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BEYOND NONSEXIST RESEARCH

The Perils of Feminist Methods in Psychology

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It is the thesis of this article that efforts to identify a distinctive set of "feminist methods" for psychological research are not only futile but unwise. We begin by discussing the defining features of feminist research in psychology. We then evaluate several proposals for distinctively feminist methods in psychology. Suggestions that feminists should avoid experimentation and quantitative research as inherently less feminist than other approaches are considered and rejected, as are criteria based on the sex of the research participants or the researcher. We further argue that the proposed distinction between "agentic" and "communal" approaches to research is misleading. We conclude that any research method can be misused in sexist ways, and that no method comes with a feminist guarantee. Feminist researchers should be skeptical of the limitations of all research methods.

In recent years, feminist psychologists have grown increasingly sensitive to the dangers of sexist bias in research and have developed thoughtful guide-

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lines for "sex-fair" research (e.g., McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986). A minimum requirement for all feminist research is that it be nonsexist. Some have suggested that psychologists should go a step further and begin to identify distinctively feminist methods. For example, at a convention of the American Psychological Association, Dee Graham and Edna Rawlings (1980) offered a detailed comparison of sexist, nonsexist, and feminist methods. They proposed that whereas sexist and nonsexist research are characterized by lab experiments, questionnaires, and tests, feminist research should primarily use interviews and personal documents. Whereas sexist and nonsexist research use quantitative data analysis, feminist research should be predominantly qualitative. They added that "If quantitative techniques are used, [the feminist researcher] will apologize for their use" (p. 15). Graham and Rawlings also suggested that whereas sexist research uses mostly male subjects and nonsexist research uses both sexes, feminist research should use mostly female subjects. In this article, we will argue that efforts to prescribe distinctive feminist research methods are simplistic and misguided.

An illustration of the hazards of methodological orthodoxy is provided by Kersti Yllo, a feminist sociologist. Yllo conducted a program of research on wife abuse, including both in-depth interviews with abused women and secondary analyses of survey data on family violence (Yllo, 1986; Yllo & Bograd, 1988). She reported that although her interview research had been readily seen as feminist, her quantitative research had been criticized as nonfeminist. Recounting her efforts to publish her survey research, she wrote: "I was stunned when my paper reporting these findings was rejected from a respected feminist journal. The problem was not with the nature of my concerns or conclusions, but with my methodology which, I was told, was 'inherently patriarchal'. Quantitative studies could contribute no feminist insights, the editor wrote" (1986, p. 3). Yllo's experience illustrates a debate among feminist scholars about how best to progress beyond nonsexist research practices, which should be a minimum requirement of all work, toward new feminist approaches to research.

The thesis of this article is that efforts to identify a distinctive set of feminist methods for psychological research are not only futile but dangerous. Instead, we will argue that any method can be misused in sexist ways, and that no method comes with a feminist guarantee. A similar point has been made by the feminist philosopher of science, Sandra Harding. Defining research methods as techniques for gathering evidence, Harding (1987) concluded that "it is *not* by looking at research methods that one will be able to identify the distinctive features of the best of feminist research" (p. 3). Rather, Harding suggested, feminists differ from other researchers in the theories they use, the ways they apply theory to specific problems, and also in their general beliefs about how knowledge is to be constructed (their epistemologies). We agree with Harding that research methods

should not be a defining feature of feminist research. We therefore begin this article by describing what we believe are the unique features of feminist research in psychology. We then evaluate and ultimately reject five proposed criteria for feminist research methods based on prescriptions against the use of experimentation and quantitative approaches, considerations about the sex of feminist researchers and their research participants, and the proposed distinction between agentic and communal research methods.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT FEMINIST RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY?

What are the core defining features that distinguish feminist psychology from nonfeminist psychology, on the one hand, and from feminism outside of psychology, on the other? The fundamental issue for feminist psychology is the dilemma of combining feminism—a value orientation with action implications—and the tradition of psychology as an empirical science striving for objectivity and value-neutrality.

Feminism is both an ideology—a set of beliefs and values about women and gender relations—and a social-political movement for social change. As an ideology, contemporary American feminism typically emphasizes the goal of gender equality, recognizes the traditional oppression of women and their historical exclusion from public life, and values the experiences of women as important and appropriate topics for scholarly inquiry. As a social and political movement, feminism strives for social changes to improve the lives of women and to bring about gender equality in all facets of society. Individual feminists differ both in their personal definitions of feminist ideology and in their commitments to social activism.

Psychology, at least as research psychologists commonly view our discipline, is a scientific enterprise whose goal is to use empirical methods to understand the behavior and mental processes of humans and other animals. Psychology is rooted in the tradition of empirical positivism that views science as objective and value-free, emphasizes the independence of the researcher and the subject of inquiry (of the knower and the known), and seeks universal truths based on findings that can be widely replicated.

How are psychologists to reconcile the inherent conflict between feminist beliefs and conventional views of science? Two alternatives are currently being explored. One emphasizes the need to create a totally new approach to science that would replace traditional science; this has been termed the "successor science" perspective (Harding, 1986). The second perspective emphasizes the value of reshaping conventional scientific practices to serve feminist goals; this has been called "feminist empiricism" (Harding, 1986).

