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## FEMINIST INTERVIEWING

*Experience, Talk, and Knowledge*

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The simple thing to say is that interview research is research conducted by talking with people. It involves gathering informants' reports and stories, learning about their perspectives, and giving them voice in academic and other public discourse. Talking with others is a fundamental human activity, and research talk simply systematizes that activity.

While true, this simple view neglects the fascinating complexity of human talk—the flexibility and productive powers of language; the subtle shades of meaning conveyed through the nuances of speech, gesture, and expression; issues of translation; the ineluctable locatedness of any moment or stretch of talk; the specialized vocabularies of particular settings and groups; the organizing effects of format and genre; the injuries and uses of silence; the challenges inherent in listening; and so on. The simple view also neglects the dynamics of power involved in any empirical research: the hierarchical, often charged relations between researcher and informants, the politics of interpretation and representation, and the social consequences of making claims on the basis of science. Add to this picture a political commitment to feminism, and one begins to see the terrain of feminist interview research.

Much qualitative and feminist research has been based on a relatively straightforward commitment to collecting and representing the perspectives of informants, and those projects have often had powerfully liberatory effects. Drawing on the political traditions of testimony and consciousness-raising and the research traditions of life history and open-ended interviewing, feminists have brought forward a wealth of previously untold stories—those of marginalized peoples, and also those that the more privileged may have kept hidden, awaiting a receptive audience (or a skillful interlocutor). But another essential aspect of feminist interview research interrogates the challenges of communication and the inherent contradictions in the desire to give voice to others. This strand of thinking has produced a variety of feminist studies that use interview data in complex and nuanced ways, often to explore language and discourse itself.

Feminist scholars operate reflexively and relationally, so we begin by considering our own intellectual biographies and contexts and our relations with each other and the concerns of this chapter. We are feminist scholars of different generations—Marj coming to feminism and the early days of women's studies in

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the mid-1970s, and Glenda entering well-established fields of feminist sociology and women's studies in the mid-1990s. When Marj took "Introduction to Women's Studies" in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1975, there was a dearth of feminist writing in the academy; texts for the course included the Bible and the novels of writers like D. H. Lawrence—works awaiting our critique. At that time, talking together about sexual harassment or lesbianism was startlingly illuminating. By the time Glenda took a first women's studies course in upstate New York, we had textbooks and readers, which drew on a rich feminist literature, as well as official policies and procedures on sexual harassment. When Marj began a study of housework as a graduate student in the early 1980s, she had to justify focusing interviews on such a "trivial" matter; yet she was inspired by a lively political literature, including that from a "wages for housework" movement. When Glenda formulated her doctoral research project in 2001, she set out to interview "feminist pedagogues," a group who had come into existence as a result of two decades of feminist theory and practice; yet her interest in their practice arose in part from the ways their practice was organized by a conservative response to academic feminism.

These histories and our reflections on the politics of feminism, especially its institutionalization in the academy, form the backdrop for our approach here. We recognize Sandra Harding's (1987) distinction between "methods" (i.e., particular research tools and practices), "methodology" (theorizing about research practices and their implications for people and communities), and "epistemology" (the study of how one comes to know); we would suggest that feminist researchers have mostly used standard methods, and that distinctive feminist insights have come in our strategic theorizing about the research process and knowledge production more generally. We see that feminist research has become an established enterprise, and that "feminist interviewing" is widely accepted and taught as an approach that any scholar should know and appreciate. Yet we worry that the label may travel more easily than the politics, and we yearn for ways to renew continually the political force of feminist scholarship. These observations frame our approach to this chapter. In keeping

with the aims of a handbook, we hope to provide guidance for new and experienced researchers conducting feminist interview research; at the same time, our understanding of feminism leads us away from any settled codification of tools and techniques.

#### ARTICULATING A CONCEPTION OF FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

Researchers who claim the label *feminist* for their methodological projects must be prepared to reply to questions about the meaning and distinctiveness of "feminist" methodology and research. Because interviewing always has, to some degree, the quality of "going to the people" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998)—located either outside or within structures of power—this definitional task is especially important for scholars who wish to claim a distinctiveness for feminist interview methodology. The range and variety of feminist theories in the social sciences are beyond the scope of our discussion here; for the purposes of this chapter, we define feminism broadly as a set of practices and perspectives that affirm differences among women and promote women's interests, health, and safety, locally and abroad. It is a diverse and differentiated social and scholarly movement; for most adherents, it includes the aspiration to live and act in ways that embody feminist thought and promote justice and the well-being of all women. This formulation reflects our desire to contribute to an inclusive and multicultural feminism, and it draws on lessons we have learned from scholarly work of "women of color feminists" such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990), María Lugones (1990), and many others.

