Feminist Social Research:
Epistemological and Methodological Implications

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Introduction

As Shulamit Reinharz demonstrates in her book *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992), 'Feminist Social Research' is an idea that feminists have conceptualized in numerous ways. Feminists define it as (among other things): research done from a feminist perspective (Reinharz 1992), research about women’s oppression (Kelly et al 1991), research grounded in and starting from the everyday lives of women (Smith 1987a), research that places the social construction of gender at the center of its analysis (Lather 1991) and research that generates its problematics from women’s experiences (Harding 1987). Some argue that there is a distinct feminist method (Kasper 1994), while others argue that, though there is no specific feminist method, there are specifically feminist methodologies (Jayarante et al 1991). Some of these debates regarding the status of feminist research are primarily focused on the theoretical or substantive positions of feminists and involve contention about the ‘proper’ approach to feminism (e.g. liberal vs. Third World vs. radical vs. Marxist feminisms). Other debates focus around the nature of research itself. These debates are organized around the subjects of epistemology, methodology and research methods-- it is to this latter set of debates that I turn in this paper.

In the past twenty years feminist theorists and researchers have produced a wide body of literature assessing feminism’s relationship with conventional epistemologies and research.

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1 Theoretical debates and controversy over the definition of feminism certainly cannot be separated entirely from epistemological or methodological concerns. In some cases, such as ethnomethodology for instance, theory and methodology are directly related and theoretical positions inform all epistemological positions (and vice-versa). Feminist and sociological theory, therefore, must be a part of any epistemological or methodological discussion. I make the distinction between the theoretical/substantive debates and those in epistemology and methodology, then, simply to stress that theoretical debates, in this paper, will primarily be viewed from the lens of what this will mean for our understandings of science, knowledge, sociology or research methods.
methodologies. In positions ranging from attempts to fit women/feminism into dominant research traditions to complete rejections of positivist epistemology and the quantitative methods generally associated with them, feminists confront a wide range of issues including the concepts of objectivity, rationality, the role of the researcher, and the strengths and weaknesses of various quantitative and qualitative research methods. Drawing on other critiques of positivist epistemology and traditional research methods, from such traditions as ethnomethodology, critical theory and most recently postmodern and post-structural theories, feminists both assess the viability of these theories for feminist research projects and expand these theories by the inclusion of gendered critiques of epistemological and methodological traditions.

Epistemology, methodology and research methods can be viewed as three different levels of analysis all dealing with the same issues: the nature and production of knowledge and research. Though there are logical connections between debates and positions in epistemology, methodology and research methods, too often these three subjects have remained separate from one another with very little dialogue between them. Theorists have produced a wide range of literature in the field of feminist epistemology regarding the concepts of objectivity, rationality, experience and science taking various positions on positivist and postmodernist epistemologies (see for instance Alcoff and Potter 1993; Lennon and Whitford 1994). These debates, however, are seldom connected explicitly to what this means for actually performing social research. Though they have produced fascinating results among themselves, how they specifically relate to methodology and methods is rarely made clear. Can, for example, an anti-realist, anti-objectivist epistemological position be useful for feminist sociological research? Do these epistemological debates imply the necessity for utilizing specific research methods or can any methods be made to
work with them? How can these interesting epistemological positions be translated into equally fruitful methodologies?

In this paper I examine some of the primary debates in feminist epistemology, with a particular emphasis on postmodern epistemological positions, asking what these mean for doing research. One central question I ask is ‘what role should the concept of objectivity have in feminist sociological research?’ I argue for a reformulation of the concept of objectivity that, sympathetic with feminist postmodernism, rejects the ideal of value-neutrality in research, but that also rejects relativism and subjectivism. Keeping these debates in mind, I will examine debates regarding feminist methodology and the question of whether or not there is a specific feminist method or methodology. I argue against the existence of a distinct ‘feminist method’ and reject the polarization between quantitative and qualitative research that dominates much of this debate.
Feminist Epistemology

Feminist theorists/researchers have engaged in a wide variety of epistemological debates. One of the most significant of these is in regards to what relationship feminist research should have with positivist epistemology. Can feminist social research be effective within this epistemological framework? Should feminists attempt to use conventional epistemology to guide their research and eliminate masculinist bias or should central concepts of positivism such as objectivity and value neutrality be rejected? Can a postmodernist epistemological position be compatible with conducting sociological research?

Sandra Harding (1986; 1991), prominent analyst of the relationship between science, epistemology, and feminism, identifies three major strains of feminist epistemology: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemology, and feminist postmodernism. These three forms of feminist epistemology approach issues of positivism and objectivity in distinctly different ways. Feminist empiricists (e.g. Millman and Kanter 1975; Cancian 1992; Molm 1993) argue that sexism and androcentrism in conventional sociological research is the result of bias on the part of researchers. These social biases, they argue, are "correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry" (Harding 1986: 24). They argue that traditional concepts such as objectivity are not the problem; it is a lack of objectivity that needs to be eradicated. Feminist standpoint theorists (e.g. Smith 1987; Collins 1991; Hartsock 1987; Stanley

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2 These three frameworks are neither entirely discrete from one another (for instance there are postmodern feminist standpoint theorists) nor homogenous categories (there are many disagreements among feminist postmodernists). Though classifying feminist epistemological positions according to one of these three categories is not free from problems and can hide some of the more subtle differences between them (differences I highlight throughout the paper) I do think Harding's tripartite model provides a useful framework to understand the major divisions in feminist epistemology and I will use her model throughout the paper.
and Wise 1990, 1993) argue that areas of inquiry in sociology have traditionally been defined through the viewpoint of those in the most dominant positions in society (i.e. those of upper/middle class, white, heterosexual, men). This has caused, they argue, an extremely skewed view of society in which the status quo is treated as either natural or functional by those who gain the most by the maintenance of contemporary social and economic relations. Alternatively, the standpoint theorists argue, research should begin from the standpoint of women and other marginalized people who occupy the positions of outsiders/within able to see more critically and perceptively some important aspects of social organization (Collins 1990a; 1990b). Finally, feminist postmodernists (e.g. Hekman 1990; Fraser and Nicholson 1990; Haraway 1988) offer an extreme critique of conventional epistemology. They argue that all ‘knowledge’ is necessarily partial and socially situated, that value neutrality is never possible, and that concepts such as truth and objectivity must be deconstructed.

These three epistemological positions offer very different understandings of such concepts as rationality, objectivity, science and even gender. A wide range of critiques have been leveled against all of these positions-- both from within feminism and from without. Critics accuse feminist empiricists of being too foundationalist and of offering a too lenient critique of conventional research, able to deal with only the symptoms and not the causes of androcentric/sexist research (Haraway 1987; Hekman 1990). Many charge feminist standpoint theorists with essentialism, an inattentiveness to differences among women and an unsophisticated understanding of ‘experience’ (Haraway 1987; Longino 1993; Bar-On 1993). To many, the

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3 Though not exclusively, I will primarily use examples of feminist criticisms of other feminist epistemological positions in this paper.
feminist postmodernist position seems utterly relativist and nihilist, having little connections to the actual necessities of doing research (Walby 1991; DiStefano 1990; Shelton and Agger 1993).

In the epistemology section of this paper, I explore the significance of these varying positions, connecting these to methodological concerns. Using the debates over the concept of objectivity to frame my analysis, I first examine the feminist empiricist and feminist postmodernist positions, which represent the two poles of this debate within feminism. The feminist empiricists, I argue, are not sufficiently attentive to the inevitable political and social investedness of their own (and all) research. The feminist empiricists, have, though, and will continue to have, an important corrective influence upon the most flagrant sexism and androcentrism in sociological research; though I cannot agree fully with their epistemological assumptions, the importance of their project of critiquing dominant research from within the epistemological framework of that research should not be underestimated. I will argue for many of the epistemological positions of the feminists postmodernists, drawing particularly on the works of Harding (1986; 1991; 1993) and Haraway (1987; 1990), stressing, however, that postmodernists must not replace objectivism with subjectivism or fall into epistemological relativism. Finally I will examine the arguments of feminist standpoint theorists who offer a variety of positions on debates regarding objectivity and 'women's experience' (some of which are highly foundationalist while others are distinctly postmodernist) to show a more applied example of what is at stake for social research in these epistemological debates. Feminist standpoint theory, I argue, can offer a useful framework from which to begin some research-- but only if it conceptualizes difference within the category of women (particularly race, class and sexuality) at the very heart of its theories, and only if a feminist standpoint is seen as a useful beginning, not an end, for research.
Positivism

Thus far I have been using the term 'positivism' in a fairly general and undefined way. Before I present critiques of positivism I feel it is important to more fully define the ways in which I will be using this term. The term 'positivism' can be used to signify a variety of things. Using a narrow sense of the word, the traditional positivist position is exemplified by the philosophies of the Vienna Circle of logical positivism and the Sociologies of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. The primary positions of these thinkers can be discussed in terms of two major issues: arguments regarding the status of (social) science and arguments about value-neutrality and objectivity.

The first issue, that of the nature and status of science, is perhaps best represented by the Vienna Circle's project of 'unified science.' This refers to their belief in a universal scientific method common to the natural and social sciences in which "methodological procedures of science are unitary regardless of their domain of application" (Heritage 1984: 45). Similarly, Auguste Comte, who coined both the terms 'positive philosophy' and 'sociology' (Giddens 1993) argued that sociology should be strictly modeled after the natural sciences, so that people and their institutions are viewed as 'neutral objects' which could be investigated in basically the same way as any other scientific object (Held 1980: 155). This designation of sociology as science is not merely descriptive, but also evaluative, in that scientific knowledge is privileged as the only true knowledge (all else being simply beliefs or opinions) and is implicated in the Enlightenment project of a search for the foundations of knowledge.
In situating sociology as a science, Comte and Durkheim make a number of assumptions about what ‘science’ means. One of the most fundamental of these is the requirement of objectivity and value neutrality. Under the requirements of positivism, knowledge and facts must be separated strictly from values and beliefs (Bottomore 1984). Durkheim, for instance, argues for a science of society that studies social facts (which are ‘things’ and exterior to the individual). This science requires objectivity, defined in this case as: “rigorous detachment on the part of the investigator of social reality . . . an emotionally neutral attitude toward what he sets out to investigate” (Giddens 1992: 89-90). In this model the position of the researcher is irrelevant, “objective theories are supposed to involve a ‘god’s eye view’ which transcends any particularity of situation and perspective” (Barwell 1984: 81).

Any individual biases of the researcher are supposed to be eliminated through application of the scientific method— in this model the epistemological agent/knower is an individual whose context is irrelevant. Implied in this is a separation between the ‘context of discovery’ (the circumstances hypotheses and research questions emerge from) and the context of justification (the arguments for a particular theory/set of data)— the context of discovery is epistemically irrelevant and the ‘bias eliminating’ aspects of the scientific method need only be directed toward the context of justification.