The radical view that all traditional beliefs about science must be re-

jected and that a new epistemology of science must be created represents a fundamental challenge to the scientific enterprise. For example, within psychology, Kenneth Gergen (1988) has proposed that the tradition of empirical positivism should be replaced with a new "social epistemology" that views knowledge claims as "fundamentally unconstrained by observation [and] dependent on social process" (p. 44). Although Gergen does not propose a uniquely feminist epistemology, he believes that a social epistemology would be congenial to the views of many feminists. Other successor science proposals have come from feminist scholars outside of psychology who endorse the creation of distinctly feminist epistemologies (e.g., Harding, 1986; Rose, 1986). They argue that because women have been oppressed members of society and are outsiders among scientists, women's experiences and insights provide a truer basis for knowledge than do men's. Feminist psychologists have only recently begun to examine explicitly the philosophical underpinnings of our discipline (e.g., M. Gergen, 1988a; Wilkinson, 1986a), and this is an area in need of much greater exploration.

For our present analysis of research methods, the key question is the extent to which epistemological changes in psychology would necessarily dictate changes in methods. In an early paper on this topic, Rhoda Unger (1983) emphasized that: "it is not techniques of experimentation or quantification that I am criticizing here. They are potential tools that are devoid of much significance in themselves. What I am criticizing is our unawareness of the epistemological commitments we make when we use such tools unthinkingly" (p. 15). We think it is currently an open question whether new feminist theories of knowledge will require new techniques for gathering and evaluating evidence or whether feminist epistemologies will lead to using old tools in new ways.

Most feminist scientists have taken the second alternative of feminist empiricism and strive to integrate feminist beliefs and conventional scientific activities. In our own discipline, feminist psychologists have questioned core assumptions about traditional science but, nonetheless, remain committed to systematic empirical inquiry (Parlee, 1979, p. 125). The rationale for this popular position can be summarized in three propositions.

1. Science can never be fully "objective" or value-neutral. Feminists believe that science is a human activity and is invariably influenced by the values and beliefs of its practitioners (Lott, 1985; Unger, 1983, 1984–1985; Unger, Draper, & Pendergrass, 1986). As Barbara Wallston (1981) stated: "Although it has been a core belief within psychology that science is value-free and objective, this view has been and must continue to be attacked strongly" (p. 599). Unless we acknowledge this feature of science, the fact that we as individuals have feminist values and beliefs would be irrelevant to our activities as scientists, and the terms "feminist psychology" and "feminist research" would have no meaning.

Feminist critiques of science emphasize that the impact of values on scientific activities is systematic and is not confined to the idiosyncratic preferences of individual scientists. Rather, science has consistently given priority to the values of the white, middle-class men who have been its main practitioners. Historically, the sexist values and attitudes of society have biased the development of scientific psychology. Sexism has affected not only the selection of research topics and the development of psychological concepts and theories, but also the research methods used, the applications of psychology to therapy, and the structure of psychology as a profession.

The recognition of sexism within the profession has led to many useful activities to create a sex-fair discipline. For example, guidelines have been developed for avoiding sexism in the practice of psychotherapy (e.g., *Report of the Task Force on Sex Bias and Sex-Role Stereotyping in Psychotherapeutic Practice*, 1975) and in the reporting of research in professional publications (e.g., APA, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 1983). Much effort has gone into identifying sources of sexist bias in the conduct of scientific research. In a recent major report on nonsexist research, McHugh et al. (1986) noted that "sexism, in the form of unexamined assumptions about the sexes and unequal treatment of males and females may enter psychological research at any phase of a research project" (p. 879). They offer many helpful guidelines, although there are still points of controversy about how best to avoid sexist bias (e.g., Eagly, 1987).

Correcting the errors of sexist bias in research is essential, but feminist researchers typically take the analysis of the role of values one step further. As Rhoda Unger (1983) stated: "I would like to join with others in arguing for a social science that admits values – not only as sources of bias, but also as means for evaluating all parts of the research process" (p. 26). Personal values can play a constructive part in shaping research activities by influencing the researcher's goals, as well as the choice of topics and procedures.

Others have suggested that science invariably serves the political interests of certain individuals and groups. Claims that science is apolitical and value-free merely conceal the ways in which science supports prevailing power elites in society. An awareness of the politics of science can enable feminist researchers to use science to challenge the prevailing power structures, to foster social change, and to improve women's lives.

2. Empirical research is a worthwhile activity. A second core idea implicit in feminist research is that scientific activities are worthwhile. The recognition that science is very much a human activity and that value neutrality has been an illusion does not require that psychologists abandon the scientific enterprise. Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), a mathematical biophysicist, has stated the position in these terms:

> One strand of the radical feminist critique goes on from the hypothesis of deep-rooted androcentrism in science either to reject science altogether, or to demand that it be replaced—in toto—by a radically different science. Because I am a scientist, the first of these moves is, for me, simply untenable. It also seems suicidal. . . . The second proposal . . . seems to be equally problematic. The assumption that science *can* be replaced, de novo, reflects a view of science as pure social product, . . . science dissolves into ideology. . . . My view of science—and of the possibilities of at least a partial sorting of cognitive from ideological—is more optimistic. . . . [The] aim . . . is the reclamation, from within science, of science as a human instead of a masculine project. (pp. 177–178)

