
UNIT 8 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES FOR RESEARCH*

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 The Beginnings
- 8.3 The Critique of the Dominant Androcentric Methodologies
- 8.4 Feminist Empirical Approach
- 8.5 Feminist Essentialism
- 8.6 Standpoint Theorists
- 8.7 Post Modernists
- 8.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.9 References
- 8.10 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- Feminist Empirical Approach,
- Feminist Essentialism,
- Post Modernists, and
- Standpoint Theorists.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Sociologists till almost the twentieth century did not focus on gender as an important aspect of society. The study of gender began in the 1970s. Prior to the 1970s there was little or no work on gender. The study of society by various thinkers before 1970s did not main stream gender. It was almost as if society was constituted only by men. It was assumed that any study of men in society automatically included women. Gendered aspects of society whether in terms of institutions or roles were unquestioned. Gender was assumed to be part of the natural order of things. This rendered gender invisible in the study of men.

The emergence of the feminist methodology challenged this way of studying society. In the initial phases it emerged as a critique to the positivist epistemology that prevailed in the social sciences. It questioned the way that gender had been largely ignored, studied and presented by the positivists. They argued that almost aspects of society include a gendered perspective. The proponents of the feminist methodology argued for a methodology that made the gendered aspects of society visible.

The debates over feminist research range from arguing about the epistemology to the methods used. There is no single method of research. The chapter looks at the way that feminist methodologies has changed and evolved over a period of time. The broad themes in feminist methodology are as follows:

- 1) The emergence of the feminist methodology as a rebuttal to research methods that were positivist and were supposed to be value neutral.
- 2) There have been debates about the method that should be used to study society. These debates have varied from the need to study society as a lived experience and the need to study it in a scientific objective manner.

8.2 THE BEGINNINGS

The values of rationality, freedom from religious dogma, ideas of progress and a linking of progress with capitalism were the main themes that dominated Sociology. The epistemology and the ontological positions that they took were predominantly positivist. There was a belief that humans had developed a better understanding of society and were committed to its development.

The first set of scholars who began studying society used the positivists approach. Positivism in the social sciences were led by theorists such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. The positivists believed that it was important to study society from a scientific perspective. They worked with the vision to formulate universal laws for the study of societies. Social structures were seen as comparable to the natural world. It was believed that the methods of the natural sciences could be applied to study society. The task of the positivist was to study social facts. They studied societies like a biologist would study a plant or an animal. The focus was on objectivity, reliability and validity. They believed that they were studying societies in a neutral impartial manner just like a chemist or a biologist would study a chemical reaction or an animal species.

Others like Max Weber were critical of the positivists. Weber studied societies through the method of subjective interpretation and *verstehen*. He believed that the method of the natural sciences were not appropriate for the study of societies. For him a sociological study was value free in the sense that its rationality was defined by the community of social scientists and the culture prevailing at that time. For Weber the choice of the subject matter for research was not value free. However, once the choice was made then the study was done in a value free manner. The subject matter chosen for research in the Weberian sense would be influenced by the prevailing norms of research. Thus objectivity for Weber in the social sciences would be determined by the ontological orientation of the researchers themselves (Weber, 1947).

Weber's version of a value free social science was flawed. The feminists argued that ontology of the researcher determined the choice of the topics of research. Since gender was almost invisible in research this meant that the epistemology of the social sciences itself was based on a falsely value free premise. The interpretation of social action was also based on this flawed version of reality shared by the researcher and the research subject.

- 1) What were the main themes that dominated sociology at its inception?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What was the method followed by the Positivists?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What was the method of research followed by Weber?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) What were the feminist criticisms of Weber's methodology?

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.3 THE CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT ANDROCENTRIC METHODOLOGIES

Feminist methodology was critical of this vision of society. Progress in society was attributed to the development of rational human thought. The default understanding was that it assumed that human beings were represented by men. It assumed that human beings and those who contributed to the development of society were men and their brotherhood. They had very little to say on issues related to gender. Nor did they have much to say on the impact of these changes on women. The universal idea of progress and thought was limited to the universe of men only.

