

5

8. OBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH PRESS. A182

Problems in Doing Feminist Research 17.12
- 1192

JOAN ACKER, KATE BARRY, AND
JOHANNA ESSEVELD

This paper examines principles of feminist research and discusses the authors' attempts to use these principles in a systematic way in their own research. Three principles of feminist research are identified: research should contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves; should use methods of gaining knowledge that are not oppressive; should continually develop a feminist critical perspective that questions dominant intellectual traditions and can reflect on its own development.

Consciously applying these principles in a research study of the relation between changes in consciousness and the changes in the structural situation of individuals raised several methodological issues and dilemmas. These include the impossibility of creating a research process that completely erases the contradictions in the relationship between the researcher and the researched; the difficulties in analyzing change as a process; the tension between the necessity of organizing the data and producing an analysis which reveals the totality of women's lives; and problems of validity, particularly those raised when the research process becomes part of the process of change.

Temas: 1. Problemática de la investigación sobre la mujer 2. Validez de la investigación

"PROGRAMA UNIVERSITARIO DE ESTUDIOS DE GENERO" - U.N.A.M.

Introduction

What methods should be used in a feminist¹ analysis of society? Are there modes of thinking, data collection and analysis that are more appropriate than others for studying the situation of women from a feminist perspective? These questions were raised early in the contemporary feminist critique of the social sciences (Bart, 1971; Bernard, 1973; McCormack, 1975; Smith, 1974) and are still being explored and developed. Feminist scholars have analyzed the male bias in the social sciences (see, e.g., Sherman and Beck, 1979) and are beginning to make a distinctive contribution to long-standing debates about theory and method (Smith, 1977; 1979; 1980; Westcott, 1979), sharing the concern of others with basic and enduring controversies such as the nature of science, its epistemological foundation, the possibility of a science of society, and the role of science in maintaining or undermining systems of power (see, e.g., Blumer, 1969; Bernstein, 1978; Hughes, 1980). In addition, we are beginning to consider how these debates become translated into problematic methodological issues

for those doing empirical studies within a feminist perspective (e.g., Roberts, 1981).

The goals of feminist social science have developed in the context of the criticism of the established natural science model of sociology and related disciplines (Bernard, 1973). Extending that critique, some feminist perspectives share the critical view of the Marxist and interpretive traditions within the social sciences, while adding their own emphasis and content (Smith, 1974; 1977). These feminists have argued that the traditional approach to social science is compatible with the aims of those in particular locations or positions of management and control in society (Smith, 1977) whose goals include such things as managing workers more effectively, dealing with civil disorder, and encouraging women to enter or leave the work force in accord with changing economic conditions; thus, what is taken as problematic in much of social science has also been what is problematic for those who control and manage the society. Moreover, in addition to problem definition, the concepts, frames of reference, and perspectives that define traditional sociology express the interests of and arise out of particular social institutions where the governing and organizing of society takes place (Smith, 1979). Almost all those who rule and manage are male; interesting and important phenomena are identified from a male perspective as well as from the perspective of those who manage and control. Women are largely absent from this world; the female domain of production and reproduction that provides the necessary infrastructure for the male world is, despite its importance, invisible, uninteresting to many social scientists, and largely unconceptualized. Thus, in the history of sociology, the development of an approach to knowledge with the goal of control has contributed to the failure to study the situation of women, as well as to a conceptualization of women that is consistent with continuing male dominance (Acker, 1973).

In the last fifteen years, attempts to deal with the exclusion, distortion, and neglect of women have produced many useful theoretical and empirical studies. One significant result of this research has been identification of many regularities and correlations that describe women's situation. However, this has limitations for building a tradition of research *for* women because it leaves largely unexamined the social processes lying behind the correlations. Understanding the processes that result in inequalities is a necessary step toward changing women's position. For us this understanding comes from a theoretical perspective which has its roots in feminism, Marxism, and critical theory. This means a commitment to a social science that can help change the world as well as describe it. "Women's devaluation and the consequences of this devaluation are reinforced by a social science which records these conditions while systematically ignoring alternative possibilities" (Westkott, 1979: 428).

The goals of a sociology *for* women, one that is in the interests of women rather than only about women, must be emancipatory (Esseveld, 1980; Hartsock, 1979; Westkott, 1979). Emancipation, as we use the term, means the eventual end of social and economic conditions that oppress women and the achievement of a free society. The ideal is that women should be self-emancipating and our conviction is that social scientists can contribute to this

process (Karabel, 1976) by analyzing how the personal is political and by pushing that analysis beyond individual experience to comprehension of "its determination in the larger socioeconomic structure" (Smith, 1977). An emancipatory social science would provide women with understandings of how their everyday worlds, their trials and troubles, were and are generated by the larger social structure.

The emancipatory aim of a women's sociology derives, from its close connections with the contemporary women's movement as well as from our particular position as women researchers. Women's research is intimately connected with the political aims of the women's movement in a number of ways. The movement provided the necessary social basis for legitimation and political support that allowed women researchers to start publicly asking some of the questions they had long been asking privately. Moreover, the women's movement outside of academia posed new questions and new formulations of women's situation which then could be taken up in the academic setting. Women researchers, in addition, were usually members of the women's movement and had, and still have, a political commitment to ending women's oppression. This commitment supplied a general standard against which to assess the kinds of questions and problems that should be dealt with. At the same time, women researchers were developing analyses of their own locations in the larger socioeconomic structure, for in some fundamental ways their positions were and are similar to those of their subjects. As women, they too may have husbands and children, they too keep house as well as work, they too have to cope with sexism in their daily lives. Thus, a sociology *for* women has emancipatory possibilities for the researchers as well as the researched, for as women researchers we also have been absent and unheard within the main sociological traditions.

Having accepted the above critique of traditional social science, and recognizing that in all social science, women have been peripheral and their lives misrepresented, it is clear that a radical rebeginning is needed in feminist research.

