

# I

## Introduction

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## Introduction

There are many possible approaches to feminist methodology. We start from the problems that arise when feminist social researchers set out to tell 'better stories' of gendered social realities than others. We examine the methodological challenges and choices that they face on the way. We do not prescribe what feminist methods must be, or specify how feminist researchers should proceed. Rather, we want to consider how feminist approaches to social research have been shaped by some of the concerns of western philosophy and epistemology, how feminist responses to these concerns have struck out in differing directions through a variety of methodological problems and solutions, and whether, despite this diversity, there is any sense in which feminist methodology is feminist, and the struggles have been worthwhile.

Methodology is not generally taken to be an exciting area, and those involved in researching gender may well wonder why they should take an interest in

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methodological problems rather than just getting on with the job. But any researcher who sets out to understand gender relations and grasp their impact on people's lives has to consider: how (or whether) social reality can be understood; why conceptions of sexuality and gender have some meanings rather than others; how people make sense of their experiences; and how power inhabits knowledge production. In seeking knowledge of gender through social research, feminists make decisions about how to produce and justify their knowledge, whether they do so intentionally or not, and we argue that these decisions matter. They affect what can be known and what gets to count as authoritative knowledge. Decisions about methodology are particularly powerful in the politics and practices of knowledge production.

Feminists (like all other social researchers) have to establish and defend their claims to knowledge of social life, because there is no certain or absolute knowledge against which the truth of everything can be measured. If feminist knowledge is to be believed, it has to be made believable, but there is more than one way of making and justifying knowledge claims (and many ways of failing). There are taken-for-granted distinctions in western thought, for example, between the authority of knowledge produced through scientific procedures, and that of knowledge produced in literature, horoscopes or dreams. It is easy to class feminist knowledge as unscientific, biased and lacking in authority. But the problems raised by feminist methodology are not peculiar to feminism: they are also problems for social research more generally.

We do not attempt to review the full range of feminist adventures in methodology or all areas of feminist expertise, since these are now extensive. Instead, three themes run through the book. The first thread of our argument is that debates on feminist methodology are framed by disagreements in western philosophy over how ideas about the social world can possibly be related to people's experiences of social life, and to actual social realities. These preoccupations mean that the feminist approaches to social research currently debated in western universities can be very different from other ways of thinking about producing knowledge. Anne Seller (who has taught philosophy in the UK and the USA) says that taking her feminist ideas and debating tradition to the Mother Theresa Women's University in India confronted her with her own cultural specificity as a philosopher (Seller 1994). She found that her tools for thinking with were characteristically western: 'the more abstract and theoretical our formulations, the more culturally specific they become' (Seller 1994: 243). Feminist approaches to methodology entail choices between different strategies for specifying connections between ideas, experience and reality, or for claiming the impossibility or irrelevance of specifying such connections.

Second, we argue that feminist responses to these debates have led to methodological dispute and diversity within feminism. It is problematic that knowledge of gendered lives (like any other claims to knowledge of social reality) cannot be claimed as simply and generally true (in the sense that this knowledge directly and accurately describes an actual reality). Feminists have to find ways of making their knowledge believable, and for evaluating competing knowledge claims, but there is more than one way of connecting feminist ideas with women's experiences and with particular conceptions of reality.<sup>1</sup>

Third, despite this divergence, feminist research is imbued with particular

theoretical, political and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive. Feminist knowledge is grounded in experiences of gendered social life, but is also dependent on judgements about the justice of social relationships, on theories of power and on the morality of social investigation. Feminist researchers are not necessarily in agreement on the meanings and consequences of experience, justice, power, relationships, differences and morality but, despite this divergence, they can potentially negotiate common moral and political positions.

The intertwining of these three themes illuminates critical contradictions in feminist efforts to produce and justify authoritative knowledge of gendered social life across a range of approaches to social research. It follows that this book is an argument *for* methodology since it is not possible to produce a neutral text *on* methodology, or to resolve feminism's inherent contradictions. It is also an argument for the importance of practical, empirical investigation in producing knowledge of gendered social life.

### **Three challenges to feminist methodology**

Feminists have made a range of claims about the position of women in relation to men, and about male domination of social theory. As a result, recent feminism and its claims to knowledge have confronted three rather different sources of criticism.

First, challenges to feminist knowledge claims have come from dominant approaches to science, reason, progress and truth, and the situation of this thought in relation to women's experience (and to other ways of thinking, colonial and imperial history, and the uneven development of global capitalism). Feminists have been criticized for failing to produce adequately rational, scientific or unbiased knowledge (on the understanding that their critics use methodologies that are adequate in these respects). As academic feminist research developed, feminists came under increasing pressure from the wider academic community to justify their knowledge in terms of, for example, rationality, validity, rules of method, control of subjectivity and political bias. Feminist thought has been treated in many academic institutions as marginal, or as intellectually inferior to existing modes of thought (Arpad 1986; Stanley 1997). When feminists judge gender relations to be unjust and want to change them, they are implying that they have knowledge of what social relations between women and men actually are, and are expected to provide acceptable grounds for claiming that others should take this knowledge seriously. By being openly politically committed, feminists are charged with failing the test of producing generally valid and authoritative knowledge.

