issue but the focus group showed that this was not really salient, with participants revealing a tendency to refuse to believe the medical evidence.*

*There were also some inconsistent findings. For example, the survey asked for the utilities of smoking and how they deterred motivation to quit, and the results downplayed importance of smoking for pleasure and to combat negativity. In contrast, the focus group started with descriptions of daily life and asked how smoking fits in; this led immediately to rich representations of stressors, to discussions of the lack of social support and utility of smoking as coping strategy, a source of pleasure. These inconsistencies resulted from the situational context of women’s lives: the “thick description” brought out in the focus groups could not have emerged from the questionnaire survey. Although the survey’s framework was a soundly-tested “health belief model” of the cognitive processes involved in decision to quit smoking based on perceived risks, this was not very meaningful to interviewees.*

*The focus group, however, was not without its own interpretative drawbacks. The focus group discussions tended to shift from the mundane aspects of women’s lives to the extreme, stressful situations (because they were more interesting to talk about!), so that use of the focus group alone could be misleading for policy purposes. Although being in a stressful situation made it very difficult to think of giving up smoking, the researchers had to be careful not to interpret their findings as meaning that intervention to help these women quit would be a waste of time. In spite of the focus group representations, many hours of the women’s daily lives were more mundane and so it would be more fruitful to concentrate on helping the women stop smoking during these periods of time.*

***Are focus groups more conducive to feminist participatory research than other types of methods?***

Feminist qualitative researchers are often drawn to focus group methods because they believe that if feminist research is to be change-oriented it must not only offer critique of aspects of society but also help women to collectively change their consciousness by fostering collective identities and solidarities. Group interviews are said to facilitate such connections because they can go beyond uncovering “already existing meanings produced by already constituted subjectivities”; they can bring “into being new meanings and new subjectivities” (Modleski quoted by Montell 1999: 54). In this way, participants gain access to new information, new ways of thinking, to the sense that they have the right to speak and the authority to act – in short, a sense of emancipation (Goss & Leinbach 1996).

Here, the important difference between a focus group and an individual interview lies in the fact that in the group setting participants’ roles are often expanded beyond the typical situation in which the interviewee feels subordinate to the interviewer. The power relationship involved in having the “expert” framing the questions is “*mitigated by the fact that (...) the main interaction will be among the participants rather than between each interviewee and the researcher. Each woman can not only tell her own story, but she can also question and challenge the other participants in an effort to gain understanding*” (Montell 1999: 51).

The focus group thus creates the possibility for a dialogue among equals, which is potentially empowering under certain conditions:

- ≠ if people come to “recognize the patterns in their shared experience” (Montell 1999: 52) (as in the case of women’s consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s...)
- ≠ if they are encouraged to participate in developing “a vision of the future as well as a structural picture of the present” (Cook & Fonow 1986: 13); this is especially likely in applied research projects seeking limited and practical short-term improvements (Gibbs 1997: 3)
- ≠ a focus group can also foster collective support of people as they recount difficult experiences e.g. those of refugees
- ≠ but the empowering possibilities of such support depend on how many times the group gets together:
  - empowerment increases with degree of participant involvement in formulating research questions and hypotheses, selecting group participants, and analyzing data for example in an action research project with Somali refugee women, the first meeting was to identify the topics the group deemed the most central to their resettlement experience (Israelite et al. 1999: 11)
  - but if the focus group meets only once the opportunity for such empowering dialogue is quite limited because of the time needed to break the ice, test the waters and build up trust between participants.

In spite of these empowerment possibilities, an unequal power relationship remains in focus group methods, because the researcher initiates the procedure, selects the participants and sets the agenda at least to some extent. Moreover, the researcher is still ultimately responsible for the analysis and interpretation of data (Goss & Leinbach 1996: 122). For, just as in the case of the individual interview, focus group participants' voices do not speak for themselves. For example, the study to examine the connection between life experiences and smoking found that this connection was not neatly expressed by group participants themselves as the researchers had hoped: "*rather, the pictures emerged from [the researchers] piecing together information about the participants' lives and when and how they smoke*" (Manfredi et al. 1997: 797). Sharing the responsibility for this work of analysis and interpretation with participants is difficult to achieve in hierarchical environments of academia and while respecting the criteria of most research funding agencies.

### **III. The "insider/outsider" conundrum in feminist interviewing: update on the debate**

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#### **Overview**

Does qualitative interviewing generate richer and more valid findings when it is conducted by "insiders" – researchers who belong to the same social or cultural group as the people they are studying – or by "outsiders"? This question has been long been an object of debate by researchers in the qualitative tradition, and has been an important issue in the circles of feminist research for the past two decades. Feminists, in addition to arguing for the importance of empathy with research participants, are often concerned that "outsiders" may be more inclined to appropriate the voices of the research. Nevertheless, the accumulated experiences of feminist researchers trying to work with the insider/outsider issue make it increasingly clear that strict prescriptions about method based on a rigid distinction between "insider" and "outsider" are not all that helpful in developing research strategies on the ground.