For us, a radical rebeginning has meant understanding gender as central in constructing all social relations and taking individual women's lives as a problematic (Hartsock, 1979; Smith, 1980). What is to be explained is what actually happens in women's everyday world and how these events are experienced. We begin, then, with the ordinary life of women, but neither stop there nor move into a search for individual psychological sources of feelings, actions, and events. Although we view people as active agents in their own lives and as such constructors of their social worlds, we do not see that activity as isolated and subjective. Rather, we locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations² which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience. What is at issue is not just everyday experience but the relations which underlie it and the connections between the two. In this analysis, we use a dialectical method, in order to arrive . . . "at adequate description and analysis of how it actually works. Our methods cannot rest in procedures for deciding among different formalized 'opinions' about the world"

(Smith, 1977). Rather, this is a method of exploration and discovery, a way to begin to search for understandings that may contribute to the goals of liberation. Exploration, in our usage, means an open and critical process in which all the intellectual tools we have inherited from a male dominated intellectual tradition are brought into question, including ideas about the basic nature of human beings, the nature of social life, the taken-for-granted world-view of traditional science, what concepts and questions might help to illuminate our shared condition, and how we should go about developing such knowledge.

In developing this knowledge we also try to maintain a critical perspective toward some of the assumptions made within the social sciences. For example, the assumption that the researcher must and can strive to be a neutral observer standing outside the social realities being studied is made by many who use quantitative and qualitative methods in a natural science model. This assumption is challenged by the feminist critique of social science that documents the male bias of theory and research which has previously been taken as a neutral account of human society. A feminist methodology must, therefore, deal with the issues of objectivity in social science and, in the process, deal also with the issue of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. As researchers, we must not impose our definitions of reality on those researched, for to do so would undermine our intention to work toward a sociology for women. Our intention is to minimize the tendency in all research to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation. In the ideal case, we want to create conditions in which the object of research enters into the process as an active subject.

Recognizing the objects of the research as subjects in their own right suggests that researchers must take care not to make the research relationship an exploitative one. This has been a concern at least since the 1960s when New Left criticism of the subtle and obvious repressions of bureaucratic society included an evaluation of the research process as oppressive. It becomes a critical issue for feminist researchers who themselves might be cast in the role of the research object and who, as women, have experienced the objectification of women in society. Perhaps more important, research that aims to be liberating should not in the process become only another mode of oppression. But this aim poses an ongoing contradiction; ultimately the researcher must objectify the experience of the researched, must translate that experience into more abstract and general terms if an analysis that links the individual to processes outside her immediate social world is to be achieved. Objectification would be minimized and the emancipatory goal furthered if both researcher and researched could participate in the process of analysis. But this is not always possible, because the preconditions of such participation, some similarity of interest, ideology, and language between researcher and researched, are sometimes absent. Even with a similarity of interest, there are still problems of a practical nature. The impossibility of eliminating all objectification exists in all social research, and the problem cannot be solved by creating the illusion that no relationship exists between the researcher and her research object.

In summary, the following are some of the principles of feminist research with which we begin this project:

1. Our goal was to contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves.
2. The methods of gaining this knowledge should not be oppressive.
3. We should continually develop the feminist critical perspective that questions both the dominant intellectual traditions and reflects on its own development.

In the pages that follow we begin to develop a methodology for doing feminist research based on the view of a social science outlined above.

Women in Transition—An Example of an Attempt to Do Feminist Research

We, the authors of this paper, started a research project in 1976 with the intention of doing a study that might contribute to the liberation of women. We tried to apply the principles of feminist research discussed above and, in the process, learned about some of the difficulties with this approach. The following is an account of our research process and the problems we encountered.

The feminist critique of social science and our own commitment to the women's movement led us to select a particular problem. The choice of the problem, together with the critique, dictated a qualitative method of investigation. We chose repeated, unstructured, individual interviews as well as some group interviews. Although this proved to be difficult and we are critical of our work at many points, the choice of a qualitative approach also produced new insights, new for us at least, about some of the issues raised above. As the project is concluding with the writing of a report, we are still convinced of the value of the method.

The Problem and the Method

The problem we chose was the relation between changes in the structural situation of women and changes in consciousness. We decided to look at the experiences of women who had been primarily mothers and wives and were attempting to move into the labor market. This group has participated in one of the major demographic changes in women's lives, their increasing entry into the paid labor force. We believed that these women, involved in a process of changing life circumstances, would come to see themselves differently as women and would reinterpret their problems, particularly in a social context that includes a widely-discussed feminist movement. The question of consciousness was important to us from a political point of view; consciousness raising is an essential component of the feminist movement, and a necessary

part of feminist action (Bartky, 1975; Westcott, 1979). An understanding of how women's consciousness changes or doesn't change might be helpful to other women. Consciousness is important in a framework that views people as actors who intentionally try to affect their own situations. The oppression of women has limited our ability to actively intervene in working out our own destiny, but changing work opportunities and the feminist challenge to a whole range of barriers should have increased the possibilities for purposive action. An examination of whether or not this was occurring was thus relevant to our theories about the relation between individuals and social structure.

We were convinced that middle-aged women who had spent most of their lives as wives and mothers had been ignored by much of the movement, and we hoped that we might give voice to some of their perspectives. We were also interested in this group because their long commitment to being housewives and mothers might make them resistant to change in a feminist direction. We also had a theoretical concern about adult life. At the time of the beginning of the research, very little had been written on middle-aged women; collectively as social scientists, we knew next to nothing about the middle years of adult life. We were critical of what little literature existed and were skeptical of widely held assumptions about women of this age. For example, we questioned the idea that women suffered from having an "empty nest" syndrome, an assumption that has since been discounted by a number of other researchers, e.g., Rubin (1979). This was our general theoretical orientation, but consistent with the feminist critique that we, along with others, were working out, we decided not to structure interviews with predetermined definitions of consciousness. Rather, we entered our interviews in an unstructured way, getting women to talk about the changes occurring in their lives, leaving the definition of consciousness as an emergent knowledge that would come out of the discussions. This would allow us to develop a more thorough understanding of the women's own perspectives as well as get unanticipated information about events and problems.