Michele Wittig (1985) has made a similar case for psychology. As part of a detailed discussion of metatheoretical dilemmas in the psychology of gender, Wittig argued that we should reject both the logical positivist view that science is value-neutral and the "subjective relativism [view] that fact-finding, analysis, and conclusions are purely subjective, and therefore, are only capable of validating the researcher's prejudices" (p. 801). Although feminist psychologists are often critical of the sexism that has characterized the discipline, they do not want to reject in toto their training in psychological research and theory, nor do they choose to abandon their identity as psychologists. Rhoda Unger (1988) has observed that "the attempt to infer cause-and-effect relationships about human behavior using the tools of empiricism is one of the few unique contributions that psychology as a discipline can offer to the rest of scholarship. If such tools may not be used by feminist psychologists there is little likelihood that their insights will be taken seriously by the rest of the discipline" (p. 137). In short, feminist research in psychology is a scientific activity guided by personal values.

3. Human behavior is complex and diverse; it is shaped in important ways by social, historical, and political forces. Because feminist ideology values equality and envisions a social world that has yet to be realized (i.e., one of gender equality), feminists are sensitive to the many ways in which social forces shape human experience and limit human potential. Put another way, feminists assume that gender equality is possible and could be achieved were it not for constraints imposed by patriarchal values, economic systems, or other social forces. The Task Force on Issues in Research in the Psychology of Women, created by Division 35 of the American Psychological Association, described the objectives of feminist research as "clarification of psychological, biological, and social-cultural determinants of behavior, along with the integration of this information about women (and men) into current psychological knowledge and theories" (cited in Lott, 1985, p. 156).

There are several related implications of this awareness for feminist psychology. First, it leads feminists to emphasize the effects of *social and cultural contexts* on human experiences. This often includes a heightened

concern with the impact of social class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. Thus it leads to an insistence that human behavior cannot be understood apart from its social environment (Lott, 1985). Second, this belief has led feminists to consider the *diversity* that exists among women (and among men). As some have put it, the notion that there is no universal man, implies that there is also no universal woman—women's lives and experiences are varied (Stacey & Thorne, 1985). Third, this view ultimately leads feminist psychologists to be skeptical of the possibility of establishing *universal* facts or laws about human behavior. These points have also been made by many other social scientists. Gunnar Myrdal (1972) wrote that the main difficulty in social research is that:

> it must concern living conditions, institutions, and attitudes which are diverse and in a complex way combine changeability and rigidity; that for this reason we never reach down to constants. . . . (p. 163)
>
> It is fruitless to expect that in the social sciences we ever will reach down to the type of universal and unchangeable, generally valid regularities of relationships between facts that researchers in the simpler natural sciences endeavor to establish. (p. 169)

Because of this recognition of the importance of social influences on human experience, it is perhaps not surprising that social psychologists have been especially active in feminist work and that psychologists from other branches of psychology who become involved in feminism seem to become more "social" in their perspectives.

ARE SOME RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY INHERENTLY MORE FEMINIST THAN OTHERS?

At this point, we turn to the question of how feminist values might affect specific methods used in psychological inquiry. We consider, for example, the suggestion that experimentation and quantitative analyses are inappropriate techniques for feminist research. In discussing these issues, it is important to avoid stereotyping our own work as psychologists. Although some may imagine that psychologists are invariably aloof researchers in white coats who engage unsuspecting college sophomores in deceptive experiments, the reality of contemporary psychological research is enormously more diverse. Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) reminded us that the practice of science is "far more pluralistic than any description of it suggests, and certainly more pluralistic than its dominant ideology" (pp. 173–174).

Experimentation

Experiments have traditionally been the most frequently chosen—and most respected—research method in psychology. In an experiment, researchers make phenomena happen in order to observe them. Experiments are characterized by the researcher's control of the environment and sub-

jects, including the random assignment of subjects to one of several "conditions" devised by the researcher. In contrast, descriptive research methods are characterized by nonintervention (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In nonexperimental studies, the researcher might, for example, observe behavior in natural settings, look for relationships among people's answers to various questions on a survey, or categorize descriptions gathered through personal interviews.

Feminists have criticized experimental methods for several good reasons. First, laboratory experiments typically study behavior apart from social contexts. Mary Parlee (1979) criticized experiments for "context stripping" in which "concepts, environments, social interactions are all simplified by methods which lift them out of their contexts, stripping them of the very complexity that characterizes them in the real world" (p. 131). When the behavior of males and females is compared in experimental studies, there is a tendency to forget that individuals are not randomly assigned to sex. Female and male participants commonly bring to experiments quite different social histories, expectations, beliefs, and values—features that are sometimes overlooked in making male–female comparisons (cf. Parlee, 1981; Wallston & Grady, 1985).

Experiments have also been criticized for creating environments in which real-life interactions are unlikely to occur (Sherif, 1979; Wallston & Grady, 1985). According to McHugh et al. (1986): "Behavior that is exhibited in an unfamiliar setting and entails little self-involvement . . . may . . . be unrepresentative of 'real life' behavior" (p. 880). Subjects may behave or relate to each other differently in an artificial experimental setting than they would in natural settings. Rhoda Unger (1981) has shown that certain sex differences are more likely to occur in naturalistic settings, such as homes and offices, than they are in laboratory settings.

