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Feminists Really Do Count: The Complexity of Feminist Methodologies

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We are delighted to be presenting this special issue on the topic of feminism and quantitative methods. We believe that such an issue is exceptionally timely. This is not simply because of ongoing debates around quantification within the field of feminism and women's studies. It is also because of debates within the wider research community about the development of appropriate methodologies that take account of new technological and philosophical concerns and are fit-for-purpose for researching contemporary social, philosophical, cultural and global issues. Two areas serve as exemplars in this respect and both speak to these combined wider social science and specifically feminist methodological concerns. The first is the increasing concern amongst social scientists with how the complexity of social life can be captured and analysed. Within feminism, this can be seen in debates about intersectionality that recognise the concerns arising from multiple social

positions/divisions and associated power issues. As Denis (2008: 688) comments in respect of intersectional analysis ‘The challenge of integrating multiple, concurrent, yet often contradictory social locations into analyses of power relations has been issued. Theorising to accomplish this end is evolving, and we are struggling to develop effective methodological tools in order to marry theorising with necessary complex analyses of empirical data.’ Secondly, new techniques and new data sources are now coming on line. This includes work in the UK of the ESRC National Data Strategy which has been setting out the priorities for the development of research data resources both within and across the boundaries of the social sciences. This will facilitate historical, longitudinal, interdisciplinary and mixed methodological research. And it may be the case that these developments facilitate the achievement of a longstanding feminist aim not simply for interdisciplinarity but for transdisciplinarity in epistemological and methodological terms.

Debates within second wave feminism have however left their legacy. Here, sustained critiques were developed of how, for example, quantitative methodological tools objectified subjecthood; how objectivity itself was a smokescreen for male interest, male perspectives and male privilege; and how ‘woman’ (both literally in terms of research respondents and in terms of epistemological foci) was missing from much research (see for example, Oakley, 1981; Mies, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Whilst the broader ‘qualitative vs quantitative’ paradigm debates predate these critiques, feminism added a dualistic critique that noted how the binary of qualitative and quantitative was associated with a dualistic structuring of female/male; soft/hard; intuitive/rational; art/science and so forth (Oakley, 1998). In consequence, feminists

called for a feminist methodology that, as the slogan at the time reflected, would not be 'on women' but would be 'for women' and later, as participatory approaches developed would be 'with women'. Qualitative methodologies came to the fore as most suited to this approach as they were viewed as the most appropriate way of enabling researchers to listen to and give voice to women. Over time this became orthodoxy: feminists use qualitative methods. Thus Oakley (1998: 249) notes that 'although there are some signs of a new recognition within feminist social science of the usefulness of non-qualitative methods, both feminist methodology and feminist epistemology remain strongly founded on qualitative methods'.

When Oakley (1998) tried to rehabilitate quantitative methods she aroused considerable disquiet within feminism. Her concern about usefulness has strong pragmatic overtones but these should be understood in terms of a pragmatic politics concerned with the efficacy of quantitative approaches for feminist aims for the achievement of social justice as well as in terms of the possibilities of more appropriate methodological approaches for a new digital and postmodern age. For example, despite a growth, and seeming greater acceptance of qualitative approaches, quantification remains the 'gold standard' for much social science and policy oriented research. Evidence for this can be found in the priority given to quantitative training by the main funder of UK social science studentships (ESRC). Feminist researchers have also raised concerns at an international level about the ways in which public funding authorities 'prefer' quantitative approaches that play to realist and positivist frameworks (see Davies and Gannon, 2006). This division between qualitative and quantitative research has persisted within and without feminism and has reinforced a host of gendered, and counterproductive notions around hard/soft; emotional/rational;

worthy/worthless dualities. Given the significance of quantified and quantifiable data to many policy deliberations associated with social justice it is crucial that we escape these simplistic dichotomies and re-open critical debates around feminist epistemologies and feminist empirics in terms of quantitative methodologies.

It is within this terrain that this special issue seeks to make a contribution. The aims of the issue are to:

- Contribute to and invigorate debates concerned with feminist approaches to quantitative methods;
- Contribute to widening the understanding and value of feminist approaches to quantitative methods;
- Inform debate about the contemporary concerns of those using quantitative methods for gender research.

