University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Burr, Vivien

The contribution of feminist research to the rise of qualitative methods: Soft data instead of hard facts.

Original Citation

Burr, Vivien (2008) The contribution of feminist research to the rise of qualitative methods: Soft data instead of hard facts. In: Institute of Educational Research Conference, March 2008, Belgrade, Serbia. (Unpublished)

This version is available at https://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/13699/

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/

The contribution of feminist research to the rise of qualitative methods: Soft data instead of hard facts.

Vivien Burr
University of Huddersfield, UK

Psychology as a science

When I was a psychology undergraduate in the early 1970s, one of the first things I learned was that psychology is a science. Like the natural sciences such as biology and chemistry, psychology was about designing experiments where variables were carefully controlled and measuring their effects. The experiment should be designed so as to control any social or environmental factors that might prevent the researcher from revealing the nature of a psychological phenomenon in its pure form.

Of course, because the subject matter of the psychology is human beings, they are not just like the things studies by the natural sciences- human beings think about what is happening to them in a psychology experiment and have an unfortunate tendency to treat the researcher just like another human being. So the researcher must try to eliminate any biases arising from their own personality, background and status. In effect, the researcher must try to exist for their subjects as little as possible- they must try to be nothing more than a data recording machine. Any interaction with their subjects must be kept to a minimum and must be standardised across all subjects.

Most psychological research that I learned about as an undergraduate was quantitative; but qualitative methods, like interviews, were sometimes used and in fact I later used a structured interview for part of my own PhD research. However, the accepted wisdom at the time was that, when using such tools, the researcher should aim to make them as comparable to quantitative methods as possible; each subject should be interviewed in the same way, using exactly the same questions presented in an identical manner.

All this seemed perfectly reasonable and I was unaware that there were contradictory voices trying to be heard.

The crisis in social psychology

It seems quite bizarre to me now that, during the 1960s and 1970s- that is, around the time when I was studying for my degree, ideas were emerging, particularly in social psychology, that raised serious concerns about our values and methods. This was the first wave of what came to be known as ‘the crisis in social psychology’. Eminent academics such as Rom Harré and Henri Tajfel contributed to this, but it passed apparently unnoticed in my psychology department.

Critics argued that psychology’s research agenda had yielded little that was useful or insightful. There was concern that the experimental method might

be technically sophisticated but offered little understanding of social phenomena- the artificial world of the laboratory could not capture the complexity of human social experience and the important contextual features that give behaviour its meaning. Questions were raised about the ethics of deception and the nature of the relationship between experimenter and subject.

However, as I say this all passed me by; why were these issues not addressed as part of the psychology curriculum? Who decides what is on the curriculum and has anything changed today? In the UK the professional body for psychologists, the British Psychological Society (BPS) has the power to control the content of undergraduate psychology degrees. The curriculum is very similar to what I studied nearly 40 years ago and what we today refer to as 'critical psychology' is not part of it.

The feminist critique

It was only when I began teaching at Huddersfield in the early 1980s that I began to be aware of some of these critical voices, particularly those of feminists who were trying, with some difficulty, to be psychologists. It seemed that the practice of psychology and even its fundamental agenda may be incompatible with feminist ideas. Over the next fifteen years or so, feminist psychologists in the UK such as Sue Wilkinson, Celia Kitzinger, Erica Burman, Corrine Squire and Jane Ussher raised a number of concerns about how women and men are located within psychology, both as researchers and as the subjects of research.

<u>Androcentrism</u>

A key criticism was that psychology is androcentric, that psychology, and especially its claims to status as a 'science', are based on a fundamentally masculine vision of the world, derived from men and male experience; mainstream psychology has been referred to by feminists as 'malestream'.

For example, in Lawrence Kohlberg's classic research on moral development in the late 1950s, Kohlberg developed his theory of moral reasoning using only boys and young men as subjects. Critics, for example Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982), argued that the theory inevitably reflects a male viewpoint and that when girls and women were later studied within this theory their behaviour and experience became distorted.

Such practices construct male experience as normal or standard, so that women become easily seen as deviant or pathological. And this problem reaches beyond gender, for example when psychologists study working class people or ethnic groups using tests or theories that have been derived from white, middle class male subjects. So it is important to recognise that the concerns of feminist psychologists apply well beyond the boundaries of gender.

A second criticism from feminists concerned the research problems that are considered worthy of attention by psychologists. They argued that the

phenomena that psychology has focussed upon have been those that have seemed important to men and the male-dominated discipline as well as the governments and industrialists funding the research, for example leadership, decision-making and problem-solving. But issues that are of direct concern to women were marginalised.