The major tenets of this positivist epistemology can be generally divided between objectivism (advocating value-free, impartial, dispassionate research) and arguments about the status of science (specifically that the social and natural sciences are unified epistemically and methodologically and the equation of knowledge with science). The distinction between these two aspects of positivism is useful because some non-positivist sociology, such as various forms
of interpretive/hermeneutic sociology (from Weber to phenomenology and ethnomethodology),
do not share the assumptions of Durkheim, Comte and the logical positivists assumptions about
the nature of social science; they may, however, advocate their own forms of objectivism (and are
thus implicated in those critiques of positivism which are centered around an anti-objectivism).
Weber provides a good example of this. Weberian interpretive sociology disagrees with a
Durkheimian focus on externality/social facts and instead is focused around Verstehen and
meaning/subjectivity in human social life. Weber argued that the methods of the natural science
were not necessarily relevant to the social sciences, which required their own methodologies due
to their interpretive focus (Turner 1992: 214). This position understands science/social science
very differently than the traditional positivist position does. Weber’s focus on subjectivity,
though, does not represent a complete rejection of objectivism—though it takes different forms
and nuances than that of Durkheim, ‘objectivity’ is a central part of Weber’s epistemology
(Bannister 1987). Though his faith in the potential for science to be completely value free was
perhaps not as strong as that of Durkheim and Comte, Weber still argued that Verstehen and
subjectivity must be studied objectively (Giddens 1992: 134). Phenomenological social science
also shares Weber’s rejection of scientism, but some retention of requirements of objectivity.
Phenomenology offers strong arguments against privileging scientific discourse as the model of all
‘true knowledge’ in its focus on ‘folk knowledge’ and its arguments for understanding science as
a practice (Giddens 1993: 19). Yet in its project of ‘bracketing’ presuppositions it “aims at
eliminating what the investigator takes for granted so that ‘things themselves’ appear without the
distorting influence of presuppositions” (Rogers 1983: 4)—which, though drawing on very
different assumptions and working towards different goals than conventional positivist-empiricism, is a position that can be understood as its own form of objectivism.
**Feminist Empiricism**

The feminist empiricists basically adhere to most major tenets of positivism and are critical of masculinist or androcentric research for failing to be objective enough. Millman and Kanter (1975) serve as Sandra Harding’s (1986) primary example of this position. In their influential book *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science*, Millman and Kanter demonstrate many problems and lacuna in traditional research that have distorted the understanding of women and gender and, consequently, all of social reality. These problems include a focus on the public/official at the expense of the private sphere, not taking gender into account as an important variable in all fields of sociology, naturalizing the status quo as ‘functional,’ and using solely or predominantly male samples from which to make generalizations about society as a whole. Millman and Kanter, highly critical of the biases of dominant (masculinist) social research suggest that movements for social liberation, such as feminism, “make it possible for people to see the world in an enlarged perspective because they remove the covers and blinders that obscure knowledge” (vii).

Cancian (1992) and Molm (1993) provide more contemporary examples of the feminist empiricist position. Cancian (1992) argues for stricter adherence to the facts and support for an arena in which beliefs/theories enter into critical debate. She argues that feminists, who offer a distinct epistemological/methodological position based on their perspectives on the gendered nature of social reality, need not give up on conventional standards of science, but rather hold all scientists more strictly accountable to them. Molm (1993) argues very explicitly against an abandonment of conventional epistemological and methodological standards stating:
The procedures associated with the scientific method are designed to do exactly what feminist critics of positivism are most concerned about: guard against bias influencing the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. (310)

Thus, the feminist empiricists work to increase objectivity through the reduction of sexist bias in order to more effectively produce social research. They work within most of the epistemological assumptions of positivist-empiricism, holding dominant theory accountable for failing to live up to its own standards.

**Research Methods and Feminist Empiricism**

Because the feminist empiricists make the least amount of challenges to dominant research epistemologies, the may be easiest to situate in terms of research methodologies and methods. Overall, because they work within conventional understandings of research practices, most feminist empiricists also work within conventional methodologies. Their challenges to the use of methods in conventional research focused on biased uses of methods (such as the use of male samples to generalize about society as a whole) and not the methods themselves. Those feminist researchers who do not engage explicitly with epistemological issues and take conventional understandings of research practices as a given would be, in most cases, appropriately identified as holding a feminist empiricist position. Cancian (1992), who I classify as a feminist empiricist, is an exception to this connection between conventional methodologies and epistemologies. Though she calls for working within conventional epistemology and argues for holding traditional social scientists accountable to their own standards, she is very critical of many conventional (especially quantitative) methods and is involved in the project of defining a ‘feminist method.’

Examining these researchers who do not specifically engage in any epistemological debates, but who, of course, do hold epistemological positions (all research operates under some
sort of epistemology) demonstrates some difficulties in using Harding’s (1986) tripartite model of feminist empiricism, standpoint theory and postmodernism. I do find her model to be a useful way of classifying feminist epistemological perspectives and for clarifying the implications of understanding knowledge in various ways. Most researchers, however, do not classify themselves in terms of these labels. My designation of specific theorists/researchers as empiricist, standpoint or postmodernist may not result from their self-identification, but rather from how closely I think they correspond to the overall perspectives of these three categories. This is important for situating the (sometimes implicit) assumptions of particular theorists/researchers in terms of broader theoretical and epistemological traditions.

**Feminist Empiricism and Positivism**

The feminist empiricists have come under considerable attack in recent years for retaining too strongly the perspectives about the constitution of social reality and knowledge held by conventional positivist-empiricism and Enlightenment thinking. In the next section, I explain the crucial ways feminist postmodernists and others strongly challenge many of the assumptions about knowledge and objectivity shared by feminist empiricists and conventional positivists. To associate feminist empiricism and positivist-empiricism too closely, however, would be a mistake. As Sandra Harding (1986; 1990) has demonstrated, there are significant ways in which even feminist empiricists undermine many of the traditional tenets of positivist-empiricism. The first area of difference is regarding the separation between the context of discovery and the context of justification. Conventional Enlightenment/positivist understandings of knowledge hold that only the ‘context of justification’ is epistemically relevant; only the results of research/theorizing matter, not the context of their genesis. The feminist empiricists, however, though they retain
ideals of objectivity and a correspondence model of reality, argue that often we must attend to the context of discovery to produce the most valid and undistorted results (Harding 1986: 25). Molm states that "it is not the scientific method that is male biased, but the choices of research questions and in some cases the origin of theories" (310). Bias cannot be looked for simply in how we handle and evaluate data, but also in what priorities and criteria determine what questions we ask and what data we seek out. Millman and Kanter (1975) in their focus on the bias-reducing qualities of feminism and other liberatory projects are specifically invoking the relevance of the social and political context of discovery for producing quality research. Though feminist empiricists are deeply entrenched in the values of truth and objectivity, by focusing on the context of discovery, they significantly transform the conventional assumptions of positivist-empiricism.

The other major area of difference between feminist empiricism and conventional positivism is in the feminist empiricist challenge to the ideal of the unitary and disembodied knower. First, this can be seen in the importance of the feminist knower, who cannot be viewed as an entirely disembodied figure-- by situating the knower specifically as feminist the knower becomes more concrete than in the conventional positivist position. Second, is the challenge to the conventional positivist understanding of the agent of knowledge as an individual. Feminist empiricists such as Longino (1993) and Nelson (1993) argue against an epistemic focus on the individual knower and focus instead on the ways in which communities of scientists acquire and construct knowledge-- communities of individuals in interaction and which are epistemologically prior to the individuals themselves. Longino (1993), drawing on such concepts such as Kuhn's (1970) theory of how paradigms shape scientific knowledge, argues that the conventional bias-reducing standards of the scientific method are all aimed at eliminating individual idiosyncratic biases. The scientific method as it is traditionally conceptualized cannot, however, eliminate or
identify biases/assumptions held by the entire community of scientists. Instead we must focus on how communities engage with information and interact with one another. In these and other perspectives, feminists empiricists, working within the positivist-empiricist framework, significantly transform many of the conventional assumptions of positivism.

The Importance of Feminist Empiricism

Though I will argue in the next section for many of the feminist postmodernist challenges to the assumptions of feminist empiricists, I do not want to ignore the importance of the feminist empiricist position in the continuing development of feminist research. The critiques feminist empiricists have made of dominant, traditional research with its male biases and androcentrism have fundamentally transformed many fields of social research. Many more researchers see gender as an important variable in almost any area of research than ever would have without the feminist empiricist critiques; as a result of these critiques, previous practices of concentrating mainly on male research subjects have come under enormous scrutiny. It is because of these feminist empiricist researchers, I believe, and their challenge to dominant research assumptions from within, that much feminist research and theorizing is possible— including that of the feminist postmodernists. The feminist postmodernists did not become an important voice in feminist epistemology until the 1980's, until after the feminist empiricists secured a more stable and stronger position for feminists researchers within the academy. It is from this strengthened position that the feminist postmodernists were able to deeply critique the assumptions of dominant research epistemologies.
**Feminist Postmodernism**

Whereas feminist empiricists aim their critiques of traditional social research against specific instances of bias, other feminist epistemologists/researchers—drawing from postmodernism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, and the sociology of knowledge—focus instead on the epistemological assumptions at the very base of positivist-empiricism. They challenge Enlightenment and positivist theories about the possibility (and desirability) of rationality, objectivity and value-neutrality as epistemological criteria in social research. They argue against the search for absolute foundations of knowledge and the positivist privileging of scientific discourse and present, instead, theories of knowledge focusing on the embodied location of research and the subject-position of the researcher. This represents a move from critiquing examples of 'bad science' (as feminist empiricists do) to challenging ideas about the meaning and structure of 'science as usual' (Harding 1986).

The feminist postmodernists focus not on examples of bias, but instead question the entire concept of 'objectivity.' They argue that no research can ever be 'value-neutral' and that this is not an ideal that should guide research. Rationality and objectivity, as they have been traditionally conceived, rely on the concept of a stable and unified self and on universal and absolute truths; these are ideas that have come under considerable attack by postmodern and post-structuralist theories. Some feminist postmodernists reject objectivity entirely (e.g. Hekman 1990), while others argue for its retention as an ideal— but only after fundamentally transforming what objectivity means (e.g. Harding 1991; Haraway 1988). Either way, though, the postmodernist critique represents a crucial challenge to the assumptions that underlie most positivist-empiricist

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4 This label is not without its problems (which I will discuss later in this section), but for now will be used for simplicity's sake.
and feminist empiricist research. Ideals of absolute truth along with the formulation of 'grand theories' and meta-narratives are rejected in favor of partial and situated knowledges. The feminist postmodernists argue that the specific instances of androcentric research identified by the feminist empiricists are not the result of easily correctable, idiosyncratic biases on the part of individual researchers, but are the results of the very structure of knowledge that guides contemporary research. This structure is fundamentally shaped by the Enlightenment dualisms of reason/emotion, object/subject, culture/nature—all of which are connected to the dichotomy of male/female. The feminist postmodernists engage in debates about the status of social science, not only in terms of whether or not sociology can be properly considered a science, but also in terms of what it means for anything (from sociology to biology to physics) to be considered a science.

In these next sections, I argue that the feminist postmodernist project offers an extremely important critique of conventional positivist-empiricism and feminist empiricism. Postmodernists demonstrate many ways that political and social location influence and constrain all research. The feminist postmodernists focus particularly on the influence of gender and patriarchy; they identify not only biases in traditional research but also ways in which the very structure of positivist empiricism not only reflects but also replicates patriarchy. Their critiques offer important models for understanding science, knowledge, and research which can importantly influence the process of conducting feminist research. Their positions, though, are often associated with relativism and therefore rejected as an unsuitable basis for feminist social research. I agree that epistemological relativism would be untenable in both feminist politics and empirical sociological research. In subsequent sections, I argue that the feminist postmodernist projects (particularly of Harding
1991 and Haraway 1988) are not necessarily relativist and can be used in ways that will be helpful for guiding future research. These theories, however, are insufficiently developed in terms of what epistemological criteria are appropriate or useful in the context of justification; this is a significant obstacle to translating their epistemological positions into working methodologies.

In the next section I present in greater depth these various positions associated with feminist postmodernists, identifying their strengths and weakness for conducting feminist social research. Before doing this, however, I feel it is important to examine some of the problems with using this label ‘feminist postmodernism.’ It both connotes a more homogenous position common to all feminist postmodernists than actually exists (there is a great deal of variety between different feminist postmodernist arguments) and also inaccurately describes as postmodernist the work of some feminist theorists/researchers who may be drawing more from traditions such as critical theory, ethnomethodology and the sociology of knowledge than from specifically postmodernist theory.