We understand feminism as one of several related and intersecting social justice projects, linked to critical social theory (Collins, 1998), that have gathered new or renewed momentum in the second half of the 20th century (others include anticolonialist struggles, antiracist projects, and liberation movements undertaken by people of color, queer activists, and people with disabilities). Feminism, as distinct from its allied movements, problematizes gender and brings women and their concerns to the center of attention. It challenges the allied movements

to attend to women and gender, and it challenges feminists to learn and attend to others' liberation and justice struggles. We would also define feminism, along with these other movements, as activity that crosses the (blurred) boundaries between academic and other activist sites. Feminist and other critical academics continually draw on the insights produced by activism outside the university; we also can sometimes create relatively protected spaces for the development and dissemination of activist perspectives. Sometimes, feminist researchers are engaged in activism, either in or outside the academy. Scholars may also at times co-opt activist ideas, "taming" them for wider consumption, and we wish to keep those risks in mind. While the academy can be a "space for imagining opposition, for producing multiple subjectivities that are capable of critical thinking and resistant action against the institution itself," it is also "an institutional structure that is part of capitalist relations of rule within the nation state as well as internationally" (Mohanty, cited in Dua & Trotz, 2002, p. 74). So, as feminists in the academy, we feel it is important to emphasize the importance of grassroots organizing, as well as political teaching and research work, in bringing about change.

Two features of contemporary feminist scholarship have important implications for those who wish to approach the research process as a feminist practice. First (and as reflected in our definition of feminism), feminists' internal critiques have dismantled the notion of "woman" as the unified and foundational subject of feminism. Arguing that women are diversely situated in history, culture, and class; that genders are multiple; and that gender itself is a discursive production, theorists of gender and sexuality (and their intersections with race, class, ability, age, and nation) now resist any simple reliance on this categorical identity. This strand of thought has traveled much further in theory than in empirical study, and another important feature of contemporary feminist scholarship is its strongly theoretical character, at least in its interdisciplinary formations. There has been a rich conversation taking place among feminists in the academy about the connection between our practice as researchers and educators and the implications of that practice for

people's daily lives. But this conversation does not easily translate into specific techniques for gathering and analyzing data. We do not mean to suggest that such theories have no relevance to practice; on the contrary, they continue to inform research practice in numerous, invaluable ways. But the theories of power and knowledge emerging from this conversation tend to emphasize historicity and ambiguity, rather than codification. Furthermore, such developments have proceeded unevenly through the disciplines: In those fields tied more closely to positivist epistemologies, scholars continue to treat gender as a relatively unproblematic variable (though with increasing attention to how it is crosscut by other identities), and those in applied fields and working in activist community settings (women's shelters, women's prisons, women's entrepreneurship programs, for instance) may find that their fields of activity remain tied to cultural and political assumptions about gender, even as scholars subject those assumptions to increasingly sophisticated critique.

These developments produce two challenges for feminist interview researchers. The first is to construct a rationale for labeling research feminist, without reproducing the false homogenization and separations of historical feminisms. That is, we need to be cognizant of the differences that exist among women and be sure that when we speak on behalf of women, we are not really only speaking on behalf of some women (e.g., North American, Anglo, able-bodied, middle-class women). We need to locate the "historically specific differences and similarities between [ourselves] in diverse and asymmetrical relations" so that we are able to create "alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances" (Kaplan, 1994, p. 139). The history of feminism, much like any history, is characterized by conflict, struggle, and resistance. And feminism owes much of its history to the political organizing of women of color, poor women, lesbian women, and women with disabilities. The work of these groups of women was instrumental in dismantling the idea that all women are the same and positioned evenly in the social landscape. The second challenge is to adapt new theorizations of feminism so that they serve empirical projects—understood in our discussion

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quite broadly, as projects in which researchers engage with others (in the flesh, or less directly) to produce new knowledge. In other words, researchers need to take up the writings of feminist theorists, learn from those writings, and consider their implications for research practices.

### ASPECTS OF INTERVIEW RESEARCH

With this background in mind, we explore below the central idea of interviewing, that knowledge can be produced in structured encounters organized around “telling about experience.” We consider feminist thinking about how to organize and conduct such encounters, and then discuss several aspects of interview research with which feminists have been especially concerned: active listening; the opportunities afforded by a focus on language, narrative, and discourse; interviewing ethics and the risks of “discursive colonization” (Mohanty, 1991); and feminist strategies in quantitative survey research. We conclude with a discussion of the accountability of the feminist interviewer to research participants and other audiences and the importance of continual reflection on the intellectual and institutional context in which we do scholarship. Our approach is broadly “postpositivist”: that is, we reject the idea that social realities are simply “there” for researchers to find. Instead, we understand the social contexts of people’s lives as historically situated and constituted through people’s activities, and the research process itself as an integral aspect of the construction of knowledge about society. While we identify a number of practices that (in our view) make interview research feminist, we would also suggest that these are never matters solely related to collecting, analyzing, or presenting data, but instead are modes of thought and action that continually inform these mutually constitutive stages of the research process.

