

Feminist Issues in Qualitative Research With Formerly Homeless Mothers

By: [Elizabeth W. Lindsey](#)

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Abstract:

This article describes the author's attempts to incorporate feminist principles into a qualitative study of the process of successful restabilization among formerly homeless mother-headed families. It discusses methods for dealing with such issues as the research agenda, epistemology, and ethics, so the credibility and agenda of feminist qualitative research is not compromised, and presents case examples from the author's field journals and transcripts of interviews.

Article:

Feminist researchers have noted a special compatibility between feminist research and the principles and methods associated with qualitative research (Allen & Baber, 1992; Harding, 1987; Mies, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Feminism and qualitative methods share a number of common elements. Among them are an emphasis on phenomenology, with importance placed on the experiences and voices of individuals, and a belief in multiple realities; the value of research as a participatory process; the importance of researchers' reflexivity; and the inevitability of researchers' subjectivity and, hence, the need to make that subjectivity overt during all stages of a project (Allen & Baber, 1992; Thompson, 1992). Both feminist and qualitative research challenge the dominant definition of valid research as being quantitative, positivistic, and objective.

Despite their commonalities, feminism and qualitative research are not identical. It is possible to do quantitative feminist research (Jayaratne, 1983; Peplau & Conrad, 1989), and most qualitative research is not informed by feminism. It may be safe to say that what feminism and qualitative research share most are similarities in epistemology and ethics. The two approaches depart from each another in the area of agenda. Feminism is a standpoint theory and, as such, has a specific political agenda: to give voice to women's experience, to illuminate the oppressive effects of patriarchy, and to empower women to make positive changes in their individual lives as well as in the society at large. Qualitative research, encompassing a variety of specific approaches (Bogdan & Bilden, 1992), does not espouse a particular political agenda.

This article explores issues associated with conducting qualitative research from a feminist perspective. It is presented as a case illustration of how I dealt with various issues of concern to both feminists and qualitative researchers in a study of the process of restabilization among mother-headed homeless families. The fact that this research involved poor African American and White women adds an element of complexity because of the differences in social class and, in some cases, race, between me and the participants.

This was a grounded-theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) involving 10 formerly homeless mothers in three Georgia communities. The participants were nominated by the staff of homeless shelters, who judged that the women had been particularly successful in restabilizing their families after their stay in the shelters. During sample selection, attention was given to the racial makeup of the residents in each shelter; 6 of the women were African American, and 4 were White. These women had children who ranged in age from 1 to 16 years; in each case, at least one of the children had stayed in the shelter with his or her mother.

The women were compensated \$25 for participating in interviews, which lasted 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours, were generally conducted in their homes, and were audiotaped and later transcribed. The constant comparative method of data collection and analysis resulted in two major sets of findings, the process of restabilization and factors influencing it, which are reported elsewhere (Lindsey, 1994/1995, 1996).

I am a White woman, trained as a social worker, who began this study while working on a doctorate in child and family development. Like most of the participants, I was born and raised in the South in a family of low-socioeconomic status.

FEMINIST ISSUES AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Thompson (1992) examined three fundamental aspects of re-search methods in relation to feminist-informed studies of family issues: agenda, epistemology, and ethics. Her discussion provides a framework for examining feminist issues in relation to the qualitative research project described here. It is important to note that these three elements are integrally related and that no one element exists independently of the others.

First, Thompson (1992) noted that feminist research inevitably involves the feminist agenda. She then differentiated between research on women, which "aims to document and correct for sexism," and research for women, which "is consciously aimed at emancipating women and enhancing their lives" (p. 4). Research on women is considered to be "corrective" in that it tries to expose inequalities in social institutions, including the family, and to "reclaim concerns of women" (p. 4) by focusing research on issues of importance to women. Research for women has a more radical, action-oriented agenda that attempts to empower women to recognize their strengths and to take action on their own behalf.