The women were interviewed in their own homes by one of the three of us as investigators. We had interviews with 65 women and followed a subgroup of 30 women for four to five years. We tried not to impose our ideas about what was important; our intention was to let the concepts, explanations, and interpretations of those participating in the study become the data we would analyze (Glazer and Strauss, 1973). While we tried to avoid determining what was to be considered in the content of consciousness, we were still aware of our own theoretical ideas. In our continual process of analysis we had to confront discrepancies between our ideas and interpretations and those of the women we interviewed. As the interview process proceeded, we decided to bring up certain questions if they did not emerge in the interviews. The areas most likely to be unmentioned were the women's movement, feelings about aging, and sexuality. However, in most of the repeated interviews, the topics that we thought would be important came up spontaneously. Sometimes we did direct the interview. For example, after discussing present life situation and changes, we asked about past history beginning with adolescence unless the interviewee

herself initiated the subject of earlier experiences. We got accounts of significant childhood experiences, as the women perceived them in the present. We also gathered information on education and work experience, on relationships with parents, husbands, children, and friends, and on their aspirations and hopes for the future.

In second and subsequent interviews, we filled out areas not touched on before, but particularly focussed on the changes that had taken place since the previous interview, as well as on the issues that seemed to be paramount at the time of the interview. During the whole period of interviewing, which for some of the participants extended over five years, we in the research group had extensive discussions of the interviews and of the interview process. In these discussions we were in an ongoing process of reformulating our ideas, examining the validity of our assumptions about the change process, about how to conceptualize consciousness, the connections between changing life circumstances and changing views of self, others and the larger world, and how to link analytically these individual lives with the structure of industrial capitalism in the U.S.A. in the 1970s. Each of us had both formal training and considerable past experience in interviewing. Consequently, although we discussed the interview process, our main focus was on the analysis and integration of the data.

The initial interviews and many of the second interviews were taped and transcribed. Later interviews were treated differently—we took notes during the interview and then wrote, immediately afterward, to the best of our ability, a process account of the interview. Some of the taped interviews were not transcribed. Instead, we listened to the interviews, perhaps several times, noting down topic areas and their locations on the tapes so that they could be listened to again when we were working on a particular theme. We then made detailed summaries of each woman's situation that included the main facts about her current life (marital status, number of children, work status, class, age), her perception of her problems, her goals, her consciousness of the women's movement, and the dilemmas or contradictions that we saw in her life. We made similar summaries at later interviews. At the same time, we were trying to identify common themes and also differences in experience. This analysis went on during the whole period of interviewing. We will return to the analysis process later, but here we want to discuss some other issues related to the interview process, in particular the influence of our relationship with our study participants.

The Research Relationship

The idea of neutrality and objectivity in the social sciences has been extensively criticized by those working within the interpretive traditions (Blumer, 1969; Hughes, 1980) and by some Marxists and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School (Habermas, 1972; Bernstein, 1978). Taking a women's perspective adds to that critique in some important ways. The ideal of objectivity is to remove the particular point of view of the observer from the research process

so that the results will not be biased by the researcher's subjectivity. "Recent versions of this ideal of objectivity have emphasized the importance of the universal application of social science methods as the best guarantee against the bias of subjectivity" (Westkott, 1979). These methods are designed to separate the knower from the object of study. Rejecting the notion that such a separation is possible, Smith (1977) argues that the illusion of this separation can be maintained so long as the knower can be posited as an abstract being and the object can be posited as the "other" who cannot reflect back on and affect the knower. "Once women are inserted into sociological sentences as their subjects, however, the appearance of impersonality goes. The knower turns out not to be the 'abstract knower' after all, but a member of a definite social category occupying definite positions within the society" (Smith, 1974; 16-17). It also turns out that research is embedded in a definite social relationship in which there is a power differential in favor of the knower who assumes the power to define in the process of the research. Research reports reflect only one side of this social relationship—that of the more powerful "knower."

That there is a relationship between the subject and object of study is more easily made visible when women are researching women.

Women studying women reveals the complex way in which women as objects of knowledge reflect back upon women as subjects of knowledge. Knowledge of the other and knowledge of the self are mutually informing because self and other share a common condition of being women. (Westkott, 1979)

The research process becomes a dialogue between the researcher and researched, an effort to explore and clarify the topic under discussion, to clarify and expand understanding; both are assumed to be individuals who reflect upon their experience and who can communicate those reflections. This is inherent in the situation; neither the subjectivity of the researcher nor the subjectivity of the researched can be eliminated in the process.

Our commitment to reducing so far as we could the unequal power in the research relationship and acknowledging the subjectivity of our study participants took a variety of forms. One strategy was encouraging the interviewee to take the lead in deciding what to talk about. This did not always work; people have ideas about what it is like to be interviewed and they want to be asked questions so that they can give the "right responses." Some women were uneasy with us because we were from the university. Others did not want to set the terms of the discussion because they felt that there couldn't be anything interesting about their lives. However, those with whom we had more than one interview increasingly took the lead in discussions and even took the initiative to get in touch with us to tell us what had been happening to them. Unstructured interviewing and letting the women take an important part in the discussion helped to counter some of the problems other researchers have confronted when using a more standard sociological methodology. Thus we did not have the problems encountered by Woodward and Chisholm (1981: 177), who used more structured interviews and, as a result, enlarged the gap already

existing between them and their subjects of study: "The very nature of our questions about employment and the domestic division of labour served to reveal our pre-occupation with work, marital conflict and women's oppression, rather than with the satisfaction of motherhood and housewifery."