### Telling About “Experience”

Various forms of interviewing have long been used to bring people’s experiences forward and make those experiences visible in more public discussions, and such projects have often

been conducted with the aim of social reform. In the progressive era, British and U.S. social reformers conducted “social surveys” in immigrant neighborhoods and racially segregated communities: Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Jane Addams and the women of Hull House, and African American researchers and reformers such as W. E. B. Dubois and Zora Neale Hurston all spent time meeting and talking with people in such communities, and they recorded those encounters systematically to bring neglected voices into a civic conversation. Interviews are not always conducted with marginalized peoples, of course—as the social sciences have matured, interviews have also been used to explore the lives and actions of the powerful (e.g., Ostrander, 1984), to display or uncover experiences of “ourselves” (e.g., DeVault, 1991), and to map discursive contexts and “regimes” of ruling (e.g., Chase, 1995; Griffith & Smith, 2005). Interviewing has also become a central element in such regimes—the way we get jobs, apply for social assistance, talk through the media, prove that we are good parents, and so on. Indeed, interviews have become so central to contemporary life and governance that Gubrium and Holstein (2002) suggest that we live in an “interview society.” Still, the traditions of research interviewing have been strongly linked to social justice concerns and projects and the idea of bringing forward neglected voices—and these traditions have been especially important for feminist projects.

The practice of open-ended, semistructured interviewing favored by feminist researchers is discussed in every textbook of qualitative research methods and many general methods texts in the social sciences; recent editions of such texts generally include attention to feminist research and writing about interviewing (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Esterberg, 2002; May, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Warren & Karner, 2005). There are also a number of excellent book-length treatments of social science interviewing (e.g., Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Mishler, 1986; Weiss, 1994; for focus groups, see Morgan, 1997; for narrative approaches, see Riessman, 1993), and we recommend these to feminist researchers as useful sources for basic background and technique. As women’s studies and feminist research in the disciplines began to

develop, in the 1970s and early 1980s, feminist scholars took up these methods enthusiastically and also began to fashion distinctively feminist ways of conducting interview research.

The notion of “experience” was central to the resurgence of Western feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s: The insights of the women’s movement of that period came from women’s collective talk, which was emerging from women’s wartime participation in work and labor union settings, the state and federal women’s commissions of the time, the civil rights and antiwar movements, and also in structured consciousness-raising groups.<sup>1</sup> The practice of feminist consciousness-raising was borrowed (via civil rights and other radical organizing of the time) from the revolutionary Chinese practice of “speaking bitterness,” a grassroots method for empowering peasant communities (Hinton, 1966; see also McLaren, 2000); Kathie Sarachild’s (1978) talks to radical groups, Pamela Allen’s (1973) booklet, and the statement of the Combahee River Collective (1982) outline U.S. feminist adaptations of the practice. In a sense, women who were part of these developments were “interviewing” themselves and others like them, and then working together to make sense of experiences that were both “personal” and “political” (Hainisch, 1970, cited in Mansbridge, 1995, p. 28). Looking back, we can see that these efforts were sometimes flawed by a failure to work out the broader politics of the “personal”; that is, the institutions, processes, and interactions shaping women’s experiences were sometimes overlooked, and the unequal relations among different groups of women (and the extent to which the privileges of some women were contingent on the dehumanizing treatment of others) were often unaddressed. Still, these were conversations that allowed groups of women to begin theorizing their relations to one another, and to introduce into public discussion ideas like “sexism,” “battering,” and “woman identification.”

Feminist theorists and researchers of the 1970s and 1980s followed these activists in their reliance on experience. Feminist theorists urged scholars to “start thought” or “begin with experience” (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987) and to rely on “the authority of experience” (Diamond

& Edwards, 1977), and researchers embraced interviewing as a method of making experience hearable and subjecting it to systematic analysis. These early moves were radical, because they suggested locating authority and “truth” somewhere other than the received wisdom of the Euro- and androcentric disciplines—in the realities of Black women’s lives, for instance, or in detailed historical analyses of struggle, resistance, and everyday living. They produced studies that told “truths” about women’s lives, in contrast to often distorted representations produced in scholarly networks made up of predominantly white or Anglo, middle- to upper-class men. African American feminists produced interview studies that portrayed Black women as strong and competent in the face of oppression, writing against sexist scholarship of the era that charged Black women with responsibility for supposed “flaws” of African American families: Joyce Ladner (1971) used interviewing and participant observation to produce an influential sympathetic study of African American teenaged girls living in poverty, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow*, and Inez Smith Reid (1972), responding to a call for information about “militant” women, wrote instead about *“Together” Black Women*. Ann Oakley (1974) and Helena Lopata (1971), in Britain and the United States, respectively, interviewed working-class women and middle-class women about housework and their lives as housewives—exploring the contours of the “problem with no name” (Friedan, 1963). Pauline Bart (1971) interviewed midlife Jewish women hospitalized for depression when their children left home and produced an account of their situation that located the problem in the culturally constructed mothering role that engulfed them, rather than their “overinvolvement.” Such studies used women’s stories in a collective project of ideological critique. These scholars set women’s own words against the ideological constructions of a racist and “sexist society” (Gornick & Moran, 1971): African American women’s words against cultural stereotypes, middle-class women’s words against the culture’s simultaneous romanticization and trivialization of household labor, and depressed women’s own stories against individualizing psychiatric diagnoses of their pain.

