"I AM NOT AN OBJECT, I AM A PERSON" RE-POSITIONING THE SUBJECT IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES'

ANGELA BARNS

Graduate School of Business
CBS Higher Degree by Research Unit
Curtin University of Technology
Building 407 – 4th Floor, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845
Email: BarnsA@cbs.curtin.edu.au

Abstract

Debates between and within methodological discourses are implicitly, debates encompassing an array of epistemological and ontological questions and assumptions. This paper seeks to initiate and engage in such a discussion, citing as its protagonist, the position of the subject/object within research methodology. Beginning with the situated narrative of a research participant, this paper attends to the differences between positivist and feminist interpretive methodologies, and the assumptions which inform their diverse ways of engaging with the social world. Using the concept of a metaphorical tour the paper invites the reader to walk the various paths created within the author's PhD research project with young women. This 'tour' seeks to not only facilitate an understanding of the everyday theorizing and enacting of feminist interpretive methodology, but through such a process, highlight its divergence from traditional positivist methodologies.

Keywords

Feminist theory, interpretive methodology, young women

Introduction

In 1987, Sally Cole (1995), an American researcher traveled to Portugal where she met with Maria, a 'retired' Portuguese Fisherwoman. Born into a small fishing village on the east coast of Portugal, for 50 years Maria earned a living, ocean fishing and harvesting seaweed. Married at 26, she became a sole parent when her husband left on the pretence of finding work in Brazil but instead spent his work days pursuing wine women and song. Since that time, 40 years ago, Maria managed to buy her own fishing boat, raise three daughters and pay off a small house. In recent months her husband, who is now in his eighties, has written her, wanting to return home. He is no longer the virile womanizer he used to be; he is old and feeling the aches and pains of his years. Maria's (cited Cole, 1995: 187) response to his request is simple but clear:

> ***"I am not an object, I am a person. I am human.***
>
> ***I have the right to be treated like a person don't you think?"***

Reflecting upon Maria's question, it would be difficult to respond in any other way but to confirm and affirm Maria's self-assertion. Maria is not an object; she is a woman. Maria was a self-employed Portuguese fisherwoman; She is a mother, a daughter and an ex-wife, a community member, a breadwinner, an owner of property, a grandmother. Maria is not just a person and a human – she is a woman. She has the right to be treated like a person and a human. She has the right to be treated with respect, dignity and integrity.

Whilst this emphasis on Maria's humanity may seem blatantly indisputable, within a positivist research context, this same woman could easily become an object; an object of study, a unit of statistical information, a number, part of a sample, a coded entry. Maria could become subsumed within the domain of research methodologies which researchers claim have no 'sex' and are therefore gender-less; methodologies which are apolitical; a neutral means through which to 'discover' 'truth' and 'fact' (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 4). These are the methodologies most sort after;

> *Discussions about methodology (often)…rest on the quest for the holy grail of the perfect method – a scientific method that will produce incorruptible data, uncontaminated by the research process itself (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001: 84).*

Within such spaces, Maria's womanhood, her personhood, her humanity and herstory, would be lost; caught in a web of reification, reductionism and quantification. Such a predicament is not only relationally unacceptable but as many researchers acknowledge, ignoring the wealth of knowledges which come from lived experiences, is academically

'stupid'. As researchers seek to engage with the complexities of post-industrial life and the need to re-examine factors traditionally treated as anomalies, nuances and irregularities within our work, there is a corresponding need to press pause on the research machine; to re-think and re-work the mechanisms through which we undertake research, to ensure that it doesn't 'chew up and spit out' people's meanings, realities and lived experiences. We need to adopt methodologies which give voice to the many silences within positivist research; the subjective stories which are lost in the pursuit of 'fact' and 'truth'. We need methodologies which facilitate, expose and explicate the many ways in which gender, culture and socio-economic positionings are implicitly and explicitly interwoven within our lives and the research landscape.

In entering such a discussion I intend to draw on my own experience as a researcher and in particular the experience of creating and enacting a feminist interpretive methodology within the context of my PhD project and its exploration of young women's relationships with work, occupation and career.

