Psychology’s Feminist Voices
“Feminist Psychologists Talk About…” Series

Feminist Psychologists Talk About… Research Methods
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fm14F3vahbw

Video Transcript

(Psychology’s Feminist Voices Presents) (jazz music)

(Feminist Psychologists Talk About… Research Methods) (jazz music fades out)

(Mary Crawford, University of Connecticut)
MC: Method creates the questions you can ask and the answers you can get.

(Wendy Hollway, The Open University)
WH: I am still as convinced as ever or more convinced that method is defining of what can be thought and known in psychology. If you do not get your methods right you get very inadequate visions of human being.

(What is the feminist critique of psychology’s methods?)

(Mary Gergen, Penn State University Brandywine)
MG: I mean, the idea that an experimenter has no relationship to the subjects. I mean, everything is a relationship and you must acknowledge that. And then the whole idea that you take subjects and you just rip them out of their everyday lives, tuck them down in a classroom, give them a survey, and now you know about their self-esteem. (cover of Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology) You know, I mean, so disembodied and so de-contextualized. Respecting the context, respecting relationship, respecting people’s relationships with one another. And then as the researcher, acknowledging your presence when you write about things, instead of acting like ‘this happened’, you know, ‘I had nothing to do with it, it was, like, facts.’

(Cannie Stark, University of Regina)
CS: My awareness of women in psychology and women in research stems from when I worked with the Le Dain commission, which was the Royal Commission on the use of non-medical drugs (cover of “Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs”). I was a senior investigator for them, running a study on marijuana. The recruiting was to be only males. I had a number of women who objected to the fact that they were being excluded from smoking good government dope (laughs). I really hadn’t realized until then just the extent to which women were excluded from participating in research, because we were a messy variable.

(Janet Stoppard, University of New Brunswick)
JS: It's absolutely impossible as a psychologist to try and understand things without having some information about social context. (Psychological Understanding Requires
Information about Social Context) I think so much of psychology has done that, you know, just lifted things out of context, and that is the strategy of experimental psychology, with the lab, and it is just useless, pointless to do that kind of work. (cover of Understanding Depression) That's the puzzle: how do we try to get things a little more ecologically valid. (Ecological Validity: The degree to which research findings generalize to real world situations) And, for me that's the appeal of a more qualitative approach, participatory, something that's more grounded in people's everyday lives.

(What role do qualitative methods play in feminist research?)

(Cannie Stark, University of Regina)
CS: I had no colleagues who knew anything about or who believed in qualitative research methods and had never even been told that there was such a thing as qualitative research. It was kind of like I was inventing it for myself in isolation and then I discovered there is a world out there, there are people have attached labels to these approaches.

(Aaronette White, University of California Santa Cruz)
AW: I was trained like most psychologists: that quantitative is what you do and when you do qualitative, mix it with quantitative. You use a mixed methods approach to be accepted in the literature.

(Charlene Senn, University of Windsor)
CS: I was trained very quantitatively. I was very secure in my experimental methodology and so on, but when I went to York to do my PhD I basically felt completely like an imposter because all of a sudden people were talking about theoretical things and about qualitative research and I had no exposure whatsoever to them until that point. (screenshot of “An Imperfect Feminist Journey”) So, it was really a learning experience but, of course, the qualitative method fit much more closely in many ways with my feminist politics.

(Mary Crawford, University of Connecticut)
MC: I’m a methodological pluralist. I certainly don’t reject quantitative methods by any means. I think we have wonderful, sophisticated, quantitative methods. I am also very interested in discursive methods, qualitative methods in general, and most of all what fascinates me is the intersection and the dialogue between and among different kinds of methods. (cover of “Promoting Methodological Diversity in Feminist Research”) So multi-method approaches, this methodological pluralism and intersection I think is something that comes through all my work.

(Rachel Liebert, City University of New York)
RL: I really, really see the political value of quantitative methods, but they’re just crazy-making for me if I try and engage. If I try and design a quantitative research project, or even a survey or something, which is qualitative but can still be quite positivist, anything that tries to force our ideas into categories is crazy-making. (screenshot of “The Politics and Possibilities of Activism in Contemporary Feminist Psychologies”) I just can’t pour
our world into there. I find it so, so difficult, so I always go for methods that allow me to blast things out and make very, very diverse connections.

(But is this psychology?)

(Paula Nicolson, University of London)
PN: I remember after I had gotten my PhD, for the very first paper I tried to write on post-natal depression I had gotten, from someone I knew, I think it was twelve pages, single-spaced abuse. (cover of Postnatal Depression) She was one of the reviewers. She actually named herself, and it was [saying], “This is not psychology. This is nonsense.” It really was quite upsetting, and I feel foolish now that I then didn’t try to publish anything in a journal for quite some time after that.

(Deborah Tolman, City University of New York)
DT: Mary Brydon-Miller is a participatory action person. So she and I were put together, I can’t even remember by whom, (cover of From Subjects to Subjectivities) to do a book, basically, to demonstrate that both narrative and participatory action research was a part of psychology because we had both had the experience of being told that we weren’t psychologists, that psychologists didn’t talk to people. I actually had someone say to me, “How could possibly learn anything about people by talking to them?” Really! I swear to God! Not a feminist psychologist.