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As these studies went forward, feminist researchers became more attentive to the dynamics of the interview process, and began to write about distinctively feminist issues and approaches to interviewing. Ann Oakley's (1981) article, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," challenged the prevailing "rules" of distanced objectivity in social research; she argued that the social science pretense of neutrality (the requirement, e.g., that a woman interviewing other women about pregnancy should feign ignorance of the subject in order not to contaminate the data) was in conflict with the principles of feminism. Rather than viewing women informants as objects of the researcher's gaze, feminists should develop ways of conceptualizing the interview as an encounter between women with common interests, who would share knowledge. Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Joke Esseveld (1983)—interested in how feminism was affecting their own lives—interviewed women who had been housewives about the process of making changes in their lives, and then wrote about the challenges of analyzing the women's reports. They wrote reflexively, looking critically at their attempts to involve participants in the research, considering how they heard and interpreted the women's accounts, and acknowledging their own concerns echoing through their analyses. Sherry Gorelick (1989) reported on her interviews with Jewish feminists, troubling the feminist idea that women's stories were straightforwardly a source of truth. She emphasized the contradictions in women's reports of their experiences, and suggested that interview researchers must develop interactive methods that allow them to challenge and explore contradictory accounts. Dorothy Smith (1987) developed the idea that one would discover "lines of fault" in women's experience, because their activities and perspectives are tied both to an everyday world of mundane caring and support work and also to a more ideologically structured realm in which those everyday concerns are relatively invisible. Her method of inquiry—"institutional ethnography" (discussed in more detail below)—was built on the notion that women could report on their everyday work, and the researcher could examine their reports and map the lines of fault they reveal.

Historian Joan Scott's (1991) landmark article, "The Evidence of Experience," crystallized these observations about women's "own stories" and opened a series of debates about the relation of experience and language that continue to the present. She argued that "experience" is always discursively structured—that what a person sees and understands is always shaped by what one already knows and can articulate. This argument presented a fundamental challenge to historians and empirical social science researchers who took as their charge finding out "what happened." Scott (1992) suggests that to understand experience as natural, inherent, or "uncontestable evidence" (p. 24) is too simple. Such a naturalist view takes for granted categories like "man, woman, black, white, heterosexual or homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals" (p. 27) and ignores the constructed and historically situated character of any experience. "Questions about . . . how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside" (p. 25). Instead of telling what happened, researchers should examine the discourses at play and the subject "positions" constructed by those discourses. One might, for example, conduct a kind of Foucauldian genealogical study (tracing the historical emergence of various categories and representations with an interest in how they organize consciousness and social institutions; e.g., Foucault, 1977, 1978) or use people's accounts of experience to investigate how such discursive formations appear in their talk, but it would be naïve to take their accounts as straightforward reports of some "actual" experience. Scott's article poses a challenge to positivism by suggesting that reality is not out there to be "discovered" but rather that realities are produced out of varying geopolitical contexts and social discourses.

Feminist researchers continue to explore and debate the implications of these ideas. Some have suggested that they signal the impossibility of any representation of others untainted by the researcher's own need and desire (Clough, 1992). But other scholars have been reluctant to abandon some grounding notion of experience (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993; Moya, 2000), emphasizing

experience as a “resource for critical reflection” (Stone-Mediatore, 1998, p. 121), and some have noted that the argument that there is no fixed truth seemed to have arisen just as women and other “outsiders” began to make their own truth claims (Christian, 1990; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989). Moreover, Shari Stone-Mediatore (2003) notes that “despite academic critiques of experience, many social struggles, from welfare rights campaigns to fair trade coalitions . . . continue to rely on stories of experience to bring public attention to their concerns” (p. 1). Certainly, these debates have produced more sophisticated understandings of experience. Smith (1999, chap. 6), for example, in an essay on “Telling the Truth After Postmodernism,” makes an argument that recognizes and draws on the central ideas of post-structuralist theory and also preserves the significance of embodied existence. She points to the groundedness of language in social interaction; in her approach language is critically important, but it cannot be separated from activity.

For interview researchers, we believe that these theoretical perspectives point to the necessity for a critical approach to informants’ accounts. A critical approach does not have to be a dismissive or “debunking” approach; indeed, we have tried to illustrate above the potential uses of interview studies founded on a relatively straightforward notion of experiential authority. But the strongest feminist research brings along with that idea a complementary awareness that researchers are always working with accounts constructed linguistically, that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the telling, that both telling and listening are shaped by discursive histories (so that fragments of many other tellings are carried in any embodied conversation), and so on. In the next section, we consider relations between teller and listener in the feminist interview.