The criticism of the dominant positivist methodology prevalent in the social sciences has been at several levels. The positivist approach was critiqued for its emphasis on value free objectivity. The dominance of reason, rationality and empiricism in the nineteenth century had a false premise of objectivity. Women were excluded from research. The views on women of the leading thinkers at that point were biased. Thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Kant deemed women to be the weaker sex. Women were positioned on the other side of truth, rationality and science. Institutionalization of such thought and expertise also meant that this view of society became legitimate and authoritative.

The feminist argued that this was just a perceived objectivity and did not constitute value free research. There was an artificial division between the mind and the body. René Descartes work in the seventeenth century was a turning point in terms of studying the world. He focussed on the world around through reason and mind and not intuitions and emotions. This Cartesian dualism believed in the separation of mind and matter. Cartesian dualism became a part of the Western common sense. It was believed that men were the masters of their mind. They were rational and could master their minds. As opposed to this women were considered to be passionate and more in tune with their emotions. The impact of the Cartesian dualism was that scientific investigations focussed on the external observable world. No importance was given to the mind i.e. thought and emotions.

The feminist researchers claimed that the Cartesian classification of women was unreasonable and was biased. The feminists said that reason itself was socially constituted (*Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, 2002*). They argued that the validity of knowledge and even the research questions asked were androcentric. The questions asked and the analysis have all been done using masculine categories of analysis. Theorists like Harding (*Harding, 1986*) and Smith (*Smith D. E., 1987*) pointed out the masculine bias in the social sciences. They argued that the focus of research has been on Western categories of reason and rationality as opposed to emotions. The focus on the official, public visible ways of functioning and not on informal systems indicated a masculine bias in the social sciences. They further contended that men and women occupy different social universes thus the generalizations presented as generalizations of human beings were unfair to women.

They argued that traditional epistemologies have excluded the voice of women. Science and history have been written purely from a masculine perspective. The subject of traditional sociological analysis has always been men (*Harding, 1987*). Such a science they argued was unreflective. The masculine bias meant that the feminine point of view was assumed to be a part of the **humanist** (implying masculine) perspective.

This was called the **gynocentric methodology** (*Jagger, 2008*) of the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist research methodology developed an understanding that it was difficult to understand women through male categories. There was a need for a rethink on categories too. Feminists like Smith (*Smith D. E., 1974*) argued that sociology was unreflective and presented women from the standpoint of men who were the ruling class. She argued that the “male social universe” included only a set of issues specific to men like industrial sociology, social stratification political sociology etc. This marginalized women. The world of women was confined to the domestic sphere. Mainstream anthropology focused on men’s activities rather than issues like child rearing or domestic violence or women’s participation in the work force. The knowledge that was produced was for the

elite (*Smith D. E.*, 1987). The epistemology used was biased. For these researchers there was a need for the feminizing of the social sciences. Smith (*Smith D. E.*, 1987) argued about the alienation of women scholars in sociology.

The feminists also argued that this sort of an objective approach led to the objectification of those being researched. The researched were treated as objects and were not given any agency. The relationship of the researcher and the researched was a hierarchical one. The researcher was the knower who imposed their own categories of thought on those being researched. In 1978 Mies (*Mies Maria*, 1983) proposed the need for a research in which the research subject is not just treated as an object but is replaced by a conscious partiality towards the oppressed and suppressed. There is a conscientization of the research and the researched (*Gorelick*, 1991). A conscientization of research implied that the researcher develops a conscience. The focus is not just on the research and understanding of the oppression and subordination of women but also challenge these. The feminist methodology should begin with the everyday world of women. The everyday world of women should be taken as problematic and not as a given.

The feminist researchers argued against the use of traditional methods of research. They argued that this created a hierarchy between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher appears as a knower who knows everything and the researched as the known. Often the category of thought that is imposed on the research subject are those of the researcher. The practical difficulty in doing research in which the subject is treated as a thing also leads to the production of a false kind of knowledge. Those who are being researched often do not share their true experiences. The power relationship between the researcher and the researched is in some ways done away with in the feminist methodology. Harding (*Harding*, 1991) and Smith (*Smith D. E.*, 1987) argue for a need to place the researcher on the same plane as the researched.

The feminists proposed a phenomenological, ethnomethodological and interactionist approach in which women's experiences mattered. They advocated the use of the qualitative method as opposed to the quantitative method. This method was based on identifying with the subjects rather than objectifying them.