Engaging Methodology

Developed through the 'interpretive turn' in the social sciences and located within postmodern discourse, interpretive methodologies acknowledge the meanings, perceptions and stories of people's everyday lived experiences. Interpretive practice privileges the "grounded, subjective, involved, emotional (and) specific forms of knowledge" discarded by positivism (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 11). Neither seeking to 'discover' or create 'expert' knowledge, interpretive methodology provides a space to unravel the languages and other symbols employed in constructing "multiple and heterogeneous subjectivities" and discursive realities (Cole, 1995: 197).

Emphasising the significance of interpretive methodologies and the privileging of the idiographic and the local is not to suggest that quantitative methodologies and methods are therefore inappropriate or irrelevant. In keeping with the acknowledgement of realities as multiple, discursive and fluid, this dichotomy is gradually being replaced by a growing recognition of quantitative research as a valuable resource within the feminist agenda; "there must be appropriate quantitative evidence to counter the pervasive and influential quantitative sexist research which has and continues to be generated" (Jayaratne, 1983). Similarly, as Hartman (1990: 3) proposes,

> we need large scale studies in which variables can be reduced to measurable units and the results translated into the language of statistical significance. We need in-depth 'thick descriptions', grounded in context, of a single case, a single instance or even a brief exchange.

Many feminists argue that the use of quantitative research can "put a problem on the map" by illustrating how widespread or prevalent an issue actually is (Reinharz, 1992: 79).

Whilst many research debates continue to be premised on an either/or construction of research methodologies, the 'textual' or interpretive turn within the social sciences has facilitated the combining of methods often presented as diametrically opposed (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). Popularised in the perpetuation of dichotomous relationships between quantitative / qualitative, objective / subjective and etic / emic, according to Riessman (1994: xii) such framings are "limiting, and fail to represent nuance and complexity" and when applied to the arguments about "the relative value of qualitative compared to quantitative methods, obscure what each has to offer.

Important within such discussions, is the detangling of positivism as a conceptual discourse and quantitative methodologies and methods. Positivism as an epistemological understanding within and through which quantitative methods can be developed, applied and analysed, is the means by which claims to truth and fact are made (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Similarly, employing quantitative methods within a postmodern discourse, whilst facilitating the collection and production of data, insists that such material is a re-presentation; it is neither fact or truth, objective or value-free but is "discursively constituted in particular ways of thinking" about a situation, event or phenomenon (Ramazanoglu, 2002: 88). Within such an understanding, no method can be or is 'gender, class, culturally or sexually neutral'; to claim such is to consider that quantitative methods have developed external to discourse, people and context. As Ramazanoglu (2002: 48) claims, quantitative research is a subjective act in which the subject of research and the positioning of the researcher in relation to both the research and the participants, is an integral (but not dominating, coercive or biased) aspect of the preparation, enactment and re-presentation of research knowledge (Ramazanoglu, 2002: 48; Kirby and McKenna, 1989);

> *How researchers see and present research isn't a product of pure, uncontaminated factual occurrences. All occurrences are a product of our consciousness because they derive from our interpretation and construction of them (Stanley and Wise, 1996: 154).*

Choosing feminist and interpretive

With this focus on 'involved', 'subjective' and 'grounded' experience, interpretive methodologies were adopted and adapted by feminist researchers as a means of exploring two key issues:

i)   the ways in which "women manage and give meaning to their lives" (Cole, 1995: 181); and

ii)   women's interactions with gender as the "organising principle which profoundly shapes and or mediates the concrete conditions of (women's) lives" (Lather, 1991: 17).

Emphasising the 'dailiness of women's lives' feminist interpretive methodologies also "allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. To begin to layout a different way of seeing reality (Apthekar, 1989: 44).

Feminist interpretive research in action

Whilst this methodology purports to be inspiring, exciting and invigorating, in theory, it is important to both understand and explore its development and enactment within the research context. In showcasing feminist interpretive methodology in action I draw on the recent experiences of my PhD research with young women.