### Conditions and Conduct of the Interview

Interview researchers have long been concerned with the identities and social locations of parties to the interview, worrying that differences will produce failures of rapport that limit

disclosure and that similarities may lead to “over-rapport” and bias. Standard practice has typically involved “matching” interviewer and interviewees to the extent possible; especially in large-scale survey and collaborative research, team members may divide interviewing labor so as to achieve this kind of fit between researcher and participants. Feminist researchers share these concerns and practices, but they have developed more complex, more thoroughly reflexive views of identity and its effects in the interview. Much feminist research has been conducted by women researchers with women participants, and, typically, feminist researchers have been committed to finding and acknowledging common ground with participants. That commitment, we suggest, has—perhaps unexpectedly—helped to bring differences into view, because feminist researchers have explored and debated what actually happens when women interview women.

White feminists’ early writings on interview research often began with the assumption of an automatically direct and comfortable relationship between the feminist researcher and her woman interviewee (like Black feminist writers on their research with Black women), but the dynamics of interviews, as they actually happen, brought more complex formulations. Catherine Kohler Riessman’s (1987) influential article, “When Gender Is Not Enough,” displayed her initial assumption that she would find common ground with women interviewees and then critiqued that too-simple desire by rereading interview material she appeared to have misunderstood in the moment of interviewing. Her article has been especially useful, because it not only cautions researchers against taking rapport for granted, but also models a strategy for working with the awkward moments of difficulty in talking with others. Josephine Beoku-Betts (1994) wrote about similar challenges related to differences among women of African descent, concluding that there are also times “When Black Is Not Enough.” And Patricia Zavella (1993) added an important idea to this strand of thought, with an analysis of how her own Mexican American identity was crosscut by other dimensions (age, education, marital and family status) so that her relation to informants who shared her racial or ethnic identity was

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nuanced and constantly shifting—researcher and participants were both “similar” and “different,” in different contexts.

Despite a preponderance of research by women with women, feminist researchers have not wanted to be limited to “cozy” interviews with participants who are comfortably similar; some have wanted to conduct research on and with men, or with women who have had very different experiences and points of view (e.g., Blee, 1991; Klatch, 1987). Terry Arendell (1997) reports that interviewing men about their divorce experiences was more challenging than her previous research with women: The men who participated in her study responded in various ways to the interview situation, but often tried to take charge of the situation, challenge the terms of the study, assert a masculinist superiority, and so on. Her account displays some men’s remarkably explicit readings of her—they chastised her, as if she were the former wife; assumed from her interest in the topic that she was angry and bitter; and addressed her as “one of those feminists.” She discusses the challenge of managing these conversations and also points out that telling such stories, and thus opening these encounters to “analytic scrutiny,” allows researchers to examine the dynamics of gender in the research relation. We would add that, while these men’s readings of the research are particularly obvious, research participants no doubt always make assumptions about the interviewer, and feminist researchers would be wise to consider those assumptions, and their effects, even when they are not so evident. For example, informants may assume that the interviewer does not care about the informant, despite a shared gender status, or assume—particularly if the interviewer and informant are positioned differently with respect to race, gender, ability, sexuality, or age—that the interviewer will judge or misunderstand the informant.

There is relatively little writing on disability issues in feminist research, no doubt because people with disabilities have been so absent, until quite recently, from most of the disciplines. Yet ability structures interview encounters in powerful ways: Communication difficulties make it less likely that some will even be included in research, leading some disability advocates to argue for a “right to be researched”

(Robert Bogdan, personal communication), and when people with disabilities are included, able-bodied researchers may rely on false assumptions or slip too easily into stereotypical ways of thinking about their lives and capacities. Most scholarship on interviewing presumes an able-bodied researcher and is geared toward an able-bodied audience. Interview techniques are designed with particular verbal and cognitive capacities in mind, assuming a relatively easy back-and-forth between interviewer and interviewee; able-bodied researchers (and researchers with disabilities) who interview elderly people with cognitive difficulties, or people with sensory, intellectual, or other impairments, for example, must adjust styles of interviewing, and in most cases must plan on spending more time with each participant in order to produce useful data. Recognition and discussion of the additional work researchers studying people with disabilities carry out is missing from most scholarship related to interviewing and feminist research.