Finally, feminists have criticized the experimental method because it creates a nonegalitarian hierarchy of power, with the powerful, all-knowing researcher instructing, observing, recording, and sometimes deceiving the subjects. McHugh et al. (1986) stated that: "The inequality between the researcher and the research participants is especially clear and problematic when the experimenter is male and the participants are female. Here the research setting most clearly reflects and reinforces the imposition of male definitions of reality on females" (p. 880). More generally, feminists have emphasized that despite an aura of objectivity, experiments are themselves social interactions, affected by the values and expectations of both researchers and participants (Sherif, 1979).

Important criticisms such as these have led a few more radical feminists to advocate abandoning experimentation (e.g., Graham & Rawlings, 1980; Mies, 1983). Most often, however, feminists have urged increased use and acceptance of descriptive methods and a corresponding decrease in psychology's unquestioned reliance on experimentation (e.g., DuBois, 1983; Fine, 1985; Unger, 1981; Wallston, 1981). We think it is very much

in the spirit of feminist scholarship to encourage and legitimate nonexperimental research methods. But we oppose the view that nonexperimental methods are *inherently* more feminist than experimental ones.

Three points about experimentation are noteworthy. First, not all experiments are as trivial and meaningless as the stereotype suggests. Carolyn Sherif (1979) concluded her insightful critique of traditional experimentation with a call for greater attention to sociocultural influences. She cited as a positive example one of the most famous experiments in social psychology, the Robbers' Cave studies conducted by Muzafer Sherif (1935) and his associates. In these experiments, a summer camp for boys provided the naturalistic context in which to study the effects of environmental influences (specifically competition versus cooperation) on individual and group behavior.

Second, feminist psychologists have successfully used experimental methods to advance our understanding of the workings of gender and sexism in society and to promote social change. For example, a large body of experimental research has clarified when and how sex bias distorts evaluations of men's and women's performance. This research has documented gender-based discrimination and has provided a rationale for endorsing nondiscriminatory policies, such as the blind review of journal articles. Finally, it should be emphasized that the use of nonexperimental techniques is no guarantee that research will be feminist. Sex bias can influence descriptive and correlational studies in many ways—by the researcher's choice of topics and operationalization of variables (Grady, 1981), by the use of inappropriate paper-and-pencil measuring instruments (Brannon, 1981), and by the use of inappropriate gender comparisons (Parlee, 1981). In short, whether a study uses experimental versus nonexperimental methods is not necessarily an indicator of the researcher's commitment to feminist principles.

Quantitative Versus Qualitative Data

The information gathered in the research process can be recorded and presented either numerically or verbally. Quantitative data are generally organized and evaluated with statistics, and the significance of a study is generally expressed in terms of statistical significance. Verbal or qualitative data are commonly organized and evaluated subjectively, often in terms of themes, categories or new concepts.

Feminists recommend greater reliance on qualitative data techniques as a way to correct the biases of traditional quantitative methods. Qualitative techniques are seen as encouraging researchers to focus on the entire context and to be open to multiple, interacting influences. Qualitative data collection allows the researcher to be more spontaneous, altering the focus of observation as the situation changes. Certain qualitative techniques, such as interviews, enable the researcher to explore the subjective salience

and meaning of various events from the participants' perspectives. Qualitative data permit an in-depth understanding of individuals. In contrast, quantitative data are criticized for limiting the researcher to a narrow focus; the researcher observes and records only those variables identified at the outset of the research (Jayarantne, 1983). Just as experimental methods may strip natural settings of richness by controlling extraneous variables, so quantitative data may diminish the psychological richness of human experience by focusing on overt behavior or by restricting responses to preset categories.

Many feminist psychologists have urged that qualitative data should be accorded greater credibility and acceptance in psychology and have also encouraged a heightened suspicion of elaborate statistical methods (e.g., McHugh et al., 1986; Wallston, 1981). A few feminists have gone further and suggested that qualitative data are the *only* data acceptable for feminist research and that quantitative approaches should be discarded (e.g., Graham & Rawlings, 1980; Mies, 1983). We argue against viewing qualitative research as *inherently* more feminist than quantitative approaches.

First, although it is appropriate to be skeptical of all research methods, there is little reason to believe that methods based on numbers and statistics cannot be sensitive to feminist concerns. The issue rather concerns just what it is that researchers count, aggregate, and analyze in statistical fashion—and why. Many psychologists welcome increasingly sophisticated statistical methods because they permit analyses of complex and nonlinear relationships. Second, there is ample evidence that quantitative analyses have been valuable tools in combatting sexism. Part of the feminist agenda within psychology has been to challenge derogatory stereotypes about the sexes. A major technique has been to show that males and females do not differ in statistically significant ways on standardized measures of performance. Recent advances in statistical techniques for meta-analysis have enhanced feminist research of this sort (e.g., Hyde & Linn, 1986, 1988). In more applied contexts, quantitative data have been vital to efforts to end sex discrimination. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled in the case of *Watson vs. Fort Worth Bank and Trust* that plaintiffs in white-collar professional and managerial jobs could use statistical analyses to prove sex discrimination at work.