Another part of the attempt to deal with the subject-object problem was to try to establish some reciprocity by offering, at the end of the first interview, to tell the women something about ourselves if we had not done so earlier. Often we didn't have to offer—it was a request made to us. We always responded as honestly as we could, talking about aspects of our lives that were similar to the things we had been discussing about the experience of the interviewee—our marriages, our children, our jobs, our parents. Often this meant also that our relationship was defined as something which existed beyond the limits of the interview situation. We formed friendships with many of the women in the study. We were offered hospitality and were asked to meet husbands, friends, and children. Sometimes we would provide help to one or another woman in the study. For example, one woman became very depressed and called the interviewer, who then went to the interviewee's house and spent several hours with her while she talked about her troubles and gradually became less distressed. However, we recognized a usually unarticulated tension between friendships and the goal of research.³ The researcher's goal is always to gather information; thus the danger always exists of manipulating friendships to that end. Given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated, attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use. We recognized this more as the research progressed and tried to avoid it.

During the interviews we were also often asked for information, which we provided. We viewed this as an additional opportunity to reciprocate for the help they were giving us by participating in the study. Now, at the stage of writing, we continue to have feelings of obligation to the women we interviewed—to finish the writing and find a way to publish our—their—material. If we do not do this, we will have failed on our part of our joint project.

A high degree of participation in the research was not established with all interviewees. As we noted above, repeated interviews resulted in more involvement. However, not only the number of interviews, but also the experiences women were having at the particular time that we first interviewed them influenced our contact. With those women who experienced this period as a critical period in their lives, we seem to have established the best rapport. Although our lives differed from most of the women we interviewed, with many we shared a sense of uneasiness, an experiencing of dilemmas and contradictions as well as a willingness to acknowledge them.

Another way that we tried to overcome the distance between researchers and researched was to show our written material to the women we wrote about. We did not do this with every woman in the study. We shared most of this material with the women with whom we had the most interviews, who were those who identified themselves as consciously trying to change. Since change was the

central issue of the study, there was a theoretical rationale for spending more time with them. And, given the focus on change as well as our limited time and other resources, it made more sense to ask these women to reflect on our written material. They were, as we mentioned above, also women who most shared our world view; a common frame of reference provided the grounds from which a dialogue could proceed. We have to admit to some reluctance to share our interpretations with those who, we expected, would be upset by them. There was a potential conflict between our feminist frame of reference and their interpretations of their own lives. Our solution to this conflict was not to include them as active participants in the analysis of our research. Whether or not to confront groups or individuals with interpretations of their lives which are radically different from their own is an ethical question faced by anyone attempting critical social research. This is particularly true when the researcher's interpretation is not only different but potentially threatening and disruptive to the subject's view of the world. For example, many of the women who were housewives defined themselves as very independent whereas our perspective defined the conditions of their lives as creating both a structural and personal dependence. These housewives had a stake in their own definition which was also a source of worth and dignity, while we as feminist researchers interpreted their situations differently. At that moment, we were dealing with a tension between the goal of reducing the power differences between the researcher and the researched and the difficulties of carrying this out when there is a lack of agreement on the meaning of experiences. We have not solved this problem; we believe that the solution lies in accepting the dilemmas and maintaining an awareness of when and why we are not able to make the research process a true dialogue, thus giving full legitimacy to the subjectivity of the other as well as to our own. At least then we can articulate the difficult balance between granting respect to the other's interpretation of her reality, while going beyond that interpretation to comprehend its underlying relations.

Problems of Analysis

As we pointed out, our commitment to minimizing the power differentials of the relationship in the research was further confounded when it came to the analysis. We found that we had to assume the role of the people with the power to define. The act of looking at interviews, summarizing another's life, and placing it within a context is an act of objectification. Indeed, we the researchers took the position that some process of objectification of the self is a necessary part of coming to an awareness of one's own existence; it is not less a part of coming to an understanding of others. Acknowledging that a necessary part of understanding others' experience involves an act or moment of objectification poses further problems and contradictions. The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality? This is part of a larger problem: a critique of objectivity which asserts that there can be no neutral observer who

stands outside the social relations she observes can easily become relativism in which all explanations are subjectively grounded and therefore have equal weight. When all accounts are equally valid, the search for "how it actually works" becomes meaningless. Though we don't claim to have resolved this problem, we tried to avoid it by claiming a validity for our analysis (see discussion below) while not in the process forcing that analysis into categories such as worker, housewife and mother, or divorced and married, which fracture women's experience.⁴ However, in the actual task of analysis, we initially found ourselves moving back and forth between letting the data "speak for itself" and using abstracted categories.

Our feminist commitment had led us to collect data that were difficult to analyze and had provided us with so much information that it was difficult to choose what was "essential" at the same time that we tried to give a picture that provided a "totality." Our solution to this series of problems was to present a number of life histories, expressed largely in the women's own words, to typify what we thought were particular patterns of change. We based these patterns on apparently discrete categories such as whether change was occurring and how it was initiated.

This attempt to make sense out of our information by placing the women into categories of "changers" and "nonchangers" obscured the complexities of women's lives. Although it was possible to categorize women using simple and rigid criteria, the boundaries between changers and nonchangers were not at all clear. We at first called all women who enrolled in school or were looking for a job "changers." But interviews revealed that some of the nonchangers were going through an active process of rethinking their lives while some of the changers (a small minority, but nevertheless bothersome in terms of a neat analysis) were actively resisting all but very superficial changes.⁵

We were pushed to develop our analysis further by women in the study whom we asked to read the manuscript. They were hesitant about being negative, but were clearly critical. What they wanted, they said, was more of our own sociological analysis. They wanted us, the researchers, to interpret their experience to them. Here, once more, we faced incompatibilities between various components of our feminist approach to social research. If we were to fulfill the emancipatory aim for the people we were studying, we had to go beyond the faithful representation of their experience, beyond "letting them talk for themselves," and put those experiences into the theoretical framework with which we started the study, a framework that links women's oppression to the structure of Western capitalist society.