For feminist (and other) interviewers, we suggest that debates about who can research what (and which researchers should interview which participants) raise important issues, but ultimately suggest that the more important question is how to organize interviews so as to produce more truly collaborative encounters, whatever the identities and commitments of participants. One strategy feminists have adopted is based on the basic fieldwork principle of sustained immersion: For example, projects based on life history interviewing, such as Ruth Behar’s (1993) work with her Mexican informant Esperanza, usually involve sustained contact over long periods of time. Behar’s account of her relationship with Esperanza provides illuminating details about the give-and-take of their research relations—on both emotional and material levels—and her text, *Translated Woman*,<sup>2</sup> uses a collage technique that combines reporting on the interviews with “confessional” and autobiographical writing to display reflexively how the data were produced and analyzed over time. A somewhat different strategy of immersion might involve seeking data in multiple ways, as in Christine Bigby’s (2000) study of older women with intellectual (or developmental) disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that some of



the women might not be able to provide all the information she wished to collect (and discovering that a few women were willing to participate in the study, but couldn't or didn't want to be interviewed), Bigby sought additional information about each woman's situation from relatives, advocates, social workers, and other caregivers; thus, she was able to produce case studies that included the women's own perspectives, and to fill out their stories with supplementary information from others. Such a strategy has the drawback of relying on others to interpret for the people with disabilities, but in some cases providing alternative modes of inclusion in the research may allow the researcher to explore experiences and issues that would otherwise be neglected.

Another dimension of reflexive interviewing that feminists have experimented with involves strategic disclosure on the part of the interviewer, whether that means sharing personal information or a willingness to reveal research interests and political commitments. Rosalind Edwards (1990), for example, suggests that white researchers interviewing Black participants should address racial identities and issues explicitly; she found that the best rapport with participants in her study came not when she asserted their similarities as women but rather when she acknowledged explicitly that her own social location differed from that of the interviewees. Marianne Paget (1983) argues that interviewing can produce a "science of subjectivity"—that is, a rigorous account of another's perspective—and that this is accomplished most successfully when the interviewer approaches the interview as a "search procedure"—a process of seeking meanings together. She suggests that the researcher share with the interviewee the concerns that animate the research, so that the conversation can unfold as a collaborative moment of making knowledge, and she illustrates that kind of sharing and unfolding with excerpts from her interview with a woman artist. In some projects, it may be appropriate not only to share thoughts but to press informants, challenging their taken-for-granted constructions. Sometimes, such a strategy might run through a set of interviews, as in Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) study of white women's racism; she asked open-ended questions, but

given the relatively subtle ways that racism may be expressed (especially in a culture of "color-blindness" that Frankenberg labels "color- and power-evasive"), she sought throughout the interviews to intervene "dialogically" in ways that would open up discussion of race and racism. In other instances, challenges to informants' taken-for-granted constructions may be more improvisational, arising in a moment of listening. For example, after several working-class informants had rejected feminism, explaining that they wanted their husbands to "open the car door and light my cigarette," Lillian Rubin (1976) thought to ask one of them about the last time her husband had done that. Her interviewee, a bit taken aback, had to laugh and admit that she didn't even smoke (pp. 131–132). The moment is enlightening because it shows how this woman's perspective on feminism is rooted in cultural discourses as well as in her experience.

In the conduct of any interview research, feminists must maintain a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but, rather, are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance. When Susan Chase (1995) interviewed women school superintendents with her research collaborator Colleen Bell, for example, they realized that the position of these powerful women shaped even the questions it was possible to ask: It was reasonable to ask them to spend time in research on their careers and achievements, while they likely would not have agreed to spend time answering questions about hobbies. Chase's treatment of those interviews makes such concerns central to the analysis: She examines the interviews with an eye to the stories that can be easily told and those that emerge only haltingly. Her reflexive approach gives us new knowledge about white and racial-minority women in a male-dominated profession, and also about "realms of discourse" and the difficulties of speaking about gender- and race-based discrimination. Her book *Ambiguous Empowerment* is an extremely useful source for feminist researchers because it illustrates how constructions of similarity and difference influence every aspect of the interview project: shaping the questions researchers ask and don't ask, the ease or

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difficulty of recruiting informants, the kinds of rapport that develop in the encounter, and the lenses through which researchers produce and analyze interview data.

It is our impression that feminist ideas about reflexivity have traveled through the disciplines more successfully than any other feminist insights. We have observed that most scholars in the social sciences now recognize the ways that a researcher's background and commitments can influence his or her thought, and it is no longer unusual for audiences to demand some accounting of the researcher's personal stake in a project. We attribute the successful dissemination of this feminist idea to the clarity and strength with which feminist scholars have spoken of the androcentric and ethnocentric biases that so often mark research conducted as if "from nowhere." And we attribute that clarity and strength to feminists' passionate and engaged desire for scholarly coalitions that will produce research that can speak to women in many different locations and circumstances.

The desire for an inclusivity that acknowledges and values difference has also led feminist thinkers to key insights about the challenges of listening to others. Listening actively and well is such an important part of the conduct of interviews that we treat it in a separate section.