Focus should not be on the structure of societies but on the processes 1. The concept should be generated within the field itself and should not be predefined. This would also give voice to the researched. The researchers should build from their experiences of the everyday world. The methodology used should be experiential and inductionist rather than deductive (*Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland*, 2002) (*Gorelick*, 1991). There was a need for generating concepts within the field rather than working with preconceived and predefined concepts. This was in direct contrast to the androcentric methodologies prevalent in the social sciences.

Gorelick (*Gorelick*, 1991) argues that giving voice to the women is not enough. She is critical of the focus only on women's experiences. Often the experiences of women are based on a false consciousness. She contends that there is a need to go beyond the analysis of the women's experiences. Using Marx's concept of the false consciousness Gorelick argues for a need to identify the unseen. She compares women to the proletariat. The development of consciousness involves a realisation by the proletariat of their importance for the continuation of capitalism and the existence of the bourgeoisie. Feminist research too should highlight the

hidden aspects of women's roles in society. It should unmask for example the emotional dependence of husbands or wives; the role of computer operators and secretaries in the work place. Gender is an inherent part of the subconscious and many aspects of gender go unquestioned. There is a need to go beyond the seen to the unseen and to raise consciousness. Gorelick contends that a focus on the experiences of women alone does not help identify the unseen aspects of society. Sharing direct experiences highlights the structures of oppression and collectivisation of these experiences become important. This helps reveal the hidden structures of oppression. Giving a voice to the oppressed is not enough. The use of a non-hierarchical methodology helps to overcome the duality between the two.

The fact that the researcher is a female and not a male alters the nature of the relationship between the researched and the researcher. The gender of the researcher means that she is able to straddle the world of women on the professional as well as the personal front. It provides for a reflexivity on the part of the researcher. It also re-theorises the relationship between the researcher and the researched (*Speer, 2002*) and (*Smith D. E., 1987*). Smith N.D. Speer and other feminist researchers argue that the very nature of feminist research does away with the hierarchy between the subject and the object i.e. the researcher and the researched. They also argue that it is difficult to link experiences and reality to theory and thus a situated analysis becomes important (*Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, 2002*). A situated analysis helps bridge the gap between absolute truth and objectivity 2 and experiences. Taking into account the experiences of the research subject takes away the anonymity of the researched. It also helps do away with the imposition of the external thought categories of the researcher.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the criticisms offered by the feminist on the androcentric methodology?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) How were the feminists critical of the Cartesian dualism?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Explain the feminist criticisms on objectification of the research subject?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) How do the traditional methods of research create a hierarchy between the researcher and the research subject?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 5) How does the gender of the researcher impact research?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.4 FEMINIST EMPIRICAL APPROACH

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an effort to respond to the criticisms against the use of an androcentric approach. Emerging from the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, feminist theorists argued that there was a need to do research from the standpoint of women. The aim was to create a space for women's research and to raise consciousness. Western feminist scholars started incorporating women in their studies of history, literature, philosophy and other social sciences. In their bid to incorporate women in their studies there was an inclusion of works by women authors. A conscious effort was also made to study women. The study of women, their achievements etc. became institutionalized in several women's studies departments in the West. Its values were those of equality and androgyny. They insisted that women were as capable as men. This was considered to be a step in the right direction, wherein the androcentric bias was being corrected.

The feminist researchers criticised this kind of an approach to the gendering of the research methodology. Just adding women to pre-existing categories did not undermine the androcentric masculine approach. They contended that this was just an attempt to study women from the point of existing masculine categories. Such researchers tend to use the positivist methodology though they were critical

of the masculinist bias in research. Millman and Kanter's work *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (Millman, 1975) and the work by Cancian (Cancian, 1992) and Molm (Molm, 1993) illustrate this approach.

