

The Handbook of  
**Workplace  
Diversity**

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## *Feminist Qualitative Research and Workplace Diversity*

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AND JEAN HELMS MILLS

In this chapter we discuss the value and application of feminist qualitative research to the study of workplace diversity. Broadly defined, qualitative research is characterized as a methodology designed to illicit insights into the *meanings* and *understandings* that people associate with social relationships and events (O'Neill, 1995). In contrast to quantitative methods, qualitative methods:

focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome; a concern with context – regarding behavior and situation as inextricably linked in forming experience; and finally, an explicit recognition of the impact of research process on the research situation. (Cassell & Symon, 1994, quoted in Brewerton & Millward, 2001: 12)

The value of qualitative research to the study of workplace diversity can be illustrated through analysis of two strongly related concepts – systemic discrimination and organizational culture. The term 'systemic discrimination' was coined by the Abella Commission (1984), a Canadian Royal Commission, chaired by Judge Rosalie Abella, that was charged with examining equity in employment. Through extensive collection and marshalling of statistics the Abella Commission was able to make a powerful case for legislation to address palpable discrimination against four designated groups – 'women, native people, disabled persons, and visible minorities'

(Abella, 1984: v). At the heart of the argument was strong evidence of systemic patterns of discrimination arising out of 'a disparately negative impact that flows from ... the nature of systems designed for a homogeneous constituency [i.e. white able-bodied males]; and [...] practices based on stereotypical characteristics ascribed to an individual because of the characteristics ascribed to the group of which he or she is a member' (Abella, 1984: 9–10). The consequent legislation provided an important framework for judging the extent of, and steps taken to reduce, systemic discrimination across government agencies and government-funded organizations in the private sector. While the report provided the incentive to reduce systemic discrimination through legislative action, it did not ultimately explain how systemic discrimination develops, is maintained, and can be changed over time. That is where a qualitative research strategy can be vital in identifying the deep-rooted factors that shape and solidify discriminatory notions of organizational reality.

In recent years a number of feminist researchers have been drawn to the notion of organizational culture as a heuristic for exploring ways that discriminatory practices are formed. Many of these studies seek to identify not only the quantifiable imbalances in employment practices (Morgan, 1988; Wicks & Bradshaw, 2002) but the influence of such things as values (Wicks & Bradshaw, 2002), sensemaking processes (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000), symbolism (Gherardi, 1995), identity work (Thomas & Davies, 2002), corporate representations (Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002), and notions of masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1994), femininity (Wolf, 2002) and sexual orientation (Hearn & Parkin, 1987). The value in all these approaches is that by gaining insights into how discrimination develops and is maintained we can also develop appropriate change strategies.

So far we have given the impression that there are unitary approaches to qualitative research and feminism. Neither is the case. The qualitative research approach of any given researcher will be influenced by his or her underlying view of reality (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology) and broad socio-political orientation (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Although feminists share a common goal of working towards 'the political, economic, spiritual, sexual, and social equality of women' (The Wise Woman, 1982, 4: 2, 7, quoted in Kramarae & Treichler, 1985: 161), they also differ in their ontological and epistemological perspectives (Calás & Smircich, 1992; 1996). Thus, for example, feminist scholars from within a 'women in management' perspective may be more inclined to adopt positivist methods, including qualitative techniques that ultimately rely on quantification (e.g. counts of particular observed behaviors) rather than a concern with deep-rooted understanding. For example, Kanter's (1977) now classic study of gender at work consisted of a number of quantitative measures, including the outcome of 'some observations of women's leadership in organizations', involving 'a variety of coding schemes in meetings, including variations on Bale's "Interaction Process Analysis"' (p. 299). When, on the other hand, Ferguson (1984) set out to interview women in bureaucratic settings she made no 'claims to have selected a representative sample', pointing out that her 'interviews do not represent a statistically valid or reliable population and are not statistically generalizable' (p. xi). The essential difference between

these feminists in their approach to qualitative methods is due, in large part, to their epistemological orientations, glimpsed in Kanter's intellectual debt to Karl Marx, Adam Smith and Peter Drucker, and Ferguson's intellectual debt to Michel Foucault.

In focusing on *feminist* qualitative research our aim is not to suggest that it is the best and only way to study workplace diversity: clearly there are a number of other perspectives – including postcolonialist (Prasad & Prasad, 2002), racio-ethnic (Cox, 1990), post-structuralist (Morgan & Knights, 1991), Marxist (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980), and others – that have made an important contribution to this field. We do, however, contend that feminism is a particularly appropriate approach to the study of workplace diversity given its historical preoccupation with gender, *difference* and *otherness*. We will engage with the strengths and limitations of the feminist approach later in the chapter.