A number of the epistemological arguments offered by feminist postmodernists such as Haraway (1988; 1991), Fraser and Nicholson (1990), and Hekman (1991) overlap with arguments arising from critical theory, ethnomethodology and other theoretical traditions. Stanley and Wise (1993: 189-90) explicitly criticize feminist postmodernists for claiming postmodernism as the sole source of rejections of ‘grand narratives,’ scientism, and a representational/mirroring understanding of the relationship between knowledge and reality; these ideas, they argue, also have their roots in critical theory, language theorists such as Wittgenstein, and interactionist and ethnomethodological paradigms in sociology. This is an important criticism and I believe that, because much of postmodern theory is situated in literary studies and philosophy opposed to
sociology and other social sciences, the connections and similarities between postmodern theories
and many sociological traditions are often ignored. In terms of specifically epistemological
debates, postmodernism, however, is the arena in which most of the very important recent
positions are being articulated--for this reason (and for reasons of organization and simplicity) I
will be using the term feminist postmodernist throughout most of this section. My usage of this
term, however, connotes not only those feminists who draw on the works of Lyotard, Baudrillard,
Foucault, and Derrida but also incorporates the work of other theorists/researchers who, though
drawing on different theoretical traditions, share a great deal of overlap with feminist
postmodernists. Nor is the term ‘feminist postmodernist’ intended to indicate an entirely
homogenous group. I elucidate some of the differences among feminist postmodernists in the
next sections.

Science, Feminism and Postmodernism

Feminist postmodernist analyses of science introduce important questions of authority into
traditional understandings of science. In doing so, they greatly improve both on the arguments of
the feminist empiricists (who do no sufficiently address questions of the authority and power of
the scientist/researcher and what this means for understanding social research) and the arguments
of non-feminist postmodernists (who do frame their discussions of power and knowledge in terms
of gender). Sartori (1994) and Yeatman (1994) argue that postmodernism and feminism produce
a dramatic crisis in the modernist authority of science. Sartori (1994) explains that, whereas
tradition and religion were dominant domains of authority in pre-modern societies and
epistemologies, science becomes the ultimate authority and guardian of truth under
modernism (113). Science becomes equated with knowledge; scientists, as the
discoverers/creators of this knowledge, are considered to have unique access to the truth and thus are in positions of great authority. This authority, Yeatman (1994) argues, though enveloped in the guise of neutrality and universalism, actually rests on a profound distinction between the knower/scientists and the objects of study—objects which, in social research, are often people; these objects have particularly included those who Enlightenment philosophy “had cast as Other: natives, colonials, women and all who are placed in a client relationship to expert, professional authority” (187). Thus the modernist authority of scientists is specifically made possible through the objectification and designation as passive of those deemed as ‘Other.’

Drawing on Habermas’ critique of scientism and on postmodernism’s challenge to universal and transcendent values, feminist theorists demonstrate crucial ways in which the structure that privileges scientific discourse inherently silences those who are not included within positivist values of rationality, abstraction, and scientific detachment. These values rest on key modernist dualisms of rational/irrational, culture/nature, subject/object and knower/known. These dualisms, Cixous and other post-structuralists have argued, are always oppositional and hierarchical (with the first term valued over the second) and are fundamentally connected to the dualism of male/female (Hekman 1990:45). Thus, devaluation of women is implicated in the very roots of concepts of rationality, subjectivity and knowledge. These dualisms, Smith (1987a; 1987b) argues, are crucial to the implicit understandings of knowledge underlying traditional sociological research.

Hekman (1990) argues against feminist empiricists and liberal feminists who simply seek to integrate/add women into positivist-empiricist conceptualizations of science, reason and knowledge (keeping the dualisms intact) and against radical feminists and some feminist
standpoint theorists who seek to overturn the dualisms, thus privileging emotion over reason, women's subjectivity over masculinist 'objectivity.' Feminist postmodern and deconstructive epistemologies demonstrate that neither of these are sufficient, that "anything short of outright rejection of the dualisms and rationalism of Enlightenment thought will not be a successful strategy" (Hekman 1990: 8). This is because, she argues, only if we displace and deconstruct these dualisms and traditional conceptualizations of rationality, science, knowledge, and research will the gender domination inherent in these concepts be obviated; on the other hand, "an alliance with modernism . . . can only result in a perpetuation of the Enlightenment/modernist epistemology that inevitably places women in an inferior position" (2).

Feminist postmodernists such as Hekman provide interesting philosophical and epistemological critiques of positivist/Enlightenment assumptions about science, rationality and knowledge and the connections these assumptions have to gender relations. It is not terribly clear, however, how these theories could and should impact actual sociological research processes. Her theories do have importance for understanding sociology in terms of 'science'; she challenges not only positivist arguments that sociology is a science that shares the same methodological and epistemological directives as the natural sciences (e.g. Durkheim) but also interpretive/humanist theories that see sociology as distinctly different than the natural sciences due to sociology's interpretive/subjective nature (e.g. Weber). Hekman sets up this debate in terms of positivists vs. humanists and argues that though the two groups differ in how they see sociology relating to natural science they share common assumptions about natural science—assumptions that postmodern theories severely challenge. Both sides, she argues, define the natural sciences as representing the paradigm of true knowledge. "Although humanists argued for
a 'separate but equal' status for social sciences, their position was always constituted as a defense of social science knowledge vis-à-vis that of natural science. Thus, the priority of the natural science paradigm was not seriously questioned"(4). Using the theories of Gadamer, she argues that both natural and social sciences are fundamentally hermeneutic and all understanding is contextual and rooted in tradition; instead of conceding that the human sciences are subjective (and therefore irrational) she rejects the rational/irrational dualism itself. Therefore, by challenging what is meant by science and natural science she is challenging how sociology is to be understood; in doing so she is refuting both 'poles' of the debate of positivists vs. humanists, showing that they share a problematic Enlightenment legacy.

Still, Hekman's arguments (and I believe this holds true for many other primarily philosophical feminist postmodernist work, e.g. Flax 1990; Benhabib 1990; Bordo 1990) are not specific in terms of doing social research, even if these issues are implicit throughout her work. How are we to use these ideas in terms of structuring research questions, defending research analyses and collecting or interpreting data? These questions are not entirely answerable from the arguments Hekman provides. I must turn to feminist postmodernists who more clearly prioritize questions about research and methodology to begin to answer these questions, which have been addressed in greatest depth around the issue of 'objectivity.'

**Feminism, Postmodernism and Objectivity in Social Research**

While postmodern feminist critiques such as Hekman's (1990) offer important analyses of rationality, objectivity, science, and knowledge on a very abstract level, such analyses can only have importance for the practice of empirical research when more directly connected to actual research processes. Feminist postmodernist debates on the question of objectivity in social
research offer an important beginning to this project. Like the feminist empiricists, postmodern feminists critique the ways in which conventional, supposedly value-neutral, social research has actually been embedded in dominant ideologies of racism, colonialism and patriarchy (Sprague and Zimmerman 1992). Code (1991) argues that crucial to the claims of objectivity and value-neutrality in traditional research are the hidden subjectivities of dominant groups. Keller (1990) and Braidotti (1994) similarly argue that the ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ stance of positivist research has historically been considered available only to those individuals who are socially considered ‘norm-al’ so that women (and all those constituted as ‘Other’) are disqualified from a capacity to achieve neutrality. Unlike the feminist empiricists, however, who organize their critique of sexist/androcentric bias around the articulation of or search for an un-biased, objective position from which to conduct research, the feminist postmodernists argue that no research can ever be entirely detached or neutral, that all research is shaped by the location of the researcher.

The objectivity and value-neutrality endorsed by positivist-empiricists (and to a lesser degree the feminist empiricists) requires the possibility of an Archimedean, ‘God’s eye view’ from which to conduct properly objective research (what Haraway (1988) refers to as the ‘God Trick,’ requiring both a view from nowhere and a view from everywhere); such a position, however, is never truly attainable. As Lather (1991), Stanley and Wise (1991; 1993), Bordo (1990), and others argue, all research is value-laden and is empowered or constrained by the material location (socially, politically, philosophically, historically) of those who conduct research.

These theories are drawing from a number of different traditions in the philosophy and sociology of science. One fundamental influence has been Kuhn’s (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Many feminist epistemologists have used Kuhn’s theories that argue
science is a socio-historical process of paradigm transitions in which "observations are theory-laden, theories are paradigm-laden and paradigms are culture-laden" (Harding 1986:107); they conclude that there are no such things as value-neutral, objective facts. Kuhn's work, however, is an internalist account of science and is marked by an absence of discussion on the impact of (social, political, and historical) events external to scientific enterprise (Nielsen 1990: 22). As a result, feminists have also turned to other more externalist accounts from the sociology of knowledge and postmodern theorists. Bloor's (1991) "Strong Programme" of the sociology of scientific knowledge expands on the Kuhnian model by explaining crucial ways that social and historical processes shape all scientific research and theories (both 'true' and 'false' theories alike). Bloor's discussion, however, curiously makes no mention of gender as a significant variable in this; feminist epistemologists greatly expand Bloor's programme through their analysis of gender relations and patriarchy. Foucault's (1972) theories about the connections between knowledge and power and the ways in which discourse structures individuals have been particularly influential on the work of postmodern feminist epistemologists. Also important is Rorty, who argues that all ideas are the creations of social beings rather than 'representations' or 'mirrorings' of nature (Bordo 1990: 136). Again, however, feminist epistemologists have significantly transformed these theories by demonstrating the specifically gendered aspects of these processes and by analyzing these theories in terms of their importance for performing feminist social research.

Drawing on these and other theories, the feminist postmodernists argue that all research (even 'good research,' even feminist research) must be understood as situated and partial, that no 'Archimedean' perspective is possible, that "each person can only achieve a partial view of reality
from the perspectives of his or her position in the social hierarchy and in history" (Harding 1991: 39). The importance of social location is most easily seen in the context of discovery in which research questions and areas of interest are influenced by what researchers see as ‘important’ (which is shaped in part by social/political location and the history of academic disciplines and fields). As Bordo (1990) argues:

No matter how local and circumscribed the object or how attentive the scholar to the axes that constitute social identity and structure, some of these axes will be chosen and other ignored or silenced (140).

Also socially constructed and influenced is the context of justification, in how we analyze ‘facts’ and indeed how we determine what can count as facts. This is because facts are always infused with values, both facts and values are open to critical debate and “evidence is selected not found” (Code 1991: 30).

Some feminists who critique the positivist project and who see value neutrality as impossible still retain it as an ideal. For example, Jayarante and Stewart (1991) argue that “although absolute objectivity is not possible... the pursuit of some type of objectivity⁵ as a goal does have the potential to protect against several forms of biases” (98). Even though we may not be completely successful, simply by striving for objectivity we may cut down on some biases. Other feminists, however, have provide extremely compelling arguments that value neutrality is not even necessarily desirable (Sprague and Zimmerman 1992). These arguments take two major forms. The first is regarding the importance that (explicitly non value-neutral) politics can have for shaping good research and the second is regarding the implications of the split between subject

⁵ Many feminists who retain objectivity as an ideal, though, significantly transform what objectivity means equating it not with value-neutrality, but rather some degree of realism/anti-relativism. The significance of this type of position (particularly that of Harding (1991) and Haraway (1988) will be further explored in subsequent sections.
and object implicit in traditional conceptualizations of objectivity. It is to the first strain of this argument that I now turn.

**Feminist Politics and Social Research**

Some feminists argue against the desirability of a value neutral position for the researcher with the explanation that specifically feminist and other emancipatory values actually improve research due to the perspective on dominant ideologies that they open up (Harding 1986; 1991; Lather 1991; Mies 1991). Thus, it is specifically from our positions as feminists (rather than an attempt at a ‘view from nowhere’) from which some of the most important insights of feminist research arise-- our biases/emancipatory values may make us more attentive to the multiple and conflicting layers of ‘reality,’ rather than limiting our understanding of it. Lather (1991) notes that the focus on the political nature of all social research has necessitated a move from the question ‘is this research biased?’ to ‘whose interests does this bias serve?’ (14). If we acknowledge that *all* research is in some ways politically and socially invested, then it may make sense that some values or politics may produce better research than others:

Isn’t it reasonable to suppose that claims originating in racist and sexist projects may well be less worthy of scientific attention and less likely to “reveal” reality-- than those originating in anti-racist, anti-sexist projects? (Harding 1986: 107).