These questions arise because of the increasing recognition of the partiality of the researcher's knowledge. This partiality exists because of her/his "positionality" relative to the research questions and relative to the subjects of research. Positionality refers to the shaping of perspective by identifiers such as class, occupation, gender, "race", sexual orientation etc. (or several of these in interaction with each other) as well as location in time and space – these can all affect the interviewer's perspective and also that of the person being interviewed.

As we saw earlier in this paper, traditional positivist methodologies adopt standardized interviewing techniques that minimize interactions between researcher and researched, so as to try to minimize the effects of such positionality, which they see as creating unacceptable bias in knowledge construction. However, post-positivist epistemologies, and perhaps especially those of feminism, accept that *all* knowledge is socially-constructed. They call on researchers to be reflexive in assessing how the circumstances of observational field work or the interview dynamic might be affecting the discourse that is constructed between researcher and subject (Maxwell 1996: 66-69).

For instance, it has been shown that the gender of the interviewer (the same or different from that of the interviewee) makes a difference to the content of the completed interview (Herod 1993; Padfield & Procter 1996). In this perspective, both parties may gain from the non-neutrality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction when the interviewer is a member of the same group as the interviewee and represents herself as such in the interview process, that is to say, when she is an “insider”.

*“When is [being an insider or an outsider] a key to insightful analysis? When does it stand in the way of clear thinking? How do we even know when we are inside or outside or somewhere in between?” (Acker 2001: 190).*

### ***Insider/outsider as polar opposites: early feminist formulations***

Early feminist discussions vaunted the merits of “insider” interviewing. They argued that in studying a group to which one belongs, one can use one’s knowledge of that group to gain deeper insights into their opinions and experiences. Moreover, the researcher and the researched are on a relatively equal footing, reducing the likelihood of exploitative power relationships (the classic statement about this is Oakley 1981). The interview ideally becomes a mutually reinforcing process; or at least, the researcher and researched establish common understandings based on, for example, recent motherhood or being perceived by members of dominant linguistic group in a society as “having a funny accent”.

Contrasted to this is “outsider” research. Studying a group to which one doesn’t belong was considered to lead, at best, to shallow research and at worst a very problematic thing to do if the person interviewed was a member of an ethnic, cultural or oppressed national minority. In the latter case it would not only be impossible to understand the subject-position of interviewee, but there would also be a strong likelihood of imposing one’s own cultural norms on the interview process, suppressing much the authentic voice of the interviewee during the interview and appropriating that voice in interpretation of the interview’s content and the presentation of results. Acker (2000) provides an excellent review of the debate.

### ***Toward more nuanced positions***

The debate has, however, greatly evolved in recent years. It has been shown that the personal relations of the interviewee-interviewer dynamic are not reducible to the insider/outsider dimension (Miles & Crush 1993). Experience has also made clear that neither gender nor skin colour (for instance) may be enough to establish an open exchange (Dyck 1997: 191). Indeed, if the notion of “insider” is taken up uncritically it brings with it a danger of “essentialism”, meaning the assumption that all those who are in a particular social category share a common perspective. Attempts have been made to move from a dualistic perspective to a more nuanced one in which intermediate categories are interposed between “outsider” and “insider” in order to cover situations where the researcher’s position is more fluid and ambiguous, such as the “outsider within” (Collins 1991; see also Acker 2000) who comes from the group being studied but

has had experiences which set her apart from it in certain ways. As Acker (2000: 201) comments, “[T]his border might be a good vantage point for a critical perspective”, but the interviewer may not be privileged to certain confidences and could be treated with suspicion.

“Outsider” research has also been shown to have its advantages: by not belonging to a group under study, one is perceived as neutral and may be given certain information not given to an insider. Conversely – and depending on the topics being addressed – “insiders” may be feared as possibly being too judgmental of individual behaviours or attitudes expressed by the interviewee that do not conform to the norms of the group, leading to self-censorship in interviewee responses. In some instances, for example in interviews with members of certain ethnocultural minority groups in Canada, a hybrid insider/outsider status has been shown to work well: the interviewer has partial shared understandings with the subject but is unthreatening and presents herself as genuinely wanting to learn something about her culture of origin.

An interviewee may also compare herself unfavourably to an interviewer perceived as an insider (for example if both are of the same age, have the same educational level and social class background but the interviewee has not succeeded in establishing a career as she perceives the interviewer to have done); this can be disempowering for the interviewee.

“Insider” research may thus be an “intrusive” research method. As Judith Stacey has commented (1991: 114): *“the greater the intimacy - the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship - the greater is the danger”*. This is especially true when, as is often the case, the researcher later “exits” totally from the relationship without having prepared the subject for this inevitability.

A more “technical” problem can also arise if interviewer and interviewee have too much in common: there may be a temptation for the interviewer not to tease out attitudes and behaviours and the reasons for them. The strong rapport between the parties generating a sharing of feelings and experiences may make for a richer interview but one that is difficult to interpret by a third party. This can pose significant problems of interpretation in multi-researcher studies (Acker 2000: 198) or when research interviews are delegated to a research assistant who is subsequently not available at the data interpretation stage.