## THE FEMINIST PROJECT

The feminist project has developed through generations of social movement aimed at 'women's liberation' and has profound implications for research. In seeking to challenge the sexist character and structure of social life, feminists fundamentally challenge the dominant positivist viewpoint of research as objective, value free and non-political. In short, feminist research, in contrast to mainstream research, is *consciously* informed by a wider project (e.g. the betterment of women, women's liberation) that precedes any research activity. As such the feminist project influences the type of research activity that is undertaken, the questions asked and the desired outcomes. For example, when Kanter (1977: xi) set out to study 'how consciousness and behavior are formed by positions in organizations' she was 'motivated by [her] involvement in the women's movement to seek understanding of the fate of women as well as men in organizations'. And she set out to 'further the cause of equality for women in organizations' (Kanter, 1977: 291). This led her to raise questions about the relationship between gender and management, power, and opportunity.

Some feminist research, however, arises out of a 'broader' enquiry in which unexpected developments encourage a feminist turn. Cockburn's (1991: 3) study of male dominance and technological change 'began as a study of the human impact of technological change [before becoming] a study in the making and remaking of men [and] about the uses to which men put work and technology in maintaining their power over women'. In this case the unfolding meanings of the workplace spoke to Cockburn's feminism and helped to change the direction of the research.

On the surface this seems to suggest that feminist research differs from other research in terms of political agenda. Yes and no. Yes, feminist researchers do share a broad political agenda of change. That agenda, however, is by no means uniform in its strategies or desired outcomes. Liberal feminists, for example, may

strive for greater numbers of women in positions of power and authority at work, while Marxist feminists may be more focused on the defeat of capitalist forms of organization and a revolutionary restructuring of society (Calás & Smircich, 1996). No, feminist research is not the only approach that is informed by preconceived notions, nor the only approach that engages in/with organizational politics. It can be argued that all research is biased and political in its start point (Hollway, 1989; Reed, 1978). Take for example research on organizational culture. This focus of interest has been explored in hundreds of books and articles since the late 1970s (Kieser, 1997) and it is fair to say that, in large part, they have concerned themselves with the relationship between organizational culture and business outcomes – including motivation, productivity, organizational growth, productivity, etc. (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohavy & Sanders, 1990; Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985). These studies share a common goal of assisting organizational managers to improve ‘bottom-line’ performance, and that goal (which is rarely problematized) shapes the type of research questions asked.

Schein (1985) captures the profound differences between mainstream and feminist research in his contrast between, what he terms, ethnographic and clinical studies of organizational culture. He argues that the ethnographic perspective is detached, bringing to any research project ‘a set of concepts or models that motivated the research in the first place’. The groups being studied ‘are often willing to participate but usually have no particular stake in the *intellectual issues* that may have motivated the study’ (Schein, 1985: 21; our emphasis). The clinical perspective, on the other hand, is ‘one where the group members are clients who have their own interests as the prime motivator for the involvement of the “outsider”, often labeled “consultant”’ (Schein, 1985: 21–2). In contrast, feminist research assumes neither that groups are willing to participate as subjects nor that the researcher is merely intellectually curious and thus disinterested as in the ethnographic perspective. In any number of feminist studies of workplace diversity the *way* people are studied (the methods involved) is seen as part of the broader problem of addressing discriminatory practices (c.f. Acker & van Houten, 1974). As we saw from the research commentaries of Kanter and Cockburn above, feminist researchers are far from disinterested in the focus of study and its outcomes. Nor do feminist researchers assume that research questions that serve the intellectual interests of the researcher and/or those who ‘are paying’ for the research (Schein, 1985: 21), namely organizational managers, are disinterested or unbiased. As numerous feminist researchers have indicated, almost all mainstream studies of organizational culture have neglected, if not downright ignored, gender and the potential effects of culture manipulation on the women and men involved (Aaltio, Mills & Helms Mills, 2002).

Feminist studies of organizational culture are more likely to set out with an examination of the impact of organizational culture on women’s employability (Morgan, 1988), sense of self and self-worth (Katila & Merilainen, 2002), discrimination at work (Wicks & Bradshaw, 2002), or strategies of organizational change towards great equity (Marshall, 1993).