Epistemology deals with theories of knowledge: what one thinks one knows and how one comes to know it. Thompson (1992) discussed four aspects of feminist epistemology related to family research: (1) the idea that "all inquiry is valued-sustained and feminist work is political inquiry" (p. 9); (2) the appropriate nature of the participant-researcher relationship and how that relationship contributes to subjectivity or objectivity; (3) the value of privileging women's experience as a source of and justification for knowledge; and (4) the postmodern perspective that there may be no such thing as truth or reality and, if there is, researchers may not be able to discover it, regardless of the methods they use.

Finally, Thompson raised two ethical issues that are of particular concern to feminist researchers: the exploitation versus the empowerment of research participants and the potential for objectifying participants, that is, viewing or treating them as objects of study, rather than as full participants, thus robbing them of "their subjectivity, authority, and individuality" (Thompson, 1992, p. 15). The feminist agenda argues for the use of designs, procedures, and ways of reporting results that empower participants. The concern with objectification raises issues related to authorship, ownership of life stories, and possible differences in the interpretations of researchers and participants. Thompson also noted that some feminist researchers have suggested that "an ethic of care and compassion should also characterize our research" (1992, p. 16).

LaRossa, Bennett, and Gelles (1981) also raised ethical issues related to qualitative research that are of concern to feminist researchers: informed consent and the balance of risks and benefits. Informed consent is not always possible because qualitative researchers cannot specify in advance exactly what will be addressed in the research, because they "consciously make an effort to remain flexible and receptive to the unexpected" (p. 305). In addition, privacy may be invaded through intrusive interviewing or the setting in which the interview is held, which may obscure the roles of researcher and participant and the purpose of the research. Similarities between qualitative interviewing and therapeutic techniques may further confuse the situation and lead participants to "disclose much more intimate information than would have been forthcoming if the subject saw the interviewer as purely a researcher" (LaRossa et al., 1981, p. 308). Ethical issues regarding risks and benefits center on the concern that participants risk public exposure or even self-exposure to an undesired extent.

APPLICATION OF FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

Using Thompson's (1992) framework, I describe, in the remainder of this article, how some of these issues arose in the course of my study of homeless mother-headed families, how I attempted to address some of these issues, and how some issues remained unresolved.

Agenda

The research question I developed reflects a specific agenda of research for women, which focuses on strengths and empowerment. The research question was "What is the process by which homeless mother-headed families are able to become successfully restabilized after staying in a homeless shelter?" Note the assumptions underlying the question: (a) homeless mother-headed families can and do become successfully restabilized and (b) information on this process (women's experience) is valuable.

The research question also demonstrates certain personal and professional interests (perhaps with accompanying biases): an interest in (a) success, rather than failure; (b) the family, rather than single homeless individuals; (c) female-headed families, instead of intact or single-parent father-headed families (to some extent this focus was influenced by research that shows that female-headed families constitute as much as 80% of all homeless families; see Reyes & Waxman, 1989); and (d) larger social issues, in addition to intrafamilial, interpersonal, or intrapersonal issues (influenced by my training and commitment to social work).

In addition, I had a clear agenda for the effect I wanted this project to have on the participants: a positive sense of their own strengths for having successfully dealt with the experience of homelessness. Thus my research was, at some level, action-oriented and interventive.

Epistemology

I have acknowledged the political nature of my research agenda and the fact that I saw this project as strongly influenced by personal and professional values regarding a focus on strengths, rather than deficits, and how families live out societal problems. That I chose a qualitative method with formerly homeless mothers as participants affirms my belief that women's experience is both a valid subject of interest and a valid source of information. However, formerly homeless mothers do not necessarily have a corner on reality or truth regarding the process by which families emerge from homelessness.

Many feminists have adopted the postmodernist assertion that there is no absolute truth or reality that researchers can pin down. This perspective would indicate that others, besides formerly homeless mothers who had been successful in restabilizing their families, may have important knowledge about the process of restabilization. For example, women who were not successful in restabilizing their families could provide information through negative examples (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Service providers who work with homeless families may also have valuable insights into the process that are colored by their experiences with many different families. I recently conducted a survey of service providers' perceptions of the process of restabilization, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. By obtaining data from both formerly homeless mothers and service providers from different types of shelters in different communities, I hope to approximate the process of restabilization more closely than would be possible with a single method and source of data.