Finally, there is nothing inherent in qualitative approaches that protects them from sexist biases. Sexist assumptions and beliefs can influence verbal descriptions of personal interviews and eyewitness accounts of participant observers as surely as they can bias the use of statistics. It would be foolish to assume that all qualitative research is feminist in perspective.

Several suggestions have been offered about the use of quantitative versus qualitative approaches. Some have proposed that researchers should match their methods to the problem they are investigating. Wallston (1981) stated that: "Methods are only tools to try to answer questions. Methods may be more or less appropriate depending on the question" (p. 602). Others have noted that the early stages of research on a new topic often

benefit from descriptive, qualitative research, with the goal of identifying relevant factors and generating hypotheses. Later in the research process, quantitative methods may be helpful in testing hypotheses (DuBois, 1983).

It is worth noting that even feminist researchers who are explicitly critical of traditional methods and scientific paradigms have sometimes found it useful to incorporate quantitative methods in their own work. A recent example comes from a study by Mary Gergen (1988b), which she presents as illustrating a feminist alternative to traditional empirical approaches. Gergen's topic was the way middle-aged women think about menopause. Her method was to hold a "research event" at her home. A group of seven friends gathered, completed questionnaires concerning their attitudes about menopause and self-image, and then held a lengthy group discussion of the issues. Gergen's research report combined a quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses with a qualitative description of themes that emerged in the discussion. Another illustration comes from the work of Celia Kitzinger (1986) on the accounts that lesbians give of their being lesbian. Kitzinger rejects the view of positivistic science that there is an objective or true explanation of lesbianism. Instead, she seeks to explore "multiple versions of reality." Based on preliminary interviews with lesbians, Kitzinger developed a standardized set of 61 statements about lesbian experiences. A subset of women from the original study then sorted these statements according to their personal agreement or disagreement with each item. A statistical procedure called Q methodology was used to identify subgroups of women who grouped statements in similar ways, and this provided the basis for identifying five distinctive factors or accounts of lesbianism. Kitzinger evaluated these groupings in several ways—using statistical procedures, comparing the factors to her original open-ended interview materials, and asking one or more woman from each subgroup to read the research report. The point of both these examples is to suggest that standardized measures and statistical analyses may not necessarily be incompatible with radical critiques of traditional scientific beliefs and practices.

In short, feminists need not view the use of qualitative or quantitative methods as a mutually exclusive forced choice. Feminists must be intelligent and critical users of all methods. Barbara Wallston and Kathleen Grady (1985) warned against the tendency to glorify statistics and urged that we "put statistics back in their proper perspective. They are tools to assist our inferences from our research" (p. 26). We should be equally cautious about the limitations of qualitative procedures.

The Choice of Research Participants

There are many ways in which sexist bias can influence subject selection (McHugh et al., 1986; Wallston & Grady, 1985). An over-reliance on male subjects in psychological research has been well-documented (Grady, 1981; Holmes & Jorgensen, 1971). In addition, there has been a tendency

for researchers to select males and females differentially, depending on the topic of research. For instance, researchers have more often used males in studies of aggression and females in studies of social influence (McHugh et al., 1986; see also McKenna & Kessler, 1977). Feminists have also criticized mainstream psychological research for focusing on a narrow range of people and have recommended an expansion in the diversity of research subjects to include various ethnic and racial groups, sexual orientations, lifestyles, and social classes (e.g., Fine, 1985; McKenna & Kessler, 1977; Parlee, 1981).

We applaud efforts to eliminate sexism in the selection of research participants and to expand the range of people studied. But we firmly reject the idea that feminist research can or should be defined by the sex or background of the research participants. Consider the seemingly reasonable suggestion by Graham and Rawlings (1980) that whereas sexist research involves primarily male subjects and nonsexist research includes both sexes, feminist research should focus on women. There are at least two serious problems with this narrow view.

The first problem stems from the fundamental feminist belief that women's behavior is shaped in important ways by social, historical, and political forces. If this is so, then it must ultimately be part of a feminist analysis to understand the *external factors* that affect women's lives—including women's interdependent relationships with men and the patriarchial beliefs and institutions of the culture. From this perspective, feminist research might appropriately study such topics as male prejudice toward women, the sources of men's aggression against women, the psychological impact of sexist language, and the nature of institutional discrimination against women. Indeed, just as blacks have emphasized the importance of understanding racism and lesbians and gay men have focused on the importance of homophobia, so, too, feminists must take an interest in the psychology of sexism among individuals of both sexes and in our social institutions. All of these considerations would make it appropriate for feminist psychologists to study men as well as women.

A second major problem with prescriptions about the proper participants for feminist research concerns the *unit of analysis*. Most research in psychology focuses on individuals. But the feminist recognition that individual action is a product of social contexts suggests that analyses might profitably study dyadic relationships and groups as well as individuals. Carolyn Sherif (1979) made this point in a discussion of the origins of social stereotypes: "Major psychological phenomena associated with invidious stereotyping of others occur within specific contexts of human relationships. Stereotypes and their psychological consequences reflect those relationships. No amount of detailed study of the individual apart from those relationships [is truly informative]" (p. 125). Consequently, Sherif argued, a feminist focus on relationships and groups is crucial. An illustration of a contextual model that focuses on dyadic processes is the recent interactive

model of gender-related behavior by Kay Deaux and Brenda Major (1987). Rhoda Unger (in press) has also suggested that perhaps the standard psychological unit of analysis should change from the individual to the group so that we can better understand forces of social control in society. Studies of the impact of being a token or solo woman in a predominantly male group illustrate research in which the unit of analysis is the sex composition of a group, rather than the individuals involved.