Both the ways in which we were categorizing experience and the kinds of categories we then developed were still somewhat antithetical to our theoretical position. We experimented with dividing our interviewees into housewives and workers for the purpose of analysis. We had tried to only recruit housewives for the study, but—not surprisingly—found that about half of the women we interviewed had had considerable work experience. Almost all of them had continued to see themselves as housewives. How should we see them? What is the critical cutting point in work experience that can tell us how to dif-

ferentiate? We came to the obvious conclusion (Acker, 1978) that the stationary concepts of housewife and paid worker are problematic ones. Most women move from unpaid work to paid work during their lifetime, and only a few fit totally within the unpaid work/paid work dichotomy, as quantitative data clearly show (Maret-Havens, 1977). Our concepts do not reflect the reality of women's lives; this was demonstrated to us again in our qualitative data. Our initial use of traditional categories, despite our own feminist critique of them, illustrates the power of conventional ways of thinking about the social world and the difficulty of breaking out of its boundaries.

Another difficulty we faced was the difficulty of conceptualizing process. We first tried to solve this and the categorizing problem together by thinking up categories of change process or categories of ways that women engaged in the change process. Thus, we tried talking about those who initiated change in an active way as contrasted to those who were forced into changes by outside events. We soon found that this categorization fell apart as we looked in depth at the actual processes. We also rejected a life cycle perspective, partly because of its biological determinist implications and partly because we could not find a common pattern among the women we interviewed in the time that change began in either the family or the individual life cycle.

We also attempted to categorize feminist consciousness and, to some extent, were successful.⁶ However, again, the boundaries were unclear, and we felt that the strategy of analysis was not productive. We were not gaining any new insights nor deepening our understanding of the relationship between the individual and social structure, and it was in this part of the research process that these connections had to be made explicitly.

At the same time that we were trying to find some fruitful categories in which to group our interviewees, we were analyzing issues or themes in the interviews. The contradictions between our commitment to a dialectical analysis; our aim of reconstructing women's experience in a way which accounts for both their and our explanations of that experience and the relation between the two; and our actual use of rigid categories, sent us back to our theoretical beginnings in Marxism, feminism, and critical theory. We saw that the themes of everyday life we were identifying could be understood as manifestations of contradictions or dilemmas inherent in the underlying social relations. We explore the nature of these relations in our account of the research itself (see, e.g., Acker et al., 1981). As the analysis proceeded we tried to understand what was changing in these women's lives and whether or not the underlying dilemmas we had identified were being resolved or were reappearing in new ways as the specific conditions of their lives were altered in a society that was both changing and remaining static. In the process of analysis we refined and reshaped our initial questions, trying to make the act of objectification analogous to a moment of critical reflection. The concepts and questions that are central in our final report are different from those with which we started. We know that this is the history of many other research projects, although usually an unwritten history. We expected to work in this way, but if we had understood beforehand how

long and difficult the process would become, we might have more consciously and more quickly worked out strategies of analysis.⁷

Problems of Validity

The research perspective outlined in the first section of the paper makes problematic the conventional way of evaluating the products of the research. How shall we decide whether what we have done—the knowledge we develop—is worthwhile? How shall we decide if what we say is true? The first question about the development of worthwhile knowledge has to be answered in terms of an emancipatory goal. We might ask whether our findings contribute to the women's movement in some way or whether they make the struggles of individual women more effective or easier by helping to reveal to them the conditions of their lives. We know that this is the case for some of the women in our study. This is also an historical question which can only be resolved in the future. An emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome. Perhaps the best we can do is to guard against the use of our research against women, although that also may be difficult.

The second question, how to decide what is true or valid, is one we have in common with all social scientists. We differ with many of them, however, in how we conceive of this truth. We are not interested in prediction, but adequate reconstruction (Schutz, 1963). We conceive of this at two levels. The first has to do with adequacy of interpretation and involves selection, organization, and interpretation of our findings with the help of our social theory. The other level of concern is with the adequacy of our findings. We want to know that our research results fairly and accurately reflect the aspects of social life that we claim they represent.

If validity is to be judged by the adequacy of interpretation, we must return to our theoretical orientation to determine the criteria of adequacy. This, as briefly discussed above, is a position that has its origins in feminism, Marxism, and critical theory. It is a position that is working toward a sociology *for* women. The first criterion of adequacy in this approach is that the active voice of the subject should be heard in the account. Our interpretation should avoid transforming the acting and thinking human being solely into an object of study, while recognizing that some objectification is inherent in the process of interpretation or reconstruction. Moreover, seeing persons as active agents in their own lives, we will not view them as totally determined or lacking in comprehension of the social world. For example, we consider the concept "false consciousness" inadequate as part of a valid interpretation.

A second criterion for adequacy is that the theoretical reconstruction must be able to account for the investigator as well as for those who are investigated. The interpretation must locate the researcher in the social structure and also provide a reconstruction of the social relations that produce the research itself. For example, what are the social relations that produce this research situation and the enterprise of research itself? What makes it possible to raise this

research problem at this time, in this place, in this society? What are the processes that have resulted in the researched and the researchers coming together in a particular kind of social relationship? Such a reconstruction should be possible, in principle, although we do not argue that every research report should spell it out in detail.

Our third criterion for adequacy is that the reconstruction should reveal the underlying social relations that eventuate in the daily lives we are studying. This is the heart of the idea of a sociology *for* women; we want to understand how the underlying organization of actions and practices results in the ordinary daily lives of women. This is a complex task, perhaps an impossible task. For example, to trace back from the daily experience of a working class mother, getting three or four children ready for school in the morning, unassisted by another adult, packing lunches, buttoning coats, etc., to the arrangements and relations that put her there, would be to describe much of the organization of the society. Thus, we need to make decisions and choices; this is part of the process of analysis that we have discussed above.

The adequacy of the interpretation fundamentally depends upon the accuracy of our descriptions of the experiences we wish to locate within the social relations of the society. Have we told it the way that it actually happens? This is the question we turn to now.