Taming researchers' subjectivity. Most of this discussion of epistemology focuses on problems of objectivity-subjectivity and the nature of the relationship between participants and researchers. Both qualitative researchers and feminists argue against the notion of researchers' absolute objectivity and embrace a belief in multiple realities and constructed knowledge. Peshkin (1988) stated that "subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17). He also suggested that subjectivity can actually be a virtue within the qualitative paradigm, "for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (p. 18). However, Peshkin also stated that "untamed subjectivity mutes the emic voice" (p. 21) and urged researchers constantly to seek and monitor their subjectivity to prevent it from overshadowing what they can learn from participants.

Krefting (1991) noted that the unchecked subjectivity of researchers, caused by their overinvolvement with participants, biases, and assumptions, can compromise the internal validity of a study. She presented several strategies for taming this subjectivity, including reflexive analysis through the maintenance of a field journal, member checking, and peer examination, all of which I used in this study

Reflexive analysis is the ongoing assessment of the biases, assumptions, and perceptions researchers bring to their work. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that researchers should keep field journals in which they record their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and hypotheses, generated by contact with participants. Such journals could also contain questions about, and problems and frustrations with, the overall research process (Krefting, 1991). The use of journals allows researchers to become aware of biases so that they can alter their data collection and analysis processes and acknowledge how their subjectivity influenced those processes. I kept such a journal in which I tracked the progress of the study and my personal reactions to the participants and their stories, as well as to the emerging findings.

Even before I began the study, it became clear that I had preconceived ideas about the potential participants. Here is an excerpt from my journal, written about 6 months before I began the interviews:

Last night . . . I went to serve supper at the homeless shelter. I was surprised to see there were very few white people there. . . . I was aware of a sense of hesitation, wondering if I really wanted to do this dissertation. I think I may have romanticized homeless women in my mind and, frankly, was probably seeing them as white rather than black. I view this hesitation as a manifestation of racism and fear of people of a different race and socioeconomic class than myself and wonder how I can present myself as other than a "honky" well-off middle-class white female interviewer. I became aware of my fears about going into housing projects to interview these women and my desire to find some safer territory.

This experience was valuable to me and a good illustration of the importance of learning about the population one aspires to study ahead of time, rather than relying on preconceived ideas. The realization that I would be interviewing African American women forced me to consider how I could attempt to minimize the racial and class distance between us, so they would feel comfortable sharing personal information with me.

Another way in which the journal helped tame my subjectivity was to point out my tendency to overidentify with participants. For example, one participant, Lorna, told me that a former landlord had refused to make repairs to her apartment until the bathroom ceiling finally fell in. Thus I formed impressions of this man as a slumlord and of Lorna as an innocent victim of his procrastination, carelessness, and greed. Several months later, I read a newspaper article about housing conditions in low-income areas of the city, for which both Lorna and her former landlord were interviewed. According to the landlord, Lorna had previously damaged her apartment. He refused to make the repairs she asked for because she had not paid for those damages and because he wanted her to leave his property. Multiple realities! Who Knows the truth?

This incident served as a reminder to me that in interviewing formerly homeless mothers, I was hearing their views of reality, which may have been different from those of other people in their social systems. I cut out the article and placed it in my journal as a warning to keep an open mind about how participants may have contributed to the situations in which they found themselves. This perspective helped me move away from my conceptualization of the participants as victims.

Participant-researcher relationship. Another epistemological issue related to the study was the nature of the relationship of the participants and me as the researcher. For instance, Lorna called me shortly after our interview and asked for help in moving furniture; she later asked me for rides several times. At first I was taken aback, because I had defined our relationship differently from the way she had: To me, this was a professional relationship between a researcher and a participant; she seemed to be asking me to be a friend or, at the least, someone from whom she could ask for favors or help. Although I felt an obligation to her because she had helped me by participating in the study, I began to resent her requests. However, I did not tell her that I did not

want to help her, and I was relieved when her requests for help ended. I wonder if I had somehow communicated to her nonverbally what I could not bring myself actually to say: "I don't want to be your friend."