Second, challenges come from women's varied experiences of cultural differences, social divisions and power relations. For example, claims that patriarchal power, sexuality or reproduction are key mechanisms in the oppression of women ignore other factors (such as racism, systems of production, nationalism, heterosexism, ablebodiedism, and the complex relations between them) that shape women's lives in differing ways, and complicate relations between women (Brah 1992; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983). Western feminists have been

extensively criticized for relying on an undifferentiated category of 'women', in what Audre Lorde (1983: 99) terms the 'pathetic pretence' that differences between women do not exist.<sup>2</sup> These criticisms signal variations in personal experiences of the complex interrelations of power between women. They target the intellectual and ethical implications of producing knowledge of gender as if 'women' were a unified category of being throughout history and all over the world. They also question whether it is possible to produce knowledge of gender when gendered power relations are only one aspect of people's lives. Issues of difference fracture, politicize and personalize all approaches to understanding gender.

A third challenge has shifted English-language feminism from a long period of engagement with scientific method, liberalism and Marxism (Jaggar 1983; Maynard 1995) to close encounters with aspects of postmodern and poststructuralist thought that question the foundations of feminist knowledge and methodology (Hekman 1992; Nicholson 1990). Feminist knowledge claims are tangled in tensions between knowledge of gender relations that take the existence of women for granted, and theories that take apart the grounds of feminist claims to knowledge, and treat 'women' and 'gender' as products of ideas rather than of embodiment, patriarchy or social construction. Poststructural and postmodern thought abandons any notion of methodology as able to produce knowledge that describes actual reality.

These three sources of challenge have thrown divided feminist researchers further into dispute. Feminists are constantly rewriting feminism and its histories with some common elements, but no general consensus (see, for example, James and Busia 1993; Kumar 1989; Mohammed 1998). We consider that disentangling the resulting methodological confusion is important, both in order to clarify how knowledge of gendered lives is produced, and because different methodological challenges and responses have different epistemological, political and ethical implications. The decisions that feminist researchers make matter.

Since feminists agree on so little, and their many critics tend to oversimplify and unify diverse feminist positions, we take the rest of this chapter to sketch some points of definition that outline our concerns.

## **What is gender?**

Feminism provides theory, language and politics for making sense of gendered lives, but no orderly position on pinning down the contradictions of 'gender'. This term can cover both how specific people experience sexuality and reproduction, masculinity and femininity, and the boundaries and interstices between them, and also variable cultural categories for conceptualizing what is lived and thought. In feminist theory, there has been considerable debate about the nature and interrelationships of sex, reproduction, identity, gender and power. We argue that sexuality, reproduction, subjectivity and gender can be taken to be interrelated – not wholly independent of embodiment, but also socially and politically constituted. Since what gets constituted and interrelated varies, gender cannot be known in general, or prior to investigation.

There are considerable differences, however, between thinking about gender in terms of: (1) what people (and their bodies) are; (2) what people do; (3) what relationships and inequalities they make; (4) what meanings all these are given; (5) what social effects ideas of gender can produce. There are also differences in conceptualizing how gender is interrelated with other ways of identifying and categorizing people, for example in racialized relationships and categories of analysis. Rather than any agreed feminist position, there are deeply felt disputes.

For the purposes of this book, we discuss feminist methodology with reference to social research on gendered lives (rather than, say, 'women', 'sex/gender' or 'sexual difference'). *We take gender to include: sexuality and reproduction; sexual difference, embodiment, the social constitution of male, female, intersexual, other; masculinity and femininity; ideas, discourses, practices, subjectivities and social relationships.* While gender can be analysed from differing perspectives and with differing assumptions, we argue that feminist knowledge of gender should include practical social investigation of gendered lives, experiences, relationships and inequalities. We see the investigation of the similarities and differences across the diversity of gendered lives as a potentially radical and emancipatory project that the term 'gender' can serve.

## **What is feminism in the twenty-first century?**

Feminism covers a diversity of beliefs, practices and politics, and these overlap and interact with other beliefs, practices and politics. For every generalization that one can make about feminism it is possible to find 'feminists' who do not fit, or who do not want to fit. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term 'feminism' in the English-speaking world generally indicated the advocacy of women's rights. In the UK and the USA, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were actively campaigning around education, political representation, working conditions, health, sexuality, motherhood and legal rights, as well as on more specific local issues. But these were not necessarily campaigns for all women (for example, in the UK, there were campaigns to gain access to the professions for middle-class women and access to contraception for working-class, married mothers). These and other campaigns were also marked by various forms of radical feminist consciousness that targeted male power over women's minds, bodies, sexuality or labour, but this was not generally respectable or politically acceptable (Bland 1995). Other countries produced diverse campaigns around both general and specific interests and concerns, often connected with struggles for national independence, civil rights, democracy and modernization.

By the end of the twentieth century, feminism referred both more specifically and more generally to theories of male dominance that took relations between women and men to be political, and feminist struggles to be political activity on behalf of women in general. Feminism, therefore, entails some theory of power relations. Feminist conceptions of gendered power have been a critical factor in developing distinctive feminist theories and practices, but there is no unified theory of power, and feminists have drawn on a variety of ways of thinking

about how to conceptualize power, the exercise and effects of power, and what can be done to change specific power relations and practices. As our concern here is with methodology, rather than the range of theory, we have not pursued variations in feminist conceptions of power. What these theories have in common is a concern that different knowledges of gender relations have different political and ethical implications. In these theories, any claim that all women are similarly subordinated, and so can and should act collectively, rubs up against actual experiences of differences between women, and different ways of conceptualizing power (Sanday 1981).