Our research problem demanded that we try to understand reality from the perspective of the people experiencing it. Since we directly asked them about their experience we did not have the problem of developing indicators of concepts. Rather, we wanted to maximize direct communication in their terms. We assumed that our study participants would have a better chance of telling us about their worlds as they saw them if their active participation in defining the dialogue were encouraged. As we have indicated above, we are confident that in most of our interviews the interviewees felt comfortable about stating their own case.

In qualitative work, the accuracy of listening and hearing may be as important as the openness of telling. The fact that we, the interviewers, were women who have been married, divorced, and had children (one of us had a baby after the study began) increased the validity of our data. We did not have to go through the process of getting to know the special perspectives and nuances of meaning of those we were studying—a process that is often identified as necessary if the qualitative researcher wants to avoid errors that simply come from ignorance (see, e.g., Filstead, 1970). We were studying people who had experiences very similar to ours, although of course there were important differences (the most important one being our status as researchers) and we were thus sensitive to problems and issues that might otherwise have been invisible.⁸

We think that it was also important that we were feminists. Our feminist analysis of women's oppression, which constituted much of the theory informing our work, also increased our sensitivity and awareness in the interview process, and contributed to the emergence of an empathetic atmosphere in the interaction process. A faithful account is best pursued, we are arguing, in

research such as ours where changing consciousness is the central question, through the close and sympathetic involvement with the informant rather than through distancing and objectifying. At the same time such closeness may create certain kinds of blindness in the researcher. One protection we developed against this was in the ongoing process of analysis in the research group. Our analytic discussions, of necessity, forced us to distance ourselves from our subjects.

We have confirmation of the accuracy of our findings from those women we interviewed. We received extensive feedback from many of them in both individual and group discussions. Some read their interviews or listened to their tapes. We also discussed our written material with many and in those discussions our findings and our interpretations were confirmed.

Much more difficult problems of validity began to emerge in the interviews that were continued over a period of four years. These problems have to do with how reality is constructed and reconstructed in the process of talking and thinking about it and how the process of research becomes part of the process of change. We will leave the psychological aspects of the reconstruction of reality to the psychotherapeutic professions. Here, we will limit ourselves to specific methodological issues and only discuss the content of the change process in relation to them. Our insights into these issues come from women in our study, and, in particular, from one person whom we asked to participate in a workshop on developing a feminist methodology in social science.⁹ Her comments on the experience of being the researched tell us a great deal about the validity of interview or questionnaire data. We will give a brief account of her experience as a background to further comments on validity.

J. began the first interview with a positive attitude toward the research. She knew that the objective was to contribute to the goal of women's liberation; she herself had a feminist orientation, and she was anxious to cooperate. During the interview, she did her best to be honest and open. The interview lasted for three hours, and both the interviewer and J. thought it was a good interview. However, reflecting on what she had said during the next few days, J. realized that she had omitted some very important aspects of her life and had unintentionally misrepresented others. She felt that the account she had given was chaotic, unclear, and disorganized. In the months between the first and second interviews, she thought about her life and tried to clarify events, relationships, and feelings; in the second interview she discussed herself within this altered point of view. Still, reviewing later what she said, she again was dissatisfied with the accuracy of her presentation of her current and past life. Once more, she went through a process of self-examination and rethinking. The third interview was somewhat better, but she was not yet satisfied. Only after the fourth interview did she begin to feel she was portraying her life as she actually lived it. By the fifth interview she had arrived at a coherent explanation of her experiences. J. said that this was the first time in her life that she was able to put together a reasonable account for herself. She believes that her first accounts were chaotic and disorganized because that was the way her life was, filled with multiple and conflicting demands from her husband, her five chil-

dren, her jobs, her volunteer work in the community, and her friends. In the research process, between interviews, she spent long hours analyzing those relationships; her work on herself was part of the work of the research. She, as the researched, was constantly checking out the validity of the data she was giving to us, the researchers. But in the process, these data changed in some ways. The facts of the past were not altered, but they were elaborated and important omissions were filled in. Her own definition of what was important also changed in the process. Although it seems the best validity check to have the study participant determine accuracy, one could also argue that the first interview might have reflected her conscious assessment of the reality of her life at that time, while the fifth interview reflected an equally valid picture at a later time. Are we thus getting a more and more valid account, or are we getting several accounts that reflect the process of change? Certainly for J., the interviews were part of a change process in which she was trying to deal with fundamental contradictions in her life situation. Her understanding of her present dilemmas became clearer too, clearer in that she was more satisfied with them.

Such problems have been discussed by others many times (see, e.g., Becker and Geer, 1957), arguing that retrospective accounts are suspect in terms of validity. For example, Becker and Geer stated (1957: 141):

Changes in the social environment and in the self inevitably produce transformations of perspectives, and it is characteristic of such transformations that the person finds it difficult or impossible to remember his [*sic*] former actions, outlook or feelings. Reinterpreting things from his new perspective, he [*sic*] cannot give an accurate account of the past, for the concepts in which he [*sic*] thinks about it have changed and with them his perceptions and memories.

We take a different position, arguing that both the past and present accounts are accurate. The first account was, we think, a true representation of J.'s conscious thoughts about her life at that time, with all the things she forgot, held back, and interpreted in ways she thought would be acceptable. But now that we have her own analysis of the process, we cannot take that interview as anything more than a reflection of her conscious thoughts at the time; we cannot take it as adequate "data" about her life history or her present situation. Her interpretations at the first interview were more narrow than the broader perspectives she had during the fifth interview, which was informed by social theory and by the interactions with the researchers. At this moment we have left our discussion of validity in a narrow sense and returned to our view of science in which an emancipatory goal is an essential part (Touraine, 1980). To return to our discussion: we should not take that first interview as filled with "error," although critical omissions may make our interpretations suspect. Especially painful memories or difficult experiences may be obscured—events such as the birth of an illegitimate child put out for adoption, abortion, rape, an illicit love affair, may be clouded over or simply seen as unimportant, when from the point of view of the outsider, they are critical to understanding a life.