Jane Ussher (1989) tells how her research on menstruation and premenstrual syndrome was not seen as 'real psychology' by her male colleagues. She points out that issues like menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, although of obvious significance to women, were ignored in lifespan research. This marginalisation also operates through editorial decisions to publish or not to publish such work in respected psychology journals and through the decisions of funding bodies.

There has been a growing concern by feminist psychologists to make the study of women's experience legitimate for psychologists. The BPS now has a Psychology of Women Section and even a Psychology of Lesbianism Section. There has been a steady rise in publications which explicitly aim to study women's experience in its own right and to avoid pathologising it by comparing it to a male 'standard'.

But some feminists argue that psychology is even more fundamentally gendered, and that its very foundations as a science are part of an ultimately male experience and vision of the world.

Value-freedom and objectivity

Psychology has built its reputation on imitating the natural sciences and key to this are the concepts of value-freedom and objectivity, the concern that our research is free from prior assumptions, vested interests and subjective interpretations. But some feminists argue not only that vested interests are pervasive in psychology but also that the goals of objectivity and value-freedom themselves are unattainable, masculine fantasies.

Where funding is concerned, it seems obvious that we should at least be cautious about assuming that research findings are value-free and objective; many researchers are very aware of the difficulties in delivering 'unpopular' research findings to industry or government funding bodies. But in addition deep-rooted societal assumptions and values inevitably creep into our research questions and interpretations of research findings:

It is argued that the whole 'sex differences' research agenda of the mid to late 20th century was heavily influenced by entrenched patriarchal assumptions, based on the assumption that men and women are different kinds of people. While psychology claims to be apolitical because it is objective and value-free, this claim is itself seen as very political since it obscures the role that psychology has played and continues to play in supporting social inequalities that are not limited to gender. We may for example also point out the inequalities endorsed by earlier psychological research that supported the idea of racial differences in intelligence.

But feminists make a more general point about value-freedom and objectivity. Science, including Psychology, gives the impression that there are 'facts' about the nature of the world which are waiting to be discovered through our scientific methods and that there are self-evident social problems that need to be researched. But there is really no such thing as a self-evident problem. A problem is always a problem *for* someone; and one person's 'problem' may be another's 'solution'. For example, in the UK we often hear that the breakdown of the family is a problem. Governments complain about the rise in divorce rates and single parent families. These certainly are problems for the state; they have implications for the provision of welfare and housing, as well as for the role of the family in the care of the elderly. However, what has been called women's 'flight from the family' may be, for some women, a solution to the problems of oppressive marriages or abusive partners, and these things may not be experienced as problems by their partners. When this becomes defined as a problem, we must ask for *whom* this appears as a problem and whether some people have a greater power than others to decide just what constitutes a problem anyway.

The kinds of answers we can get to our research questions are necessarily limited by the problems that seem self-evident to us, from our perspective as governments, men, women or any other grouping. And 'objectivity' becomes a fiction. Facts are always the product of someone choosing to ask a particular question which in its turn rests on prior assumptions for instance, that 'the family' should be preserved, or that men and women must be different from one another. So we cannot claim that research findings are truly objective; it is a logical impossibility, since no-one is able to see the world from anything other than their own position in it.

In addition, research findings must be interpreted and are inevitably framed by the knowledge and assumptions of the researcher, who ultimately is just an ordinary human being, like everyone else. It is a fantasy to expect that we can step outside of our culture's taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes by an act of will or by calling ourselves scientists. For example, findings that men are 'field independent' (which is positively valued) and women field dependent (seen as a handicap) might just as legitimately have been interpreted as showing that women are able to take contextual features into consideration and men tend to take things out of context. But they were not.

The researcher-subject relationship

The relationship between researcher and subjects is profoundly undemocratic. The researcher is seen as the bearer of knowledge, the one who tests theories and whose interpretation of the say results carries weight. The subject, by contrast, merely responds to stimuli and is not consulted about the interpretation of their behaviour. Because the experimental subject's behaviour and experience is stripped of the social context which gives their behaviour its meaning, it has been argued that

psychology has not done justice to the perspective and agency of the people it has used in its research, irrespective of their gender, class or ethnicity. Psychology has taken the experience of such people and has offered accounts of it which those people have had no voice in producing and which may served to reinforce the inequalities they already suffer.