Nevertheless, the goals of insider research remain crucial in terms of the validity of the research. As Acker (2000: 201) points out’ *“it is still important to question the extent to which we can achieve real empathy when we do not share the crucial characteristics of those we interview”*; with all the will in the world, differences that impede understanding will continue to exist and interviewees may have *“reason to suppress aspects of [their] experience that [they] believe the interviewer could not comprehend of should not be privy to”*.

### ***“Insider/outsider” identities as fluid social constructions***

Researchers are increasingly discovering that these identities and statuses can be fluid, even in within a single research project. Within the same interview, the degree of empathetic connection between researcher and researched can vary depending on the topic being discussed at the moment (Dyck 1997).

In addition, researchers’ identities can appear multidimensional to those whom we study: *“The researcher may represent, for instance, relations of oppression, the ‘expert’ knowledge of an academic institution, a woman with children with some common interests, or a person with whom concerns can be talked about in a safe environment beyond the networks of local knowledge”* (Dyck 1997: 198).

These discoveries have important implications:

- ⚡ The researcher may have to try to represent herself as more of an insider or more of an outsider depending on who she is interviewing and what topic is being discussed at any given point in an interview, in order to gain access to the person and to information.

*“Typically, an interview situation requires an effort to find common ground and emphasize whatever ‘side’ of oneself will make the best match to the other. As we are not chameleons, this search is not always easy”* (Acker 2000: 205).

*Based on her experiences interviewing both senior management and workers (female) in local and non-locally owned data-processing firms in Jamaica, economic geographer Beverly Mullings (1999) (a Black woman with a British accent, studying at a Canadian university) found that gaining the confidence of the local elite group required on the one hand demonstrating that she was quite knowledgeable about the industry, while on the other hand displaying little knowledge about political and social conditions in Jamaica so as to be non-threatening. She found that being a woman of colour helped black owner-managers open up about the difficulties of getting the high quality of their services being recognized as such by the American firms to which they wanted to sell these services. When interviewing women managers she found that they established a rapport with her based on perceived class affinity, rather than gender affinity; these women managers were no more sympathetic to the situation of the very low-waged women workers than were their male counterparts. Finally, building up trust with workers was very difficult because the only “official” access to them was through management – this gave the impression of coercion and put the researcher in a power relationship she did not want.*

*Mullings concludes that researchers should try to identify the “versions of themselves” that both interviewer and interviewee create and present. She stresses that this inevitably leads to uncertainties and gaps in information. She argues that especially when research involves contrasting groups (such as labour and management) one’s goal should be to search for positional spaces which allow for the development of a partial empathy with the “situatedness” of each group from whom one is seeking answers (Mullings 1999: 341).*

### **“Outsider” feminist research: an oxymoron?**

How can white western feminists conceptualize difference and diversity – and contribute toward the development of policies that are more sensitive to “other” needs – without appropriating “other” voices and naturalizing socially constructed categories (see e.g. Dyck 1997; England 1994)? Code (1995: 30) underlines that *“the politics of speaking for, about and on behalf of other women is one of the most contested areas in present-day feminist activism and research”*. She calls for advocates who have *“learned to see the hitherto unseen, and who can claim feminist and public credibility, reframing received knowledge within a feminist-informed analysis of asymmetrical social structures. Such vigilance for traces of the untold story is central to many feminist research and activist methods”* (1995: 32).

“Outsider” feminist research concerning minority groups is probably only possible if framed within participatory action research – to which we now turn in the next section of this paper. Outsider researchers can then collaborate with people close to the experience of the research, taking direction for the focus and the research questions from the collaborators. Both parties need to clearly state their expectations and assumptions from the start, and the process is usually easier to work through when the collaboration organization already has research experience.

## **IV. “Participatory research” in practice: some recent rethinking and circumspection**

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### **Overview**

Feminist researchers have long been attracted by the ideals and methodologies developed in the “participatory research” and “participatory action research” (commonly known as PAR) traditions. Broadly speaking, these traditions, based in the liberation politics of the 1960s, are committed to the emancipation of marginalized and oppressed groups. Consequently, in their research they honour the principles of respecting, valuing and bringing into the foreground the lived experience and indigenous knowledge of those being researched. They also try to develop methods and models of research practice that minimize hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched, and that involve a genuinely collaborative approach throughout all stages of the research process (Reason 1994).

Participatory research holds that academic researchers are not “the sole possessors of truth and knowledge” and challenges the traditional academic model in which “researchers, guided by theoretical questions of interest, or past research, would formulate a research hypothesis, identify the data requirements, and set about the task of conducting the research” and encourages community-based stakeholders (such as service providers) or activists to define the questions they see as important based on their own experience. This means that “research questions [may] derive not from prior research or theoretical considerations, but from the ‘work-a-day’ worlds of people who themselves are seeking creative solutions to the challenges they face” (Grant 1999: 9). This does *not* imply, however, that existing literature on a subject can be ignored when formulating a

project or interpreting results, but it means that the literature review becomes a search for relevant examples of other places or groups that have similar problems for which they have found good solutions (“best practices”).