In keeping with my research project's focus on the everyday experiences of young women's career decision making and imaginings of their future lives, the feminist interpretive methodology described above was both fitting and appropriate. Unlike the determinism inherent within positivist theory, my PhD research was underpinned by an understanding of young women as active agents, "capable of choice …hav(ing) the ability to act upon the world and to change it in line with their own needs, aspirations or perceptions" (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989: 29). Correspondingly, as a feminist interpretive researcher, I was neither a 'discoverer' or an 'authority', my role was to listen rather than test; re-interpret rather than state facts; highlight difference and ambiguity rather than dissect it or cast it away as contaminating; and relate with 'participants-as-subjects' rather than as cohorts or objects.

As a means of honouring its commitment to privileging the experience of young women, I employed three central methodological 'principles', developed by the feminist ethnographer, Christine Griffiths (1995: 11):

i)   "Starting from the perspective of (young) women,
ii)   Breaking down the researcher-researched divisions
iii)   Creating a sociology for women".

Starting from the perspective of young women

In enacting the principle of 'starting from the perspective of young women', this research performed two specific actions; firstly, to work with young women only, as opposed to young men or even, older women; and secondly, to ensure that the young women's experiences provided both the framework and direction for the research.

Young Women Only!

Whilst the research could have included both young women's and young men's experiences of occupational decision making, as a feminist researcher I was wary of the pitfalls imbued within bi-gendered research. Not withstanding the numerous logistical issues, such as the notorious 'compare and contrast' analysis which pervades much gender research, my concerns were more politically motivated. In choosing to research with 'young women only' this research sought to dispel the modernist tradition endemic within many current research arenas, that young women's views and opinions gain relevancy and validity only when positioned with those of their male counterparts (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; McRobbie,1991). Focusing on the local and particularised experiences of the young women through the employment of 'in-depth 'conversational' interviews was also a direct attempt to disrupt traditional methodological and technical research tools which "employed a neutralized authoritative…voice and homogenized people's lives" (Cole and Phillips, 1995: 2).

Young women and the 'knowing and doing' of the research

In 's*tarting from the perspective of young women'*, the research also sought to ensure that young women's interests and needs provided both the impetus and the direction of the 'knowing and the doing' of the research. Employing particular methods in researching with the young women, this research project aimed to create a space in which the young women's voices rather then the researcher's were respected, encouraged and prioritized. Through in-depth interviews based upon the notion of interactive conversations (Kvale, 1996: 4) and the application of an interpretive framework which emphasized pattern and meaning, the young women remained a central focus and framing for the research.

Breaking Down the Researcher-Researched Division

Within positivist research methodologies, the researcher is depicted as an impartial observer obscured behind the smokescreen of the clipboard; s/he is nothing more than a mechanism for collecting 'the facts' (Olivia cited Bloom, 1998: 19). Contrary to such illusiveness feminist interpretive methodology encourages the 'outing' of the researcher. Through the researcher's 'use of self', the researcher and the researched are re-cast as active authors, co-creators of research stories. Such a relationship, although the antithesis of the objective-observer stance adopted within positivist research, is an acknowledgement that "we are always part of what we study and always stand in definite relations to it" (Cole and Phillips, 1995: 200). Despite this commitment to equalising the research relationship, Acker et al (1983: 134) propose that, "it is impossible to create a research process that completely erases the contradictions between researcher and

researched ". Neither research that is feminist or interpretive is devoid of power plays and researchers must be attentive to potential and actual issues of power and knowledge. Considering these warnings and in light of the above discussion, this research project adopted a number of strategies in an attempt to make the relationship between the young women and myself as the researcher both equitable and mutual.

Self-Disclosure

Researcher self-disclosure within feminist interpretive research is not only encouraged but is considered a necessary part of the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants (Oakley, 1980; Griffiths, 1995). Throughout the process of gathering the research material, from the initial invitations to the interviews, my self-disclosure as the researcher was an integral component. Whilst not seeking to impose or project my subjective experiences, it was evident that this self-disclosure contributed to the creation of rapport between the young women and myself and a space within which the young women could safely ask questions and share their experiences.