But this concern to detach the person from their social world and to construct the fantasy of the separate, self-contained individual that is psychology's subject-matter, is seen by some feminists as a particularly masculine preoccupation; here, a fear and distrust of relationships with others is argued to be a masculine concern, based on anxieties about autonomy and independence. The experimental paradigm in psychology thus becomes seen as associated with the insecurities and vested interests of masculinity. So why should we see this paradigm as superior?

Re-writing the aims of psychological research

The arguments against the experiment as an appropriate research design for psychology are now well-documented, although they have had little impact in the traditional paradigm still enjoys a privileged position. However, there has been a growing move among feminist psychologists (and others) to question the dominant definition of science and to promote methods which are based upon very different assumptions about the aims and purposes of research.

The central concern is for a more democratic vision of research, where the aim is no longer for 'scientists' to perform experiments *on* 'ordinary people' but to conduct research which is explicitly *for* people. Feminists have tried to redress the balance by conducting research which generates explanations that women themselves can own, understand and use to change their lives, not explanations useful to 'male' institutions such as medicine and the law. This model demands that the views and interpretations of the people being researched have at least as much validity than those of the researcher, and has led to a preference for the term 'participant' rather than 'subject'.

So there has been a growing enthusiasm for methods of enquiry which do allow the 'voice' of the participant a place, giving validity to the person's experience and their account of it. Qualitative research methods, which have been widely used in other social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology, are now becoming more respectable in psychology. Nevertheless, there is still a widespread perception that quantitative (or 'hard') data is somehow superior to qualitative (often referred to as 'soft') data. The words 'hard' and 'soft' themselves are so infused with gender connotations that it is difficult not to agree that the quantitative/qualitative debate or divide is one that fundamentally maps on to gender divisions.

Depth interviewing has become a popular method with researchers who aim for the democtratisation of research. But textbook advice on how to conduct rigourous and valid interviews is often based upon the same idea of dispassionate objectivity that underpins the experimental method.

Interviewers are supposed to operate only as recorders of information, and to minimise their own impact upon the respondents in order not to 'bias' their responses. They are advised not to become too friendly with their interviewees or to talk about themselves.

The sociologist Anne Oakley, who has inspired feminist-minded psychologists, sees these recommendations as originating in the same masculine preoccupation with objectivity and detachment that underpins experimental method, and argues that successful interviewing cannot realistically achieve these ends and indeed should not try to do so. Oakley discussed her research, in which she interviewed women about their experiences of childbirth. She argued that the process of conducting an interview is in practice very different from the recommended model (1981). It is a fantasy that the interviewer can be an impersonal stimulus which evokes an uncontaminated or pure response from the interviewee. In reality, interviewer and interviewee are bound up in a social relationship, and the contributions to the interview data of each person cannot be separated.

But this does not mean the interview is biased or invalid; it means that all scientific inquiry involving people is necessarily embedded in a web of social relations from which it simply cannot be separated. Laboratory experiments are no exception to this, and should be seen not as revealing examples of pure and unbiased behaviour, but as social interactions themselves- albeit of a peculiar and particular kind, with their own sets of expectations and rules.

Reflexivity

This view leads to the recommendation that as researchers we accept and work with this interconnectedness between researcher and participant. Breaking the rules of interviewing (for example allowing the researcher to offer their own experience or to answer personal questions) is thus seen as producing a *more* rather than *less* valid interview. The role of the researcher is made explicit in a discussion of the research, which comments upon its own method of production, producing an account which is much more reflexive than would be possible within the traditional paradigm.

For example, a friend of mine was studying the relationship between adopted daughters and their adoptive mothers. As an adopted daughter herself, she argues that to properly research these relationships it would not be possible or desirable for her to try to distance herself from her respondents, and openly discusses the way her own biography has contributed to the research.

Conclusion

Feminist thinkers have contributed to the rise in the use of qualitative methods in psychology by arguing for a different conception of what it means to do science, one that accepts the relativity of different perspectives, that acknowledges that research findings are a co-

production between researcher and participants, that argues for a transparent discussion of the values underpinning our research, that aims to be liberatory and facilitative for its participants, and tries to avoid unequal power relationships in the research process.

However, there is still a deep suspicion and de-valuing of qualitative methods in some parts of the discipline. The labelling of qualitative data as 'soft' as opposed to the 'hard facts' supposedly revealed by more traditional methods, seems to me to signal that in challenging methodological assumptions and traditions in psychology we are challenging something much more fundamental to society- the divisions and inequalities attached to the gender categories of masculine and feminine.

References

Gilligan, C. (1982) In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Oakley, A. (1981) Subject Women, London: Fontana.

Ussher J. M. (1989) The Psychology of the Female Body, Routledge: London.