In setting out the parameters of this issue, we would begin by asserting that there is a strong evidence for the belief that there is a dominance of qualitative approaches within what we define as the broader field of feminism. However, drawing from an analysis of articles published in gender, women's studies and feminist journals, our own research – and the contents of this special issue - challenge the simplistic, and consequential, presumption that to do feminist empirical research one has to use qualitative methods. Our own analysis (see Cohen, Hughes and Lampard, 2009 for a fuller account) indicates that we need to add two further field factors into any argument about methodological dominance or preference. These are geography and discipline. In terms of geography, it appears that there is a pattern of United States

exceptionalism in terms of feminist or women's studies methodological approaches in English language journal publishing. In our analysis we used the national base of the first-listed author as a simplified proxy for geographical location. Of the articles we sampled with a first-author based in the US, 60 percent were quantitative and 41 percent qualitative, something that was reversed for articles with a UK-based first-author (with figures of 13 percent and 73 percent, respectively). Articles with first-authors from other countries were, like those with a UK-based first-author, much more likely to be qualitative. Thus, as suggested by the differences found in British and American sociology (Dunn and Waller 2000; Platt 2007; Payne et al. 2005), geography impacts upon methodological choice with researchers from the United States much more likely to draw on quantitative approaches than other countries. Our analysis also demonstrated the importance of discipline and, associated with this, the journal within which articles appear. Thus, the journals *Feminist Economics*, *Women's Health Issues* and *Psychology of Women Quarterly* evidence a strong quantitative dominance in line with the disciplines of Economics, Medicine and Psychology. In comparison there was a lack of any quantitatively based articles in our sample of inter-disciplinary Gender or Feminist Studies journals: *Feminist Studies*, *Social Politics*, and *Journal of Gender Studies*. Therefore where feminist or gender analysis occurs within distinct disciplinary contexts methodological choice is influenced by that context. Yet articles in more general feminist or women's studies journals generally conform to the widely recognized feminist 'qualitative bias'. This suggests a possible tension – between feminist scholars working within disciplinary boundaries and the larger feminist project of trans-disciplinarity. Additionally, it may indicate a certain practical pragmatism whereby feminist scholars in primarily 'quantitative' fields have negotiated their own compromises between disciplinary

norms and practices and the feminist critical project. There has, however, been little public discussion or methodological consideration of how this has occurred, which is why we believe that the discussion of feminism and quantitative methods, re-ignited here, is long overdue.

The issue of disciplinary location is at the forefront of the concerns of two articles in this volume (Jill Williams and Lotta Vikstrom). Both authors in different ways reprise earlier feminist critiques of the reductionist and marginalizing epistemological tendencies of a discipline. As such, these articles are important reminders that we should not rush toward a new methodological future without recognising that there remain some longstanding and seemingly intractable methodological concerns about the way in which quantitative methods are treated as a ‘gold standard’ and that the second-wave feminist critiques still have potency. Jill Williams’ article clearly articulates how the strongly quantitative disciplinary approaches of demography resist feminist knowledge. Within a quantitative approach that regards analysis as primarily concerned with the manipulation of key variables, she highlights how a focus on power in gendered relationships drops out of view. Within this framework qualitative approaches are acceptable only insofar as they provide a route to improving the validity of measures. As Jill notes, there has been an analytic vacuum despite the discipline’s concerns with issues of empowerment and women’s lives globally, and the appeal of these foci to feminists. Jill critiques the practice of demographers to simply treating ‘Gender’ as an independent variable, invariant across time or place, given extensive feminist scholarship that demonstrates that the category ‘woman’ (and similarly ‘man’) is socially constructed and differently salient in different contexts. Her suggestion is that demographers treat gender as a dependent variable,

examining the *production* of gendered inequalities. She convincingly argues that this move would fit with demographers' interest in 'content validity', as this is effectively a call to unpack the meaning of gender. In addition, Jill indicates how feminist reflexivity over issues such as the politics of location would enable demography to counter its tendency to Western bias both in how research questions are framed as well as the lenses brought to the analysis of data.