A feminist research methodology did not imply making women as objects of study. They argued for the inclusion of women in research however they also purported that the study of women should be done as per the norms of existing research. This meant that objectivity and the methods of the positivists continued to be followed. The feminist empiricists brought women into research but they continued to follow the existing methodologies. They believed that for feminist research to be taken seriously it was important to follow the existing *scientific* methods of research. The structures of analysis used by the empiricists were the structures already being used in research. This approach assumed that all men and women are essentially the same.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How did research on women start in the 1960s and 1970s?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What were the criticisms against the early attempts to do research on women?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What is Feminist empiricism?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.5 FEMINIST ESSENTIALISM

The feminist empiricists were criticized for not recognizing the difference between men and women. They were criticized for just adding women to the mix of research that was already being conducted. The critics contended that women

and men were different. The feminist researchers however followed the humanistic approach. They argued that the study of *man* was just the study of men and not *mankind* (meaning humankind). The study of *women* was essential for *womankind*. They sought to replace ideal man with ideal woman. The humanist approach declared that that women can perform all tasks of men but go beyond that as well. There was a transfer of women from the margins to the centre in research. The effort was to rebuild humanities from point of view of women.

For example, it was assumed that the Western white middle class female represents all women. This was true for men too since all men were considered to be essentially the same. This approach was criticized for othering women and men who are different. It was critiqued for not representing the less privileged or those who were different. It assumed that there was no difference between men women, homosexuals, Jews, Christians etc. The focus was on the ability to understand society as a product of rational human thought. The emphasis was on the rational ability of men and women to exercise agency and bring about change. There was no recognition of the fact that knowledge is situated and is always produced from a particular standpoint. This knowledge was assumed to be universal and rational. However this knowledge was produced from the point of view of the white, heterosexual male and later female.

The standpoint theorists questioned the fact that a particular variety of women and men were represented as universal humans. It was critiqued not just by feminists but also by queer theory as well as ethnic and post-colonial studies. Feminists like Harding (*Harding*, 1986) argue that all knowledge is situated. The epistemology and the ontology of the researcher is determined by his or her location. The researcher as an abstract disembodied entity without a historical and social context is challenged by this methodology.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) What were the criticisms of the feminist empirical approach?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What does feminist essentialism mean?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.6 STANDPOINT THEORISTS

The standpoint theorists argue that without acknowledging the social location of the researcher the knowledge that is presented as universal is incorrect. The situatedness of the researcher is important. The value neutrality of the social sciences was biased and skewed. The normative framework that is used for analysis must necessarily take into account the social locations of the researcher and the researched. These normative frameworks are not universal and will necessarily vary. They also contend that knowledge that is presented as universal is always produced from a position of power.

The standpoint theorists believe that understanding women's experiences is fundamental to understanding their realities. The feminist researcher on the one hand is trying to hold onto the values of science and reason and on the other hand she knows that there is no absolute truth and that truth is socially and culturally located.

The standpoint theorists argue that research should be from all points of view. They contend that the point of view of the white, heterosexual, upper and middle class researcher is extremely skewed. They argue for a research from the standpoint of the marginalized. Standpoint theorist like Nancy Hartsock (*Hartsock, 1983*) believe the Marxist idea of truth is historically specific and all knowledge is political. She contends that the position of women in society and the sexual division of labour means that the lives of women differ from the lives of men. The patriarchal vision of gender structures material relationships between men and women. The situatedness of women gives women a unique standpoint from which they are able to critique the status quo. The situatedness of women does not give them the power to struggle for equality naturally thus a feminist point of view is essential. She argues for a feminist standpoint and not just a women's standpoint. She is like Harding arguing for a version of absolute truth while agreeing that truth is historically specific.

Patricia Hill Collins (*Collins, 1990*) uses Hartsock's conception of truth for the Black feminist thought. She believes that knowledge does not arise from experience and that experience is not individual. She argues for drawing on collective experience of the subjugation of the Blacks and the other disadvantaged groups in the USA. Collins approach is one of straddling the two consciousness from the point of view of Black feminists. She contends that Black feminist Sociology has been marginalized by the Black men and white women. Thus making the Black women the outsider within.

Smith (*Smith D. E., 1987*) unlike Hartsock (1987) believes that the reality of experiences produces knowledge. She argues for a women's standpoint and not a feminist standpoint unlike Hartsock. The reality of experiences is situated. She argues for a **Sociology for women**. She argues for a Sociology that is not organized around anonymity and impersonality. But for one in which the researcher is between two consciousness that of a trained Sociologist and a woman. Stanley and Wise (*Stanley and Wise, 1990*) believe that reality is not unproblematic and that there are different versions of reality. Reality for them is not just based on person's experience but also on their realisation that there is an objective reality over and above their individual reality.