These obscured experiences are central to the systematic devaluation of women in a male dominant world. A feminist perspective redefines these experiences as part of women's oppression, helping women to see their feelings as legitimate and eroding the taboos against discussing such life events. Moreover, distance and some confidence in the interviewer that has been built up over time may make it possible to reveal such events while altering the ways that they are assessed by the person who experienced them.

Unless a relationship of trust is developed, we can have no confidence that our research on women's lives and consciousness accurately represents what is significant to them in their everyday lives, and thus has validity in that sense. This is particularly true if we are trying to understand lives in their totality, as ongoing processes in which the person plays an active part. Certain survey data becomes, then, even more suspect. We have difficulty in assessing the validity of even the most factual data, to say nothing of data about opinions and attitudes. Even "in depth" interviews present problems of interpretation, as the above discussion indicates. We are probably faced with another unresolvable dilemma: working from a perspective in which we are trained to want to give a reasoned and connected account, we face live material that is constantly in the process of transformation, that is not organized in the way of academic theories. Virginia Woolf, among other novelists, may give a better account of the conscious experiencing of life in all its episodic and unorganized ways than we sociologists can achieve. However, as sociologists we can find representations of such experience that allow us to build a sociology for women, a sociology that connects experience at that level to its structural determination in the wider society. What distinguishes us from those who are not social scientists lies in our method of systematically attempting to reconstruct social reality and to put these systematic reconstructions into a social theory which we share with other social scientists. We are part of a group endeavor to understand society, even though the group is scattered and many of its members unknown to us.

Summary

In this paper we have discussed our attempt to use principles of feminist research in a systematic way as we carried out a research project. For us, feminist research should contribute to the liberation of women. We chose our research problem with this goal in mind. The problem was the relation between changes in consciousness and changes in the structural situation of individuals. Women who were at the end of their period of intensive mothering were the ones we chose to study. Our problem dictated qualitative data gathering. This method of data collection forced us to confront issues about the research relationship and influenced our data analysis. It was extremely difficult to analyze process, even though we had at least some relevant data. We still tended to look at our participants at one interview and then at the next, observing the changes but unable to adequately account for the intervening process. Yet, that process may be most important to understand if we are to

comprehend the ways the larger structure penetrates the life of individuals, as well as the ways that individuals in their daily lives both reproduce and undermine that structure.

Our commitment to bringing our subjects into the research process as active participants¹⁰ influenced our rethinking of our original categories, strengthened our critique of research methods, and forced us to realize that it is impossible to create a research process that completely erases the contradictions in the relation between researcher and researched.

In the relationship with those women who were actively changing both their life circumstances and their understandings of their lives, we were able to glimpse the research process as consciousness raising or emancipatory. Many of them told us that they experienced the interviews in this way. However, the emancipatory potential could only be partially attained even with those who were most aware of subjective change. The limits were in the restricted possibilities for satisfying work and financial independence facing all the women in our study. The research process was not consciousness raising for those whose life situation had not brought them into contact with the movement nor confronted them with the necessity to reflect upon their experiences. These were the women who were not in the process of trying to establish new forms of daily life and those whose interests seemed to be farthest from ours, the researchers. As we evaluate our experiences in interviewing these women, we are led to another dilemma of feminist research—should we do research that is not consciousness raising for the participants? Is such research an oppressive process that of necessity exploits the subject? If our answer to these questions is yes, we are faced with the possibility of only doing research with people who are very much like us, eliminating most women from our view and limiting the usefulness of our projects. Perhaps this is another necessary tension in the ongoing project of feminist investigation.

We have not solved the problems of doing emancipatory research. By trying to make our hopes and failures explicit, perhaps we have made a contribution toward that end.

NOTES

This is an extensively revised version of "Problemstillinger i Kvinneforskningen" av Joan Acker og Johanna Esseveld in samarbeid med Kate Barry in *Kvalitative metoden i samfunnsforskning*, Redigert av Harriet Holterog Ragavald Kalleberg. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1982.

1. The term feminist refers to diverse groups of people who take varying positions on particular issues and who identify with a range of political positions. In our usage here, feminist refers to a point of view that (1) sees women as exploited, devalued, and often oppressed, (2) is committed to changing the condition of women, and (3) adopts a critical perspective toward dominant intellectual traditions that have ignored and/or justified

women's oppression. Some people who identify themselves as feminists accept the natural science model of sociology.

2. The term social relations here signifies a particular epistemology derived from the Marxist tradition and is not equivalent to the notion of social relationships. We are not referring to interactions between individuals. Rather we see individuals' activities in daily life as producing their social worlds; yet at the same time we recognize that there is an underlying organization of these activities which results in similar outcomes. This organization is what sociologists call social structure, but this is usually conceptualized as a fixed determinate abstract category which is apart from or radically other than individual action. The term social relations is a way of overcoming this dichotomy: to give centrality to the organization of social life without positing either "the individual" or "the social structure" as separate and oppositional. See the work of Dorothy Smith (1977; 1979; 1980) for a feminist interpretation of this concept.

3. Arlene Daniels discusses a similar problem in "The low-caste stranger in social research" (1967).

4. For a perceptive discussion of the need to reconceptualize social structure in ways that do not push women's experience into categories that are no longer reflective of that experience, see Joan Kelly's "The double vision of feminist theory" (1979).

5. This attempt to categorize was related also to our initial statement of our problem, the relationship between certain "exterior" changes—going to school or work—and certain "interior" changes—consciousness of self as woman who exists in a particular world and the interpretations of that world.

6. We used two categories, personal feminism and political feminism. These are explained in Acker et al. (1981).

7. Our commitment to doing feminist research and thus the attempt to do away with the hierarchy so often present in research may have prolonged the time the research took us as well. We tried to work in a nonhierarchical way as a research team and also tried to do all the necessary work. This included transcribing interviews ourselves, with some positive and negative results.