Probably my most dramatic experience with how feminist qualitative research can lead to dilemmas in the nature of the researcher-participant relationship was my reaction to Ellie. This woman had been homeless a number of times but was now living with her father and his second family, along with three of her five children. Her father refused to take her to see her 18-year-old son, who was in jail for murder, and had even refused a collect call from him. Her father also discouraged Ellie from having visitors, and no one with a car came to see her anymore. I was concerned about her situation, especially since her oldest daughter seemed to be having a recurrence of the cancer with which she was first stricken while the family was staying in a shelter. I wrote in my journal:

I met with Sharan (my dissertation methodologist) yesterday to go over the latest results. At the end of our discussion, I told her that I felt drawn to ask Ellie if she would like me to take her to see her son in jail. We talked about the dangers of getting too involved, but Sharan believed that once the data are collected, there is less danger of a personal relationship contaminating the study. She seemed more concerned about the cost to me person-ally . . . She concluded our conversation by saying that she could see why I would be tempted to try to help some of these women, but that I should be careful not to get more involved than I really want to. She suggested that I call Ellie next week and see if she still needs a ride. She also suggested trying to link Ellie up with a community service that might provide a ride. I'm still drawn toward offering her one myself. I guess I'll think about it.

In the end, I offered to give Ellie a ride, but she did not accept it. Another passage from my journal, this one written immediately after my first interview with Ellie, sheds some light on why this situation was such a dilemma for me:

When the interview was over, I was left with a feeling of being honored that she chose to share such intimate details of her life story with me. I guess that's a predominant feeling I have right now, a sense of being honored by these women's trust, as well as a sense that they really want to tell their stories.

My desire to help Ellie came not from a desire to compensate her for telling me her story or for giving me her time, but from a genuine desire to help someone I admired for her perseverance in the face of life experiences I could hardly even imagine, much less understand. I am reminded of the notion that feminist researchers should adopt an ethic of care and compassion and that being a researcher does not necessarily prevent one from caring for the people involved in one's research. In this situation, consulting with Sharan (Krefting, 1991) helped me to sort out my feelings and my role as a researcher versus my role as a human being. Writing in my journal helped crystallize my thoughts, but I really needed to talk with someone else to help me sort out the issues involved.

Another way in which the nature of the relationship between researchers and participants became an issue in this study involved my interactions with several nonparticipants. A director of a shelter in one of the study communities introduced me to potential participants by writing them letters. He had formed close personal relationships with many of the people who had come through his shelter, often based on shared Christian beliefs. It became clear that some of the women who received his initial letters closely associated me with him, which probably helped me gain their cooperation but also raised some difficult issues. For example, before I even contacted her about participating in the study, one woman phoned and asked me to come to the hospital and pray with her before surgery. Another woman phoned and asked me to bring food for Thanksgiving and then for Christmas.

Fortunately, the second woman did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study, so I had no issue to resolve (other than the personal issue of whether or not to take food to her). However, the first woman did meet the criteria for inclusion. I was surprised by her request that I should pray with her at the hospital, but I decided to do it, even though I was uncomfortable with her belief that I was a deeply religious person. Was my reluctance

to decline to pray with her a lack of assertiveness? Was it White middle-class guilt (she was African American and poor)? Was it a desire not to hurt her feelings or sully her memory of the shelter director, who had since moved out of town? I was clearly a replacement for him, because she had made similar requests of him in the past.

If I went to the hospital and then interviewed her, would the information she gave me or my analysis of those data be contaminated? I do not know the answers to these questions. My way of resolving this dilemma was to exclude her from the study and agree to meet her at the hospital, although I had to cancel my visit when I became (conveniently?) ill myself.

Participants who are not familiar with research agendas and procedures may well believe that researchers are taking a personal interest in them beyond the scope of the study I decided to let the study take a backseat at times, but obviously, if many potential participants had shared the perceptions of these two women and I did not find another way to resolve my dilemma, I would not have been able to complete the project.

Ethics

The third methodological aspect of concern to feminist qualitative researchers is ethics, specifically in relation to the possible exploitation or objectification of participants.