Participatory *action* research carries with it the additional requirement of actually working with the participants to help them *effect* change. While embracing these principles, feminist researchers have shown that PAR traditionally lacked an awareness of how masculinist conceptions of knowledge and gender dynamics within the research process itself impeded the “foregrounding” (meaning bringing to the forefront) of women’s experience and the full participation of research subjects. Feminists have also emphasized that participatory research must be an empowering process for the researched, who are said to become “co-subjects”. This means that as well as co-directing the research process, the participants jointly “own” the products of the research. Such democratization of the research endeavour is supposed to foster or reinforce a belief among the research subjects that they can be agents of social change.

Feminists do not only advocate participatory research for ethical reasons, however. It is also seen as increasing the scientific validity of research. The researcher can no longer take her expertise for granted; she is forced to question her preconceptions. Subjects’ participation in designing and carrying out a project increases its accuracy for at least two reasons. First, this process helps to ensure that the issues they see as most pertinent are included in the research. Second, it helps to ensure that the research instruments are non-alienating to the researched and that the questions posed are sufficiently meaningful so that they can in fact enable the subjects to convey their experiences to the researchers (Menzetti 1997). Finally, a participatory approach may be essential to gain access to “hard-to-reach” populations; such access may only be had by engaging with members of such populations on their own terms (Grant 1999: 9).

Yet, in the light of accumulated experience, however, feminist researchers seem to have become less confident about the possibilities of genuinely participatory research (see e.g. Gustafson 2001; Spalter-Roth & Hartman 1995). Claims for the participatory character of the research are becoming less strident, more modest. This – short – segment of the present working paper will try to clarify what we mean by “participation” and then outline the bases for recent feminist circumspection. This is not out of any desire to debunk the ideals of participatory research, but rather in the hope that an injection of realism will help to minimize the disappointment and cynicism that can develop in the wake of unrealized expectations.

### ***Dimensions of participation***

What do we mean by “participation”? It is not an “all or nothing” matter. It can vary along a number of dimensions, as schematized in Table 3. For each dimension, the question is asked, “who participates”? The responses include full participation (everyone involved) or the selection of some members of a group to represent others. The question is also asked: “to what extent are they involved”? A range of involvement is possible and it can involve some or all of the stakeholders; these can, moreover, be same or different stakeholders for each dimension. This type of grid could perhaps be used to help at the design stage of a research proposal to help the researchers think in a systematic way about precisely what kind of “participatory research” they propose to conduct.

TABLE 3:  
WHO WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH, AND HOW?

DIMENSIONS <i>For each dimension, which stakeholders participate, and to what degree?</i>	ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS	SELECTION CRITERIA
<i>Content of situation:</i>		
1. providing data	informants	Who has stake in situation and info needed to define situation? <i>(diversity of perspectives needed)</i>
2. interpreting data	interpreters	Who has adequate knowledge of situation and the “language” of participants? <i>(community organizations)</i>
3. planning for change	search for shared vision, planners, decision-makers	Who’s best placed to envision and plan change? <i>(those directly affected)</i>
4. implementing change	implementers	Who is in a position and motivated to implement change?
<i>Research process:</i>		
5. managing data collection and interpretation	facilitators/local informants	Motivated and can be trained in skills needed to manage parts of process
6. designing overall study	researchers/co-researchers	Motivated and can be trained in skills needed to manage parts of process
7. being kept informed about study and its implications	recipients	Wider group not directly involved

Source: Dick 1997 (adapted into tabular form by the present author)

***Participatory research in practice: some problems and some limits***

As feminist researchers have accumulated more and more experience trying to implement participatory principles, they have become increasingly aware of a variety of barriers and limits. Debate on these questions is still in a state of flux, and the issues are complex, so that neat prescriptions to the problems researchers are likely to encounter are not readily available. It is nevertheless instructive to run through briefly some of the main issues raised and debated.

⚡ The concept of *empowerment* is sometimes employed in a simplistic or even glib way. Participating in a research project rarely leads to transformations in participants’ lives, and even if they acquire through the research a greater