The feminism that developed in the last 30 years or so still attracts criticisms for its supposedly powerful consensus, and its tyranny in imposing hatred of men and denying fun and femininity to women (Gill 1997).<sup>3</sup> In practice, late twentieth-century feminism developed, alongside many other political movements and activities, as an unstable intellectual, political and practical activity grounded in a sense of women having some common political interests across their social divisions, and so having some potential interest in acting together to transform unjust gender relations. Feminist notions of liberation, emancipation and social transformation imply freedom from oppression and freedom to live differently, but this is a slippery area of debate, difference and disagreement, rather than one of agreed concepts, aims or strategies (Ahmed et al. 2000).

Feminist notions of social transformation are rooted in varied experiences of gender subordination, expressed in varied theories of gender and power, and incorporate a range of moral and political judgements on what constitutes injustice. If the subordination of women is taken to be unjust, then it is unjust wherever it occurs, and strategies for tackling particular injustices imply some general notion of justice. This gives feminism a problematic relationship to women-in-general. Feminism depends critically on establishing: first, that a category of women (female persons, clearly differentiated from male persons) exists; second, that women do have some common conditions of gendered existence, despite the social and cultural divisions between them, and despite the interests that women can share with men; and, third, that there are universal criteria of justice/injustice. Feminism in this cloak of well-meaning universalism has been unmasked as a form of western cultural imperialism seeking to incorporate all women into a particular set of western values and categories (Mohanty 1988). Challenges to feminist universalism mark a central contradiction in feminist politics. There is a critical difference between building limited generalizations about women's social existence (based on specific histories, experiences, cultures, localities and relationships) and making universal generalizations about 'women' (based on prior theory).

The characteristics of feminism remain open to dispute since women's movements have developed at different periods, in different languages and cultures, and in differing ways. The diversity of women's struggles around the world constitutes a challenge to claims that feminism is a western invention. All over the world women are occupied in struggles for more humane and just societies through action on 'women's issues', which takes various forms and adopts various cultural expressions. The extent and limits of common experiences, visions of alliances and social divisions are well exemplified in the global women's conferences organized periodically by the United Nations (see, for

example, Basu 1995; Brah 1992; Sum 2000). There has never been a shared theory of gender oppression or male dominance; a unified vision of justice and liberation; a common approach to the production of knowledge; agreed knowledge of the extent of women's differences; or a consensus on truths about gender.

Any definition of feminism can, therefore, be contested. But a review of developments in western feminism since the nineteenth century, and of the activities of women's movements around the world that are in critical tension with western feminism, suggests the following key characteristics of the feminism that is the focus of this book.

- 1 *Feminism is diverse and decentred.* There is no political centre to provide an authoritative definition of common goals and strategies for liberation. So there is no ruling on what does or does not constitute feminist methodology.
- 2 *Feminism is exclusionary.* Despite its diversity, any definition of feminism excludes 'non-feminism', or 'not-quite-feminism', thus exposing fragmentation among feminists and divisions between women. This leaves as problematic who (if anyone) has the power to define boundaries for whom, and whether, or how, feminists can speak for 'women'.
- 3 *Feminism implies a unified subject.* Women can only constitute the subject of feminism if they share a gendered social position. Feminism, therefore, requires some concept of a community of women who really exist. This raises the question of whether 'women' (and so 'men') are a real collectivity with political interests in common, rather than a variable social category.
- 4 *Feminism entails some claim to common interests between women.* Attempts to define feminism and its goals in some neutral way encounter real divisions of political interest, and so differing experiences of power, inequality and injustice between women. Any specific goals of social transformation can be very actively contested. Gender cannot be separated in practice from other social relationships, including those that empower and privilege some women over others. Nevertheless, feminism addresses women across their social differences, on the grounds that common interests can be found wherever gender relations are unjust. If women really have nothing in common, and no gendered inequalities or injustices exist, the rationale of feminism disappears.
- 5 *Feminism implies a case for emancipation.* Feminism can only be justified where gender relations are unjust/oppressive, and people are able to choose to change them. Feminist claims to knowledge of gendered lives carry dreams of resistance, agency and emancipation across social divisions and the complexities of social existence. But emancipation also raises numerous problems about how change for the better is conceived, by whom, for whom and why.

## **Are feminists women?**

Any notion of 'we' implies either universal humanity (all of us human beings) or requires some specification and justification of the boundaries of the particular category of being in question. (Which of us human beings does this particular

'we' refer to?) Feminists cannot speak for 'we humans', 'we women' or 'we feminists' without specifying the nature and boundaries of the collectivity or category they speak for. The notion that women are a community with a shared social position whose lives can be investigated by women researchers who share this common position has been extensively criticized. In this book, we use 'we' to refer to us, the authors addressing you, the reader, unless we specify otherwise.

As an alternative to assuming that there are always two rigid, natural categories, 'women' and 'men' (which could clearly identify feminists as women speaking on behalf of women), 'women' and 'men' can be seen as socially constituted, and so variable, gender categories. There is no certain knowledge, though, on what aspects of gender identities exist at birth, the consequences of genetic variation, or of variable interaction with environments. It does seem increasingly likely that what is innately gendered, what develops in interaction with specific environments, and what is learned interact in ways that are both variable and not fully understood. Gender categories can operate differently in different periods and cultures in identifying what some people share with those like themselves and do not share with those unlike themselves, with particular reference to sexuality and reproduction. What people with male/female labels share in any given instance cannot be known in advance and so needs investigation.