Exploitation. I was particularly worried about exploiting the participants because they were extremely poor women who had experienced a variety of traumas in their lives, and I did not want them to undergo any more traumas because of the project. In addition, 6 of the 10 participants were African American, and I strongly believed that many of their previous experiences with White women, especially in the social service sector, had been demeaning and even humiliating. Therefore, my agenda was to create a research environment and process that would empower the women to recognize and appreciate their strengths in the face of adversity, and I did not want to invade their privacy in ways that were offensive or hurtful to them. I adopted the following three strategies for dealing with these ethical issues:

- I paid them, which I hope conveyed my appreciation of the value of their time. However, I do not believe that \$25 repaid them for opening their hearts to me.
- I designed the interview to focus on success, rather than failure. Although I followed up on unsuccessful experiences when the participants mentioned them, I did not include specific questions about their lack of success in the interview guide, other than to ask about barriers they had experienced. Also, I took care in phrasing certain questions. For example, I asked, "What happened that you did not have a place to live?" rather than "Why were you homeless?" and "To what do you attribute your success at getting back on your feet?" rather than "How were you able to move out of the shelter?"
- I tried to honor the participants' privacy, believing that the right to privacy was more important than information I could perhaps have pried out of the women. When the women seemed uncomfortable, declined to answer a question, or were not specific, I did not press them. It is interesting that they often ended up sharing the sensitive information later in the interviews, after they had become more comfortable with me. For instance, one woman declined to explain specifically why she had become homeless and said only that she had been evicted from public housing for her failure to pay the rent. Later in the interview, she confided that she had spent all her money on drugs. Another woman seemed reluctant to talk about whether she had considered turning to her family before she entered the homeless shelter. Later she told me that her parents had abused her when she was a child, that one of her brothers was in prison, and that she had cut off all contact with the other brother.

Even though I attempted to be sensitive to the participants' feelings, it is possible that some of the strategies and procedures I used may have set the stage for the invasion of the women's privacy. Patton (1990) stated that good qualitative interviewing includes the communication of empathy with participants. Yet, empathy is also a

specific therapeutic technique. LaRossa et al. (1981) pointed out that holding interviews in participants' homes and using an open-ended interviewing style similar to what a therapist might use may actually lead participants to share more than they feel comfortable sharing, especially in retrospect.

An example of how LaRossa et al.'s (1981) warning predicted an event in my study occurred in an interview with Jean. Jean was a 52-year-old White woman who had been homeless many times in her life, both with her own children and later with her grandchildren. She had also been severely beaten by a man she loved. As she talked about this latter experience, she began to cry, and she cried again several times during the interview. Concerned that I had stirred up more than she was able to deal with, I asked her (quoted from the interview transcript):

I: As you talked today, I got a sense of you being there for a lot of people, and I wonder who's there for you. [In my transcription, I noted: "Okay, here comes Therapist Betsy!"]

J: God. We have a very personal relationship. And I'm a very self-sufficient person, so . . . sometimes when I need things, there's usually someone there.

I: So, I just kind of wonder, with all you're putting out for all these people around you who need you, how do you get filled back up again? [Here, I noted on the transcript: "She never gives up, folks!"]

J: [She went on to talk about how God helps her and ended up crying again.]

I: Well, you know, we've talked about some pretty intense things today and the last time we talked.

J: Oh, yeah. I've been in a lot of pain with my shoulder, and that wears me out.

Clearly, Jean did not see me as her therapist and preferred to associate her emotions with her physical condition instead of with her memories of the abuse, so I backed off. Although many of the women I interviewed cried during our conversations, Jean was the only one who really brought out the therapist in me, probably because she seemed so out of touch with her own needs that she tapped into my need to take care of others. Was this exploitation—gathering research data at the emotional expense of a participant? I do not think so, but I cannot be sure. Jean did tell me that she enjoyed talking with me, but, of course, I do not know if she was being honest or if she later regretted having opened up to me.

To reassure myself that the participants were not feeling exploited and to allow them the experience of reflecting on the interview process, I asked each participant what it was like to tell me her story. Every woman I spoke with responded in a positive fashion. The following are some examples of their responses:

Oh, I don't mind. . . . I would hope that you would be able to help somebody because of something that I said.

I really enjoyed it. It seem like I been knowing you. [We both laughed.] I mean I feel totally comfortable with you.