The point of this discussion is to emphasize that we cannot evaluate the feminist merits of a research project by the sex of the participants. Feminist psychologists have a legitimate interest in studying not only girls and women, but also boys, men, dyads, groups, social systems, and social products such as language and media images of the sexes.

Who Can Conduct Feminist Research?

Most feminist research in psychology has been conducted by women. The question arises, however, whether women are the only ones who can do feminist research (cf. Wilkinson, 1986b, p. 17). Some have argued that women are uniquely able to create a new feminist psychology. The reasoning is that if science is affected by personal values and experiences and if there are sex differences in values, interests, personality, or life experiences, then it should follow that a psychology created by women will differ systematically from a psychology created by men. The idea is not necessarily that men are more sexist than women, but rather that men have *different* interests and concerns which influence their conduct of science. The effects of personal values and experiences may be more extreme in psychology than in other sciences, because we focus directly on human behavior (as opposed to the natural sciences that study nonhuman topics—or the social sciences that study larger-scale social processes). A related idea has been that women may practice science differently because they are "outsiders"—members of a minority group who bring a distinctive perspective to the scientific enterprise (e.g., Keller, 1985). Both lines of reasoning—that women have different values or concerns and that women are outsiders—imply that women will approach scientific inquiry differently than men. These gender effects are thought to influence not only the body of knowledge accumulated, but also the methods and procedures used in psychological research.

Within psychology, women have taken the lead in investigating topics relevant to women's lives and in developing new concepts and theories to explain women's experiences. It is much less obvious, however, whether male and female psychologists actually show systematic differences in the methods they use to conduct psychological research. This is fundamentally an empirical question that could be addressed by research. Unfortunately, systematic research on sex differences in the research practices of psychologists is lacking. A few studies have examined sex differences in the use of

quantitative versus qualitative methods in sociology. Most commonly, this issue is examined in terms of whether or not researchers present statistical analyses of their data. The typical finding has been that most published studies by both male and female researchers are quantitative, but men are even more likely than women to use statistical methods (Mackie, 1985). In an analysis of sociology journals from 1974–1983, Grant, Ward, and Rong (1987) found that more than 75% of articles used statistical analyses. Women were less likely than men to use statistical methods, although statistical analyses were the typical pattern for both sexes. Further, counter to prediction, articles about gender or sex roles were actually *more* likely than other articles to use quantitative methods.

Beyond these few studies of the use of statistics, little is known about sex differences in research design and procedures, or in other aspects of research style. In our view, we should be very cautious about assuming pervasive sex differences in research strategies without empirical support. This may turn out to be still another area of human activity in which variations within sex are large, and systematic differences between the sexes are small. The research methods an investigator uses may have much more to do with the person's professional training, the topic of the research, or the methodological preferences of professional journals and funding agencies than with gender. In a recent editorial in the journal *Gender and Society*, Judith Lorber (1988) argued against assuming sex differences in research methods: "Some men and some women have more intuitive styles of working; other men and women scientists are more often methodical, objective, distant from their materials, and many researchers use both styles" (p. 7).

A related question is whether researchers who define themselves as feminists differ from nonfeminists in their research interests, methods, or goals. Since feminists have an explicit value orientation and are critical of aspects of traditional psychology, it might be expected that they would differ from mainstream psychologists in their research practices. Although work by Unger (1984–1985) has shown that feminist scholars differ in their general ideas about science, we know of no studies comparing the research methods of feminist and other psychologists. Many prominent studies in the psychology of women—such as Matina Horner's (1972) work on fear of success, Sandra Bem's (1981) work on androgyny, or Carol Gilligan's (1982) work on moral development—have been conceptually innovative, but have used standard research methods. Our guess would be that feminist psychologists will tend to differ from other psychologists in the topics they study and in the way they conceptualize and interpret issues, but not necessarily in their research methods.

Finally, a few additional observations about the impact of gender on the conduct of psychological research seem important. The first is that we must be careful to avoid the equation that female=feminist and that male=nonfeminist. There is no reason to assume that most women psy-

chologists are feminist or even that women who study gender issues are necessarily feminist. Indeed, several commentaries on women in science have noted that, as a result of processes of selection and professional socialization, women scientists are often very similar to men in their approaches to research. Biologist Ruth Bleier (1988) wrote that few women scientists are feminists or identify with the women's movement, even when their research involves gender (p. 195). It would be useful to study this matter systematically and to learn more about feminist psychologists who are men.

Second, although psychology has traditionally been a predominantly male profession, this is shifting rapidly. Today, half of all PhDs in psychology go to women. In other words, we are currently training a generation of women psychologists who may not perceive themselves as outsiders or minorities within the profession. This change may have profound consequences for psychology.