## FEMINIST PHILOSOPHIES AND METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE

As we argued earlier, while there is a shared agenda of the betterment of womankind, feminists differ on a number of issues, including the definitions and understanding of central terms, strategies and outcomes. Thus, there are various feminist approaches to workplace diversity, reflecting the diversity of thought that underlies the different feminisms. Calás and Smircich (1996), for example, delineate a range of feminist theories that include liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist, post-structuralist, (post)colonial and psycho-analytic. This typology of feminisms is, for the most part, built around the broad political agenda that each perspective is thought to characterize, but there are other differences both within and beyond these boundaries that reflect ontological and epistemological differences (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Each feminist perspective informs not only the research agenda but also how it is studied and the questions asked; in short, the methods used to study workplace diversity. Liberal feminists, for example, view women as essentially different from men but argue that those differences have been made too much of in workplace hiring and promotion to the detriment of women (cf. Henning & Jardin, 1977). This ontological view of women facilitates the study of workplace discrimination through statistical analysis of the extent to which women are excluded from certain organizations, occupations, industries and job positions. Schein (1973), for example, provided valuable insights into the relationship between the attitudes of male managers to women and management as an important variable in the relative exclusion of women from management positions. She did this by getting a number of male managers to respond to a series of affect terms which they were asked to relate to their understanding of women, men and leadership. The results indicated that the managers assigned similar affect terms to the notion of men and to leader but very different affect terms to the notion of women. Post-structuralist feminists, on the other hand, 'question the very stability of such cultural categories as gender' (Calás & Smircich, 1992: 226), focusing on 'the discursive nature of "social reality" and "subjectivity", and its inessential nature' (Calás & Smircich, 1996: 244). An excellent example of how feminist philosophy shapes the way that things are studied comes from Humphreys' (1994) account of different approaches to women's history. She argues that there are various feminist historiographies (or methods of studying history), including history by women, history about women and the history of conceptions gender. The first approach reflects an underlying philosophy of 'women's voice', seeking change by adding female voices to the narratives of history. The second approach is similar to the liberal feminist perspective, focusing on 'including women in the historical record', seeking change by revealing the contribution of women. The third approach owes more to feminist social constructionist approaches, focusing on how cultural features contribute to the social construction of 'women' and 'men'.

## FEMINIST QUALITATIVE METHODS IN ACTION

According to Reinharz and Davidman (1992: 327), 'there is no single "feminist way" to do research'. The choice of qualitative or quantitative, and of positivist or anti-positivist qualitative, methods is rooted in ontological/epistemological preferences more than broad political agendas. Liberal feminism, for example, has been characterized as engaging in a 'stream of research [that] is strongly influenced by experimental and behaviorist psychology' (Calás & Smircich, 1996: 223). This research is heavily influenced by a predilection for realist/positivist views of reality. Nonetheless, this view of reality is not restricted to liberal feminism (but encompasses elements of socialist and Marxist feminism), nor does it describe liberal feminism as a whole. Some liberal feminists, for example, engage in quantitative research to establish statistical differences between men and women in the workplace, in terms of job level, hiring rates, opinions, etc. (e.g. Morrison, White & Van Elson, 1987) but they may also engage in (positivist) qualitative research in an effort to understand how the people involved feel about discrimination at work (cf. Harriman, 1985). On the other hand, the prospects of quantitative research diminish among those feminists who reject realist and positivist notions of reality, including post-structuralist and interpretivist feminists, who are more defined by their ontological preference than their political agenda. In short, while the use of quantitative methods is an option among some feminist perspectives, we may find evidence of a qualitative research approach in every feminist perspective.

## RESEARCH TECHNIQUES IN CONTEXT

In this section, for reasons of space, we will explore selected techniques of qualitative research.

### **Kicking over the Traces: Content Analysis, Discourse Analysis and Historiography**

In studying workplace diversity it is not always possible or necessary to speak to or observe members of an organization. It depends on the specific purpose of the study and the researcher's theoretical framework. Materialist feminists, for example, may be primarily interested in (re)constructing histories of women (cf. Rowbotham, 1974) and other so-called minorities through the collection of archival materials and content analysis of existing accounts. Feminist post-structuralists may use discourse analysis to deconstruct the understandings that we bring to and make sense of a particular organizational context. Feminist historiographic accounts and/or content analysis may be used to develop an understanding

of the context in which workplace diversity is enacted, or to deconstruct observations and interviews.