Lotta Vikstrom's article also focuses on demographic research although in this case it is historical demography that is the field of enquiry. She notes that few feminists work in this field and suggests that this may be because of its quantitative orientation. A contrast is drawn with social and cultural history, a field in which feminism has made a significant impact. Lotta argues that consequently historical demography lacks a feminist perspective and that there is a strong divide between quantitative and qualitative scholars. Her article outlines an interesting case study that attempts to bridge this gap. The study is an exploration of the occupations of women living in Sundsvall, Sweden during the period 1860-1890. Lotta's article draws a variety of sources together (trade directories and registers; census data; newspaper reports) and highlights the importance of digitization in enabling researchers to access this data. By bringing together data from multiple sources on the same women Lotta exposes the problems and issues that arise when the data are dissonant, contradictory or indeed confirmatory. In this sense, Lotta demonstrates a concern that has been central to feminist scholarship – to retrieve the actual lives of individual women from the historical records. Moreover, she argues that 'triangulation' enables the researcher to investigate data validity and explore the problems associated with paradigmatic boundaries, Lotta's article also highlights the potential of new digital technologies,

suggesting that these may not simply facilitate but may begin to require researchers to work across long policed boundaries, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The issue of paradigmatic boundaries and mixed methodologies is a theme of many articles in this issue. This is perhaps most strongly expressed by Jacqueline Scott who clearly states that there is no one best method, rather there different methods are appropriate for addressing different research questions. Quantitative analysis importantly provides evidence of the modification or reproduction of gendered inequalities over time and space. Jacqueline's article draws on studies being undertaken as part of the ESRC Research Priority Network on Gender Inequalities in Production and Reproduction (GeNet), which explore the inter-relations of paid and unpaid work. Her article demonstrates how feminist critiques of the false divide between public and private and the recognition of intersectionalities, are contributing to and motivating methodological developments including the kind of triangulation indicated by Lotta Vikstrom. As Jacqueline notes, however, these forms of analysis are still in their infancy in part because of data limitations. For example quantitative approaches to intersectional analysis require very large sample size. Similarly, questions of gendered power in time allocation require large time-use studies which allow family and individual time to be compared. Given the somewhat patchy availability of data the significance of a methodologically and disciplinary diverse network such as GeNet is all the greater. Like Jill Williams, Jackie's emphasis is on gender as a historically and socially specific category and her article highlights how the interchanges of quantitative and qualitative research amongst network participants can move us away from outdated, static and universalizing accounts of gender

inequalities to more nuanced and contextualized findings that recognise the complexities of social inequalities. Overall this article makes a convincing argument that good quantitative analysis, is not ‘simply gathering numbers’, but fundamentally rooted in developing a theoretical understanding of gender.

Jacqueline Scott’s article is also significant because it remarks on the capacity building issues around skill and knowledge, particularly in terms of quantitative approaches, that are required if feminists are going to be able to rise to the methodological challenges we currently face. Sylvia Walby and Jo Armstrong’s article is especially pertinent in this regard. They present some of the work they have undertaken for the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on developing measures of equalities. Sylvia and Jo note the contentious issues associated with measuring such a complex concept as equality and yet recognize the importance of confronting these dilemmas if we are going to improve comparative, (trans)national and intersectional analysis, making it accessible to wider audiences, and importantly, speak to policy makers. Their article outlines the framework they employed, which includes issues of definition and data availability and the technical aspects of measuring equality. Overall, they argue that the criteria for judging fitness for purpose rest on principles of: relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility and clarity, comparability and coherence. Their article concludes with what they refer to as ‘Headline’ indicators which they suggest, until more data and greater harmonization of data occurs, provide for a robust assessment of the degree of equality across the economic, political and social spheres.

In detailing their approach to developing these ‘Headline’ indicators, Sylvia Walby and Jo Armstrong’s article note the struggles that ensue over definitional criteria. This is because what might appear to be small details can make a considerable difference to revealing or obscuring levels of inequality. Marianne Hester, Catherine Donovan and Eldin Fahmy demonstrate these concerns in terms of the development of survey instruments in the field of domestic violence and same sex relationships. Marianne, Catherine and Eldin’s article provides a further demonstration of how debates within feminist epistemology are contributing to the development of more sensitive methods for understanding social concerns. In this regard they note how similar survey instruments had been used to study domestic violence in both heterosexual and same sex relationships. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) has been the most widely used instrument in this field. Thus, some of the critiques of surveys focused on heterosexual relationships also apply to those concerned with same sex relationships. Critically the CTS provides measures prevalence of violence but takes little account of impact. Since qualitative studies have shown that the impact of domestic violence is gendered the authors suggest that it is crucial that a survey instrument is able to examine the how this may differ between same-sex and heterosexual couples. In this article Marianne, Catherine and Eldin take a feminist epistemological approach to gender and power, problematising the relationship between experience and discourse. This allows them to redevelop the CTS and to disaggregate the experience of abuse, its impact and the perception of that experience (whether respondents themselves believed that they had been experienced domestic abuse). In doing this Marianne, Catherine and Eldin make a convincing argument that an assessment of severity of impact requires these multiple measures. Moreover, like

Jill Williams, they illustrate the utility of a feminist epistemological approach for the production of better quantitative analysis.