According to Sandra Harding (*Harding, 1991*) the standpoint epistemology starting from the perspectives of the marginalized lives makes the everyday world problematic. The knower and the known are both situated in the same plane. The standpoint of the marginalized provides us with new ways of understanding the world around us. She advocates for a Sociology organized around the marginalized. This methodology will allow for a dialogue between the researcher and the researched and will articulate women's own voices. She argues for a **sociology of women**.

Thus a feminist standpoint theorists explores the relationship between knowledge and power. This means that what is considered to be knowledge is something that is dependent on equations of power. It is the voice of those in power that is heard. It also problematizes the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The researcher by virtue of her position becomes the one in power and thus the knower. Realisation by researchers that their positions effect the questions asked and the responses they get. It is not always neutral. The social position of researcher in terms of gender, class etc. all impact the research. The question then is that is it the standpoint of the women or the feminist. Women have diverse experiences. Bringing these diverse experiences together and interconnecting the experiences of not just women but of all (men and intersexual) is problematic. Knitting them together needs a certain knowledge of social situations, of power and of empirical investigations. This will necessarily privilege the researcher and put her in a position of power. There is thus a need for an intermediate position. This intermediate position between discovering absolute truth on the one hand and multiple truths based on multiple realities on the other hand offers a methodological way out of the conundrum put forth by Harding (*Harding, 1986*) (*Harding, 1991*). The recognition of the intermediate position between absolute truth and truth based on women's experiences helps overcome the criticisms as offered by Hammersley (*Hammersly, 1994*) (*Hammersly, 1992*) of the researcher losing their objectivity.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) What were the criticisms of feminist essentialism by the standpoint theorists?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Discuss Nancy Hartsock's views on feminist methodology?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Explain Collin's views on standpoint methodology?"?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) How does Harding argue for a sociology for women?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 5) What is the significance of adopting an intermediate position between absolute truth and multiple realities?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.7 POST MODERNISTS

Post modernists critique feminist knowledge production since the 1980s on the grounds of the focus on epistemological assumptions of rationality, objectivity and value neutrality. They argue that research is never bias free. Post-modern thought as developed by Derrida, Foucault and has had a powerful impact on feminist methodology. They contend that the feminist ways of thinking about the world is just one of the ways of thinking about the world. Feminist thought following post modernism challenged the unified conception of women or feminism. This also was an answer to critics like Martin Hammersley (*Hammersly*, 1992) (*Hammersly*, 1994) who offered a positivist critique of feminist research. He believes that the focus on experiences of women takes away from research and theory building. The postmodern feminist thought argue that this does not necessarily mean that research that is apolitical is not political. They argue that all research is political and socially invested. The growth of epistemology is determined socially and politically.

Ramzanoglu (*Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland*, 2002) argues that postmodern feminist thought also needs to recognise the limitations that our material existence sets upon the performance of gender. For instance a black poor woman cannot perform the role of a white rich woman. The material reality

constrains our choices and access to resources. Feminist thought needs to recognize that there are social, cultural and political constraints on our existence be it as a transsexual, homosexual, female, male or intersex.

Check Your Progress 6

- 1) What is the postmodernist critique of feminist methodology?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) How does Ramzanoglu criticize the postmodernists?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.8 LET US SUM UP

Feminist methodology is varied and diverse. There is no single version of feminism rather there is a need for feminisms. However, feminist methodology despite its divergence and differences implies a general commitment to understanding gendered lives. The understanding of gendered lives as standpoint theorist argue began with an understanding of women. Feminist research remains committed to exploring and documenting diverse gendered lives.

In this chapter we have explored the emergence and development of feminist thought over the years. Feminist thought has progressed through Empiricism to Essentialism to Standpoint Theorists and finally to Post modernism. The development of feminist methodologies cannot be looked at independently of the development of methodologies in general.

8.9 REFERENCES

Bar-On, B. A. (1993). Marginality and Epistemic Privilege. In L. A. Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies* (pp. 83-100), New York: Routledge.

Cancian, F. (1992). Feminist Science: Methodologies That Challenge Inequality. *Gender and Society*, 6(4), 623-642. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189729>.