> **Angela:...I didn't know what I wanted to do until I was about 27.**
>
> **Christine: So what were you doing before that?**
>
> **Angela: I left school when I was 17 and went to uni but I really didn't know what I wanted to do...so then I left and worked for awhile, traveled around Australia and when I came down to Perth, I studied social work; worked in a youth support service and then thought I'd like to do some research, so that's why I am here now... so I can relate to that feeling of 'not knowing'**
>
> **Christine: wow...I want to travel, but maybe not in five years, maybe a bit later than that**
>
> **Angela: Where do you want to travel to?**
>
> **Christine: Well, I want to go around Australia, and do that whole thing...when did you go?**
>
> **Angela: I left Melbourne in 1995**
>
> **Christine: So how old were you?**
>
> **Angela: I was 26... yeah and then I came to Perth at the beginning of 1997 I think it was...**
>
> **Christine: How come you stayed here?**
>
> **Angela: Because I was doing uni here and then I was working...**
>
> **Christine: That's funny because so many people I know want to go to uni in Melbourne.**

Ways of talking

In keeping with the postmodern, feminist and interpretive emphasis on language as both the creator and transmitter of meaning and "the power of language...to constitute social realities", the ways in which the project was constructed and communicated to young women as potential participants was critical (Ramzanoglu, 2002: 124). Whilst traditional research, constructed and enacted through malestream language, can alienate women

from their social worlds, reifying their experiences, feminist interpretive research seeks to use language's performative capacity to re-engender respect for women's lived experiences (Luke and Gore, 1992: 3). Through the reclamation of everyday language and ways of interacting it is possible to dismantle the barriers between the researched and the researcher and the field and the academe. I was also conscious that whilst the young women I hoped to interview were 'young' they were also in Year 12 and probably considered themselves as young adults rather than 'children'. As such, in both inviting young women to participate in the project and in the development and articulation of the interview guide, I sought to use language and ways of communicating that were 'respectfully everyday' without being patronizing, paternalistic or arrogant. Consulting with a group of young women in the same age bracket prior to the interviews was critical in this process and no doubt saved me from the embarrassment ensuing from the wrong word or outmoded expression! With this focus on the local and the grounded, there is however a 'fine line' between respectfully engaging with women as research participants through appropriate ways of speaking, and the patronizing guise of the 'try-hard' or 'too cool for school' researcher.

Feedback

In keeping with Kirby and McKenna's (1989: 104) insistence that "participants should have access to the research process" and that it's "progress and focus should be as open as possible to participants" I continuously sought the young women's feedback in relation to the methods being used and the topic of the research. Transcripts of the interviews and email updates were received enthusiastically by many of the young women who expressed an on-going interest in the research's process and outcomes. In closing each in-depth interview I also invited the young women to discuss their experiences of being a participant within the research process. At the conclusion of her in-depth interview, Emily offered this spontaneous reflection;

> *I just want to say I think the research that you're doing is really cool. I feel that women haven't been treated equally for a long time and it's about time that we caught up. I think it's good that women are given equality and don't feel they have to be depressed or anything and your research is helping that I guess. I like this interview... you're really positive and stuff...*

Creating a Sociology for Young Women

The final principle enacted within the space of this research project related to the creation of knowledges which not only reflect but speak to, young women and their experiences. Young women's stories within academic disciplines are often subsumed within a generalised category of 'youth' or relegated to the periphery of young men's experiences, which form the "normative paradigms about adolescence" (Harris, 2002: 107).

Creating an Opportunity for Learning

Inherent within the emphasis on creating new knowledges, feminist researchers advocate the use of research as " a change-enhancing reciprocally educative encounter" (Lather, 1991: 18), through which participants have the potential to "reach new personal and political insights in relation to the research focus" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 68). Within this research project, for the young women as participants it was hoped that the research project, particularly the interviews, would facilitate a space for reflection and exploration during a time in their educational year when decisions and choices relating to their work, occupational and career futures needed to be made. Whilst a lack of time and energy were identified by many of the participants as hindering their ability to engage in such decision making in their everyday lives, other young women expressed reluctance and fear of having to make such seemingly crucial decisions. Within this context, the research as a space for sharing ideas, meanings and experiences was noted by many of the young women as not only a support but a much-needed respite within which to actually sort out their many conflicting and competing ideas, wants, needs and desires. Zena described the learning facilitated through her engagement in the interview process as providing 'incite';

I had good time, it gave me a bit of an incite into my own brain.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting upon feminist interpretive methodology in action, let us return to the question which both inspired and informed this discussion:

"I am not an object, I am a person. I am human.