We, three researchers with different theoretical traditions and with specializations in different areas of sociology, had the same interests and political goals. By working closely together we developed the central concerns of our research. During our discussions we also developed a common theoretical perspective in which no person attempted to dominate or impose her own views. Differences in interpretation could then be more democratically resolved. This way of working was often a long drawn-out process, but we believe a necessary one for working with the kind of questions in which we were interested. The research process was also prolonged by our decision to do all the work ourselves. This meant that we would do the transcribing, as we believed that to be one of the most oppressive tasks in the research. We did the transcribing during the few extra hours left us after we had taken care of our teaching, work loads, and family responsibilities. It was a tedious process, especially since we were not trained transcribers. Eventually we decided to have some of the interviews transcribed or listened to the tapes, noting down topic areas and their location on the tapes.

Looking back, we may have overemphasized the overcoming of hierarchy and may have lost some of the expert knowledge and differential experience in the group. It might have been better to include in the project the person doing the transcribing instead of trying to deal with the oppressiveness of transcribing by doing the work ourselves.

8. Taking the position that the idea of the neutral observer is a false assumption has implications for validity. The researcher does not stand outside social structure. Her location in society enters into the research relationship. To recognize and take this into account as we did contributes to a better understanding of reality and greater validity.

9. We wish to thank Joanne Ferrero for contributing her perceptive insights to our workshop on feminist methodology and to this paper.

10. The research process affected us as researchers and in our own lives. Our role as

researchers was greatly changed because of the more active involvement of the women in our study, something which became especially clear during the analysis when our interpretations were being questioned. During the interviewing, we faced a tension between being expected to take the initiative and wanting more of a dialogue. Personally, it helped us to reflect on our own situations and influenced future personal choices.

REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan. 1973. Women and social stratification: a case of intellectual sexism. *Am. J. Sociology* 78 (4): 936-45.
- . 1978. Issues in the sociological study of women's work. In Ann Stromberg and Shirley Harkness, *Women Working*. Mayfield, Palo Alto.
- Acker, Joan, Kate Barry and Johanna Esseveld. 1981. Feminism, female friends, and the reconstruction of intimacy. In Helena Z. Lopata, ed., *The Intertwining of Social Roles*, vol. 2. J.A.T. Press, Greenwich, Conn.
- Bart, Pauline. 1971. Sexism in social science: from the iron cage to the gilded cage—The perils of Pauline. *J. Marriage Family* 33(2): 741.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1975. Toward a phenomenology of feminist consciousness. *Social Theory Practice* 3 (4): 425-39.
- Becker, Howard S., and Blanche Geer. 1957. Participant observation and interviewing: a comparison. *Hum. Org.* 16:28-32.
- Bernard, Jessie. 1973. My four revolutions: an autobiographical history of the ASA. In Joan Huber, ed., *Changing Women in a Changing Society*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bernstein, Richard. 1978. *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Daniels, Arlene Kaplan. 1967. The low-caste stranger in social research. In Gideon Sjoberg, ed., *Ethnicity, Politics and Social Research*. Schenkman, Cambridge, Mass.
- Esseveld, Johanna. 1980. Critical social research: women's perspective. In Mette Kumøe and Bergitta Possing, eds. *Kvindforskning 1980: Rapport Fra Hindegavl Seminaret*. Aalborg universitetsforlag, Aalborg, Denmark.
- Filstead, William J. 1970. *Qualitative Methodology*. Markham, Chicago.
- Glazer, Barney and Anselm Strauss. 1973. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine, Chicago.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1972. *Knowledge and Human Interest*. Beacon, Boston.
- Hartsock, Nancy. 1979. Feminist theory and the development of revolutionary strategy. In Zillar R. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. Monthly Review Press, New York.
- . 1981. Fundamental feminism: process and perspective. In *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from Quest*. Longman, New York.
- Hughes, John. 1980. *The Philosophy of Social Research*. Longman House, Essex.
- Karabel, Jerome. 1976. Revolutionary contradictions: Antonio Gramsci and the problems of intellectuals. *Politics Society* 6(2): 123-72.
- Kelly, Joan. 1979. The double vision of feminist theory: a postscript to the 'Women and Power' conference. *Feminist Studies* 1:216-27.
- Maret-Havens, Elizabeth. 1977. Developing an index to measure female labor force attachment. *Mon. Labor Rev.* 199(5):35-38.
- McCormack, Thelma. 1975. Towards a non-sexist perspective on social and political change. In Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, eds. *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives of Social Life and Social Sciences*. Anchor, Garden City, N.Y.
- Roberts, Helen, ed. 1981. *Doing Feminist Research*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Rubin, Lillian. 1979. *Women of a Certain Age*. Morrow, New York.
- Schutz, Albert. 1963. Concept and theory formation in the social sciences. In H. Hatanson, ed., *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, pp. 231-49. Random, New York.
- Sherman, Julia A. and Evelyn Torton Beck, eds. 1979. *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisc.
- Smith, Dorothy. 1974. Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology. *Sociological Inquiry* 44:7-13.
- . 1977. Some implications of a sociology for women. In Nona Glazer and Helen Waelrer, eds. *Women in a Man-Made World: A Socioeconomic Handbook*, 2nd ed. Rand McNally, Chicago.
- . 1979. A sociology for women. In Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn Torton, eds. *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisc.
- . 1980. An examination of some sociological methods of thinking from the standpoint of a sociology for women, and an alternative. Unpublished manuscript prepared for the meetings of the American Sociological Association, New York.
- Touraine, Alain et al. 1980. *La Prophète Anti-Nucléaire*. DuSueil, Paris.
- Westcott, Marcia. 1979. Feminist criticism of the social sciences. *Harv. Educational Rev.* 49(4):422-30.
- Woodward, Diana and Lynne Chisholm. 1981. The expert's view? The sociological analysis of graduates' occupational and domestic roles. In Helen Roberts, ed., *Doing Feminist Research*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.