- understanding of the societal conditions underlying the problems they experience in an individual, personal way, is this necessarily “empowering” if it is not linked to capacity-building to effect change (Kelly, Burton & Regan 1994)?
- ⚡ Also, empowerment is not a “thing” that is to be – magnanimously! – “granted” by the researcher. Nor can it simply be “taken” by the individuals or groups being researched, given the constraints imposed by the institutional structures in which research – especially funded research – is embedded. Rather, it is a process that has to be constantly negotiated between all the parties concerned throughout the research process.
    - Moreover, in policy-oriented research, as VanderPlaat (1999) discovered in the course of a project to evaluate how well Health Canada’s Community Action Program for Children was operating in Atlantic Canada, *“scholars/activists occupy a dual location, one in which they have to strive to be both empowering and empowered”* (1999: 779). In this case, the giving of power to program participants to “create knowledge about their own life experiences” put the academic and government researchers in a position where they had to use the power that came with being recognized researchers to empower themselves to convince senior officials that this type of knowledge was not only valid but important enough to challenge the criteria used for program evaluation.
  - ⚡ The sense that excessive emotional demands are being imposed on feminist researchers as regards the requirement to solve power relationship problems and establish rapport (Reinharz 1992: 267) – especially since those who don’t define themselves as feminist researchers are not judged the same way
  - ⚡ It is a mistake to presume that research subjects necessarily want a strongly participatory process. It is not always practical for them, due to time constraints (e.g. women with multiple paid and domestic responsibilities; front-line service agencies serving immigrants). This is especially the case in the analysis phase:
    - sometimes, *“what the women participating wanted was for the researchers to ‘be’ researchers – locate their individual experiences in relation to those of the other participants [...]. This contextualizing and comparing of personal experience is what many research participants want ‘back’ [from the researchers]”* (Kelly, Burton & Regan 1994: 37).
  - ⚡ Participatory approaches patently do not work when the target group does not share basic beliefs with the interviewer! For example, Millen’s goal was to study gender/power issues facing women scientists, but most of them defined their successes and failures in terms of their individual efforts rather than relating them to systemic conditions. Consequently,
    - *“Had I adopted a more participatory research programme designed to raise these women’s consciousness of the ways I considered them to be oppressed . . . these women might well have declined to participate at all, and any chance of probing their views and representing their experiences in some form would have been impossible”* (Millen 1997: para. 4.6).

≠# The institutional environment:

- “Accountability” concerns make academic institutions (and, usually, funding agencies) unwilling to allow control over the research process to be taken out of the hands of the researcher who is administratively in charge of the project.
- Concerns about academic freedom lead ethics committees to vest ultimate control over the analysis and ownership of the written product in the hands of the researcher, even though they may require consultation with representatives of the groups being researched before definitive interpretations of data are made.

≠# The time-frame of a research project, in the context of academic agendas or government agencies’ deadlines for “deliverables”. Research proposals for feminist PAR are often excessively optimistic as regards their time frame, especially in cross-cultural situations:

- For example, geography MA student Barbara Shaw (1995) worked with a small environmental action group in Goa, India to study the potential of this activist NGO to support the everyday resistance of local people to ecologically destructive models of development that were resulting from large-scale industrialization and mass tourism. Shaw interviewed villages about impacts of this organization’s local environmental programs but her research raised expectations that couldn’t be met within the time constraints for her thesis. She faced the problems of insufficient time to settle in, and of premature exit from the setting so that participants may have felt “let down”.

Problems such as these have led to some significant shifts from earlier, idealistic (even naive) interpretations of feminist research methods. Feminist researchers today are more likely to acknowledge that research relationship with “subjects” is inherently unequal in most research projects, because the researchers almost always have ultimate control over the data and the interpretation of it (Gatenby & Humphries 2000). Does this inevitably lead to the distortion or even the exploitation of subjects’ experiences? Many feminist researchers are now inclined to say, “no, not necessarily”; they argue that the researcher’s interpretation of that experience does not (normally) alter its meaning for the participant - as long as researchers do not demean or devalue it. However, not all feminist researchers would agree with this position: it can be shocking, for instance, for interviewees to see abstract concepts teased out from their personal narrative (see Borland 1991).

Many feminist researchers (especially those in academic settings) have accepted that full collaboration is more often than not an unrealistic expectation; they believe it is enough to be open and honest about the limits to collaboration. All the same, by participating in constructing research data in a relatively open setting (group interviews, semi-structured interviews), *“people can contribute significantly to the description and analysis of a social issue that is of great importance to them, and this can be empowering”* at least in a small sense (Montell 1999: 55) – especially if the participants

are confident about the researchers' ability to write up the research in such a way that it could influence policy-makers.

In spite of the difficulties of implementing PAR principles, in some types of policy-oriented research strong notions of collaboration and participation will need to be employed. Especially when the researcher is unambiguously an "outsider" and the topic is a delicate one affecting vulnerable groups, protocols establishing joint ownership and control over the research findings are highly recommended if not essential.

**Applying the principle of joint ownership of findings in participatory research**

*Renzetti (1997) recounts her experiences developing an empirical study of domestic abuse in lesbian households. Activists in the local lesbian community had begun to collect data on this topic; the researcher made contact with them and obtained funding from her university, which happened to be a Roman Catholic institution. In this case, it was decided that the researcher be responsible for distributing findings among academics, social service providers and practitioners while the activists would take charge of informing the lesbian community. In this way, each party to the research could use their particular expertise to the full in order to communicate findings effectively. The research subjects were protected from unintentional misinterpretations or insensitivities by the "outsider" researcher (who was heterosexual), while the researcher was protected from the possibility of censorship by her employer in the event that findings produced policy recommendations not compatible with the university's religious principles.*

In the case of research concerning those of culturally different backgrounds from the researchers, researchers need to deal with the limitations of being an "outsider" by being constantly self-reflexive. They need to practice what Maria Mies (1991) refers to as "double consciousness", meaning to observe oneself from the outside so as to understand how those of radically different backgrounds see the researcher, and to be able to examine one's own cultural and historical biases. The great challenge to the researcher conducting policy-oriented PAR in such contexts is how she can succeed in acting as "translator", facilitator or intermediary between the researched and the public policy officials without purporting to be their "representative" or usurping the leadership role that should remain with the community being studied (Archibald & Crnkovich 1995).