As Marianne, Catherine and Eldin note geography as well as discipline has its effects in terms of methodological directions. In this respect, they confirm our own analysis that North American approaches are more heavily dominated by quantitative than qualitative approaches. In the USA, for example, there has been a burgeoning of large scale quantitative studies of domestic violence which use comparative scales and inventories. In the UK and Europe, the focus has more strongly been toward the analysis of personal experience via phenomenological and critical research. Interestingly, however, Marianne, Catherine and Eldin also point to the ways in which gender influences methodological approaches more absolutely with research on gay men more likely to be quantitative whilst research on lesbian relationships has been more qualitative. Diane Croker's article, discussing Canadian surveys on woman abuse, also confirms the predominance of quantitative approaches to issues of gender and violence in North America. However, Diane's article is less concerned with definitional issues of abuse or methodological precision. Indeed, she suggests that we have collected sufficient data about the levels of abuse women are subjected to. Rather, her article analyses the constitutive role of statistics and the consequences of their reception for policy development. Diane draws on Foucauldian perspectives of governmentality to analyse how woman abuse is publicly debated in neo-liberal societies. Diane's article compares the reception of two surveys: *Violence Against Women Survey* and *The Dating Violence Survey*. Her analysis describes differences in the responses to these surveys from feminist, anti-feminist and media sources. Significantly, however, Diane argues that whilst definitional debates and struggles continue, surveys that measure individual experiences of abuse both construct such

abuse as ‘an injurious act’ and focus policy toward criminal justice solutions concerned with punishing perpetrators rather than toward policies that would better support collective and individual women in the multiplicity of ways in which they seek to resist violence or, indeed, supporting them through the effects of such violence. Overall, Diane reinforces feminist concerns with the politics of method. This is that whilst it remains significant that we ensure there are adequate and appropriate measures and methodologies, an issue all the articles in this special issue speak to, feminist research is also concerned with the consequences of the production of particular forms of knowledge.

This special issue concludes with an extended book review, in which Rosario Undurraga examines the place of quantitative approaches in feminist methodology texts. These texts are used in courses on feminist epistemology and are taken up by students. As such they form a central pedagogical element for the becoming feminist researcher. Rosario writes from the perspective of a doctoral student and her analysis provides further evidence for the stereotype of the qualitatively focused feminist scholar. She does uncover a little discussion of quantitative methods in feminist textbooks, and is appreciative of much of what this offers. The overall impression is, however, that quantitative approaches are given tokenistic attention or are primarily understood in terms of mixed methodological approaches. This suggests that, despite our conviction that feminist methodological approaches are far more complex than the stereotype suggests, it is easy to see how such a stereotype becomes reinforced in the imagination of new and emergent scholars.

This brings us to the final point that we wish to make about feminism and methodological choice. This is that our own research into methodological approaches in feminist and women's studies journals (Cohen, Hughes and Lampard, 2009) also demonstrates how the discussion of *feminist* methodological justification is rarely an explicit aspect of published empirical research. This is the case not only in wider social science publishing where the emphasis is more directly on findings or theoretical framing. It is also the case within women's studies and feminist journals. This is not to deny, of course, that methodological debate within feminism does occur (see, for example, Bacchi, 2005; Eveline et al., 2009; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Henry, 2007; Power, 2004; McCall, 2005; Vickers, 2006). However, our findings suggest that in empirical articles where methodological justifications are given they refer predominantly to technical rather than epistemological issues. We trust therefore that this special issue has provided an important space for bringing together debate about the development of feminist methodologies that link quantitative concerns with those of qualitative; that point to the continuing significance of disciplinary and geographical location and their influences of methodological direction. The articles in this special collection further highlight the exciting and innovative technical and epistemological developments arising from feminist research that are drawing on contemporary social concerns for the analysis of complexity in an era of increasing digitized, technological and interdisciplinary developments.

In concluding we wish to thank the Editors and Board of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* for providing this opportunity and especial thanks to Ros Edwards who has responded to our numerous queries with great patience and who has supported us throughout. We also want to thank the referees who so

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