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

- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, London: Harper Collins.
- Gorelick, S. (1991, December). Contradictions of Feminist Methodology. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 5(No. 4), 459-477 . Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/190095> Accessed: 12-08-2019 07:24 UTC
- Hammersly, M. (1992). On Feminist Methodology. *Sociology*, 26(2) , 187-206.
- Hammersly, M. (1994). On Feminist Methodology: A Response. *Sociology*, 28(1), 293-300.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.”. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The Science Question in Feminism*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Harding, S. (1987). “Introduction: Is there a Feminist Method?” . In S. H. (ed.), *Feminism & Methodology: (Vols. Social Science Issues,*, pp. 1 14), Bloomington: Indiana University Press,.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hartsock, N. (1983). The Feminist standpoint:Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism. In S. a. Harding, *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (pp. 283-310). London: Reidel.
- Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited. *Sign, Winter* 22, 341-365. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175275>.
- Jagger, A. M. (2008). The Humanities. In A. M. Jagger, *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader* (pp. 3-6), Boulder USA: Paradigm Publishers.
- Lazreg, M. (1994). “Women’s Experience and Feminist Epistemology: A Critical NeoRationalist Approach . In K. L. Whitford, *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives Epistemology* (pp. 45-62), London: Routledge.
- Maureen, C. (1993). Foucault, Feminism and Feeling:What Foucault Can and Cannot Contribute to Feminist Epistemology. In C. Ramazanoglu, *Up Against Foucault:Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Mies Maria. (1983). Towards a Methodology of Feminist Research. In G. B. edited, *Theories of Woman's Studies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Millman, M. a. (1975). *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science*, New York: Doubleday.
- Molm, L. (1993). Toward integrating micro and macro, structure and agency, science, and feminism. In P. E. edited, *Theory on Gender, Feminism on Theory* (pp. 301-312), New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Smith, D. E. (1974). Women's Perspective As a Radical Critique of Sociology. *Sociological Enquiry*, 44 (1), 7-13.

Smith, D. E. (1987). Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology. In S. H. ed, *Feminism and Methodology* (pp. 84-96), Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Speer, S. (2002). What can conversation analysis contribute to feminist methodology? Putting reflexivity into practice. *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 6, *Special Issue: Gender, Language, Conversation Analysis and Feminism*, November, 783-803.

Stanley and Wise, L. (1990). Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Process. In L. S. ed, *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (pp. 21-45), London: Routledge.

Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York: The Free Press.

8.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The values of rationality, freedom from religious dogma, ideas of progress and a linking of progress with capitalism were the main themes that dominated Sociology. The epistemology and the ontological positions that they took were predominantly positivist. There was a belief that humans had developed a better understanding of society and were committed to its development.
- 2) It was believed that the methods of the natural sciences could be applied to study society. The task of the positivist was to study social facts. They studied societies like a biologist would study a plant or an animal. The focus was on objectivity, reliability and validity. They believed that they were studying societies in a neutral impartial manner just like a chemist or a biologist would study a chemical reaction or an animal species.
- 3) Weber studied societies through the method of subjective interpretation and *verstehen*. He believed that the method of the natural sciences were not appropriate for the study of societies. For him a sociological study was value free in the sense that its rationality was defined by the community of social scientists and the culture prevailing at that time. For Weber the choice of the subject matter for research was not value free. However, once the choice was made then the study was done in a value free manner.
- 4) The feminists argued that ontology of the researcher determined the choice of the topics of research. Since gender was almost invisible in research this meant that the epistemology of the social sciences itself was based on a falsely value free premise. The interpretation of social action was also based on this flawed version of reality shared by the researcher and the research subject.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Feminist methodology was critical of this vision of society. Progress in society was attributed to the development of rational human thought. The default understanding was that it assumed that human beings were represented by men. It assumed that human beings and those who contributed to the development of society were men and their brotherhood. They had very little to say on issues related to gender. Nor did they have much to say on the impact of these changes on women. The universal idea of progress and thought was limited to the universe of men only.
- 2) The feminist researchers claimed that the Cartesian classification of women was unreasonable and was biased. The feminists said that reason itself was socially constituted (*Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, 2002*). They argued that the validity of knowledge and even the research questions asked were androcentric. The questions asked and the analysis have all been done using masculine categories of analysis. Theorists like Harding (*Harding, 1986*) and Smith (*Smith D. E., 1987*) pointed out the masculine bias in the social sciences. They argued that the focus of research has been on Western categories of reason and rationality as opposed to emotions. The focus on the official, public visible ways of functioning and not on informal systems indicated a masculine bias in the social sciences. They further contended that men and women occupy different social universes thus the generalizations presented as generalizations of human beings were unfair to women.
- 3) The feminists also argued that this sort of an objective approach led to the objectification of those being researched. The researched were treated as objects and were not given any agency. The relationship of the researcher and the researched was a hierarchical one. The researcher was the knower who imposed their own categories of thought on those being researched. In 1978 Mies (*Mies Maria, 1983*) proposed the need for a research in which the research subject is not just treated as an object but is replaced by a conscious partiality towards the oppressed and suppressed. There is a conscientization of the research and the researched (*Gorelick, 1991*). A conscientization of research implied that the researcher develops a conscience. The focus is not just on the research and understanding of the oppression and subordination of women but also challenge these. The feminist methodology should begin with the everyday world of women. The everyday world of women should be taken as problematic and not as a given.
- 4) The feminist researchers argued against the use of traditional methods of research. They argued that this created a hierarchy between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher appears as a knower who knows everything and the researched as the known.
- 5) The fact that the researcher is a female and not a male alters the nature of the relationship between the researched and the researcher. The gender of the researcher means that she is able to straddle the world of women on the professional as well as the personal front. It provides for a reflexivity on the part of the researcher. It also re-theorises the relationship between the researcher and the researched (*Speer, 2002*)(*Smith D. E., 1987*). Smith, N.D.