### *Content analysis*

An example of the first type of approach is that of Acker and van Houten (1974), who analyzed the readings, diaries and notes of the original Hawthorne Studies researchers from a feminist perspective. By analyzing what the original researchers had to say, how they said it, what they included and what they excluded, Acker and van Houten (1974) were able to draw attention to the potential sex dynamics that may have influenced management practice at the Hawthorne works and the process of management research of those who developed the Hawthorne Studies.

Other forms of content analysis include work by Benshop and Meihuizen (2002) who deconstruct text and photographic material from the annual reports of a number of companies – revealing the gendered character of corporate presentation. See also the work of Helms Mills (2005), who examines representations of diversity through three major periods of organizational change in the annual reports of a utility company.

### *Discourse analysis*

Calás (1992) used discourse analysis in her study of the representation of Hispanic women in US organizational scholarship. In this study, she reviews various texts found in Western organization studies and deconstructs the dominant discourse that refers to Hispanic women. By asking particular questions – ‘How are these discourses constituted? How are they similar to already constituted organizational discourses? How would these constructions impede the appearance of “the different”?’ – she offers an intervention into the reproduction of this emerging identity (Calás, 1992: 203). In the discussion that follows, Calás analyzes the concepts in the text in the categories of time, race and voice and from comparative epistemological perspectives. This methodology offers insight into the developing ‘knowledge-about-Hispanic-women’ being produced in organizational scholarship.

### *Historiography*

Mills’ study of race and gender in British Airways over time (Mills, 1994; 1995; 1996) is an example of a social constructionist feminist approach to history. Mills set out to uncover ‘how the cultural features of an organization contribute to the social construction of “womanhood” or “manhood”’ (Mills, 2002: 292) and notions of race and ethnicity. The research included textual analysis of ‘cultural traces’ reflected in ‘corporate memories’ developed by those in privileged positions (e.g. managers, editors, corporate accountants, marketing personnel, film producers) and for specific ends, as well as interviews with some of the men and women who had worked for the company over a period of time.

## **Crossing the Boundaries: Narrative Analysis, Life Histories and Discourse Analysis**

While some methods of analysis focus on the traces of enacted agency (i.e. past actions), other feminist methods attempt to capture the sensemaking processes in action through such things as narrative analysis, discourse analysis and life histories.

### *Narrative analysis*

This is a process of gathering and analyzing narratives and interpreting meaning from these. For example, Olsson's (2000) study of women managers' narratives of gender in the context of organizational archetypes looks at the role of organizational myths and stories in the definition of leadership as heroic masculinism.

The study involved women business students who also held management positions at various levels and studied at a New Zealand university. The sample of 26 stories was coded and analyzed on the bases of recurring themes. Attitudes towards women managers are discussed in three interrelated categories: invisibility, sexuality and stereotypes. Through an analysis of the themes represented in the women's stories, the researcher is able to identify modern myths of management and create space for the introduction of a women's archetype of leadership excellence. The study concluded that:

The women managers' stories in this study 'break the silence' and expand official organizational myths to provide vibrant assertions of women's experiences. In parodic inversions of heroic masculinism represented in the Ulysses quest, these stories reveal that the 'monsters' and trials of women's career journeys, are not to do with their competencies or abilities, but rather to do with stereotyped attitudes encountered along the way. The stories also suggest a distinctive female archetype of women as leaders. (Olsson, 2000: 302)

### *Discourse analysis*

Hardy (2001: 26) describes discourse as 'the practices of talking and writing ... which bring objects into being through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts'. Dick and Cassell (2002) employ a technique of discourse analysis to focus on the issue of resistance to diversity initiatives in a British police force. They introduce their methodology with a discussion of the problems they see as inherent in research methods, which speak on behalf of subordinated groups. As a result, their approach was to facilitate non-directive and open-ended interviews/conversations. Unlike Calás's post-structuralist approach, Dick and Cassell use Potter and Wetherell's (1987) concept of 'interpretive repertoires' to identify discourses that police officers used to construct their accounts of promotion and sexual harassment. The technique:

involves a close examination of the vocabulary used when talking about a specific issue (i.e. promotion or sexual harassment) and the development of appropriate labels to describe this vocabulary. [Dick and Cassell] used the method of constant comparisons,

taken from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to achieve this aim. [They] identified and made extracts of each occasion when ourselves or the participants had spoken about promotion and sexual harassment. [They] then compared each extract with every other, looking for similarities and differences in the ideas articulated in the extracts. This enabled [them] to identify two dominant interpretive repertoires (discourses). (Dick & Cassell, 2002: 961)

The authors then examined each discourse through Fairclough's (1992) three dimensions of analysis – text, discourse practice and social practice. This analysis leads the authors to argue for a 'far more critical and theoretical approach to the management of diversity' (Dick & Cassell, 2002: 973).