### **The participatory researcher as “translator”: action research with Inuit women**

*Archibald and Crnkovich (1995) discuss how white southern Canadian feminists struggled to put PAR principles into practice in a participatory action research project for an Inuit women’s organization. The researchers (who had Justice Department funding) had to prepare a policy paper on justice issues and Inuit women’s responses to the justice system in Inuit communities. Their strategy involved a focus on encouraging the imagining of creative alternatives to problems raised in fictitious scenarios (as though Canadian laws did not apply). But group discussions led to a personal account of a family violence incident (leading to a death). This led, in one of the regions studied, to a reorientation of the research focus toward an action plan to combat inadequate police response to such violence against women. Among other things this involved the women’s group doing their own study to obtain better measures of violence levels.*

*In this process, the researchers aimed to be intermediaries between Inuit women and public policy officials. They had to try to convey Inuit women’s recommendations and strategies by “translating” them into reports and policy documents that would make sense to officials from the dominant culture. The researchers stress that, if the project is to be truly participatory, it is crucial not to cross this line from intermediary or technical resource person to expert purporting to be the representative of the group. They insist that the researcher must relinquish control of research process, be a facilitator not a leader so that the women define their own issues. Follow-up is also needed after the delivery of the final report.*

## **V. Establishing validity and rigour in qualitative research**

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### **Overview**

The notion of “validity” refers to the plausibility of relationship between data and concepts; it implies the collective agreement of intended audiences that interpretations of data are not only compelling but convincing. This means that research procedures have to be “rigorous”; there has to be “quality control throughout the stages of knowledge production” (Kvale 1996:236). This is just as true for policy-oriented research as it is for more academic research: if new policies are to be developed or existing ones modified, there has to be firm justification for doing so.

Janet Finch (1999: 183-184), a feminist scholar and author of *Research and Policy: The Uses of Qualitative Methods in Social and Educational Research*, insists that policy-oriented research...

J · "... is research which is technically competent, rigorously and professionally analysed and interpreted"

*"[P]olicy-oriented research must be at least as rigorous as any other kind. Because [its] audience is composed [...] of groups and individuals who may not be well informed about social science research [...] and] the results of research may be used in the 'real' social and political world [, this] places a special obligation on the technical and professional conduct of researchers"*

Is it possible to agree about what constitutes rigour? Some feminist researchers find the discourse of rigour too "masculinist" but others accept it, more or less willingly, because they feel it will lead to wider acceptance (mainstreaming) of the findings of feminist-inspired research, and to a greater use of qualitative feminist research to guide public policy development. Previous sections of this working paper have already touched on various dimensions of the validity and rigour questions; we have seen that feminist and other qualitative researchers have successfully challenged some of the traditional ways that validity and rigour are defined, and have helped raise the standards of social science by insisting that *transparency* in all aspects of the research process be a key criterion of validity and rigour. This final section of the present working paper aims to bring together some of these strands and to provide guidelines (but not recipes!) to help ensure that qualitative research studies are indeed conducted in a rigorous fashion.

### ***Feminist standpoint theory and the evolution of debates around validity***

The reluctance of qualitative feminist researchers to engage with debates about validity, until fairly recently, needs to be understood in the context of debates and controversies generated by "feminist standpoint theory". Here, we will only touch on the debates sparked by feminist standpoint theory that are most pertinent to decisions about *method*, in particular those concerning the validity of presenting the experiences of research subjects without interposing the researcher's interpretations of these experiences.

Feminist standpoint theory holds that there are multiple realities that we can observe and experience, and that feminists should accord epistemological privilege to the realities of subjugated groups in order to valorize and give power to alternative forms of knowledge. "Strong" forms of feminist standpoint theory argue that any type of research practice that questions a woman's reported experience or puts it into a different framework from that which she herself sees herself in is an inherently non-feminist practice because it disempowers the subject and subjugates her to the researcher's own privileged standpoint. These strong versions of feminist standpoint theory imply that researchers should totally respect the "truth" of the subject's perspective. They should refrain from trying to interpret it with regard to their own theoretical framework and with regard to their sense of where the subject fits into broader social processes. Nor should they try to evaluate the extent to which the subject may be constrained by social forces that she does not recognize. Uninterpreted "biographical" types of interviews are thus

favoured by advocates of this perspective; the subjects speak for themselves to the point where the researcher eschews interpretation altogether.