Feminist theorists have argued for this position in numerous ways. Mies (1991) uses the explanation that in order to understand a thing one has to change it (65). Lather (1991) comments that ‘emancipatory knowledge’ increases an understanding of perspectives on social organization that are hidden by dominant ideologies in conventional research (52). Finally, Sprague and Zimmerman (1993) argue that, to avoid serving dominant interests and seeing from
the dominant perspective, researchers must consciously orient themselves towards the interests and struggles of dominated groups (260).

These positions all represent arguments not only about the possibility, but also about the desirability of the value-neutral and detached researcher of positivist epistemology. The explicit political stance of feminist research is the focus of many criticisms; positivists argue that the influence of politics upon research produces biased and unscientific results. Martyn Hammersley (1992; 1994) provides a useful example of the positivist critiques of feminist research. He rejects the position that research is benefited by explicitly orienting it towards (feminist) politics, arguing that “the point of research is to produce knowledge, not to transform the world or to adhere to any other practical result. This is what distinguishes research from political activity in the narrow sense” (1994: 293). Implicit in this position is the assumption that research that is not explicitly political is apolitical and that, by not acknowledging one’s politics or social position, one’s research is not influenced by social and political location. The feminist postmodernist critique, however, demonstrates that not concerning one’s self with the political implications of one’s work is itself a political position. Code (1992) proposes that “we abandon the search for and deny the possibility of the disinterested and dislocated view from nowhere and assert the political investedness of most knowledge producing activity” (20). By demonstrating the political and social investedness of all research, postmodern feminists severely disable the type of criticism that Hammersly presents. They show that the difference between explicitly feminist research and ‘neutral’ research is not that feminist research is political and therefore biased, but that feminists acknowledge their politics while many traditional social scientists deny and disguise theirs.
Subject and Object in Social Research

Another reason many feminists cite not only the impossibility but also the undesirability of conventional objectivity is the conceptual split between knowing subject and known object embedded in the concept of objectivity. Smith (1987) argues that the positivist ideal of objectivity that guides much of sociological research is designed to separate the knower from the object of study. She explains that the illusion of this separation can only be maintained if the knower is posited as an abstract being and the object is posited as the ‘other’ who can never reflect back on or influence the knower. The assumptions about the knower/subject and known/object are seriously undermined through many feminist critiques. As discussed earlier, many feminists (e.g. Code 1992; MacKinnon 1983; Smith 1987) show that the ideal of the abstract, disembodied knower hides the actual historically and socially situated subjectivities of the knower. Feminists also challenge the objectification of the known/object of research. Stanley (1990) argues: “for feminists the known is also the knower, research objects are their own subjects” (11). MacKinnon (1983) argues that “having been objectified as sexual beings while being slighted as ruled by subjective passions, women reject the distinction between knowing subject and known object, the distinctions between subjective and objective positions” (248).

Looking at the power differentials between researchers and those researched is an important project and must inform our understanding of the concept of ‘objectivity.’ Granting agency to the researcher/subject at the expense of the researched/object, in which only the researcher is granted a critical voice, is detrimental to the research process as a whole and is

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6 These critiques of the subject/object dichotomy are also important to the feminist standpoint theorists.
antithetical to most feminist politics. I strongly agree with Smith (1987) and Harding (1991) who argue for the necessity of the researcher to place herself in the same critical plane as those she studies. This project is the subject of many of the debates surrounding feminist methodology. I explore the ways many feminists attempt to apply this directive in actual empirical research in the methodology sections of this paper.

Postmodern feminists, though, demonstrate that feminists must be wary of simply reversing (rather than deconstructing) the subject/object dichotomy or of uncritically celebrating women's subjectivity (which often becomes equated with women's experience). MacKinnon (1983), who denies the desirability of objectivity, equating it with male subjectivity, argues that "feminism's claim to women's perspective is its claim to the truth... feminists do not see women's perspective as partial" (252). Such a move is problematic because it assumes that women, through their experiences, have an unmediated relationship with 'reality'--a perspective that postmodern deconstructions of representation and experience have made suspect (Fraser and Nicholson 1990; Lazreg 1994). Acker, Barry and Esseweld (1991) present an important challenge to the assumptions made by MacKinnon and others who focus on women's subjectivities. They argue that it is important to transform the researcher/researched relationship and that the objectifying tendencies of objectivity need to be minimized. They note, however, that this project can never be entirely complete or free from tension. For the experiences of individual women to inform our understanding of social structure, "the researcher must [to some degree] objectify the experience of the researched, must translate that experience into more abstract and general terms" (136). One of the greatest challenges for feminist research will be finding "how to
produce analysis that goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity” (Acker et al 1991: 147).

MacKinnon’s perspective also treats “women’s subjectivities” as a unified, stable and homogenous category. This assumes the presence of a unified subject within each individual, thereby failing to address the postmodern deconstruction of the subject (Gibson 1994). It also ignores the enormous differences among women (on lines of race, class, or sexuality, for instance). As Cannon, Higginbotham, and Lewy (1991) argue, what many feminists have described as women’s subjectivity or women’s experience is actually white, middle class women’s subjectivity. This problem is intensified in the case of feminist standpoint epistemologies which are organized around doing research from the perspective of women’s lives, experiences, and subjectivities; I further the difficulties with the concept of experience (and specially ‘women’s experience’) in the section on standpoint theory.

Feminism, Postmodernism and Relativism

To some, the feminist postmodernist arguments about the partiality of all perspective and the value-ladenness of all knowledge and research seem very dangerous to feminism. Walby (1992) associates this move with “abdicating the goal of accurate and systematic knowledge” arguing that “rather than abandoning the modernist project of explaining the world, we should be developing concepts and theories to explain gender, ethnicity and class” (48). To Walby, the argument that grand narratives or complete and final knowledge projects are not possible is the same as completely abandoning any search for knowledge. Similarly, DiStefano (1990) claims that “the postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible” (76). This, she explains, is because in rejecting absolute categories
and the concept of truth, feminist postmodernists lose any basis from which they can judge competing claims; without this basis there can be no feminist knowledge projects or feminist politics because feminists would not be able to critique patriarchy and androcentrism. I agree that epistemological relativism (that there are no grounds upon which to judge competing knowledge claims) seems incongruous with programs of social research and feminist politics; this would be tantamount to conceding that patriarchal ideology is as valid/invalid as feminist critiques of it, which would be enormously disabling for any sort of feminist political action. I argue, though, drawing particularly on the works of Harding (1986; 1991) and Haraway (1988), that an extreme critique of value-neutrality and the assertion that there is no unitary or final truth, does not necessarily result in an epistemological relativism. Instead, their reformulations of the concept of objectivity offer important alternatives to the dichotomy of absolute truth/value neutrality vs. nihilistic relativism that are too often presented as the only alternatives for a feminist epistemology.

Harding (1986) examines the question: “does our recognition of the fact that science has always been a social product-- that its projects and claims to knowledge bear the fingerprints of its human producers-- require the exaltation of a relativistic subjectivity on the part of feminism?”(137) and answers a definite “No.” Though no disinterested, impartial and value-free knowledge is possible and “each person can only achieve a partial view of reality,” she argues that “nevertheless it is possible to make reasonable judgments that some beliefs are better supported by empirical evidence than others”(1991: 99). Harding is actually not rejecting the concept of objectivity entirely, but instead radically transforms what the concept means. Positivists and feminist empiricists assume that objectivity requires value neutrality, that only absolute, scientific
knowledge is actually knowledge (all else being "beliefs"). Harding refers to these projects as "objectivism" or weak objectivity. Weak objectivity, by discussing itself as value-neutral, allows dominant groups to disregard their own historical commitments. Harding instead advocates what she calls "strong objectivity"; this separates the concept of objectivity from the modernist ideal of value-neutrality and does not abandon empirical research entirely even though she acknowledges the incompleteness of all knowledge projects. What Harding (and others, such as Barwell 1994) rejects is not objectivity but value-neutrality, not knowledge but grand theory and the belief in absolute knowledge. In arguing this she is not only critiquing positivist-empiricists, but also those postmodernists who completely reject "objectivity" as an ideal and along with it any sort of systematic knowledge projects and who advocate epistemological relativism. She argues that "postmodern relativists agree with positivist modernists in the assumption that one truth vs. none is the only system" (1991: 99). Relativists have too limited a view of objectivity because they do not separate it from value neutrality and do not allow for partial knowledges. Harding accuses these postmodern feminists of actually being too modernist because they assume that the only objectivity and science possible is that which is tied up with modern, Western and androcentric values.

Haraway (1988) addresses these questions of objectivity and relativism in a similar fashion. She sees most feminist thought as being trapped between the two poles of totalization and relativism. Under the constraints of this dichotomy, she demonstrates, it seems natural to assume that if one is rejecting absolute truth and the "god trick" of "being nowhere yet claiming to be everywhere" (584) the only alternative is relativism. Haraway, however, argues that neither pole of this dichotomy is viable for feminism. She explains that relativism is the "perfect mirror of totalization . . . both deny the situatedness of location, embodiment and partial perspective and
both make it impossible to see well”(584). Relativism is only the ‘natural alternative’ to
totalization and ‘value-free’ research if you accept the positivists’ claims that truth must be
classified as unitary, that knowledge must be aperspectival. Instead, she argues that we
must reject this either/or dichotomy of total truth vs. no truth along with the assumption that
knowledge requires the ‘god trick’(585). She argues for the need to go beyond identifying bias
and holding out for some form of feminist empiricism, “to have an account of radical, historical
contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects,” but also simultaneously to have “a
no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real world’”(580). She does not reject the
concept of objectivity, but she does completely transform its meaning arguing that “feminist
objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting
of subject and object”(583). But, to hold at bay those who still interpret this as leading to
relativism, she makes it explicit that “not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to
easy relativism and holisms”(585). Feminist objectivity, she argues, is about “situated knowledges
... objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about
the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility ... only partial perspective
promises objective vision”(583). This concept of situated knowledges importantly and
fundamentally transforms conventional positivist-empiricist understandings knowledge without
falling prey to the dangers of relativism.

Feminist Postmodernisms: Going a Step Further

I find both Harding (1986; 1991) and Haraway’s (1988) perspectives on the issues of
objectivity, value neutrality and relativism to be extremely important starting points for feminists
to further develop. There are many questions left unanswered by their projects, however. One is
simply whether or not it is productive to retain the word 'objectivity' (with all of the baggage it carries) if we are going to fundamentally transform our understanding of this, or if it would be more useful to devise a new vocabulary (Tancred 1994). Another question I have is regarding the application of these ideas. Both Harding and Haraway ground themselves more specifically in epistemology than methodology; it is crucial to work out the methodological implications of these theories. The fact that the methodological implications of these positions on objectivity have not been nearly as well developed may help to explain why these postmodernist approaches seem much more dominant in the fields of philosophy, literary theory, and epistemology and much more marginalized in relation to applied social research. Do Harding and Haraway’s positions imply any specific method or methodology? Can all traditional research methods be used with these epistemologies or are only some appropriate? Is there a feminist method? These questions and others need to be more fully addressed before postmodern feminist positions are able to move from intriguing epistemologies to useful methodologies.

Another important question left unanswered is that of epistemic justification (Longino 1992). It is clear that both Harding and Haraway are arguing that there are grounds upon which we can discriminate among competing knowledge claims (even if no claims can represent the absolute final truth), but upon what basis can we do this? One possible answer, that utilized by Stanley and Wise (1991) for instance, is to base epistemic justification on women’s perspective and experience. Though they see integrating women’s subjective accounts of their experience into research as vital, both Harding and Haraway resist any move that valorizes women’s subjectivity and that creates a new experiential foundationalism. If women’s experiences and subjectivities do not provide their basis for epistemic justification, what does? It seems to be some
recourse to 'the (partial perspective of) evidence,' but it is unclear on what basis researchers can discriminate between different 'evidences.' Are they accepting the positivist-empiricist account for this part of the research process (the context of justification) or are they presenting something unique and new? It is clear that a theory of power needs to be integrated into our evaluations of competing knowledge claims, but what specific form is this to take? The context of discovery may be so much more emphasized than the context of justification simply in reaction to conventional epistemology in which only the context of justification is viewed as open to intelligible debate. Regardless, I think Harding and Haraway's arguments will be much stronger if they more explicitly and in greater detail answer questions of epistemic justification.