Speer and other feminist researchers argue that the very nature of feminist research does away with the hierarchy between the subject and the object i.e. the researcher and the researched.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Western feminist scholars started incorporating women in their studies of history, literature, philosophy and other social sciences. In their bid to incorporate women in their studies there was an inclusion of works by women authors. A conscious effort was also made to study women. The study of women, their achievements etc. became institutionalized in several women's studies departments in the West. Its values were those of equality and androgyny. They insisted that women were as capable as men. This was considered to be a step in the right direction, wherein the androcentric bias was being corrected.
- 2) The feminist researchers criticized this kind of an approach to the gendering of the research methodology. Just adding women to pre-existing categories did not undermine the androcentric masculine approach. They contended that this was just an attempt to study women from the point of existing masculine categories. Such researchers tend to use the positivist methodology though they were critical of the masculinist bias in research. Millman and Kanter's work *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (Millman, 1975) and the work by Cancian (Cancian, 1992) and Molm (Molm, 1993) illustrate this approach.
- 3) The feminist empiricists brought women into research but they continued to follow the existing methodologies. They believed that for feminist research to be taken seriously it was important to follow the existing *scientific* methods of research.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) They were criticized for just adding women to the mix of research that was already being conducted. The critics contended that women and men were different. The feminist researchers however followed the humanistic approach. They argued that the study of *man* was just the study of men and not *mankind* (meaning humankind). The study of *women* was essential for *womankind*. They sought to replace ideal man with ideal woman. The humanist approach declared that that women can perform all tasks of men but go beyond that as well. There was a transfer of women from the margins to the centre in research. The effort was to rebuild humanities from point of view of women.
- 2) The feminist researchers however followed the humanistic approach. They argued that the study of *man* was just the study of men and not *mankind* (meaning humankind). The study of *women* was essential for *womankind*. They sought to replace ideal man with ideal woman. The humanist approach declared that that women can perform all tasks of men but go beyond that as well. There was a transfer of women from the margins to the centre in research. The effort was to rebuild humanities from point of view of women.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) The standpoint theorists argue that without acknowledging the social location of the researcher the knowledge that is presented as universal is incorrect. The situatedness of the researcher is important. The value neutrality of the social sciences was biased and skewed. The normative framework that is used for analysis must necessarily take into account the social locations of the researcher and the researched. These normative frameworks are not universal and will necessarily vary. They also contend that knowledge that is presented as universal is always produced from a position of power.
- 2) Standpoint theorist like Nancy Hartsock believe the Marxist idea of truth is historically specific and all knowledge is political. She contends that the position of women in society and the sexual division of labour means that the lives of women differ from the lives of men. The patriarchal vision of gender structures material relationships between men and women. The situatedness of women gives women a unique standpoint from which they are able to critique the status quo. The situatedness of women does not give them the power to struggle for equality naturally thus a feminist point of view is essential. She argues for a feminist standpoint and not just a women's standpoint. She is like Harding arguing for a version of absolute truth while agreeing that truth is historically specific.
- 3) Patricia Hill Collins uses Hartsock's conception of truth for the Black feminist thought. She believes that knowledge does not arise from experience and that experience is not individual. She argues for drawing on collective experience of the subjugation of the Blacks and the other disadvantaged groups in the USA. Collins approach is one of straddling the two consciousness from the point of view of Black feminists. She contends that Black feminist Sociology has been marginalized by the Black men and white women. Thus making the Black women the outsider within.
- 4) Smith unlike Hartsock believes that the reality of experiences produces knowledge. She argues for a women's standpoint and not a feminist standpoint unlike Hartsock. The reality of experiences is situated. She argues for a **Sociology for women**. She argues for a Sociology that is not organized around anonymity and impersonality. But for one in which the researcher is between two consciousness that of a trained Sociologist and a woman.
- 5) Bringing these diverse experiences together and interconnecting the experiences of not just women but of all (men and intersexual) is problematic. Knitting them together needs a certain knowledge of social situations, of power and of empirical investigations. This will necessarily privilege the researcher and put her in a position of power. There is thus a need for an intermediate position. This intermediate position between discovering absolute truth on the one hand and multiple truths based on multiple realities on the other hand offers a methodological way out of the conundrum put forth by Harding. The recognition of the intermediate position between absolute truth and truth based on women's experiences helps overcome the criticisms as offered by Hammersley of the researcher losing their objectivity.