### *Life Histories*

The life history method is a presentation of 'the experiences and definitions held by one person, one group, or one organization as this person, group or organization interprets those experiences' (Denzin, 1970: 220). 'Data for life histories can come from private documents such as diaries, letters or taped accounts, or from public records such as autobiographies, television or newspaper stories, minutes of meetings, doctors' records and the like' (Kirby & McKenna, 1989: 81). The challenge in using this methodology, as with other methods of textual analysis, is usually one of access to complete documentation.

Kirby and McKenna (1989: 82) outline the following process used in the life history research approach:

- 1 List the landmarks or milestones in the person's life.
- 2 Gather material by interviewing, library searches and so on.
- 3 Reconstruct the experiences of the individual by filling in a chronological account of his or her experiences.
- 4 Detail the reconstruction with information available from others and/or by incorporating parallel life histories.
- 5 Repeat steps 2–4 until, as much as possible, the life history takes shape as a relatively complete accounting of the individual's life experience.

Cotterill and Letherby (1993) offer an interesting discussion of the importance of personal biographies as a tool in feminist research. Contributing to the debate on the role of the experience of the researcher in feminist qualitative research, Cotterill and Letherby (1993: 67) discuss the importance of the biography and the challenges involved in including the researcher's autobiography at the publication stage. They conclude not only that the process of research using personal biographies is important in a retrospective sense, as a historical perspective, but that the research experience 'also alters the personal biographies of the future for all those involved'.

Bell and Nkomo (1992) argue that a life history approach is useful for understanding the experiences that influence women's career choices and opportunities. They contend that such an approach allows the researcher to move beyond universal notions of women by taking into account 'the interactive layers, role and expectations

as well as the contexts in which their lives are embedded' (p. 245). In this way we are forced to acknowledge 'the differing experiences of women due to their gender, racial-ethnic, and class identities. And [to take] into account women's lives from a holistic perspective rather than compartmentalizing their lives' (p. 236).

## **Living with the Results: Interviews, Observations and Ethnographies**

Some research methods are designed to directly engage with the members of an organization; these can range from interviews and observations to more extensive ethnographic study.

### *Interviews*

Interviews in feminist qualitative research can take a number of forms. They may appear as conversations, structured interview settings, focus group interactions, sharing of information through storytelling, etc. The concept of the 'long interview' as an open-ended and relatively unstructured approach to gathering information is a key component in much qualitative research. As advocated by McCracken (1988: 9), 'the long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing.'

However, there is some debate among researchers as to the role of the interviewer and, to some extent, the role of the participant in the interview, whatever its form. McCracken (1988) describes the role of the interviewer as one that is benign, accepting and curious. He suggests that the interviewer should present as neutral to sympathetic and even the body language of the interviewer should appear benign. He suggests that interviewers appear 'slightly dim and too agreeable' rather than risk upsetting the atmosphere of safety for the respondent (McCracken, 1988: 38).

This perspective is quite different from that of a number of feminist researchers who view the interview process more as a sharing of information than a search for 'truth', which may or may not be withheld by participants. Kirby and McKenna (1989), for example, argue that the form of the interview should be defined by the interviewer and the participant together. The participant should be seen as more than just data and the interviewer as more than just the vehicle for gathering this data. Interviews that are described as 'non-exploitative' are considered to be a guided conversation where the interviewer and the participant both share information and contribute to the research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989: 66).

In their description of the elements of interview research, Kirby and McKenna (1989) emphasize the fact that both the researcher and the participant should get what they want and need out of the experiences. The interview is described more as an interactive process of information sharing than the traditional, quantitative interview, which would be much more structured with a very limited role for the researcher.

On the other hand, there are those feminist researchers who do see merit in searching for truth rather than a process of sharing. Kanter's (1977) study of corporate leaders, for example, set out to probe the extent to which workplace discrimination relied more on 'the nature of organization' rather than individual men and women (p. 291).