Feminist empiricists and feminist postmodernists present important challenges to dominant practices and assumptions about the social research process. Feminist empiricists demonstrate many problems with androcentric research and paved the way for other positions in feminist epistemology, but are too accepting of the structures and assumptions that underlie positivist-empiricism. Feminist postmodernists demonstrate that all knowledge is marked by the social location of its producer and that all knowledge is partial. Partiality is not necessarily detrimental, but instead may be a resource for feminists; value-neutrality should not always be an ideal. However, this position does not necessarily lead to relativism; this is only the case if we accept the positivist's claims that objectivity requires value neutrality and only 'absolute' knowledge projects produce real knowledge. Though these epistemological projects have yet to be completely worked out in terms of applied method and methodologies, the epistemological projects outlined by Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway provide important beginnings for reformulating our understanding of objectivity and the position it should have in feminist social research.
Within the various forms of feminist standpoint theory there are conflicting positions on objectivity and relativism; some theories share affinities with feminist empiricism and others are distinctly postmodernist. Examining the standpoint theorists in terms of both epistemological and methodological implications thus sheds light not only on these particular theorists, but much of feminist empiricism and feminist postmodernism as well, and it is to this group that I turn next.
**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theorists draw on arguments about how male subjectivities and standpoints have been disguised as unbiased/value-neutral in conventional social research and arguments about the socially situated and embodied nature of all research. They argue that people who occupy different structural positions in society see social life and social organization in different ways, from different standpoints. The questions traditionally asked in sociology have been based on seeing society from a masculinist standpoint. To correct this tendency, they advocate social research organized around feminist standpoints. In order to explore the epistemological implications of such a position I will briefly outline the arguments of some of the key figures in standpoint theory: Hartsock (1987), Smith (1987), Collins (1990a; 1990b) and Harding (1993).

Marxist arguments about the ways in which position in the division of labor structures the experiences and perspectives of individuals provide a major source of thought for feminist standpoint epistemologies. Hartsock (1987) argues that women’s position in the sexual division of labor means that women’s lives differ dramatically from those of men and that this has significant epistemological consequences. Hartsock explains that Marx and Luckacs argue for the importance of the standpoint of the proletariat who, because they do not have the investment in the perpetuation of the *status quo* that the bourgeoisie do, are able to see and understand aspects of reality hidden in dominant ideology. She transfers these arguments to the sexual division of labor, arguing that the material/structural position of women provide them with a scientific/epistemic privilege because they can see and critique aspects of the sexual division of
labor that men, who benefit from existing gender relations, cannot (158). She argues that it is through the struggle against exploitative systems, thereby positing the need for a specifically feminist standpoint, not just a woman’s standpoint.

Smith (1987) argues for a sociology not only about, but for, women which eschews the abstraction and disembodiment of conventional sociology and takes the everyday lives of women as its problematic. Conventional sociology, she argues, is organized around principles of anonymity, impartiality, detachment and impersonality and has objectified women’s experiences. Such positions, according to Smith, must be seen as social practices possible only through a sexual division of labor in which men are accorded the privilege of detachment from everyday concerns only through placing the responsibility of focusing on daily lives and experiences on the shoulders of women. Smith argues that sociological priorities need to reorganized so that concrete experiences and the perspectives of women take on a new importance through a sociology from the standpoint of women. Feminists sociologists experience a “bifurcated consciousness” which is the result of the contradiction and points of rupture that emerge from their involvement with the abstractions and detachment emphasized in their training as sociologists and their daily experiences as women. These points of rupture generate important insights about the nature of sociology and social relations (particularly gender relations) that will be of fundamental importance in the creation of a sociology for women.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990a; 1990b) draws on these ideas about bifurcated consciousness, writing specifically about the standpoint of Black feminists. Black female sociologists, marginalized not only by those who are most privileged in society but also by Black men and white women, inhabit an ‘outsider/within’ status in sociology (they are insiders though their
training and authority as sociologists, but outsiders through their marginalization. She comments: “As outsiders/within, Black feminists may be one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich contemporary sociological discourse . . . they may reveal aspects of social reality obscured by more orthodox approaches” (1990a: 36). She draws on Kuhn’s (1970) arguments about the nature of paradigms for organizing knowledge in which those fully embedded in a paradigm cannot see its internal contradictions; because of this, she argues that Black feminists, as outsiders, may be more likely to see anomalies within dominant discourse and thus may not be as accepting of the assumptions and practices of ‘normal science’ (1990a: 53). An Afrocentric feminist epistemology, she argues, challenges many positivistic ideals by stressing the importance of concrete experiences (including the experiences of the researcher), of emotional connectedness between the knower and known, and of an ethic of accountability towards one’s research subjects (1990b: 201-219).

Finally, Sandra Harding (1993) argues for a standpoint epistemology that starts from the perspectives of marginalized lives, takes the everyday as its problematic, and situates the knower and the known in the same critical plane. In stratified societies, she argues, the activities of those at the top limit what persons who perform these activities can understand about the world, whereas the standpoints of those marginalized by social hierarchies may provide starting points (though still partial) that open up new and less distorted ways of understanding the world (54).

\textbf{Standpoint Theory and Methodology}

The feminist standpoint theorists, unlike most of the feminist postmodernists, orient themselves very specifically in terms of actually performing research. Because of this they make many more explicit connections between their epistemological stances and
methodologies/research methods. They advocate a sociology organized around understanding society from the standpoint of women and other marginalized persons. In most cases this translates into a focus on methodologies that allow for dialogue and exchange between the researcher and the researched and which can present the women's own voices. Highly interactive qualitative interviews and participant observation are seen as especially helpful for this project. Unlike quantitative surveys, in which respondents are constrained by the categories and questions of the researcher and unlike lab experiments which are detached from the everyday lives of women, qualitative methods, they argue, allow for the researched to organize their responses from the priorities of their daily lives. For these reasons, those advocating a specific feminist method/methodology are almost always working from an (implicit or explicit) feminist standpoint epistemology. In the second (methodological) half of the paper, I examine the implications of this methodological stance.

**Critiques of Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory has been the subject of considerable criticism, particularly from feminist postmodernists. Various theorists have accused it of essentialism, of ignoring the differences within the category 'women,' of working from an uncritical understanding of 'experience,' and of foundationalism or, conversely, relativism. In this section I examine the criticisms of Longino, Lazreg, Haraway and Bar On, and argue that the problems they find represent serious traps that much of standpoint theory falls into. For feminist standpoint theory to have any utility in guiding feminist social research it must account for various and competing

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7 Harding (1993) differs significantly from most other feminist standpoint theorists. She does not necessarily share in the same methodological assumptions. I examine her methodological arguments in the conclusion to this section on standpoint theory.
women's standpoints and cannot use standpoints as criteria for epistemic justification. Feminist standpoint theories that are combined with feminist postmodernism, however, (particularly that of Sandra Harding (1993)) can provide a useful epistemology for some feminist research.

Bar On (1993), a critic of the standpoint position, defines standpoint epistemology as the idea that "not only is all knowledge perspectival, but also that some perspectives are more revealing than others" and "the attribution of epistemic privilege to socially marginalized subjects"(85). The attribution of epistemic privilege from the criteria of marginality encounters a number of problems when we acknowledge the existence of multiple socially marginalized groups (e.g. African American middle class women, working class white men, Latina lesbians). She asks: "Is any one of these groups more epistemically privileged than the others and if that is not so-- if they are all equally epistemically privileged-- does epistemic privilege matter?"(89). To answer these questions standpoint theorists have generally either assessed various positions in terms of distance from the center or looked at the cumulative effect of multiple oppressions. Both of these practices are problematic, Bar On argues, because they are operate under the assumption of a single center that society is organized around. This ignores the numerous developments in contemporary feminist theory that document the multiple and conflicting logics of racism, homophobia, capitalism, and patriarchy. Equally problematic to Bar On is the fact that they are grounding epistemic privilege in the identity and practices of marginalized people. Though she acknowledges that granting the marginalized an epistemic privilege may have seemed politically advantageous, Bar On posits that we must give up the idea of epistemic privilege: "by claiming an authority based in epistemic privilege, the group reinscribes the values and practices used to
socially marginalize it, by excluding its base, silencing it, and commanding its obedience to the voice of the dominant group”(97).

Lazreg (1994), reacting against the use of experience in feminist standpoint theory, argues that focusing too much on the individual, subjective level ignores structural constraints on experience. She argues that, in privileging women’s experiences, feminist standpoint theorists seem to assume that women have an unmediated relationship with reality and therefore can find ‘the truth.’ Though they may be arguing against the rationalist foundationalism of much Enlightenment thought, the feminist standpoint theorists still retain problematic aspects of modernism in their recourse to ‘the truth’ (albeit on a different basis than positivism). In doing this, Lazreg argues, the feminist standpoint theorists may be guilty of attempting to create a new ‘experiential’ foundationalism, which will ultimately be as destructive for feminist politics and empirical research as Enlightenment’s traditional search for absolute foundations of knowledge.

Haraway (1988) argues against standpoint theories, charging them with not acknowledging the heterogeneity among women and not being sufficiently critical of the limitation of all standpoints (including feminist standpoints). Standpoint theory, she argues, is in “serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position”(584). She argues that no standpoints are ‘innocent’ or exempt from critical analysis or deconstruction. Instead of basing feminist research around the assumed commonalities among all women or trying to construct a new truth based around women’s experiences and standpoints, feminist research can only be successful when based around differences between women and acknowledging (even celebrating) the partiality of perspective.
Finally, Longino (1993), echoing Bar On (1993), defines feminist standpoint epistemology as the position that “the powerless are those with epistemic legitimacy” (106). Longino agrees with many of the tenets of feminist standpoint theorists, such as their arguments against the possibility of value free knowledge. The problems she encounters come from the issue of multiple oppressions. Standpoint epistemologies, in their concern with epistemic privilege due to marginalized standpoint, seem unable to deal with multiple forms and sites of oppression faced by different groups. ‘What group is the most oppressed? What group is the most epistemically legitimate?’, she asks. Feminist standpoint theorists cannot legitimize one standpoint above all others, but:

if no single standpoint is privileged then either the standpoint theorist must embrace multiple and incompatible knowledge positions or offer some means of transforming or integrating multiple perspectives into one. Both of these moves require either the abandonment or supplementation of standpoint as an epistemic criterion. (107)

The arguments of Bar On (1993), Longino (1993a), Haraway (1988) and Lazreg (1994) demonstrate serious flaws in many forms of feminist standpoint theory. Smith (1987) constantly writes of “the standpoint of women” as an unproblematic concept stressing the commonalities among all women, often at the expense of any recognition of differences. Kasper (1994) who attempts to ‘apply’ Smith’s epistemological stances in research uses standpoint theory to focus on women’s experiences and grant them full subjectivity. To Kasper, this means to “respect each women’s ability to interpret the experiences of her life far better than I could,”(277) arguing against “imposing” her values upon their experiences. This certainly seems to be a form of ‘experiential foundationalism’ and is guilty of exactly what Haraway (1988) charges of standpoint theory—romanticizing women’s standpoints and treating them as innocent/undistorted. Finally, Hartsock (1987) explicitly grants women epistemic privilege due to their social position or
standpoint. That women themselves inhabit very different social structural positions from one another and that women have varying degrees of privilege/power does not seem to inform her theories at all. She provides absolutely no way of judging between competing perspectives arising out of different women’s standpoints.

