

Sociology Shortcuts

M10. Feminist Research: The Weak and The Strong Thesis

Methodological debates within feminism have led to two distinct arguments about how feminists should approach social research...

1. The Weak Feminist Thesis

This approach suggests research methods are *not* inherently sexist - but their application may be surrounded by sexist assumptions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in feminist research *if* the researcher recognises their potentially sexist dimensions and adjusts their research to ensure they are purged of sexism. Eichler (1991), for example, identifies "7 sexist problems" feminist researchers frequently have to overcome.

A. Primary Problems

1. **Androcentricity** involves viewing the world from a male standpoint (the "male gaze") where women are reduced to "passive objects" - "acted upon rather than actors". Most research has a male focus - conducted by men about the lives of men. The objectives of feminist research are, therefore to:

- **Refocus the gaze** to see female lives through female eyes,
- Research women as "**active subjects**" in terms of their beliefs, attitudes and experiences. As Ruspini (2000) suggests researchers must take account of the **gendered nature** of social life: men and women - even of the same class or ethnicity - experience it in different ways.

2. **Generalisation / Overspecificity**: The former occurs when research "*presents itself as if it were applicable to both sexes*" but actually focuses on men. The class position of women, for example, is often assumed to be that of their male partner

The latter refers to the use of **sexist language**, such as "he" used to refer to both men and women.

3. **Gender blindness** involves research that "*ignores sex as a socially important variable*".

4. **Double standards: Burke and Eichner** (2006) argue this occurs when "people are treated differently when they don't actually require different treatment" - such as female needs treated as less important than male needs.

B. Derived Problems

5. **Sex appropriateness** involves "*the assumption there are behaviour patterns more appropriate for one sex than the other*" such as women seen as responsible for child care".

6. **Familism** involves the tendency to see the "family unit" as the smallest area of analysis, which assumes "a family" is relatively undifferentiated - that men and women experience the world in the same ways.

7. **Sexual dichotomism** involves "*characteristics found in both sexes being classified as either masculine or feminine on the basis of prevailing stereotypes*". In this type of derived sexism, "male" and "female" are not only seen as **homogeneous** categories - "all men" are seen as being broadly similar - they're also defined in terms of **oppositional characteristics**. Men, for example, characterised as "aggressive", women as "passive".

2. The Strong Feminist Thesis

An alternative feminist thesis put forward by **Maynard** (1987) argues "*research must actively promote the views and interests of women*" by developing feminist theory "*concerned with the analysis of women's disadvantaged position in society and with their oppression*".

This notion of "*women as an oppressed group*" guides the rejection of many **quantitative** methods based on notions of **objectivity** and a detached relationship between researcher and respondent. Where women do not have an equal status to men such detachment is neither possible nor desirable. **Mies** (1993) argues feminist research should have the following features:

1. Empathy: Female researchers should connect with female subjects through a process of **conscious partiality**; the researcher identifies with those being researched, while maintaining a **personal objectivity**. This reflects a strongly **value-committed** approach to research, tempered with what **Gouldner** (1973) calls **partisan objectivity**: although the sociologist is committed to a particular political viewpoint, they should carry out their research in a **personally objective** manner.

2. Active identification: Feminist researchers should actively "take the side" of their female subjects as a means of both allowing their stories to be told and as a way of challenging the (**patriarchal**) status quo. **Oakley** (1981) argues research should "allow women to speak for themselves" and criticises "masculine interviewing techniques" based on social and moral distance, objectivity and the like between the researcher and female respondents as self-defeating in terms of data **validity**.

Oakley argues higher validity is achieved when the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is **non-hierarchical** and the researcher uses her own sense of female identity to understand female viewpoints.

For **Wadsworth** (2001) this involves breaking away from traditional types of interview because they involve relationships where "*a more powerful woman asks the questions and a less powerful woman answers*".

3. Active participation involves the idea valid data is most likely to be generated through the researcher **participating** in the behaviour being studied.

4. Conscientisation involves providing respondents with the means to understand their own inequality and oppression: research becomes a "consciousness-raising" process, with both researcher and respondent actively contributing to the raising of each other's knowledge, awareness and understanding.

Evaluation

For both theses there is a general agreement reliable and valid knowledge can only be produced by the active co-operation of researcher and researched. This distinction is broken down by feminist approaches that stress **empathy** rather than **hierarchy** and **subjective experience** over objective detachment.

However, in terms of the **strong thesis**, **over-identification and involvement** with those being studied means there is a danger partisan objectivity can't be maintained and the researcher simply becomes a member of the group they are studying.

Some forms of feminism (such as **Liberal** and **post-feminism**) argue that if feminist science is only concerned with research into the lives and experiences of women significant areas of social life are neglected. Would, for example, research into male-dominated groups and institutions be possible using the type of **strong thesis** outlined above?

Although feminist approaches have much in common with **interpretivism** - particularly the idea that the best we can hope for in social research is subjective knowledge of the world that is nevertheless valid at the point at which it is produced - they fit much less easily with both **positivism** and **realism** since these, in their different ways, argue it is possible to create **objective knowledge** about the social world.