Although the interview format is to be unstructured in the feminist qualitative approach, Kirby and McKenna (1989: 74) contend that there is still a need for clear and well-conceived questions:

the basis of all interviews is the question ... You must transform your research focus from one research question into many specific questions that will help you, the interviewer, stay close to the research focus and help the participant respond to questions about her or his own experience in an insightful and thoughtful way. The way in which you word the questions, the order in which you ask them and what the participant thinks you might be seeking are components of the interview process.

The application of these questions, and the involvement of the participant in the process, allows feminist qualitative researchers the opportunity to explore the subjective experience of those involved in a more profound way. For example, in Lee's (2002) study of gendered workplace bullying in the British Civil Service, feminist qualitative research exposed the gender dynamics of bullying and uncovered a more complex relationship between gender and bullying than had been offered in previous analysis. Her qualitative methodology, which involved 50 semi-structured interviews with male and female workers who had been exposed to bullying, provided insight that challenged previous work in this area. Earlier studies into bullying had been conducted from a quantitative perspective, and concluded that because men and women had both been exposed to bullying in the workplace, it was not a gender-related issue (i.e. Adams, 1992). Lee's (2002) feminist qualitative approach offered a more in-depth analysis of the impact of gender on bullying, finding that bullying was experienced differently by men and women and it could be a gendered experience for workers. This analysis problematized the absence of a gender analysis in the existing workplace bullying discourse (Lee, 2000: 227).

Aaltio (2002: 201–2), however, suggests 'gender issues sometimes disappear when a researcher tries to capture them by means of interviews', because the interviewee's 'talk and stories are not merely unique to the individual, but they take place within gendered cultural contexts'. To deal with this she argues for a process of 'shadowing' where 'we read gendered processes from material in which gender (notions of women and men) is not explicitly mentioned' (Aaltio, 2002: 201). This can involve examination of not only what is said, but also the organizational culture in which the interview takes place.

### *Observation*

There are various forms of observation in qualitative research but we shall deal with three here – observation, participant observation and ethnography. Observation is in many ways the most straightforward when it involves someone

who is known to be a researcher spending time observing certain activities and making notes. For example, to understand the impact of organizational structure on discrimination Kanter (1977: 299) 'watched meetings of two professional women's leadership training programs, a task force at a church, an innovative parochial school, an "alternative" service organization, and a traditional service organization. [She] took field notes and used a variety of coding schemes in meetings.' Pollert (1981) also used observation (and a series of informal interviews) to detail the factory lives of women workers in a Bristol (UK) tobacco company. She initially attempted to engage in participant observation by getting a job at the factory but this met with resistance from the trade union. Thus, she did not have to make a secret of the fact she was a researcher. This suited Pollert (1981: 6) because she 'did not have much chance of learning how to do the work (weighing, for example) in a short period of time, and because adroit enough to talk, observe, or think about anything except keeping up'.

Nonetheless, because observations can encourage people to be on their best (less obviously gendered) behaviour some researchers prefer participant observation in which 'the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role' (Becker & Geer, 1957: 28). As a form of gaining access to people's ongoing sensemaking or accounts of reality this has proven a useful but troubling approach for feminist researchers (Breeman, Guberman, Fournier, Gervais & Lamoureux, 2003). For one thing, participant observation may hide as much as it reveals through the influence of the gendered relations and expectations in which they occur (Brayton, 2004). For example, the needs of the feminist researcher to have access to participants can come into conflict with the cultural expectations of women's role. As Warren (1988: 13) explains, 'the fieldworker's initial reception by the host society is a reflection of cultural contextualization of the fieldworker's characteristics, which include marital status, age, physical appearance, presence and number of children, and ethnic, racial, class, or national differences as well as gender'.

These factors can be even more problematic in ethnographic research where the researcher attempts to become embedded in a particular organizational community over time.

### *Ethnography*

Arguing for a 'gendered perspective to cultures' to uncover resistance to organizational change, Shepherd and Pringle (2004: 160) undertook an ethnographic study of a US company operating in New Zealand. The case study was designed to illuminate 'the gendered nature of organizational cultures and more importantly the gendered nature of resistance to specific attempts to change the organizational culture' (p. 164). The study involved a 12-month investigation that included interviews, discussions, observations and analysis of corporate documents. In this way, argue Shepherd and Pringle (2004: 164), the combination of techniques used over a longish period of time allowed them to 'discern layers of meaning from a close reading of participants' "short stories"'.