It's been fun to me. [laughing] I guess to actually sit back and . . . just talk about some of the things I've actually been through. And I've actually listened to myself talking, saying, "Whew, gosh, I did do it. . . . You did pretty good with yourself."

Although I do not know whether the participants later regretted having been so open with me, subsequent phone conversations led me to believe that they did not feel exploited by our interactions.

Objectification of participants. Related to this issue are such questions as, Whose story is it? How much input

do participants have in the research process? What responsibility do I have, as a researcher, to make judgments about the information I have received that may be at odds with the participants' opinions or views? Throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study, it was clear to me that the individual women's stories were theirs—in a sense, on loan to me—but to be treated as their property. Once I began writing up the results, however, I developed a strong sense of ownership.

Stacey (1988) concluded that the products of research are the researchers' because the researchers shape their final reports in their own ways. However, this stance does not fully appreciate the notion of coconstructed knowledge: Because what re-searchers write comes out of their interaction with participants, can it belong solely to either party? For example, if I wrote a book that included these women's stories and the findings I cocreated with them that was later published, would the women not be entitled to some financial remuneration? Would the fact that almost all these women are still extremely poor be an important consideration? Might I feel less of an obligation to share financial rewards with middle- or upper-income participants? I have not yet had to make these decisions, but the issues they raise are of ethical concern.

One way in which researchers can avoid objectifying participants is to see and treat them as experts on their own lives, as well as on the phenomenon being studied. This is a principle of both qualitative and feminist methodologies that requires the researcher to adopt an attitude of not-knowing curiosity. Many of the questions I asked during the interviews reflected my belief that the participants were experts. For instance, I asked what advice they would give to other mothers in similar situations and to the staff of shelters about how to help families get restabilized as quickly as possible. I also asked what advice they would give to researchers who are interested in learning more about homelessness and if there were additional questions I should ask future participants. These questions seemed to help the participants summarize their thoughts about what we had discussed during the interviews and let them know that I believed their opinions were valuable.

Another way that researchers can avoid objectifying participants is to ask them for feedback on the findings (member checking), a strategy that Krefting (1991) stated also improves the validity of qualitative studies by ensuring that the findings accurately represent the realities of the participants. Member checking involves "testing with informants the researcher's data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions" (Krefting, 1991, p. 219). In this study, I sent summaries of the participants' accounts of their experiences to the participants for verification and clarification. When the participants asked that specific information be deleted from the summaries, I did so. In addition, I asked two participants to review and comment on the findings of the study, although time constraints prevented me from having any participants read the entire final report.

Participants' involvement in developing the findings of a study raises the question of what to do if some of the participants disagree with the researcher's interpretation of the findings. Even if I had time to ask the participants to review the final report, it would have been difficult to ask one of them to review the findings because I reported some of my impressions of her that she would probably not have appreciated. Thus my desire to avoid hurting a participant's feelings might have kept me from seeking what could have been valuable input. On the other hand, if the participant refused to allow me to include her in the report, information about her experiences would have been lost. Therefore, when researchers decide to involve participants in various stages of a study, it is important to decide how to handle such issues ahead of time.

How to report differences of opinion or conflicting findings is yet another issue. Stacey (1990) showed by example how to incorporate participants' thoughts about research processes and products into a book-length research report. However, space limitations make it difficult for most researchers to include so much information in reports published in journals.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have a demanding task when they attempt to incorporate principles of good qualitative research and feminism into the designs of their research projects. Although this case study has illustrated ways in which I attempted to incorporate these principles into my work with formerly homeless women, I could have used

additional strategies to manifest these principles even more thoroughly. For instance, I could have involved participants in the actual design of the study, asked them to generate research questions, specifically looked for negative cases to illuminate further the multiple realities of homeless families, and asked participants to review and give feedback on the final document.

As LaRossa et al. (1981) pointed out, the nature of qualitative research is such that we researchers never know ahead of time exactly what will happen and what will be important. Feminist principles can serve as guideposts to ensure that we handle issues of agenda, epistemology, ethics, and method responsibly and take into account that the participants are not simply subjects but individuals who are sharing their lives with us. For that gift, we owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude and a commitment to do no harm.

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