Confusions about the significance of embodied differences, and their relation to social identities, arise because there can be political struggles around what sense is made of sexual and reproductive difference. There are not in practice two mutually exclusive, wholly natural, gender categories, and official attempts to classify international athletes as definitively male or female have made clear the impracticality of drawing clear boundaries around individual bodies. Instead, there is an area of intersexuality, normative confusion and social regulation, where differing cultures draw, disrupt and regulate their gender boundaries differently (Sawhney 1995).

The UK, for example, has only two gender categories (male/female). Newborn babies whose genitals do not mark them as clearly fitting into either category are assigned a gender that is recorded on their birth certificate and may not legally be changed. Such babies may be deemed to require surgery, or other medical intervention, to 'improve' the fit with their assigned gender. Other ways of conceptualizing gender can allow more than two gender categories or different or more flexible boundary systems (Sawhney 1995). Intersexuals and transsexuals in the UK, as in the USA, may support existing gender boundaries by seeking clear assignment as either man or woman. Alternatively, they may disrupt rigid boundaries by asserting their difference and refusing to 'fit' (Hird 2000).

Once it is established that what it means to be woman/man/neither-woman-nor-man, can be different within different ways of knowing and being, feminist researchers cannot simply take 'women' as the subject of feminism, and cannot assume that the feminist is simply a woman. If a feminist methodology has distinctive rules, a politically sympathetic man should (in theory) be able to use them. If only women can do feminist research, where does this leave intersexual or transsexual researchers? (Problems can arise in



practice if a researcher's claim to share feminist politics or have knowledge of women's experience is disputed.) Since understanding power relations is central to feminist research, investigation of gendered lives by feminists includes the study of men and masculinity (Holland et al. 1998; McKee and O'Brien 1983; Sharpe 1994). The more male-oriented field of men's studies is also informed by feminist theory and politics (Ramazanoğlu 1992a).

These problematic characteristics of gender, feminism and feminists both shape and constrain the development of feminist methodology. There is an enormous feminist literature on knowledge, methodology and science, but considerable confusion and contradiction within modern feminism (and in the many criticisms of feminism) about where feminists stand in relation to notions of science, reason, method and truth. In the next section we outline the context and the key characteristics of methodology that have both shaped feminist approaches to social research, and encouraged the diversity of these approaches.

## What is methodology in social research?

Methodology in social research is concerned with procedures for making knowledge valid and authoritative. But questions of truth and authority are extensively disputed in western philosophy, and can be thought of in different terms in other ways of thinking. Attempts to clarify the problems and possibilities of feminist methodology range from abstracted debates on science, truth and epistemology to the details of fieldwork practices (Cook and Fonow 1990: 71).

For our purposes, different approaches to methodology in social research are different responses to how, or whether, the knowledge people produce about social life can be connected to any actual reality. Philosophers disagree on the possibilities of connections being made between:

- 1 *ideas* (theories, concepts, consciousness, knowledge, meanings) through which people imagine or make sense of reality and experience, for example in conceptions of 'family';
- 2 *experience* (how people live and make sense of the social world, and each other, in their everyday lives), for example in everyday experiences of 'family life', its meanings, relationships and practices;
- 3 *material and social realities* (things, relationships, powers, institutions, and impersonal forces that really exist and can have effects on people's lives whether people are conscious of them or not), for example relations between sexual partners, or parents and children, that actually exist independently of people's knowledge of them.

Different conceptions of 'family' clearly have different political implications, and there are also ethical issues in how knowledge of the 'family' is produced and used. The methodological choices open to feminist social researchers in connecting ideas, experience and reality provide the main theme of this book.

## Connecting ideas, experience and reality

Feminist methodology is one set of approaches to the problems of producing justifiable knowledge of gender relations. Any claim to know social reality, though, is fraught with difficulty. Western philosophers disagree on what claims can be made about connections between knowledge and reality, or whether any claims are possible. Positions vary from claims that knowledge can directly describe or mirror reality, to claims that all that researchers can know is ideas, or the particular shared language through which knowledge claims are expressed.

Modern scientific method is a form of the pursuit of truth, in the sense that scientists do aim to specify connections between ideas (scientific theories), experience (what our senses and experiments tell us) and reality (what actually exists independently of human thought). Alternatively such connections can be deemed problematic or impossible. Although these concerns with making and contesting connections run through western thought, they run in different directions. There are particularly sharp disagreements over: whether social reality can exist independently of people's ideas about it; whether experience can exist independently of the ideas/language that give meaning to experiences; where ideas come from, and whether/how they are powerful. Disputes over how, or whether, connections can ever be made, and social reality ever actually known, provide the methodological context within which feminist approaches to methodology have developed.

While feminist methodology is rooted in conceptions of scientific method as the means of producing authoritative knowledge of social reality, these roots do not grow into clear pathways through debates on methodology. Feminists too are divided over where ideas come from, how people make sense of experience, whether social reality can be connected to ideas and experience, and what evidence is evidence of. Claiming connections (or being unable to specify connections) between ideas, experience and reality can be thought of as a social process of knowledge production. This requires further reflection on who is doing the knowing, the nature of mind, self and subconscious, whether individuals can produce knowledge, or whether they always do so as part of a community, and what it means to be reasonable. For feminists, this process is intrinsically political, and has ethical implications.