## **Being Feminist: Autoethnography, the Self in Research and Techniques of the Self**

Stanley and Wise (1983: 165) advocate a recognition of the fact that 'personal, direct experience, underlies all behaviours and actions'. As a result, the requirement for generalizability and external validity required in the quantitative approach is less important in qualitative research. The focus here is on a more profound understanding of the experiences of individuals, rather than a large-scale study of a particular demographic group. This has led a number of feminist researchers to examine the role of the self in qualitative research.

### *Autoethnography*

A recent example of autoethnicity can be found in the work of Hearn (2004). Attempting to provide insights on the processes of gendering, Hearn found himself reflecting on his own experiences and how they could help to illuminate the linkages between 'men, gender, sexuality, violence, organizations, management, and multiple social divisions' (Hearn, 2004: 40). To that end, focusing on his involvement in a university hiring process – as the candidate – he developed 'a reflexive composite methodology, combining participatory action research, documentary analysis, critical life history, memory work and autoethnography' (Hearn, 2004: 40). Through this approach Hearn develops insights into the gendering of organizational processes but in a way that 'raises complex uncertainties about the nature of knowledges and the relations of Ones to Others' (Hearn, 2004: 60).

### *The self in feminist research*

Katila and Merilainen (2002: 185) argue that 'placing self in the centre of research – that is, seeing self both as the subject and the object of research – can be a meaningful and fruitful strategy' for dealing with 'discriminative organizational cultures'. At the heart of this strategy has been the generation of data 'based on naturally occurring conversations, some of which we [they wrote down] on site, and some of which [they] recorded from memory afterwards' and the utilization of 'any and all situationally available techniques to gather data' (p. 188). Reflecting on their strategy, Katila and Merilainen (2002) are aware of the dangers that their work will be seen as biased – that they would be seen as 'too intimately involved with the organization under study and its members to be able to distance [themselves] from the field' (p. 192). Their answer is that 'there are no essential differences between the subjects and objects of knowledge' (p. 193). They conclude, by 'reporting on our identity work as female academics in a male-dominated academic community, we have been able to highlight the gendered nature of academic work in general, and the difficulties women face in constructing their professional identity in particular' (p. 197).

### *Techniques of the self*

In a similar vein Brewis (2004) puts herself in focus, drawing on Foucault's notion of techniques of the self to her 'being-in-the-world' (p. 24). In fact, the study is fourfold:

first, to outline the ways in which we moderns are enjoined to interpret ourselves ...; second, to describe the price [she] has paid for [her] own 'truths' of 'self'; third, to review [her] efforts to change how [she thinks] about what happens to [her]; and, fourth, to suggest that, although we might be 'free' to make alterations in this regard, these alterations are by no means easy nor are they passports to a better way of life. (pp. 37–8)

In her brave attempt at critical self-analysis Brewis leaves us with powerful insights into the related problems of identity work, organizational discourse and resistance.

### **Deconstructing the Social Constructions: Deconstruction**

Finally, at the end of the day, we need to make sense of what we have studied. How we do that will largely depend on which feminist approach we have taken in the first place. Making sense of data may be as simple as 'writing up' the 'results' through to what post-structuralists call 'deconstruction'. To end this section, and with full apologies to the many feminist approaches that we have not been able to cover, we take a brief look at deconstruction – and only one (post-structuralist) variant at that.

#### *Deconstruction*

This is another approach applied to textual analysis and it asserts that there is no one true account of the world. Therefore, only partially objective truths can be created as all language creates a discourse that will, at the same time, include some voices and exclude others.

Martin's (1990) study of organizational taboos used a deconstruction of an excerpt from a speech given by a corporate CEO. In response to a question about the company's concern for the well-being of women employees with children, the CEO told a story, by way of example. Martin introduces her methodology by saying 'I deconstruct and reconstruct this story from a feminist viewpoint, examining what it says, what it does not say, and what it might have said. This analysis highlights suppressed gender conflicts implicit in this story and shows how apparently well-intentioned organizational practices can reify, rather than alleviate, gender inequalities' (Martin, 1990: 339).

### **And the Underprivileged Methods**

Due to the limits of time and space we have only focused on some of the techniques of feminist study leaving out of account several other important

methodologies, including symbolic interactionism (Hall, 2003), hermeneutics (Code, 2003), feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), feminist materialism (Kuhn & Wolpe, 1978), postcolonialism (Prasad, Mills, Elmes & Prasad, 1997) and a rich variety of postmodernist and post-structuralist feminist research (Olesen, 1994).