- 1) They contend that the feminist ways of thinking about the world is just one of the ways of thinking about the world. Feminist thought following post modernism challenged the unified conception of women or feminism. They argue that all research is political and socially invested. The growth of epistemology is determined socially and politically.
- 2) Ramzanoglu argues that postmodern feminist thought also needs to recognize the limitations that our material existence sets upon the performance of gender. For instance a black poor woman cannot perform the role of a white rich woman. The material reality constrains our choices and access to resources. Feminist thought needs to recognize that there are social, cultural and political constraints on our existence be it as a transsexual, homosexual, female, male or intersex.

GLOSSARY

Androcentric Methodologies: Methodologies that focus on men and assume that men represent humankind.

Cartesian dualism: The thought of Rene Descartes. Cartesian dualism believed in the separation of mind and matter. Cartesian dualism became a part of the Western common sense. It was believed that men were the masters of their mind. They were rational and could master their minds. As opposed to this women were considered to be passionate and more in tune with their emotions.

Epistemology: Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. It has to do with the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge.

Feminist Empiricism: This believed that knowledge of reality can be established through observations.

Feminist Essentialism: Claims that all women are essentially the same. They possess the same inherent qualities for example women's power of intuition.

Feminist standpoint: The standpoint theorists believe that understanding women's experiences is fundamental to understanding their realities.

Humanistic Approach: The humanistic approach is one in which men have the agency and the power to alter the world. This arose as a result of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance in which attention was driven away from God and was directed to the study of God. There was a belief in rationality and in the Modernist movement with its belief in the power of men. There was a rejection of religion which placed God at the centre of thought.

Ontology: Ontology is any way of understanding the world or parts of it. It has to do with understanding of the nature of reality. It makes assumptions about what kind of things exist in that reality. For example ontology in Sociology would include things like norms, values, social structures, roles etc. Epistemology and ontology are linked to one another.

Positivism: Positivists were influenced by the methods of the natural sciences. They follow the empiricist tradition. They sought to develop the study of societies

along the same lines. They tried to discover the origins of society and the laws of societies. The first to write on positivism was Auguste Comte.

Postmodernism: Post modernism refers to the writings of French theorists like Foucault and Derrida. It questions the epistemology and constitution of knowledge. It deconstructs the concepts of feminism and women. It contends that these too are products of a particular discourse.

FURTHER READINGS

Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

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

Hammersly, M. (1992). On Feminist Methodology. *Sociology*, 26(2), 187-206.

Hammersly, M. (1994). On Feminist Methodology: A Response. *Sociology*, 28(1), 293-300.

Jagger, A. M. (2008). *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader* (pp. 3-6), Boulder USA: Paradigm Publishers.