

Narrative, Post-Modern, and Feminist Theory  
(Paper on feminist theory presented as part of a roundtable discussion.)

Paper presented at the 1995 Rural Sociological Society  
Pentagon City, VA

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### Feminist Theory

Earlier this summer I attended the 17th annual Women Coal Miners' Conference in Charleston, WVA. There they were selling tee-shirts that read: "Feminism is the radical thought that women are people, too." I also thought about last night's RSS Presidential address given by Ann Tickamyer and decided to do some participant observation of the audience. Men were generally bored and the women were generally attentive. I think my results point out why we do need to offer feminism as an alternative perspective for rural sociological investigation.

Like postmodernism and the narrative approach, feminist theory also challenges conventional interpretations of science and society by striving to understand different ways of viewing the world and the complex identities upon which these views are based according to gender, race, class, region, ethnicity, and sexuality. However, while more feminists are embracing aspects of postmodernism, many feminists actively reject postmodernism largely because of its failure to further a political agenda. Unlike postmodernists, feminist theory focuses primarily on explaining and changing the subordination of women. While it is not possible to consider the vast array of feminist theories here, we briefly discuss shifts in

feminist epistemology and the implications these shifts have for both theory and method in rural sociology.

A strategic starting point for this discussion would be to examine positivists' expectations that scientific knowledge is objective and, thus, universal. Feminists generally argue that dominant social science epistemology emerges from and actually serves the purposes of the privileged social classes and primarily the interests of men. They argue that women have been excluded from defining what counts as knowledge and that questions in various fields have rarely been asked from women's perspectives. In recognizing this situation, feminists join other critics of positivism in asking questions of conventional epistemology such as: Can there actually be value-free, objective knowledge? Who are the subjects and agents of knowledge? What is the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge? (Harding 1991). In responding to these questions, feminists offer several competing epistemologies listed here in the order of their evolution: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism (Harding 1991).

Feminist empiricism attempts to eliminate sexist biases in research by exposing androcentric biases in scientific research. Much of the early feminist work in rural sociology (Bokemeier and Tickamyer 1985; Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1988) proceeded from this approach. However, many scholars working in this tradition soon understood that employing scientific methods more rigorously failed to significantly shift research questions to more adequately explain women's situations. Following such research trajectories,

many feminist theorists of knowledge recognized that women's experiences differed from men's and that scholarship should begin from the daily life experiences of women. Such a reconceptualization of women's experiences simultaneously defies the assumption that women and men possess the same sociocultural system of meaning and exposes the male bias inherent in sociological theories and research.

Feminist standpoint theorists suggest that women have particular standpoints (Smith 1987) or angles of vision (Collins 1991), but because of women's subordination to men, their standpoints remain subjugated and unheard. Standpoint theory leads us to examine how the context of women's lives situates them in different positions than men for understanding and changing the world. For example, Haraway's (1991) concept of situated knowledge provides an avenue for understanding multiple perspectives and the experiences of rural women. While some rural sociologists have examined race (Jensen and Tienda 1989; Snipp et al. 1993), ethnicity (Salamon 1985), and class (Goss et al. 1980), findings from these studies are not central to the general theories of rural society, perhaps with the exception of class issues. Feminist attempts to include the multiple perspectives and identities of women from different races, regions, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities also can prove useful for rural sociologists.

Feminist standpoint theorists also argue that women's standpoints are privileged and offer emancipatory possibilities for transforming gender relations. One common unifying theme that has

emerged among feminist scholars is women's modes of resistance to their subjugation by males. They focus on what women know about those who attempt to disempower them and how they compromise, accommodate, and defy those individuals who represent the male system. In her writing about African-American women, Collins (1991) states that women have developed a "dual consciousness," enabling them to deal with their "other" status in the white male world. This consciousness contains knowledge about the oppressor common to all women and knowledge about the self. The very separate nature of the two types of knowledge sustains women in the face of dominant forces. Investigations of this duality could be used to inform the agendas of women's political activism in all spheres of their lives including social science and the production of legitimate knowledge.