Feminist researchers today are no longer so sure that this type of “giving voice” unmediated by the researcher’s interpretations is in fact an “emancipatory” strategy. Some argue that becoming an “expert” about one’s own experiences requires “consciousness of the forces that have acted upon” you and an ability to “articulate [your] reaction to those forces” (Montell 1999: 50). This requires the establishment of an interpretive dialogue between researcher and subject *during* the interview process. Many feminist scholars also argue that it is their social responsibility not only to legitimize subjugated knowledge, make visible the invisible, but also to develop analyses that interpret and contextualize the experiences that shape people’s horizons, representations and actions. To do this we need to use our privileged knowledge about other comparable situations and we need theoretical categories. According to this logic, allowing the data (e.g. life histories) to “speak for themselves” is something of an abdication of responsibility on the part of the researcher, to the extent that *“individuals may not have a full awareness of the systems that surround and constrain them, and as researchers, we have a responsibility to illuminate those systems using their experiences, and illuminate their experiences using these systems”* (Millen 1997: para. 3.5).

**Feminist debates about the validity of experiential data: a way forward?**

*Lorraine Code (1995: 36) argues what is needed is to tread a path between “the old tyranny of authoritarian expertise that discounts women’s experiences . . . and a new tyranny of ‘experientialism’ that claims for first-person experiential utterances an immunity from challenge, interpretation, or debate”.*

Participatory research strategies are often thought to offer a way out of this dilemma. They allow for “interpreters”/“translators” of individual subjects’ expressed experiences (e.g. members of community organizations) to be called on to help the researcher develop analytical categories. These categories of the community representatives are at least one step removed from the “raw” personal unanalysed experience of the individuals but they are nevertheless sensitive to the individuals’ frames of reference. Alternatively, through group discussions in which commonalities or differences of interpretation are uncovered, subjects may come to develop their own broader analytical categories and thus take control of the interpretation and presentation of the research.

***A checklist for establishing “rigour” in qualitative interview-based analysis***

What does the increasing attention to “rigour” in qualitative research mean for how feminist researchers – and indeed qualitative researchers more generally – should write their research proposals and think through their data collection and analysis strategies before and after the fact? Here, no framework for proposal-writing will be offered, since good examples have been developed elsewhere (see for example Heath 1997; Finch 1999; Marshall & Rossman 1995). Instead, a “checklist” for establishing rigorous procedures will be outlined. This checklist focuses on interview-based research

(individual interviews or focus groups). It is loosely based on a major article by social geographers Jamie Baxter and John Eyles (1997, Table 3) – researchers who have themselves been influenced by feminist perspectives – but it also incorporates other methodological contributions from the literature (and from the present author’s own experience). The checklist may help in designing proposals and in establishing detailed protocols for different phases of the research. It may also be of value for evaluating the validity and rigour of an existing completed research project.

The checklist reflects a recognition that the different types of knowledge and understanding produced in qualitative research – description, interpretation and theory – each have threats to their validity which researchers can do a great deal to minimize by using rigorous procedures (Maxwell 1996: 89). In making use of this checklist it is important to note that there are no infallible rules for establishing validity in qualitative research, but many tactics can be employed to ascertain and maximize that credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of findings (Miles & Huberman 1994). Neither this or any other checklist can offer unequivocal or “right” answers as to what should be done to maintain validity and rigour, but such a checklist can be a tool to help think about issues of validation at the appropriate point in the research process, so as to avoid the problems that will inevitably arise if they are not addressed.

## 1. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

- ⚡ What was its original purpose (objectives, values/goals underlying)?
- ⚡ What is the position of the researcher in relation to the research (transparency helps ensure validity):
  - who funded/commissioned the research?
  - why did the researcher embark on the study?
  - what are the researcher’s links, if any, to the group being researched?
- ⚡ Have the research questions been developed based on existing literature (theoretical works or existing policy analyses)?
- ⚡ Do the research questions stem from the concerns of local stakeholders or community activists?
  - If so, is it possible to answer these questions by looking at community-based research done elsewhere i.e. are there other experiences that might transferable to this case? Or *must* data be collected from within this particular community or group? (*Public funds for research are scarce. This means that even in community-based research one must begin with the position that “there is nothing new under the sun” – it’s up to the research proposer to prove otherwise!*)
- ⚡ What is the rationale for the chosen methodology?
  - Could the same questions be examined using other possible methodologies? If so then why choose one over the other?

## 2. METHOD OF SAMPLING

- ⚡ Sampling frame – what is the pertinent universe?
- ⚡ Sampling method: random; purposeful/intentional; or convenience – rationale for choice? (Maxwell 1996: 69-73 provides an excellent and accessible guide to decision-making)
  - What were the chains of contacts used to build “snowball” samples? (drawing a “tree” diagram showing the referrals and intermediaries used is very useful)
- ⚡ Difficulties encountered in building sample

## 3. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

- ⚡ Type of interview guide (structured/semi-structured/unstructured)
- ⚡ How was the interview guide developed? (participation of key informants and/or research subjects?)
- ⚡ What methods were used to minimize problems such as incomplete recall of events?
- ⚡ Methods of note-taking and recording (audio-taped? videotaped?)
- ⚡ Interviewer’s impressions of each interview (in field notes written immediately after interview)
  - type of dynamic/rapport established during the interview
  - factors that encouraged the subject to be more/less forthcoming