(So what are feminist methods?)

(Lisa Diamond, University of Utah)
LD: The main thing is just having a critical perspective on gender and a critical perspective on the methods of science. That does not mean that you have to reject them. I spent many years reading Donna Haraway, and reading Sandra Harding and being about as critical about scientific practice as you could be, but I do it. (cover of Sexual Fluidity) I do it with a critical perspective that understands both the strengths and limitations of that mode of inquiry. There are a lot of scientists who just cling to the scientific method and believe that they’re totally objective, and I think they’re full of bunk. And I’ve met a lot of feminists who are like, “there’s no way to collect data without it being oppressive, and data has no meaning, and the world is socially constructed,” and I think that’s bunk too. For me it means being able to work within the traditional scientific practice with an eye to the social context, the historical context of the development of positivist practice and a very clear view as to what you can and cannot get from that. For me, that is how I define my identity as a feminist scientist. I am doing science, and I believe I am doing good science. But I am not stupid enough to think that I am producing some pure objective knowledge, or that I am seeking the path to truth. I am seeking a path, and I am not sure if it’s truth that I am seeking or knowledge or what. I’ve always has this multifaceted view of methodology.

(Aaronette White, University of California Santa Cruz)
AW: I am listening to the voices of Black women and I am listening to their voices in terms of how they have struggled with race and gender and class, and then later how they struggle with sexuality issues, then I need them to talk to me. It really came from this
feminist position of, “Women’s voices are not listened to. They are often downplayed and ignored. What research methods allow me to clearly hear women’s voices without my voice getting so directly in the way?” That is when I started using interview approaches and started using more narratives because I started asking questions where we didn’t have a lot of information about Black feminists, so I needed to listen to them first. We didn’t have information about Black feminist men. People didn’t believe men could be feminists, let alone a Black man be the poster child for feminism.

(Olivia Espin, San Diego State University)
OE: The last book I wrote on immigrant women and sexuality was done precisely because whenever we talk about immigrant women in field of immigration studies, women are always mothers in families and that’s the only way in which they are talked about (cover of Women Crossing Boundaries). They are not talked about as individuals who are going through a process of transformation as persons. And yes, they may have families or not, but they are people who need to be listened to and their stories deserve attention.

(What is the potential of feminist methods?)

(Carol Gilligan, New York University)
CG: I’d like to see psychology free itself, both in theory and in methods, from the gender binary and the gender hierarchy. That is, to me, the Chi squared table is almost like a magnet for the gender binary. (cover of The Deepening Darkness) All it does is reifies and gives statistical credence to the extent to which we perpetuate patriarchal gender norms and values.

(Rachel Liebert, City University of New York)
RL: I think of my feminism as really, really helping me to think through things like relations of power, to really embrace or value the richness of bodies and feelings and different epistemologies and ways of being in the world that can usually get really marginalized in a very heavily positivist discipline. Therefore, [I use] more creative and collaborative research methods.

(Lorraine Radtke, University of Calgary)
LR: Although some of the feminist scholarship has been absorbed into the mainstream, it’s not always absorbed as explicitly feminist work. And so I think what would be ideal for me would be for feminist psychology to be seen as a kind of meta-theoretical framework for the discipline, and to be recognized in that kind of a way.

(Deborah Tolman, City University of New York)
DT: If we just talk about the vulnerabilities of all of our methodologies then we can pick and choose and in fact put them together in order to maximize what any methodology can bring to understanding whatever it is we want to know.

(Final words…)

(Wendy Hollway, The Open University)
WH: If you look at the term now, “psychosocial studies”, it does not sound feminist. But it is in the sense that the whole of feminist psychology has informed it (cover of Doing Qualitative Research Differently); it is critical, it is qualitative, all those things that had happened over the last 25 years or so. My version of objectivity is through subjectivity. So they are not binary terms anymore.

(Aaronette White, University of California Santa Cruz)

AW: I have just been hooked on the narrative approach then for some of the newer questions that I am asking. I have accepted that it takes me longer because the coding and the, oh my gosh, but I get so much out of it because it’s a relationship. It becomes this dialogue. I don’t forget those voices. (cover of African Americans Doing Feminism) They are not just numbers, they are not just participants, and I usually have lifelong relationships with the people who I do these thick, description narrative in-depth interviews with. They touch your life. They have changed me.

(Dedicated to Aaronette White, 1961-2012)

(Discussion Questions) (piano music)

(How does our choice of methods affect what we can come to know through our research?)

(What are some concerns feminist psychologists have had about the ways psychological research has traditionally been conducted?)

(What characteristics might you, as a feminist researcher, want to build into your methods?)

(Are qualitative methods more ‘feminist’ than quantitative methods?)

(What makes certain research questions more feminist than others?)

(Selected Readings)


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(Produced by Psychology’s Feminist Voices)

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This project was made possible by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.)

(*piano music fades out*)