However, much debate has ensued concerning what, if anything, comprises the particular life experiences that women share. Just as feminists avoid using the falsely universalistic practices of positivism, they also strive to recognize and understand the diversity or multiplicity of women's voices. In fact, some feminist theorists embrace the turn towards postmodernism, critiquing earlier feminists for falling into the trap of "essentializing" women. Recently, Haraway (1991) questioned the necessity of delineating one feminist standpoint. Rather her work suggests that knowledge claims are derived from situated, located positions; that is there are multiple standpoints and positions, not a singular feminist standpoint. In this regard,

African-American women, other women of color, and lesbians have seriously questioned the concept of a singular women's standpoint and successfully challenged feminist theorists and practitioners to consider differences between women by race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. For example, Collins (1991) argues that black women cannot separate their experiences of being women from being black. Anzaldua (1990) points out how the hybrid, multiple identities and experiences of women of color force them to survive by developing flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and divergent thinking. In a similar vein, lesbian theorists such as Allison (1994) challenge heterosexist assumptions in feminist theory and call for attention to the particular experiences of lesbians. Judith Butler (1990) goes even further to question the very stability of the categories of sex and gender. All of these turns broaden feminist analysis to include and recognize the multiple perspectives of women and to provide more complex and deeper pictures of women's lives.

Shifts in feminist epistemologies also compel feminist social scientists to continually reshape their methodology. The issues raised by recent work on feminist epistemology have implications for studies of rural women in terms of their life experiences, their differences, and their resistance to male dominance or institutions in rural society. As in sociology, most rural sociologists generally use theories developed from men's perspectives in which women are defined in terms of men's activities. Otherwise, rural sociologists have often confined their investigation of gendered issues to the use of gender as a

variable. Recently, some studies have used feminist theory and corresponding methodologies to demonstrate how rural women's experiences differ substantially from men's. While feminist methodological approaches vary widely, we discuss three key aspects here by continuing our critique of positivism, noting different investigations of women's experiences, and concluding with ways to pursue an action agenda.

The tenets of feminist method stand in sharp contrast to traditional social science methods. Feminist epistemological goals veer from the search for universal truth, thereby leading to a critique of positivist research methods which include claims to objectivity, value neutrality, and sole reliance on statistics and quantitative methods. Feminist social scientists claim that reliance on statistics and quantitative methods, as the privileged way to describe the world, limits our understanding of women's lives.

Central to feminist methodology is the approach of beginning with women's experiences as the starting point for analysis. Smith (1987) emphasizes how sociological work overlooks women's everyday experiences and how men's categories have traditionally defined research problems and approaches. For women scholars, "the challenge to begin with our own experiences arose out of the frustration at the realization that women's lives, their history, their struggles, their ideas constitute no part of dominant science" (Mies 1991:66). By understanding women's daily lives, scholars are better positioned to interpret social life more fully.

An important aspect of this approach involves seriously considering emotions and feelings as well as reason. Stanley and Wise (1983) point out that both the researcher and the research subject's emotions are relevant.

While not arguing against the usefulness of statistics, feminist methodologists have employed oral histories, ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and other data-gathering techniques. Most often they have used the semistructured or unstructured interview. These techniques are a departure from the survey interview because they allow for a guided conversation with the opportunity for clarification and relatively free interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Reinharz 1992). Thus, avoiding the standardization of response and ultimate control over the research participant characteristic of positivistic techniques, the relationship between the interviewer and research participant becomes more egalitarian. Moreover, the data gathered reveal a rich diversity of understanding unattainable via dominant research approaches.

Feminist methodological approaches have become increasingly reflexive, recognizing the limitations of qualitative as well as quantitative research. Many researchers focus on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and those they are researching. Attempts to empower research participants may be problematic. As stated earlier, feminist methodology challenges the notion of value-free science by identifying the false separation between subject and object, between the knower and the known. By rejecting

the relations between researcher as subject and researched as object, feminist scholars call for a participatory, empowering approach to research. By building on Marxist and critical theory, feminist researchers pursue an explicitly political agenda for improving women's lives, thus, directly confronting scientific claims of value neutrality.

The work of many feminist researchers appears biased from the positivist perspective. Rather than claiming an objective, value-free stance, feminist researchers emphasize subjective reality and explicitly support political agendas for improving women's lives. However, their willingness to explicitly focus on the political nature of their research can be instructive to rural sociologists, many of whom work to improve rural communities and rural people's well-being. Rather than drawing a strict line between action and research, feminists see their research problems and methods as connected to social change. Important similarities exist between feminist methods and participatory action research strategies, as suggested by Chambers (1990) and others. In sum, feminist methods are consistent with recent sociological attention to people's agency and their potential to change their lives.

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