Collins (1990a; 1990b) and Harding (1993), however, do not fit the critiques of feminist standpoint theories quite so neatly. Integral to Collins’ standpoint theory is an understanding of the interlocking nature of various social hierarchies and she is certainly not guilty of homogenizing women’s experiences into one ‘woman’s standpoint’ (though she may in some instances homogenize African American women’s experiences). Neither, however, is she arguing for the sole epistemic privilege of Black feminists. She notes that “one implication of standpoint approaches can be that the more subordinated the group, the purer the vision of the oppressed group,” but argues against this tendency stating that “although it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes and effects of oppression, this simply is not the case” (1990b: 207). Collins is not, however, able to completely respond to the questions raised by critics of standpoint theory who wonder how standpoint theorists plan to argue for or against competing knowledge claims arising from different standpoints. This is because she, like Smith and Hartsock, focuses on the privilege of standpoint in the context of justification. It is in challenging this aspect of feminist standpoint theory that Sandra Harding (1993) makes a significant contribution to this theoretical tradition.

Harding (1993) specifically addresses the issue of difference in her arguments for her project of strong objectivity and feminist standpoint epistemology. The version of standpoint
epistemology that she presents differs sufficiently from the types criticized in the above paragraphs so that she successfully avoids the paralysis and contradictions that other standpoint epistemologies may face when dealing with a heterogeneous group of women and groups of marginalized people that are not female. To understand why this is, it is important to look at how she defines standpoint epistemology. She argues that "All knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations [those of traditionally marginalized people] are better than others for starting points for knowledge projects" (56, emphasis mine). Though this very closely resembles the definition used by Bar On and Longino (quoted above), it contains differences that free Harding's project from the problems identified by critics of standpoint epistemology. Harding does not grant the standpoint of marginalized people epistemic privilege or legitimacy in the context of justification, as the analyses of Bar On and Longino would imply. She treats marginalized standpoints as neither innocent nor as the basis of new epistemic foundations (as Lazreg and Haraway accuse). Instead, Harding points to the importance of turning to the lives of marginalized people to "provide particularly significant problems to be explained or research agendas" (54). She explicitly contrasts standpoint epistemology with theories on "the unique abilities of the oppressed to produce knowledge". It is the latter of the two that the critics of standpoint theory are describing. Harding argues instead that "marginalized lives provide the scientific problems and research agendas- not the solution- for the standpoint theories" (62).

Because it is not an issue of granting epistemic privilege or legitimacy, but rather locating a starting point for research agendas, Harding does not need to engage the question of who is most oppressed, most marginalized, or further from the center to discover who has the most
epistemically legitimate voice. Her theory does not fall into the trap of either looking only at oppressions dealing with gender or of ignoring differences within the category of women.

The subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory and incoherent . . . So the logic of the directive to “start thought from women’s lives” requires that one start one’s thought from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments (66).

Harding deals with the question of difference head on and at the very root of her conceptualization of standpoint theory. Rather than presenting a problem for her theory, difference is crucial and necessary for her project of strong objectivity. The critiques of standpoint theory discussed above are very important but rely on assumptions that feminist standpoint epistemology is about determining epistemic legitimacy or privilege. Harding, by privileging the standpoints of marginalized peoples in terms of the context of discovery and the beginning of research questions/agendas avoids these problems and provides an important way for maximizing objectivity. She does not present a ‘new basis for the truth,’ but acknowledges the partiality of feminist standpoints and in doing so offers a distinctly postmodern feminist standpoint theory.

Harding’s different standpoint epistemology does not have the same methodological implications often associated with standpoint theory. Though she argues for starting research questions from the perspectives of marginalized standpoints, this does not necessarily mean specifically studying, observing or interviewing women. Quantitative methods may be just as helpful for answering questions generated from the standpoint of women as qualitative methods. Because of this, Harding (1987) explicitly argues against the idea of ‘a feminist method’ and sees the importance of using all methodologies available.
Methodology, Methods and Feminist Research

Feminists provide a wide variety of epistemological critiques of positivism. The feminist empiricists give numerous examples of masculinist biases in conventional research that are not as value-neutral or objective as they purport to be. Feminist standpoint theorists argue that conventional sociology generates its research questions and analyzes its data from the standpoint of those who benefit most from social hierarchies and stratification. They alternatively suggest beginning research from the standpoint of women and others who have been traditionally marginalized. Finally, feminist postmodernists have severely challenge positivist ideals of objectivity, rationality and foundational/absolute knowledge. They demonstrate the social and political investedness of all knowledge and research and show the impact of the knower/researcher on research. These theorists transform the concept of objectivity, separating it from value-neutrality and instead associating ‘good, objective research’ with situated knowledges and partial perspective.

Many of these critiques exist only at an abstract or theoretical level and have not made it a priority to explain the impact these epistemological positions could or should have on actual research processes. For these epistemological positions to have any importance, however, a more explicit connection between epistemology and empirical research (and specifically methodology and methods) must be made. In the remaining sections of the paper I examine some of the debates on feminist methodology in light of the feminist epistemological arguments.

The debates of feminist methodology and methods take a variety of forms. Some are primarily about what constitutes “feminist research” (not necessarily about methodology per se).
Other debates are specifically concerned with the ideal overall methodological position of feminist social research. One of the most developed aspects of this regards the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Finally, some focus on specific methods of social research critique or transform conventional methods. This has taken its most extreme form in those who argue for a specific feminist method for social research. This generally means a rejection of quantitative methods (which are seen as objectifying and masculinist) and a valorization of specific qualitative methods, most often semi/un-structured interviews, as the most appropriate for feminist research.

I argue that the methodological directives about the researcher/researched relationship can provide an important corrective to the objectification and detachment that marks much of conventional research. This, however, can not be effective if it uses a too uncritical understanding of subjectivity and experience. Many of these arguments also focus on feminist research exclusively in terms of research on women, at the expense of research done on men and masculinity as well as patriarchal institutions. Finally, I argue against the idea of a ‘feminist method’ and the understandings of quantitative and qualitative research upon which this rests. The arguments for a feminist method display a misunderstanding of quantitative methods, conflating them with positivist epistemology and ignoring the importance they can have for feminist research. It also represents an overly idealistic approach to qualitative methods, ignoring problems inherent to this style of research.

Before moving on to the methodological debates, I think it is useful to outline Sandra Harding’s (1987) arguments about the distinctions between method, methodology and epistemology. She defines ‘method’ as: specific techniques for gathering evidence. ‘Methodology’ is theory and analyses of how research proceeds (or should proceed). ‘Epistemology’ is theory of knowledge and is concerned with such questions as: Who can be a
"knower?" What can count for knowledge? and What tests must beliefs pass to be considered knowledge? (Harding 1987: 7). These three concepts are not entirely discrete and it would be a mistake to treat them as completely distinct. In my above analyses of feminist epistemologies, for instance, I have included some methodological aspects in order to more concretely connect epistemology to actual research processes. Harding's typology, however, is fairly useful for distinguishing between various levels of analysis and I will be use it to avoid some of the confusion in many methodological debates that results from a failure to distinguish between method, methodology and epistemology.
Feminism and Methodologies

The arguments for feminist methodologies are attempts to connect the epistemological insights about the importance of the social location of the knower and the sociohistorical context of knowledge and the ways in which researchers have conventionally 'objectified' the research subject to concrete research processes. Many feminists attempt to counter research objectification through transforming the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This represents a movement against the conventionally defined researcher/researched relationship.

In the conventional model, the researcher strives for a detachment from those she studies, minimizing emotional involvement in the research (to decrease bias in the analysis) and attempting to have as little impact as possible upon the lives of those she studies (to decrease researcher impact on the data collected). Instead many feminist researchers argue for a focus on the emotional/affective components of all researcher, viewing an emotional connection as a strength, not a weakness (Stanley and Wise 1993; Fonow and Cook 1991; Collins 1991b). They encourage engaging not in 'interviewing' but in dialogue in which the researcher reveals aspects about her life to those she is studies and in which the researcher herself answers the questions of the researched (Oakley 1981). This has even included involving those who are being researched in the analysis/interpretative stage of research, in order to grant the researched full subjectivity and agency in the research process (Acker, Barry, Esseweld 1991; Kasper 1993). In part, this is an attempt to resist the tendency to replicate the extreme power differentials involved in the researcher/expert and researched/object relationship (Stanley and Wise 1993). This is also implicated in the desire, by some feminist researchers, to enable the research process to be an empowering experience for the individual women studied (Lather 1991).
I believe that these transformations of the relationship between the researcher and researched provide interesting new perspectives on women's lives that research done under the guise of detachment lacks. In resituating the researched within the research relationship and in granting a greater critical and interpretive voice to women researched, feminist sociologists show aspects of reality not revealed by those research projects that treat women studied solely as research objects with no critical voice of their own. I also believe, however, that these projects may be unrealistic about the possibilities of diminishing power differentials in the research relationship. I explore this problem in greater depth in my analysis of feminist qualitative research projects in the section on 'feminist method.'

Feminist researchers focus these methodological critiques almost exclusively on qualitative research. Many of these feminists do not entirely reject the use of quantitative methods, but the implications of their methodological and epistemological critiques for doing quantitative research remain relatively unexplored. I examine some of these implications in the section on quantitative research.

There are three major methodological issues I examine first. These are: the focus on researching women in feminist methodological debates; the idea of empowerment or advocacy research; and the question of whether or not there is a 'feminist methodology.'

Research on Women

Implied in the vast majority of debates about feminist research is that it specifically must involve researching women. Almost all of the literature on transforming the researcher/researched relationship or on using the research process as an arena for empowerment of those researched takes this as a given. I believe, however, that this would be a mistaken position for feminists to
work from. A great deal is to be learned, of course, from researching women and presenting a view of society from the perspectives of various women. There is also, however, a great deal to be learned from studying men, masculinity, and social institutions from a feminist perspective; this necessitates more than just researching and talking to women. Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1994) present compelling arguments in this regard. They detail their research projects on child sexual abuse and domestic violence, which entailed analysis of the institution of social work and of male perpetrators of family violence. They show that, had they only researched women, a great deal of what they learned would have been lost or ignored. Studying gender, gender relations and patriarchy cannot be equated solely with studying women. To do so would result in a perpetuation of the ghettoization of feminist/gender studies as solely a sociology of women (Barrett 1987). This ghettoization of feminist research has meant a lack of influence of feminist research projects outside of specifically feminist circles and has resulted in what Stacey and Thorne (1991) refer to as ‘the missing feminist revolution is sociology.’ This does not necessarily mean a rejection of feminist standpoint epistemologies, at least not of the kind advocated by Harding (1993); starting research from the perspective of women’s lives does not mean only studying women’s lives.

Bringing the analysis of masculinity or the analysis of institutions into the research picture also raises a number of questions regarding the applicability to this type of research of the transformation of the research process many feminist methodologists advocate. Should that sort of research be guided by the same directives to empower the researched (if the researched are, for instance, convicted rapists) or to bring the researched into the interpretative process? This hardly seems likely. The overemphasis on research on women has resulted in an underdevelopment of ideas concerning the methodological implications of doing feminist research not on women.
There are also serious questions that need to be raised about the entire directive to make all feminist research empowering to the women studied, and I turn to these questions now.

**Empowerment and Advocacy in Feminist Research**

Another major directive of those advocating feminist methodology is to connect the research process to empowerment, advocacy and political action. Patti Lather (1991), drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, endorses ‘advocacy research’ that is focused around praxis. For research to be truly feminist, she argues, it must be change-embracing and interactive. The goal of this emancipatory research is “to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched, at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge”(60). Similarly, Fonow and Cook (1991) advocate ‘consciousness raising’ in the feminist research process. Lather (1991) also connects the research process to specific involvement, on the part of the researcher and the researched, in political/social action that challenges the existing social order. Mies (1991) advocates a similar project, speaking of it in terms of “the challenge to replace contemplative spectator research with active involvement in emancipatory actions and the integration of research into such movements and actions”(67).