Further philosophical disputes about cause and effect, determinism and free will affect conceptions of human agency. Agency implies that people have the ability to choose their goals and act (more or less rationally) to achieve them, as opposed to actions and ideas being determined by one's social position, genes, subconscious, impersonal historical forces, or other factors. Western feminism has recognized that agency is difficult to establish, but has been reluctant to dispense with a notion of individual agency, however philosophically problematic. Most versions of feminism assume that people have some power to make choices and act on them (unless forcibly rendered totally helpless) and so can be held morally responsible for their actions. But this notion of individuality and agency is not common to all cultures, and is never a simple one to defend.

Methodology in social research entails:

- 1 a social and political process of knowledge production;

- 2 assumptions about the nature and meanings of ideas, experience and social reality, and how/if these may be connected;
- 3 critical reflection on what authority can be claimed for the knowledge that results;
- 4 accountability (or denial of accountability) for the political and ethical implications of knowledge production.

It is these concerns that situate the roots of feminist methodology in modern western thought, despite feminism's engagements with other ways of thinking and other cultures.

### Method is not methodology

Although they are often confused, it is useful to make a clear distinction between methodology and method in social research. Used loosely, 'method' indicates a general approach to research, as in 'empirical method', 'scientific method' or 'Marxist method'. More specifically, the notion of method simply refers to techniques and procedures used for exploring social reality and producing evidence (such as ethnography, interviews, observations, focus groups, questionnaires, life histories, documentary analysis, laboratory experiments, analysis of texts, objects or images). Different disciplines tend to specialize in a particular range of techniques, but there is no fixed relationship between particular methods or research techniques used in social research and particular methodologies.

### The characteristics of methodology in social research

A methodology in social research comprises rules that specify how social investigation should be approached. Each methodology links a particular *ontology* (for example, a belief that gender is social rather than natural) and a particular *epistemology* (a set of procedures for establishing what counts as knowledge) in providing *rules* that specify how to produce *valid knowledge of social reality* (for example, the real nature of particular gender relations).

A key feature of feminist methodology is the implication that the relevant rules can provide criteria for judging between competing knowledge claims. For example, in judging feminist knowledge to be 'better' than patriarchal knowledge, or in deciding between conflicting feminist accounts (despite the problem of not being able to establish once and for all what 'better' means). There are different methodologies because different schools of thought have different rules for producing and justifying knowledge. We sketch the common characteristics of methodology briefly here.

#### *An ontology is a way of specifying the nature of something*

Different methodologies depend on different beliefs about what really exists, and so on different notions of the essences of things. Those things that are social

(for example, education, families, relationships) are generally conceived in western thought as essentially different from those things that are natural (for example, rocks, trees, reproductive organs). Other cultures have other systems of classification, and other notions of essence and difference. Different ontologies offer different beliefs about social existence. Critical debates in feminism, for example, have developed over the 'true nature' of sex, sexuality and gender (Jackson and Scott 1996). The notion that masculinity and femininity are natural states pinned to male and female bodies has been contested, as has the belief that 'sex' is what is biological while 'gender' is what is social. There are also more complex beliefs about the interrelations of bodily differences and their social forms that indicate how difficult it is to understand the interactions of ideas, bodies and their physical and social environments. *Feminists can have different ontological beliefs (and so different theories) about the nature of reality and the objects of their research.*

***An epistemology is a way of specifying how researchers know what they know***

Different epistemologies (for example, empiricism, realism) offer different rules on what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and what criteria establish knowledge of social or natural reality as adequate or valid. Differences within and between epistemologies are many and complex, and have diversified over the years. From the perspective of feminism, the development of methodology has been influenced, in particular, by philosophical struggles over how far knowledge (of the natural world or God, or social life) is produced through *reasoning*, through *ideas* in people's minds, or from evidence available to the *senses* (particularly through systematic observation and experiment).

Empiricist epistemologies, for example, offer rules on how to move from the evidence of our senses, and private experiences, to general and certain knowledge of what is really there. There are many versions of empiricism, and it is difficult to embrace them in a brief definition, but empiricists rely on their observations and experiments to make connections between human experience, external reality and ideas about what really exists. Despite disagreements between empiricists, Ted Benton suggests that 'the touchstone of empiricism [is] that there is no knowledge *a priori* ("prior to" or independent of experience) which is at the same time informative about the world, as distinct from our ideas, or the meanings of the terms we use' (Benton 1978: 22).

The common sense of western thought largely takes for granted that knowledge of reality rests on factual evidence that can be observed, and that these facts (if properly interpreted) can indicate what is real, independently of the researcher's values. The inferiority of women was scientifically established in the nineteenth century in this way (by examining brain size and bodily differences, observing behaviour, and so on). Feminists have challenged these 'facts' by arguing that patriarchal or racial prejudices and power relations were present in the initial ideas and in the research method, producing 'bad' theory, and that the evidence of inferiority does not 'fit' reality or accord with experience.

Realist epistemologies assume, in contrast to empiricism, that although reality is not fully available to the senses, it can still be grasped. Theory (of what reality is like) is required in order to imagine what is hidden from the senses and cannot be directly observed. Reality (for example, the reality of 'patriarchy') may or may not be imagined correctly. Realist epistemologies do not require the separation of fact and bias, as theory must come both from the reasoning mind and from the material conditions in which the thinker lives. Karl Marx, for example, claimed to have 'discovered' the logic of capitalism, which could not simply be deduced from evidence or experience. Marxists also 'discovered' that social class is a more fundamental social division than gender. Feminists have countered this conclusion by arguing that a gender-blind theory is inadequate for understanding people's experiences of the realities of gendered social relations.