Agentic Versus Communal Methods

The methodological issues discussed so far are combined in the distinction between "agentic" versus "communal" methods (Bernard, 1973; Carlson, 1972; Wallston, 1981). Using a typology proposed by Bakan (1966), this analysis characterizes two distinctive approaches to research, the agentic reflecting experimental and quantitative approaches, and the communal reflecting nonexperimental and qualitative approaches. Rae Carlson (1972) described the typology this way:

> Current scientific operations (separating, ordering, quantifying, manipulating, controlling) . . . are "agentic" features which research has also identified as distinctively masculine. . . . In contrast, more communal kinds of scientific inquiry—relatively neglected in psychology, but exemplified in ethology, anthropology, and in such physical sciences as geology and astronomy—involve naturalistic observation, sensitivity to intrinsic structure and qualitative patterning of phenomena studied, and greater personal participation of the investigator. (p. 20)

Agentic methods are those that emphasize the manipulation of subjects and the environment, the distancing of the researcher from the subjects, the separation of behavior from the natural context, the repression of thought, feeling, and impulse, and the quantification of data. In contrast, communal methods are based on the cooperation of the researcher and subjects, the personal participation of the researcher, an appreciation of natural contexts, the free expression of thought, feeling, and impulse, and the use of qualitative data.

The agency–communion distinction has frequently been linked to gender. Both Bakan and Carlson described these approaches as sex-linked, although not mutually exclusive. According to Bakan (1966), "Although agency is greater in the male and communion greater in the female, agen-

cy and communion nevertheless characterize both" (p. 152). More recently, Keller (1982) has argued that the ideology of Western science, with its emphasis on power and control, is a "projection of a specifically male consciousness" (p. 598) that results from boys' childhood experiences of separating from the mother.

A number of feminists have discussed agentic and communal methods, offering a wide variety of recommendations about their use (e.g., Bernard, 1973). They have suggested that we should acknowledge both types of methods, encourage greater use of communal modes of inquiry, but avoid the mistake of devaluing agentic methods (Wallston, 1981). They also have suggested that we should use gender-free terms such as "agentic" and "communal" as a way of avoiding "masculine" and "feminine" labels for types of research.

Our own position on the agentic versus communal typology differs sharply from those just described. We believe that the agentic–communal distinction is false and misleading, and should be abandoned. Our concerns can be summarized in three points.

1. It is not conceptually useful to describe research methods in the broad, loosely drawn categories of agentic and communal. Such categories imply a consistency among the components of each approach. So, for example, research that uses qualitative data should also include an appreciation of the natural context, and so on. The assumption is that if a particular research project includes one or two communal characteristics, it will necessarily include them all. Clearly, this is not always true. Consider the work of Sigmund Freud as a case in point (Lerman, 1986). Freud's methods were descriptive and nonexperimental. He relied heavily on interviews and case studies. He encouraged the free expression of thoughts and feelings. In these ways, his methods were communal. But at the same time, he emphasized the distance between himself and the patient, and acted in an authoritative (if not patriarchal) manner—features of an agentic approach. Furthermore, although qualitative methods and in-depth case studies are believed to encourage an appreciation of the "context," Freud has repeatedly been criticized for ignoring the impact of Victorian attitudes and experiences in shaping the phenomena he observed. The point is that the linkages among separate elements of research methods are much more diverse and varied than broad typologies would lead us to believe. We believe that the agentic versus communal characterization of research is inaccurate and misleading.

2. There is no merit to identifying agentic methods as "masculine" and communal methods as "feminine." This linkage presumably arises because of cultural stereotypes that depict men as relatively more agentic or instrumental and women as relatively more communal or expressive. But there are at least two reasons to avoid the sex-typing or labeling of research methods. The first is that it has virtually no foundation in empirical evi-

dence. As we discussed earlier, it has not been established that female psychologists and male psychologists actually differ in the research methods they prefer or actually use. Nothing is gained by perpetuating an unsubstantiated generalization that women or men (feminists or not) are more or less likely to conduct a certain type of research.

Second, the very stereotypes of the sexes that feminists seek to weaken are preserved by labeling some research methods as masculine and others as feminine. The perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and the association of those stereotypes with research methods, only blocks the goal of developing more fully *human* approaches to science.

3. *The equating of traditionally "feminine" approaches with feminism and of traditionally "masculine" approaches with sexism is illogical.* Discussions of agentic and communal approaches to research sometimes propose that communal approaches are feminist and agentic approaches are not. The logic here is loose at best. The idea seems to be that because some research methods have historically been viewed as "feminine," and have been out-of-favor with the male establishment, they should be taken as models for feminist scholarship. Because other methods have been valued highly by the traditional male establishment, they must be nonfeminist (or sexist). Any research that contains feminine qualities – such as communal research – is feminist research, and any research that contains masculine qualities – such as agentic research – is nonfeminist. What seems especially odd here is that instead of challenging traditional sex stereotypes, this approach seems to take cultural stereotypes as a point of departure.