These projects represent an exciting movement to truly perform praxis, to explicitly connect feminist social research and feminist politics. We should not, however, be unrealistic about the possibilities for connecting individual acts of social change to individual pieces of research or ignore the important social research for which such political involvement may not be conceptually appropriate. Kelly et al (1994) point out that, in most cases, participation in a research project is unlikely to actually transform the condition of the women/researched’s lives; we cannot, for instance, generally change the material conditions of these individual women’s
lives. Acker et al (1991) question whether or not we always want to ‘empower’ the researched and what this means. They ask “what does ‘empowerment’ mean when women express overtly racist, homophobic and/or classist opinions in a research context?” (147). Though they sympathize with the desire to combine research with empowerment, they note numerous examples from their own research in which this can be not only very difficult, but at times, inappropriate.

There is also a great deal of research for which it makes no conceptual sense to be tied directly to a political action. Is feminist research not only to be solely about women (as I discussed above), but more specifically about women who want to actively engage in emancipatory action? Though there is much to be learned from the type of research endorsed by Lather, Fonow and Cook, and Mies, limiting feminist research to such projects is a mistake.

**Feminist Methodologies?**

Another question I have about the feminist methodological critiques and the arguments about what constitutes ‘feminist research’ regards the specifically *feminist* nature of it. Some define feminist research in terms of the theories or perspectives used by feminist researchers or the questions asked by feminists, not in terms of the methodologies used (see for example Reinharz 1990; Harding 1987). Other researchers define feminist research specifically around the utilization of specific methodological positions, some of whom argue for a specific feminist methodology. Chaftez (in Risman 1993) argues that feminist scholarship must: challenge the status quo that devalues women, analyze how gender relationships are constructed, and problematize sexual inequality (15). Lentin (1993) describes feminist sociological research methodologies as: based on women’s experiences (both of the researcher and the researched), granting analytic attention to the
position of the researcher, and having a political commitment to the emancipation of women (119-20). In these examples, it is clear what makes this specifically feminist research—what they are describing is basically a commitment to feminist politics within the research process (though it is less clear if these are methodological, rather than theoretical, directives).

In other models of feminist research/methodologies the feminist nature models is less clearly defined. Stanley and Wise (1990) define the specifically feminist nature of the research they advocate as: a commitment to a more equal researcher/researched relationship, taking into consideration emotion as a research experience, an inclusion of the intellectual autobiography of researchers and an acknowledgment of the complex question of power in research and writing (23). They define feminist theory and research as: that in which theory is derived from experience, which is continually subject to revision in light of that experience and that is accessible to everyone, not just academics (25). Fonow and Cook (1991) define feminist methodology as involving a reflexive relationship between the researcher and the researched, as having an action orientation, of having an emphasis on the affective components of the research act and in using the ‘situation at hand’ or everyday experience to generate research questions. My final example is Jayarante and Stewart (1991) who outline 10 criteria that define ‘feminist methodology.’ The first of these is the substantive directive to ask how research can help women’s lives when selecting a research question. The other nine of these, though, are such things as: using appropriate research methods for the topic, trying to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, and producing bias free/sex fair research.
All of the criteria listed by these researchers are beneficial for all research (including feminist research), but it is not clear to me what makes these criteria specifically feminist or specifically appropriate for feminist research. Because of this, McCormack (1989) concludes that "feminist methodology is not radically different from other methodologies in the social sciences . . . many of the criticisms feminists made about methodology in the social sciences had already been made by others"(27). This is not what I am arguing. On the contrary, I do believe that feminists have contributed numerous unique insights into the nature of the research process. These relate to the specific gendered implications of research methodologies and attempts to use various methodologies for feminist ends. I agree, however, that though these feminists may offer important recommendations concerning what are the most appropriate methodologies for feminist research, this does not necessarily constitute a 'feminist methodology.' As Marshall (1994) explains about her own methodological directives for Black feminist research, "the methods I have been discussing are not exclusive to Black feminism, but characterize good praxis"(123).
A Feminist Method?

Some feminists argue not only for a feminist methodology, but also for a distinct feminist method. This takes a variety of forms, but is generally characterized by an endorsement of qualitative methods (particularly highly collaborative, semi/un-structured interviews) and a rejection of quantitative methods. Examples of this position include Kasper’s (1994) study of women with breast cancer, Oakley’s (1981) discussion of the feminist interview process, and Cancian’s (1992) arguments about ‘feminist science.’

Kasper (1994) argues for placing women at the center of inquiry, for a methodology that enables women researched to be active participants in the research process and creates an equal relationship between the researcher and the researched. She sees the research subjects as ‘expert’ and respects “each woman’s ability to interpret the experiences of her life better than [she] could” (273). Kasper recommends against imposing interpretations and research priorities onto the voices of women studied. She argues that her recommendations define a ‘feminist method’, that “just as feminism offers a powerful new perspective on social life . . . so too can feminism create new methods to match its revolutionary perspective” (267).

Oakley (1981) identifies conventional directives for conducting interview research that stress detachment on the part of the ‘expert’/researcher as “morally indefensible” (41). Instead, she argues for a feminist method focused on the development and identification of common concerns between researcher and researched— a research process marked by non-hierarchical dialogue and based on developing emotional ties or friendships between the researcher and researched.
Implicit in defining feminist method solely around (particular forms of) qualitative research is a rejection of quantitative methods. Cancian (1992), who does not reject quantitative methods entirely, but does see them as much less desirable for feminist research than qualitative methods, explains some of the reasons for this. She rejects "positivism's focus on complex quantitative data which . . . devalues personal experience and everyday knowledge produced by non-elite people and defines non-experts as incapable of understanding and controlling their own lives"(624).

There are a number of difficulties with this position--both in the assumptions they make about their qualitative methods and in their limited view of quantitative methods. The power and efficacy of feminist research will be seriously lessened if only qualitative methods are used.
Qualitative Methods and Feminist Social Research

It is important to call into question a number of the assumptions made about the nature and possibilities for qualitative research in writings such as Kasper (1993), Cancian (1992) and Oakley (1981), that privilege qualitative over quantitative research. The biggest issue regards the researcher/researched relationship. These theorists overestimate the degree to which identification and rapport between researcher and researched results from a common gender identity. There is also a possibility that due to the more intensive relationship between the researcher and researched in qualitative interviews and ethnographic field research, there are greater possibilities for exploitation. Finally, the eschewal of 'imposing interpretative frameworks,' endorsed by Kasper seems neither possible nor desirable.

A Common Bond Between Women

The recommendations for an extremely interactive and collaborative research process tend to assume a research relationship characterized by common identification and common concerns of the researcher and researched in feminist research. They assume that, because women all share in the experience of patriarchal culture, gender commonality is enough to automatically create good rapport between the researcher and the researched (Shields and Derwin 1993). This, Jayarante and Stewart (1991) point out, characterizes an almost exclusive focus on inter-sex differences and intra-sex commonalities which can result in differences among women being ignored and rendered invisible. Phoenix (1994) demonstrates that the warm and reciprocal relationship between the researcher and researched in feminist qualitative sociology (such as that
identified by Oakley 1981 and Kasper 1993) may not be due solely to a common experience with
gender, but because of shared class or race on the part of the researcher and the researched (50).
She argues that because of differing social structural positions and material experiences, “the
woman interviewer/woman interviewee situation does not always produce rapport through shared
identification” (55). The discussions of a ‘common bond’ between researcher and researched due
to shared gender seem only able to deal with female researchers studying ‘women like them’ and
unable to deal with difference.

This is connected to broader problems in many feminist qualitative studies in terms of class
and race difference. Cannon, Higginbotham and Lewy (1991) argue that although feminist
qualitative studies on women have produced a great deal of important information, this
information has too often excluded women of color and working class women (107). This is
results from a variety of causes. Part of this is because white feminist researchers have been too
willing to study only white middle class women and have traditionally displayed a general
inattention to the relationships between gender, race, and class. Cannon et al (1991) also point
out, though, that qualitative studies are often biased because of the greater willingness of white,
middle class subjects (who may be more trusting of the researcher and of the potential uses of
research) to participate in qualitative research. If those focusing on a ‘feminist method’ continue
to only stress the commonalities among women, ignoring differences of race, class and other
factors, their method will be an extremely limited one.

Vulnerability and Exploitation in Qualitative Research

One of the arguments against the use of quantitative methods in feminist research is that
because the researcher/researched relationship is more detached and hierarchical and because the
researched are not actively integrated into the interpretive process, it objectifies and exploits the women studied. On the other hand, the qualitative methods they endorse, because of the greater emotional connections between researcher and researched and the more personally involved research process, are considered empowering and non-exploitative. Stacey (1987) and Acker, Barry and Esseweld (1991) demonstrate, however, that there may be equal, if not greater, dangers of exploiting the researched in qualitative research.

Judith Stacey (1987) relates important concerns about the dangers of exploitation of research subjects in qualitative research, documenting difficulties she encountered in her ethnographic research of families in post-industrial America. She explains that initially ethnographic methods seemed ideal for feminist research because ethnography/participant observation emphasizes the experiential, has a contextual and interpersonal approach to knowledge and a stronger relationship to research subjects than found in other research methods. She found, however, that this "appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach may mask a deeper more dangerous form of exploitation" (22) than found in other methods. This is because, the researched are more vulnerable, due to the greater intimacy with and deeper involvement of the researcher in the lives of the research subjects; the decisions made by the researcher can have a more intense (negative) impact on the actual lives of the researched and the potential for exploitation is heightened.

Acker et al (1991) discuss similar problems with the deeper relationship between researcher and researched in qualitative (as opposed to survey) interviews. They argue that while developing friendships and emotional connection with the researched can have positive effects, there is also the danger that this can be more exploitative--that this can lead to manipulating
friendships to the end of gaining information. There never is an entirely equal relationship between the researcher and the researched. Proceeding as if there is a completely non-hierarchical relationship. “Given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated, attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically be more exploitative”(141).

Neither Stacey (1987) nor Acker et al (1991) entirely reject attempts to develop interactive, collaborative qualitative methodologies because of these problems. They do demonstrate, however, that the assumptions made by many feminist methodologists regarding the researcher/researched relationship need to be challenged. The type of ‘feminist method’ endorsed by researchers like Oakley (1981) and Kasper (1993) ignores many dangers associated with their methods, thereby severely limiting the desirability of the type of projects they endorse.

**Interpretative Frameworks and Abstract Analysis**

One of the fundamental difficulties with the assumptions Kasper (1994) and Oakley (1981) make about feminist methods concerns the directive not to ‘impose’ the researchers’ frameworks on the experience of the researched. This seems neither possible nor desirable. Acker et al (1991) explain that, though focusing on the experience of the researched through their own eyes is important, research cannot end there.

Ultimately, the researcher must objectify the experience of the researched, must translate that experience into more abstract and general terms if an analysis that links the individual to processes outside her immediate social world is to be achieved. (136)

Thus, the idea that research can or should avoid any level of abstraction or ‘imposition’ of theoretical frameworks onto the experiences of the researched seems antithetical to producing quality research; indeed it seems detrimental to the feminist project of linking the personal
experiences of women to a broader politics. Even if this were desirable, it is never truly possible. Sprague and Zimmerman (1992) point out that even if a researcher desired solely to present the ideas and views of the researched, with no analysis by the researcher, they are still utilizing their own interpretative and theoretical frameworks in deciding who to talk to and what words to include.