Since different epistemologies (and their many variations) specify differing relations between knowledge, experience and reality (or deny that researchers can access reality independently of how they think about it), it is not surprising that *feminists can draw on differing epistemologies*.

### *Validity is a way of establishing what counts as true*

In recent western scholarship (in modern and postmodern debates on scientific method, scientific knowledge and truth) feminists have thought about the investigation of social life through debates on what social reality is like and whether/how reality can or cannot be validly known (in the sense that connections between knowledge of reality and actual reality can be specified). Feminists have had to contest what counts as reliable knowledge (in the sense of what can be replicated by other researchers) and valid knowledge (in the sense of representing reality), and how (or whether) such knowledge can be achieved. In order to challenge existing knowledge of women's inferiority, and to have their challenges taken seriously, feminists have either to validate their claims to knowledge of social life/gender through existing scientific methods, or to propose other criteria for justifying their knowledge and how it is produced. *Feminists can draw on different rules for establishing what counts as true, or can regard valid knowledge as impossible (in the sense that connections between knowledge and an independent reality cannot be specified).*

### *Power makes a difference to who is able to know what*

Feminist methodology always entails some theory of power, since the power to produce authoritative knowledge is not equally open to all. Feminists therefore question who has the power to know what, and how power is implicated in the process of producing knowledge. (Can the pregnant woman determine what is going on in her body in the same way as the obstetrician? What is the relation between medical professionals and those whom they treat? Whose knowledge is authoritative/legitimate? Why are the obstetrician, the midwife, the mother and the father differently situated in relation to knowledge of childbirth? Why does the attribution of birthing knowledge and skills vary between cultures?)

Questions about the nature of power and where power lies are critical to the political/ethical implications of producing knowledge in one way (for example, via medical hierarchy, examinations, professional qualifications) rather than another (for example, via personal experience). *Feminists can draw on different theories of power.*

### *Knowledge is not separable from experience*

Knowledge of social life is shaped by theory, culture and ideas, but does not come only *from* theory or language. It is a historical product, produced in particular social, political and intellectual conditions and situations. Feminist approaches to methodology have to tackle the problem of how to take account of experience when researchers are all personally and variably engaged, experienced and situated in social relations. What people do in everyday life, including researching, teaching or learning, is not separable from the rest of their lives. *Feminists can have different experiences and different conceptions of how knowledge is connected to experience and its meanings.*

### *Ethics expresses moral judgements, for example on rights, obligations, justice*

A feminist methodology implies that researcher bear moral responsibility for their politics and practices. Feminist investigations of the social world are concerned not just with truth, but also with how knowledge is produced and authorized. Judgements about power, justice and the transformation of what is unjust have to be balanced against tolerance of contradiction and respect for difference. These aims are deeply problematic since there is no neutral way of producing valid knowledge of gendered lives across differences, or of judging between different accounts of social reality. The ethical and political implications of defining a relationship as violent are very different from defining it as domestic. *Feminists can adopt different ethical and political positions.*

### *Accountability allocates responsibility for what knowledge is produced, and how*

What feminism adapts from its critique of modern western thought is a moral responsibility for feminist knowledge, through some concept of agency. This entails a general ethic of accountability to a community of women. *Feminists can take differing positions on: defining agency; allocating accountability for knowledge production; conceptualizing a community of women.*

The choices open to feminists in relation to these aspects of methodology indicate that feminism requires some level of political unity from those who are philosophically and methodologically as well as socially and politically divided. Feminist methodology is initially hard for students to grasp because different feminists take different positions in claiming that their knowledge is both in

some sense 'believable' and also in some sense 'feminist'. This is sometimes dealt with by referring to 'feminist methodologies', rather than 'methodology'. Multiplying methodologies, however, does not clarify in what respects different approaches have something distinctively feminist about them. We use the term 'feminist methodology' (rather than methodologies) throughout this book for simplicity's sake, but in doing so we take methodology to be a plural term covering a broad area of thought, debate and practice.

### **Is feminist methodology distinctively feminist?**

Since feminists can make choices in relation to all the key characteristics of methodology, the idea of any distinctively feminist approach to methodology is problematic (Harding 1987a). The academic area of feminist methodology was initiated primarily as a way of characterizing existing methods of producing knowledge as masculinist, and of challenging existing understandings of gendered social life. In general, feminists were critical of ways of producing supposedly scientific knowledge of social life that claimed to be politically neutral, or gender-neutral, while in practice promoting, reproducing or ignoring men's appropriation of science and reason (Clegg 1975; Stanley and Wise 1993).

Sandra Harding comments: 'For feminists it is moral and political rather than scientific discussion that has served as the paradigm – though a problematic one – of rational discourse' (1986: 12). Since there is more than one moral/political position within feminism, claims for a distinctive feminist methodology have always been debated and contested by feminists. If feminist methodology is not distinctive in terms of women studying women, or in its methods/techniques, or in its epistemologies and ontologies, or in its conceptions of rationality and validity, then any distinctiveness must come from the relations between epistemology and politics in feminist research. The following four points summarize this position:

- 1 *Feminist methodology is not distinguished by female researchers studying women.* Since feminist consciousness is not derived from a female body, women do not have a special claim to know gender. Those who are materially and socially more-or-less-female do not necessarily fully share political interests or experience a common social/embodied existence.
- 2 *There is no research technique that is distinctively feminist.* Feminists have developed, and experimented with, qualitative, politically sensitive research styles and fieldwork relationships, because this suits their purpose of making diverse women's voices and experiences heard. But they can also use a range of quantitative and other techniques. The empirical finding that many feminist researchers use particular qualitative techniques does not mean that feminist research logically or necessarily requires such techniques, or that others cannot use them. There is no research method that is consistently or specifically feminist.
- 3 *There is no ontological or epistemological position that is distinctively feminist.* Feminists have interacted with a range of existing positions. There are particular differences between: (i) those taking realist positions (indicating a

belief in a real world external to and independent of human knowledge of it, which needs human consciousness/social theory in order to imagine what it is like); (ii) those taking empiricist positions (indicating that knowledge of what is real is limited to the evidence of our senses); (iii) those taking relativist positions (rejecting the possibility of scientific method as a means of accessing social reality). While some have argued that feminist methodology is distinctive in how it locates the researcher in the research process (Harding 1993: 69; Stanley 1992: 31), we take the view that this is also characteristic of other radical approaches to social research (for example, in anti-racist or disability studies). It is a requirement of feminist research to reflect critically on the place of the researcher in the process of knowledge production, but this is also a requirement of good practice in social research more generally.

- 4 *Feminist methodology is distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experience.* Logically, feminist methodology cannot be independent of the ontology, epistemology, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social situation of the researcher. No rules of methodology enable researchers to escape their ideas, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social location. Feminist claims to know what people's lives and relations are like are politically charged. They defy patriarchal 'truths' that women are naturally inferior to men; they defy the reasoning and scientific methods that are blind to male dominance. This defiance ranges from wild excitement at unleashing women's full human potential to cautious programmes of equal rights in limited public spheres, but it rests on the moral and political position that authoritative knowledge of the unjust subordination of women can be produced and justified.

What is distinctive is the particular political positioning of theory, epistemology and ethics that enables the feminist researcher to question existing 'truths' and explore relations between knowledge and power. Because of the social diversity of gender relations, and the variable interaction of gender relations with other power relations, feminist knowledge of women's lives cannot be assumed or generalized without qualification and empirical investigation. Regardless of their epistemological and ontological differences, what distinguishes feminist researchers (of whatever gender) is some shared political and ethical commitment that makes them accountable to a community of women with moral and political interests in common (Code 1991; Nelson 1993). Feminist research is politically *for* women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women's *experiences*, and in how it *feels* to live in unjust gendered relationships.

These appear to be the only grounds on which something distinctively feminist might be claimed for diverse approaches to methodology. Confusion can arise where people fail to distinguish clearly between methodology and method (see above), but much feminist debate on methodology is unresolved or confusing because feminists have been arguing *for* feminist methodology *from* differing political and epistemological positions. While feminist methodology has its roots in modern debates on reason, science, truth and progress, it has both grown from these roots and developed in various directions. In the chapters that follow, we look at key challenges that feminist researchers have faced in producing knowledge of gender, and how these challenges have been tackled.



## The structure of the book

Part I situates feminist approaches to methodology in the context of the challenge of scientific method. We note the cultural particularity of the debates and assumptions that have shaped feminist thinking about possible connections between ideas, experience and reality. Chapter 2 locates the roots of feminist approaches to methodology in particular preoccupations with social research as a pursuit of truth, and particular notions of reason, science and progress inherited from the European Enlightenment and from humanism. The notion of man's mastery of nature, particularly the assumption that human beings, as free selves with agency, can use reason progressively to discover the truth about the natural or social worlds, served both to disparage women and to shape feminist approaches to knowledge production. We argue that feminism in the West was substantially influenced by Enlightenment thought, but also developed in conflict with it, giving feminism a powerful but contradictory methodological heritage. It is the methodological problems and contradictions of feminist responses to a lasting Enlightenment and humanist legacy that are addressed in the rest of the book.

Feminist researchers face particular problems in taking on a political and epistemological responsibility to tell accurate stories of gender (since different stories have different effects on people's lives) without being able to establish accuracy with any certainty. In Chapter 3, we look at the struggles over 'truth' and 'objectivity' in late twentieth-century feminist debates on methodology. Since claims that there are universal criteria for establishing which are the better stories of gender have been challenged, feminists have taken a variety of positions in justifying the knowledge of social life that they produce. This chapter suggests four possible stances towards justifying connections between knowledge and reality, and the confusions that arise from failure clearly to distinguish between them. In the first two, objectivity and subjectivity are seen as separable but as providing contrasting paths to truth claims; in the third, subjectivity and objectivity are taken as problematically inseparable in seeking hidden truths; the fourth position, that of relativism, denies that researchers can specify connections between knowledge and reality.

Chapter 4 examines the consequent question of whether telling the truth is at issue at all. Feminists have to weigh any commitment to science, rationality and rules of method against the relativist claim that the 'knowing feminist' (the self who produces feminist knowledge) and her 'truths' are socially constituted and so are contingent on how they are produced. In trying to resolve these problems within modern thought, some feminists have attempted to move beyond debates on objectivity and truth through notions of a feminist standpoint. While standpoint theories are often dismissed as a unified and simplistic position, we consider conceptions of a feminist standpoint to be a critical area of debate on the possibilities of feminist knowledge. Proposals for a feminist or women's standpoint, from which 'better' knowledge of gender relations can be produced, offer differing approaches to making feminist knowledge plausible and authoritative. These debates bring out key problems in claiming connections between ideas, reality and experience, and the limits of modern thinking in this respect.