ALL METHODS CAN BE FEMINIST METHODS

Contemporary psychological research is more diverse than our ideology and stereotypes would suggest. Although many of us were taught that psychological research focuses on prediction and control using laboratory experimentation as the primary tool, this no longer defines the scope of psychological inquiry. Feminists are correct in encouraging the use of a rich variety of methods and in challenging the claim of any method to superior status. But we should also reject the claim that some methods are necessarily more feminist than others. No research method is inherently feminist or nonfeminist. Any research method can be used in sexist ways; no research method guarantees a feminist perspective. The recognition that psychology has devalued some research methods in preference for others provides grounds for expanding the range of techniques we consider legitimate. But little would be accomplished in psychology if we substitute reliance on one method for reliance on another.

Further, if we define feminism at the level of methods, we cut ourselves off from our feminist heritage. The history of psychology records that feminist researchers have used all available methods in their efforts to

challenge sexist beliefs and theories and to create a truer understanding of women's lives and the impact of gender in human experience. More importantly, if we define feminism at the level of methods, we trivialize the feminist challenge to psychology. Our goals must be more radical and far-reaching, seeking not only to question our research methods, but more fundamentally to rethink the aims of science, the models we use to understand human experience, and the philosophical underpinnings of scientific activities.

Our impression is that *most* feminist scholars reject efforts to enforce methodological "purity tests" and instead advocate diverse methods for feminist research (see Wilkinson, 1986b, p. 14). Bernice Lott is typical in suggesting that "feminist scholarship rejects no careful, rigorous, intersubjective, repeatable method of inquiry" (Lott, 1985, p. 158). Discussions of feminist methods are useful in helping researchers to understand the relevant questions and to make informed decisions about how best to incorporate feminist values into their own work. But it is both unnecessary and unwise to try to constrain the methods of feminist psychology.

An opportunity to investigate the criteria that psychologists actually use to define their own work as feminist was provided by materials from the 1988 national conference of the Association for Women in Psychology. As part of its "call for programs," AWP asked those who submitted proposals to include a paragraph "indicating specific ways in which your contribution . . . takes a feminist or nonsexist approach to research, theory, or practice in the psychology of women's experiences." We were able to analyze these paragraphs from 41 (anonymous) proposals for the 1988 conference.

A first question we considered was whether or not participants' statements referred to methodological issues. Only 13 proposals (32%) made any reference to methods in describing how their work was feminist or nonsexist; of these, 3 commented that their methods were "nonsexist." For example, one said that: "the traditional experimental research methods we employed, while not especially 'feminist', were used in a nonsexist way. We are quite aware of some of the sexist pitfalls of research methodology and tried to avoid them – we used equal numbers of female and male subjects; we tried to generate our hypotheses, operationalize our concepts, and interpret our results in ways that are not stereotypical or sexist." Four of the proposals mentioned characteristics of their sample, with 3 emphasizing that their work involved nontraditional subjects (lesbians, blacks, working class individuals), and 1 mentioning that they were studying a topic in which women had previously been omitted as subjects. Three proposals mentioned their approach to questionnaire construction, noting that they had consulted with prospective subjects or knowledgeable others (e.g., lesbians, rape victim advocates) in developing their measures. Two mentioned that their interview format provided an opportunity for the researcher to validate and support participants' descriptions of their personal

experiences. For example, "The methodology of this research was nonsexist: interviews were voluntary, supportive, open-ended and person-centered." One proposal acknowledged that its methods were traditional: "I cannot claim that the methodology employed in this study is anything other than a mainline agentic approach. However, I hope the theoretical approach as well as the focus speak for themselves." None of the proposals cited methodology as the main criterion for defining their project as feminist, and none suggested that they were using an innovative new feminist methodology. All 13 proposals that did mention methods also discussed other features of the work, most commonly the topic under investigation.

Indeed, across all 41 proposals, the major factor cited as a feminist contribution was the topic, as seen in these examples:

> "The main way in which this research takes a feminist approach is through tackling a topic of great concern to feminists—the effects of male-biased language on women's lives."
> "This research is feminist in that its primary focus is on the uniquely female experience of the menstrual cycle."
> "Feminist theory informed both the formation of the hypothesis . . . and the interpretation of the findings."
> "Rape is inherently a feminist issue."

As these quotations suggest, psychologists recognize that feminist research should be nonsexist, but further emphasize that work is feminist because of the issues under investigation and the use of feminist theory and perspectives.

In summary, feminist psychologists do not need to abandon the research methods that have been central to our discipline. Methodological orthodoxy will limit the growth of feminist psychology, rather than enhance it. Using a diverse array of methods, feminist psychologists have already effected substantial changes in psychology, by exploring new topics of importance to women and by interpreting human experience in light of feminist frameworks. We do not know what new directions feminist psychology will take in the next decade. Forecasting the future is a risky business. The comments of William McGuire (1973) about the need for a new research paradigm in social psychology are informative. He offered this description of the process that might bring about a paradigm change:

> I feel somewhat uncomfortable here in trying to describe in detail what the next, radically different paradigm will look like. It will be hammered out by theoretically and empirically skilled researchers in a hundred eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations of thought with data, all the while obscured by a thousand mediocre and irrelevant studies which will constitute the background noise in which the true signal will be detected only gradually. Trying to predict precisely what new paradigm will emerge is almost as foolish as trying to control it. (p. 450)

The evolution of feminist psychology is likely to be similar. Creative new approaches to feminist research will emerge gradually as individual psychologists and research teams work in their own diverse ways to use the methods of science in the service of human values.

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