## 4. METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

- ⚡ Methods of preparing transcripts (see Poland 1999)
  - verbatim? (if not verbatim: how is selectivity avoided? how is the focus group dynamic captured?)
  - annotated?
- ⚡ Procedures for “navigating” through the data:
  - coding scheme(s) and procedures
  - possibility of modifying coding scheme as new analytical categories emerge
  - how will non-selectivity of data analysis be assured (i.e. an exhaustive analysis, using all the pertinent data, not just the parts of the data that support one’s hypothesis or argument)? ♥ decision to use or not to use qualitative data analysis software (e.g. NUD\*IST™, Atlas/ti™)

## 5. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

- ⚡ Rationale for presenting results: description or theory-building?
- ⚡ Since qualitative projects tend to yield vast quantities of data – one cannot write about everything all at once – one must be explicitly selective as to sub-themes to focus on in paper/report and analyse all the data pertinent to that theme
- ⚡ How are quoted segments of interview text selected for use to illustrate a point?:
  - Consistencies and similarities in data across a range of interviews are evidence of its reliability, so select quotes that best illustrate a viewpoint/experience expressed by a number of interviewees.
  - But the *atypical* case may also be important because anomalies challenge existing theory or accepted explanations, and help in theory-generation:
    - š if highlighting a unique case, explain why it is interesting, what can be learned from it
    - š why does this person’s experience differ from that of the rest of the group? – this could lead to decision to do a 2nd set of interviews with people who are more like this “atypical” person...
- ⚡ Distinguish between constructs derived from the data and those derived from existing literature or previous research
- ⚡ Distinguish between categories and concepts identified by participants (e.g. quotations) and those defined by the researcher (interpretation of meaning of data)

## 6. CREDIBILITY OF LINKS BETWEEN DATA AND THE ANALYSIS

- ⚡ Identify and code all the themes and issues raised – only eliminate those that stray totally off-topic: in coding, assign a category to what at first seems irrelevant, because you never know...
- ⚡ Use multiple coding to identify interconnections between issues
- ⚡ Have more than one person code same transcript; compare and negotiate to achieve consensus (this is called inter-researcher triangulation)
  - this may involve dealing with value and power differentials within the research project (gender; status) (Baxter & Eyles 1999).
- ⚡ With whom should interpretations be checked?
  - Useful (essential in participatory research) to ask facilitators/interpreters (eg. community group representatives) to examine the coding scheme to see that it chimes with the way they would categorize the information.
- ⚡ Should coded transcripts be returned to an interviewee (a way of letting subjects re-appropriate their experiences) or will summaries of findings be offered?

- transcripts are rarely returned, in part because of the risk of breaching confidentiality if a third party sees the transcript; a more common practice is to provide participants with summaries of findings so that they can see where their own experiences/attitudes fit in or compare to those of the whole sample (Baxter & Eyles 1999).

#### 7. PLAUSIBILITY/CREDIBILITY OF DERIVED THEORY, IF ANY, OR OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ≠# Use existing literature as reference point for theory development (otherwise, great danger of “reinventing the wheel”)
- ≠# Always try to find another case through which a provisional hypothesis can be tested.
- ≠# In the case of policy oriented research, look at what has been done elsewhere: seek out pertinent comparisons and “best practices”.

#### 8. TRANSFERABILITY OF FINDINGS

- ≠# Reflect on whether the study succeeded in “saturating” the categories.
  - It’s important to strive for saturation, because where qualitative research “shines” is as a tool for improving on existing conceptualizations of issues and problems; as such it can be very influential in policy development (Finch 1999).
  - If saturation was not achieved, the research must be characterized as exploratory and the conclusions must be considered to be tentative, because not all of the range of possible situations, outcomes, attitudes or behaviours may have been identified. Certainly, without saturation, theory development is not possible and policy recommendations would be ill-advised.
- ≠# Specify what type of generalization - if any - is intended: empirical or theoretical: usually it is the latter.

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# REVISITING FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: A SELECTED THEMATIC BIBLIOGRAPHY

compiled by

Damaris Rose

6 July 2001

Author's note:

This bibliography, although up-to-date, does not claim to be an exhaustive resource. It draws in the first instance on sources that the author of this document – a social geographer by training – has found useful in teaching research methods courses, in supervising graduate students, in evaluating research proposals and in developing methodologies for her own research. These sources are complemented by journal articles from a variety of social science disciplines, as well as edited books.

Keyword searches using various Internet-based resources were of great help in adding to this bibliography. While (free) bibliographic data bases such as Ingenta (<http://uncweb.carl.org>) are very useful for finding printed journal articles, finding edited books is more of a challenge, especially if they are not published by a university press. To this end, library catalogues of universities known to be strong in social research and/or women's studies were consulted. In addition, Web page search engines were used to find university course outlines and reading lists, as well as on line journals. All Web links shown were checked and found to be functional at the time of compiling this bibliography.

NB: In this bibliography, the symbol \* denotes a reference cited in the Working Paper.

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