I have the right to be treated like a person don't you think?"

In responding to this question from within the context of research, as researchers we are invited to engage with the theory and practice of methodology. Whilst positivist methodologies would answer through the façade of value-free objectivity and detachment, feminist interpretive methodologies would call for engagement. The traditional barrier between the researcher and the researched would be exchanged for a relationship which is interpersonal and reciprocal (Bloom, 1998: 1).

Rather than denying, obscuring and/or ignoring the intersubjective performance of research, feminist interpretive methodologies acknowledge the positioning of the researcher and the researched as knowing gendered subjects and encourages the creation of reciprocal, interactive and recursive research relationships (Kemmis, 1994: 6-7). Within this understanding the researcher and the researched are always engaged as "knowing and aware subjects", a relationship which rescues the research participant from

the position of 'othered object' and dismantles the pedestal from which the researcher as the 'objective authority' has reigned supreme (Shiach, 1999: 372).

References

Acker, J. B. K. and Esseveld, J. (1983) 'Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research', in *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, 423-435

Apthekar, B. (1989) Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness and the Meaning of Daily Experience, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Bloom, L. R. (1998) Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation, State University of New York Press, New York

Cole, S and Phillips, L. (eds.) (1995) 'The work and politics of feminist ethnography: An introduction', *Ethnographic Feminisms: Essays in Anthropology*, Carleton University Press, Toronto, 1-15.

Cole, S. (1995) 'Taming the shrew in Anthropology: Is feminist ethnography 'new' ethnography?', S. Cole and L. Phillips (eds.) *Ethnographic Feminisms: Essays in Anthropology*, Carleton University Press, Toronto, 185-205.

Edwards, R and Ribbens, J. (eds.) (1998) 'Living on the edges" Public knowledge, private lives, personal experience', *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, London, 1-23.

Griffiths, C. (1995) Adolescent Girls and Their Friends: A Feminist Ethnography, Aldershot, Avebury.

Harris, A. (2002) 'Introduction: New directions in feminist research', *Hecate*, 107-108.

Hartman, A. (1990)'Many ways of knowing', in *Social Work*, January, 3-4.

Hitchcock, G and Hughes, D. (1989) 'Models of social research', in *Research and the Teacher*, Routeldege, London, 112-35

Jayaratne, T. (1983) 'The value of quantitative methodology for feminist research', in G. Bowles and R. Klein Duelli (eds.) *Theories of Women's Studies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston

Kirby, S and McKenna, K. (1989) *Experience Research Social Change Methods From the Margins*, Garamond Press: Toronto.

Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An Introduction*, Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, California

Kemmis, S. (1994) 'The possibility of emancipatory action research', Address to the *Deakin University Nursing Research Conference*, Geelong, Australia, June 30, 1-8.

Kirby, S. and McKenna, K. (1989) Experience Research Social Change Methods From the Margins, Garamond Press, Toronto

Lather, P. (1991) 'Introduction', *Feminist Research in Education: Within/Against*, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E. (2000) 'Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging influences', N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative research, 2nd Edition*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 163-188

Luke, C and Gore, J. (1992) 'Introduction', *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, Routledge, New York, 1-14

McRobbie, A., (1991), *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Unwin Hyman, Boston

Oakley, A., (1981), 'Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms', in H. Roberts (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. 30-61

Ramazanoglu, C. (2002) *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, with Janet Holland, Sage Publications, London

Reinharz, S. (1992) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, New York

Shiach, M. (1999) *Feminism and Cultural Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Stanley, L and Wise, S. (1993) *Breaking Out Again*, (New Edition), Routledge, London.

Walkerdine, V. Lucey, H and Melody, J. (2001) *Growing Up Girl: Psycho-social Explorations of Gender and Class*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, Great Britain.

Acknowledgements

Copyright