Barbara Risman (1993) provides an excellent example of a feminist researcher who utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods and who very explicitly 'imposes her frameworks' upon the voices and experiences of those she researches. Under the guidelines of feminist research presented by Oakley (1981) and Kasper (1993) her research could not be considered feminist; however, her research questions arise from her position as a feminist, her analysis incorporates feminist perspectives and should definitely be considered a piece of feminist research. In one of her research projects, she studies sorority girls and their understandings of who a sorority girl is and what are the appropriate criteria for membership. These criteria are almost exclusively concerned with physical appearance and perceptions of social class; this, she explains, represents an internalization, on the part of the sorority girls, of dominant societal norms about gender, appearance, and class. Her conclusions and her feminist analysis are the specific result of not simply taking at face value the interpretations of those she researched (who probably would not agree with her analysis), and instead of using 'external' theoretical frameworks to understand the experiences and perspectives of the sorority girls. As Risman concludes:

We certainly have more contact with our subjects while doing qualitative research, but that doesn’t mean that we are any less detached from the analysis, nor that we should be. Qualitative research does not allow us to avoid imposing analytic frameworks upon our subjects unless we give up analysis. (23)
Those researchers who, in the interests of developing a feminist method, want to avoid inserting their own perspectives into the analysis of the experience of the researched may actually share in many positivist assumptions about the research process. Clearly there are enormous differences—those arguing for a feminist method reject the politics/science dichotomy and conceptualize the research process very differently than conventional positivists. They share some assumptions with the positivists, though, in that they do not acknowledge the crucial impact of the location (socially and theoretically) of the researcher on the research. Like some positivists they seem to assume that analysis or interpretation simply arises out of the data if they use careful enough methods (though of course their methodological criteria may differ dramatically from those of most positivists). This seems quite contrary to the many feminist epistemological explanations of the research process regarding the social construction of knowledge and the importance of taking the subjectivity of the researcher into account.
Quantitative Methods and Feminist Social Research

The assumptions of those proposing a ‘feminist method’ are problematic not only regarding feminist qualitative research, but also in terms of understanding quantitative methods. In these discussions, quantitative methods are often equated with positivist epistemology; this inaccurately conflates the two issues. Their rejection of quantitative methods ignores many of the important advantages quantitative methods can have in explanatory research and for generalization. Finally, to reject quantitative methods in sociology, a discipline dominated by quantitative research, can only result in a further ghettoization of feminist sociological research and compliance with a lack of impact of feminist perspectives on research produced by quantitative researchers. It is important for the potential feminist uses of all research methods, including quantitative methods, to be explored and utilized.

Positivist Epistemology and Quantitative Methods

Many feminists reject quantitative methods because they connect them to positivism; they view quantitative methods as the natural result of positivist epistemology or positivism is seen as inherent to quantitative methods, I believe, however, that one can reject the epistemology of positivism and still use quantitative methods. Positivism and quantitative research, though historically linked, are not intrinsically linked (Maynard 1994). The use of survey research, for instance, does not need to be accompanied by a lack of understanding of the social construction of knowledge, the impact of the location of the researcher on choosing research questions and utilizing theoretical frameworks, or of the partiality of all knowledge projects. Sprague and
Zimmerman (1992) demonstrate that those endorsing the exclusive use of a qualitative feminist method tend to describe qualitative research as it might be practiced ideally, yet describe quantitative methods in terms of its most problematic potential uses. Quantitative methods should not necessarily be rejected because of its problematic history and past anti-feminist uses, any more than qualitative methods should be rejected because of the historical relationship between ethnography and colonialism (Mies 1991: 67).

Risman (1993) argues that to reject quantitative methods because of a connection to problems with scientific method or positivism is analogous to ‘throwing the out the baby with the bathwater’; I wholeheartedly agree with this position. The extreme concentration on quantitative versus qualitative methods in much of the literature on feminist methods “obscures the more fundamental challenge of feminism to the traditional ‘scientific method’ . . . That challenge really questions the epistemology or theory of knowledge underlying traditional science” (Jayarante and Stewart 1991: 101), rather than necessitating the adoption or rejection of any one method.

The rejection of quantitative research because of its association with positivism may be another instance of feminist methodologists sharing in some of the assumptions of positivism. Sprague and Zimmerman (1992) explain that, just as positivism collapses epistemology and methodology into ‘the scientific method,’ those rejecting quantitative methods assume an inseparable link between the denial of the possibility of objective research (an epistemological position) with a denial of the desirability of quantitative studies (a method). The feminist methodologists do not sufficiently challenge the positivist assumption that ‘scientific method’ is epistemologically and methodologically unified.
Feminist Quantitative Research

Those who focus exclusively on the use of qualitative methods for feminist research ignore the specific advantages that quantitative methods offer for some research projects. One of these is the larger sample population possible in survey research. Due to financial and time constraints there are serious limits to the number of people that can be observed or interviewed in qualitative research. Because of the less intensive (but broader) focus of many quantitative research projects, larger and broader samples can be included in quantitative studies. This is particularly helpful for studying differences among women— an important project in feminist research. Qualitative studies provide a greater amount of information about a smaller number of people, whereas quantitative research enables discovery of more general and less detailed information about a greater number of people. Both have tradeoffs, but both also have advantages for feminist research.

A related issue is that of generalization. Survey research methods utilize strict sampling techniques to obtain the most representative a sample possible. The data obtained from these samples, unlike qualitative samples which are rarely truly representative, provides a greater ability to generalize the findings to a broader population. This ability may is especially important for convincing policy makers and others about the scope of problems; therefore survey research can be an important contribution to feminist politics (Reinharz 1992).

The greater control and precision of quantitative methods is extremely important in establishing causal relationships between factors. Qualitative research is more helpful for exploratory research projects and useful for exploring new areas of inquiry and developing new research questions, due to its greater flexibility. The explanatory and descriptive projects for
which quantitative methods are particularly suited, however, are equally important for producing feminist knowledge and furthering our understanding of gender and patriarchy.

Finally, quantitative methods may be less suited to the use of interactionist and ethnomethodological frameworks and for understanding how actors produce meaning in their everyday lives. However, quantitative methods have a number of advantages over qualitative research for studying structural issues. Macro-structural analysis is crucial to studying the system of patriarchy and other societal institutions and for connecting individual experiences to broader social trends. A feminist sociology that utilized only qualitative methods and studied only micro-interactionist issues would be a limited one indeed.

Reinharz (1993) comments that from reading a great deal of feminist methodological literature one might assume that there is no such thing as a feminist quantitative sociologist. The important contributions quantitative feminist sociologists have made to our understanding of work, family, education and other social institutions are, she explains, ‘neglected voices’ in feminist methodological literature. Because of the advantages of quantitative research for generalization and studying structural issues, Jayarante and Stewart (1991) and Sprague and Zimmerman (1992) argue, as I do, that the use and further development of quantitative research is crucial for developing feminist knowledge and feminist politics.

I also am concerned with the effects that an over-reliance on qualitative methods can have on attempts to communicate the knowledge generated in feminist research to researchers outside of the feminist community. Because so much of sociology is guided by quantitative research, the impact feminism can have on transforming sociology as a whole would be seriously diminished, if feminists were only to use the qualitative feminist methods endorsed by Oakley (1981), Kasper
(1993), Cancian (1992) and others. The focus on only a few specific methods can result, and possibly has resulted, in a ghettoization of feminist research, which can only have negative effects. Using only specific qualitative ‘feminist methods’ and avoiding engagement with the potential positive uses of quantitative research would results in a complicity with the non-feminism of many traditional (quantitatively focused) fields of study.

Instead of attempting to blend a number of different methods or attempting to locate the feminist uses of all research methods (as Maynard and Puries 1994, Jayarante and Stewart 1991, and Sprague and Zimmerman 1992 do), those advocating only one specific feminist method polarize various methodological options as either exclusively good or bad. Sprague and Zimmerman (1992) argue that, though these feminists may try to overcome dualisms of subject/object, rational/emotional, male/female they (like those who only value quantitative methods) perpetuate and strengthen the dualism of quantitative/qualitative. This is completely at odds with feminist epistemological directives to deconstruct dualist thinking and can only have deleterious effects on the future of feminist research.
Conclusion

A short while ago, someone who had just heard me explain my thesis asked me how the conclusions I have reached in writing this thesis have influenced my own views on and use of research, especially considering I am currently engaged in quantitative analysis. To this question, I flippantly answered: 'It hasn’t.' And yet, if these theoretical and epistemological positions about research and knowledge do not have a connection to how we really do research, then there is very little point in engaging further with these debates. I would like to conclude with a discussion of how I think the issues I’ve discussed in my thesis can and will influence my own role as a researcher.

I turn first to the methodological debates I examined in the second half of the thesis. Another friend of mine remarked to me some time ago: “Isn’t it ironic that you’re writing your thesis on feminist methodology and yet taking a data analysis class at the same time?” To her, the two projects seemed utterly contradictory. If there is any point to the latter half of my thesis, it is specifically to counter this assumption.

Certainly there is a lot to gain from the type of qualitative research projects endorsed by many feminist methodologists; though I have critiqued a number of their assumptions, I do believe that, as one of many research options, sociology is benefited by their attempts to transform the research relationship, grant women a greater critical voice, and take seriously the subjective experiences of the researched. This type of research by itself, however, is not sufficient for building a feminist sociology, or any other sociological
project for that matter. One of the crucial tasks for contemporary sociologists is integrating 'micro' and 'macro' level analyses. To do this requires not only intensive examination of the experiences and subjectivities of individual women, but also critical examination of broader structural phenomena. The use of quantitative methods will be an important resource for feminists in this project. Thus, survey research and the use of statistical methods are not only defensible, but necessary for feminist sociology. For these reasons, I do not find any contradiction between my use of statistical data analysis and my interest in feminist methodology.

The questions still remains of how the epistemological positions I examined in the first half of the thesis inform my own research. For some feminist sociologists, accepting the critiques of positivist epistemology offered by postmodern feminists and feminist standpoint theorists results in the sole identification of certain qualitative methods as feminist. For me, however, the critiques of positivism most certainly do not lead in this direction. Indeed the criticisms of dualistic thinking offered by the postmodernists cause me to be extremely wary of basing a methodology around a strict quantitative vs. qualitative dichotomy (Sprague and Zimmerman 1992).

Though quantitative research has traditionally been connected with positivist epistemology, this is not an inseverable connection (and we must also remember that use of qualitative methods does not make one immune to the problems of objectivism and positivism). Any quantitative research in which I participate, at least, will be highly influenced by the work of the feminist postmodernists. Quantitative research, because there is generally much less interaction and personal engagement with the research
subjects, can be extremely prone to the problems of impersonality and detachment; these are issues that need further examination by quantitative feminist sociologists. Other epistemological issues seem to have as much potential connection to the use of quantitative methods as any other methods. The questions I ask in my (quantitative) research and the theoretical perspectives I turn towards to help explain my data, are of course shaped by my socio-historical position; my research, like all other research, is not bias/value-free. Nor do I conceptualize my research in terms of foundations of absolute knowledge; by asking a particular question or turning to a particular data source, we necessarily leave others out. This does not mean, however, conceding that all (partial) knowledges are equally valid. If I truly believed this, it would be difficult to imagine why I would engage in any research at all.

One might still ask, if the epistemological critiques of positivism can be compatible with quantitative method, then why do we find so few feminist quantitative researchers actively engaging in the feminist methodological debates? In researching my thesis, I did have trouble locating quantitative researchers who offer explicit contributions to the epistemological and methodological debates in feminism (Jayarante and Stewart 1991, Risman 1993, Molm 1992, and Kelly et al 1991 being exceptions to this). This, however, may be less the result of a lack of attention to the issue and more the result of the constraints of publishing in journals that may be highly unsympathetic to lengthy epistemological and feminist theoretical discussions. Publishing in journals that are not specifically feminist, though, will be of utmost importance if feminist theory is to move beyond ‘convincing the convinced.’ Quantitative feminist researchers may also be
reluctant to engage in the feminist methodological debates because their methods have been so entirely devalued by other feminists who consider their work unfeminist or amoral.

It is my hope that feminist quantitative researchers will begin to engage more deeply and explicitly with the epistemological and methodological implications for doing feminist research. This will be of utmost importance both for translating the epistemological debates into methodological directives and for moving feminist methodology beyond the over-simplistic assumptions about quantitative and qualitative research that have dominated so much of this debate thus far.
References