## Listening

Listening can be a radical activity. . . . For any listener, at risk are not only a sense of self, place and society, but also knowledge of one's own complicity with oppression. (Lester C. Olson, 1998, p. 448)

Listening is not as simple as it sounds, and failures of listening are often part of our interactions with others. Active listening means more than just physically hearing or reading; rather, it is a fully engaged practice that involves not only taking in information via speech, written words, or signs, but also actively processing it—allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours, "away from abstract . . . bloodless, professionalized questions," toward peoples, knowledges, and experiences that have been disavowed, overlooked, and forgotten (Gordon, 1997, p. 40).

Antiracist feminists have long theorized the transformative potential of active listening. Audre Lorde (1984), for instance, has written on the troubling consequences of Anglo women's inability to listen actively to women of color's experiences with racism, (hetero)sexism, and economic exploitation. When white women use women of color's anger as an excuse to ignore and dismiss women of color's concerns, she argues, the possibilities for meaningful, systemic change are significantly weakened. While Lorde acknowledges that "the history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with [Black women], is long and discouraging" (p. 66), she hopes more and more white women will hold themselves accountable to recognize the various forms of violence and oppression that characterize the realities and experiences of women of color. As Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) explains in "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," moving outside one's cozy "barred room" into situations or spaces that are uncomfortable is not easy, but is certainly necessary if any coalition work is to be successful. Active listening, she suggests, is about survival. "There is no chance that you can survive by staying *inside* the barred room" (p. 358). Feminist researchers can learn from these activist writings: If we wish to create knowledge that challenges rather than supports ruling regimes, we must constantly be attentive to histories, experiences, and perspectives that are unnoticed, unfamiliar, or too easily neglected or misrepresented.

A researcher's practice of listening deeply affects the data and knowledge she or he produces. The feminist researcher who takes the work of active listening for granted risks producing data, writing up her or his findings, and responding in ways that are colonizing rather than liberating because they reproduce dominant perspectives. For instance, a researcher who enters a research encounter assuming she or he is a naturally good listener, without consciously acknowledging the work that active listening entails, may end up hearing only what she or he wants or expects to hear. Furthermore, while it may seem plausible to assume that our status as women or feminists prevents us from reproducing power relations during and after an interview, such an assumption is problematic.

As researchers, we must be cognizant of the fact that feminists may be divided by relations of power and privilege, and that listening may require that we acknowledge the ignorance our own privileges may have produced before we can hear what others wish to tell us.

It is difficult, of course, to know from published reports about a researcher's practice of listening, but some feminist scholars have written in ways that open a window onto listening as an element of interview research. DeVault (1990), for example, in "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint," adopts an analytic approach influenced by ethnomethodology that entails close examination of the interview talk—a kind of textual representation of listening, constructed retrospectively. She suggests that this kind of approach allows the researcher to attend to silences and difficulties of communication produced by the lines of fault in women's lives: Noticing when women speak haltingly, or circuitously, for instance, can provide an opening for analysis of a misfit between women's own experiential perspectives and the languages or ideological constructions of their cultures. Amy Best (2003) adopts a related approach to "hear" and bring forward the ways that she and the participants in her study were producing "whiteness" as they managed and negotiated their racial identities through their interview talk.

Some researchers bring forward particular instances of listening (often highlighting difficulties) and discuss what they reveal. Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005), for example, report noticing the discomfort they experienced as they interviewed mothers about their children's schooling; recognizing that some of the mothers' reports elicited intense guilt about their own mothering, they developed an analysis of a mothering discourse that produces such feelings. Similarly, Sari Knopp Biklen (1995) reports on a series of interviews with an African American schoolteacher in which she wanted to focus on the teacher's professional work, while her informant seemed to want to share talk about their children and family lives; in retrospect, and noticing that they were the only two "working mothers" of young children in the school, Biklen believes she failed to hear the woman's attempt to share perspectives with someone in a similar circumstance.

Listening may also become an explicit topic when it is especially challenging. Rebecca Klatch (1987), who interviewed "right-wing women," describes her "non-argumentative approach": "If asked, of course I would state my own doubts or disagreements, but generally I defined my own role entirely in terms of listening and absorbing the other world view" (p. 17). Kathleen Blee (1991) conducted oral history interviews with women who had been members of the white-supremacist Ku Klux Klan in Indiana during the 1920s, when the group was quite active. As an antiracist sociologist, she reports that she was "prepared to hate and fear" her informants, but instead forged more complex and ultimately more disturbing relations: She was able to speak easily with the women, so long as she didn't denounce the Klan, and could identify shared cultural backgrounds and values. Listening carefully allowed her to see that the Klan of the 1920s expressed a racism that was exaggerated, but not unrelated to the white culture of its time and place. Sometimes, this kind of challenging listening, across differences, may serve as the basis for an interview project, as in Faye Ginsburg's (1989) study of grassroots activists on both sides of the abortion debate.