## CHALLENGES IN USING THESE METHODOLOGIES

The application of feminist qualitative research methodology is not without its limitations. The major criticisms of this perspective are similar to those leveled at qualitative research in general. These include; the role of the researcher and subject, research bias, ethical practice, validity and credibility. As Fielding (1999) points out, 'Qualitative methods have lately enjoyed enhanced legitimacy and are increasingly used in academic and applied social research. Yet the field is marked by controversy about virtually every key tenet of qualitative inquiry, from matters of epistemology to purely practical matters of relations with research subjects.'

In response to the question of research bias and research subjectivity, feminist qualitative researchers would argue that bias is a misplaced term (Olesen, 1994: 165). The researcher's experience and involvement in the research process are seen as resources, rather than 'problems' to be overcome in the research process. The challenge for researchers is to recognize and reflect upon their involvement in the process so that their views may be an appropriately attributed part of the research.

## CONCLUSION

The feminist approach to qualitative research offers a unique response to current criticisms of workplace diversity initiatives. A reliance on quantitative, ethnocentric research over the past decade has failed to illuminate the underlying problems with diversity management, be it as a program, field of research or paradigm. More recently, a feminist critique of the state of workplace diversity has offered some insight into the fundamental issues that need be addressed if diversity management is to succeed. These include the potential of backlash towards marginalized groups, a lack of definitional clarity of the term diversity management, and a 'watering down' of diversity issues to that of affirmative action programs. Feminist qualitative research techniques offer an opportunity for researchers to begin to address issues of relationships, power and oppression within organizations by providing a more profound understanding of the experience of individuals within organizations.

As in any research program, researchers must define their research objectives and identify data accordingly. Feminist qualitative researchers must also justify this 'alternative' research methodology to the dominant paradigm. In the end,

however, the challenge for feminist qualitative researchers may be a question of how to represent their research as well as how to conduct it. Although a feminist perspective may help to provide a wider audience for diversity research, there are many organizations that prefer to leave issues of diversity to the human resources department. Feminist qualitative research provides a critique of this practice, and contributes to the growing understanding of the limitations of traditional organizational practices with regards to marginalized groups. The fundamental goals of feminist and diversity research are to facilitate change and provide opportunities for representation of marginalized groups and individuals. If these goals are to be realized, researchers in these perspectives must work together with postmodern and critical researchers who are theorizing organizational power.

At the same time, if diversity initiatives are to be meaningful in contemporary organizations, researchers must recognize the environment in which workplace diversity research takes place. It can be argued that to discount organizational structures as they currently exist is unrealistic. 'Critique is a valuable way of exposing the negative outcomes of organizations but of itself it will not lead to change' (Mills, 1998: 297). We would encourage critical organizational theorists to incorporate the insights gained through mainstream management theory, and build on that knowledge to effect organizational change.

Finally, we want to return to the point that we introduced at the beginning of this chapter, that feminist qualitative research is a useful way of generating insights into workplace diversity. We have argued that qualitative research need not be seen as an alternative to quantitative research and can even be complementary, but it depends on which feminist perspective you take and your respective understanding of qualitative and quantitative research. We have also attempted to provide various examples where feminist research has attempted to deal with issues of gender, race, ethnicity and class. Nonetheless, we are cognizant that some may ask: how can a perspective that is women centered adequately deal with the broader issues of diversity, which has come to stand for race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and age, as well as gender? There are four answers to this question that, we hope, will provide an appropriate conclusion to this chapter:

- 1 As we have argued above, feminism draws attention to difference and otherness, serving as a method for exposing how the social construction of organizational life and of knowledge per se contributes to different subjectivities and associated outcomes.
- 2 Workplace diversity is a highly problematic term that has served to open up debate on workplace discrimination while simultaneously constraining it by problematizing everyone except the able-bodied white and heterosexual male. In the process various, sometime contradictory, political struggles have been reduced to a single issue of diversity (Prasad & Mills, 1997). Thus, arguably, we need to search not for an artificially designed method that mirrors the call for understanding workplace diversity, but for multiple perspectives that are based on the specific struggles of the different constituencies involved.

- 3 Feminism makes an important contribution to insights into/or the deconstruction of workplace diversity not by subsuming its political focus on women's liberation under a broader umbrella, but by continuing to stress the problematic of gender discrimination.
- 4 To us, this means that feminism has much to offer workplace diversity research where it is able to deal with issues of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age while continuing to focus on the contribution of those insights to addressing gender discrimination at work.

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