

Introduction

Feminist research methods arose from a historical backdrop in which women, women's experiences, and subjects of interest to women had routinely been excluded from scientific studies; few women held positions as researchers; and the form research questions took and the ways results were interpreted tended to reproduce commonly held stereotypes or assumptions, thus helping to maintain the denigrated status of women. Against this backdrop, feminist researchers struggled with the idea that women, as a group, shared a set of experiences and a "way of knowing" that set them apart from men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), while also uniting them as a single oppressed group whose needs and experiences were deserving of attention and study. At the same time however, feminism itself (as a political movement) was being strongly criticized for attempting to create a "common identity" for women, seeking common ground while overriding or ignoring important and very real differences shaping women's lives and experiences due to race and/or class (Lorde, 1984; Scott, 1996; Walley, 1997). As Lorde (1984) argued, "White women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" (p. 116).

The focus of feminist epistemology, meanwhile, was to analyze and critique traditional sources and systems of knowledge as well as to construct alternatives (Hughes, 1994) – for, as Lorde (1984) writes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). Feminist researchers were keenly aware that reliance on aggregate statistics, such as means and covariance structures, captured only the most typical experiences in the sample while "disappearing"

experiences less typical. In effect, the reliance on aggregate data reproduced the very "common identity" that had created such controversy within the feminist movement. Thus, from the beginning, feminist researchers have felt that information gathered about women should simultaneously honor difference and the complexity of human experience, while being both morally responsible and respectful of research participants. To this end, feminists embraced approaches used in fields such as anthropology and sociology and in certain concentrations within the field of psychology, advocating that research begin with qualitative interviews and/or observation rather than the kinds of quantitative measurements that had become the standards for scientific research. Some feminists even suggested that in-depth qualitative interviewing was the "best" way to find out about women's lives (Oakley, 1981) and interviewing quickly became the "principal means" by which feminists sought to engage in data collection (Graham, 1984, p. 112). Perhaps because of the continuing emphasis on "voice," feminist research has become most closely associated with qualitative methods, which tend to rely on narrative rather than numerical data and offer a multitude of ways to listen carefully to subtleties of speech, emphasize the relational nature of research, and attend to power differentials and cultural context: innovations that have come to define a feminized approach to research (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Way, 2001).

Unfortunately, the intensive and in-depth nature of the data collection and analysis procedures associated with qualitative research is only feasible with limited sample sizes, often fewer than 50 participants. A common critique of such small-scale studies is that the results may not generalize well beyond the bounds of the study sample. Although some researchers downplay the role of generalizability as a primary goal of their

research, the influence of study results on broad public policy frequently hinges on a demonstration of the applicability of the findings to a much larger subpopulation of society. Indeed, evoking large-scale shifts in social policy is a primary focus of feminist activism and thus, the tension between the need to generalize experiences that would unify groups whose experiences indicate strong, undeniable, and coherent need for societal change and the need to attend to true heterogeneity of lived experience still exists for feminist researchers even today.

We hold that what makes a research method “feminist” goes beyond the purpose of the research, the questions asked, or the population served and extends to a particular approach and orientation to research. As Letherby writes, “It is important to stress that it is not the use of a particular method or methods which characterizes a researcher or project as feminist, but the way in which the method(s) are *used*” (Letherby, 2003, p. 81). In this way, we view both quantitative and qualitative approaches to social science research to be potentially powerful tools for feminist inquiry. Indeed, triangulation of research results across qualitative and quantitative studies greatly strengthens the external validity of the findings. However, in cases where quantitative and qualitative findings disagree, integration and interpretation of results across these two disparate research paradigms can be difficult (Maracek, 2003). Discrepant results may stem from differences in studies in terms of sampling frame, the social context of the data collection protocol, the operationalization of the constructs under study, the conceptual model, and/or assumptions underlying the analysis itself.

In an effort to capitalize on the strengths of both approaches and to facilitate cross-method

interpretation of results, there has been an increased emphasis on the use of mixed method approaches that utilize sequential, coordinated substudies to address and refine a given research question. For example, Spencer, Porche, & Tolman (2003) explored the relationship between a gender equitable environment and educational and psychological outcomes by combining survey responses with classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews, using discrepant results from the differing methods to reach complex understandings of the experience and effect of equity within school environments. Still, sequential mixed method approaches continue to rely on embedded substudies that may require different sampling frames, different modes of data collection, and different analytic assumptions. Thus, even with a coordinated mixed method approach, findings from two or more substudies may lead to different conclusions that reflect methodological as well as substantive distinctions.

Fortunately, recent advances in statistical modeling estimators (Muthén & Shedden, 1999) have made it possible to combine elements of both the qualitative and quantitative analytic paradigms into a single analytic model. Models using this new statistical framework, known as latent variable mixture modeling (LVMM: Muthén, 2001), allow for the preservation of individual “voices” that are present in the data while also affording generalizability through the parametric modeling of these individual differences both within and across diverse subpopulations. In this way, models based on the new framework resolve some of the tension between traditional quantitative and qualitative data analysis paradigms in the analysis of large sample data.