Part II marks a shift in approaches to knowledge production by considering

whether there is any place left for feminist methodology when feminist claims to knowledge are confronted by the poststructuralist and postmodern critiques that we loosely term 'postmodern thought'. In Chapter 5, we look first at the positive opportunities offered by postmodern thought through deconstructions of the very terms of feminist thinking on methodology. From a postmodern perspective, feminism's inheritance of modern and humanist thought can be viewed as defective. This challenge need not be negative. It can offer escape from the constraints of modern thinking on the pursuit of truth, and propose productive ways of thinking about gender, power and knowledge production. The concerns of postmodern thought and of feminist social research, however, remain different. Postmodern freedoms to think about connections between knowledge and power can appear to unravel feminist politics and ethics. We argue that feminism should retain some distinctive elements in its approaches to social investigation, particularly in studying the institutionalization of inequalities of power, issues of materiality, difference and experience, and the interconnection of politics, ethics and epistemology. Feminists have been concerned about the political and ethical implications of abandoning the entire legacy of humanism and scientific method, but this concern has resulted in a contradiction at the heart of feminism, and varying feminist responses to postmodern thought, rather than a single methodological strategy.

In Chapters 6 and 7 we take up the choices facing feminist social researchers in the aftermath of postmodern thought. Chapter 6 starts from the problem that in empirical social research the researcher and the researched always stand in some relationship to each other. Feminists cannot assume any shared situation of 'being women'. Researchers have the problem of conceptualizing and experiencing multiple differences between 'women', but they also seek to represent gendered realities across differences, and to do so within a normative framework for assessing injustices. There are persistent tensions between pressures to fragment feminism, and pressures to focus on the political concerns of feminism and possible alliances between women. Since reality cannot be directly represented in research texts, representation of the researched and interpretation of data are powerful ways of claiming particular connections or a lack of connections between experience, ideas and realities. We consider the problems facing feminist social researchers in dealing with privilege, and look more generally at the politics of representing 'others' across social, political and cultural differences. Feminism has been shaken by women's resistance to being constituted as 'other', and by accusations about women's exercise of power. The moral agency of the feminist remains a vital factor in reflecting critically on power relations in the research process and in seeking strategic alliances between women, but the choices facing the researcher as the producer of feminist knowledge remain politically and epistemologically problematic.

In Chapter 7 we return to three recurrent and interconnected issues that have run through earlier chapters: (1) whether, or how, feminist knowledge can be grounded in women's experiences if experience cannot be taken simply as true; (2) whether, or how, gendered experience is connected to underlying material realities; (3) whether, or how, there are grounds for deeming any knowledge claim 'better' than another. Different views of possible connections between feminist knowledge, people's experiences and material realities remain sharp

points of divergence between feminists. Different epistemological and ontological assumptions offer different understandings of the complexity of social life and the nature of power relations. We consider the case that feminist knowledge cannot be grounded in experience, and then use the example of accounts of rape to explain why, despite the problems of making sense of them, feminists are reluctant to abandon experience as a source of knowledge. This reluctance brings researchers up against the case for claiming connections between experience and material social realities. Despite considerable resistance to any notion of validity, we argue that feminists (and their critics) should work out what criteria they actually use in judging between competing accounts of gendered lives, and how these may be defended. The assertion that feminist knowledge claims are evaluated and authorized within feminist epistemic communities requires further investigation.

Part III is a brief consideration of what choices are encountered in doing a small-scale feminist research project. Once the feminist researcher is located in a social process of doing research, abstract debates on methodology have to be brought down to earth, and their implications worked out in practice. In Chapter 8, we take prospective researchers through the stages of a small-scale feminist social research project, in the light of the challenges to feminist knowledge production that we raise in earlier chapters. The point is not to provide correct answers or propose a model procedure, but to deconstruct a version of the research process from research question to presenting the results. We take the novice researcher through key decisions on the production and justification of feminist knowledge.

In Chapter 9, we conclude that although feminists are as much in disagreement as any other social researchers over how connections or disconnections can be conceived between feminist knowledge, women's experience and gendered social realities, knowledge of gender has flourished. Feminists have risen to the challenges of scientific method, postmodern thought and differences between women in productive ways, despite their disagreements. Feminist knowledge has been effective in grasping hidden power relations, in bringing out the diversity of gendered social existence, and in offering well-grounded strategies for how women can envisage justice, exercise choice and make alliances across their differences.

## Notes

1. Sandra Harding has pointed out that different feminists have adopted different ways of knowing. She distinguishes between feminist empiricism and taking a feminist standpoint (Harding 1987b, 1991, 1993), and distinguishes both these positions from the production of male-centred (androcentric) knowledge and from poststructuralist feminism.

2. It is not true, however, that white American feminists of the 1960s and 1970s ignored all differences between women. Shulamith Firestone (1970), Kate Millett (1970) and Robin Morgan (1970), for example, all indicate differences of class, race and sexual orientation in the USA. Millett and Firestone specify interrelations between sex, racism and patriarchy that implicate white women in racism. But all three focus on exposing sex/gender as the key political division between women and men. While judging racism

to be immoral, they emphasize that what women have in common is their subordination to male supremacy in patriarchal society. Analyses such as these of women's common interests in sexual politics have been strongly resisted by women whose own experiences of sexism are intermeshed with other forms of subordination (Joseph and Lewis 1981; Mirza 1997a and b; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983).

3. For some current examples of criticism see the Feminism on Trial website.