One of feminism's central claims is that women's perspectives have often been silenced or ignored; as a result, feminist researchers have been interested in listening for gaps and absences in women's talk, and considering what meanings might lie beyond explicit speech. DeVault (1990, 1991) attempts this kind of analysis through close attention to speech, focusing interpretation on the moments when speech seems to falter. Wendy Luttrell (1997), who conducted life-story interviews with working-class women that focused on their experiences with schooling, reflects not only on the content of the interviews but on moments when she believes she caught unspoken meanings in her exchanges with informants (see, e.g., pp. 16–17). In a more recent project (Luttrell, 2003), she worked with African American teens continuing their schooling during pregnancy. The young women had to confront negative social stereotypes in talking about themselves, and Luttrell developed an innovative methodology to explore their self-perspectives: The girls made collage art pieces, and Luttrell interviewed

them, as a group, about the images they had chosen for these representations.

Some experiences are more obdurate, and feminist researchers must sometimes be content simply to point toward silences. R. Ruth Linden (1993), for example, in a reflexive analysis of Holocaust survivors' attempts to narrate their experiences, draws on Hannah Arendt's notion of unassimilable "sheer happenings." She suggests that gaps and silences in their narratives may point to events they experience as simply so horrific that they cannot be narrativized. Another intriguing example comes from Rannveig Traustadóttir's (2000) ethnographic study of the friendship between two young women, one with an intellectual disability and the other a "typical" student preparing for a career in special education. Traustadóttir spends time with the two girls, interviewing them informally along the way; she also conducts more formal interviews with the young student, but cannot elicit a clear statement of the other girl's perspective through formal interviewing. Despite this silence, the researcher provides a tentative interpretation of the disabled girl's (possibly) increasing dissatisfaction with the relationship, "read" through clues that Traustadóttir could observe in her behavior. As in Bigby's (2000) study (discussed above), there are risks of misinterpretation in such a strategy, but we would suggest that the value of bringing forward, however tentatively, a perspective that might otherwise simply fall out of view outweighs those risks. We assume, of course, that researchers' readings of informants' views in such cases will be based on extensive and systematic observation, as well as knowledge about informants' circumstances and contexts, and we recommend such "readings" be put forward "lightly" (DeVault, 1999, chap. 5), with explicit acknowledgement that readers should consider alternative interpretations.

In summary, we argue that if feminist researchers are interested in creating knowledge that is for rather than about the people they study, then they must be active listeners. Like the playful "world" traveler that María Lugones (1990) imagines, the active listener must interrogate her or his deep-seated assumptions about various worlds and her or his arrogant perceptions of others in those worlds. Both playful "world" traveling and active listening operate as

means to identify with and love people living in alternate, unfamiliar worlds without (ab)using them. We have learned what it means to be active listeners not only from second-wave feminists in the social sciences, but also from women of color like Audre Lorde and others whose writings and edited collections continue to call our attention to and nourish us with stories of oppression, resistance, and survival (Alexander, Albrecht, Day, & Segrest, 2003; Anzaldúa, 1990; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1984; Jordan, 1985; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). These writers and writings fuel many feminists' investigations of the social world. They remind feminist researchers to be self-reflective and critical of deeply disciplined research practices by offering "imaginative access to what is, for some, an unimaginable experience" (Code, 2001, p. 273). The insights of women of color feminists and Anglo feminists continue to cultivate the transformation of scholars from arrogant perceivers to empathetic, decolonizing researchers and foreground the importance of active listening in all stages of the research process.

### Structures of Talk and Discourse

Perhaps because of the significance of listening, feminist researchers have been especially attentive to one recent trend in interview research, which involves a heightened attention to the structures and organization of language, talk, and discourse. Throughout the social sciences, scholars refer to an interdisciplinary stream of thought focused on narrative and representation as a linguistic or narrative "turn" (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford & Marcus, 1986), which has gathered momentum since the 1980s. One central idea is that narratives are fundamental to identity and to the ways that people make sense of their worlds. People are constantly telling stories, to themselves and to others. Elliot Mishler's (1986) influential book on interviewing pointed to the pervasiveness of stories in most interview data, and suggested that conventional approaches to analysis, which extract thematic bits of those stories, are likely to disrupt the coherence of informants' perspectives. By contrast, looking at longer stretches of talk (referred to by some as "discourse analysis"), and especially the stories people tell, and

how they tell them (typically labeled “narrative analysis”), offers distinctive possibilities for maintaining the coherence of a person’s perspective. Feminist scholars such as Catherine Kohler Riessman (1990, 2002) and Susan Bell (1999) have developed these insights and applied them in studies of women’s experiences of divorce, infertility, and reproductive health. Some studies of this sort focus extensively on the structures of people’s stories, so that the content of their talk becomes secondary, but feminists using narrative analysis generally want to examine the structures of storytelling in order to enhance their interpretations of women’s reports. Riessman’s (1987) analysis of the form of her Latina interviewee’s story, for example, provides a way for her to hear more fully what is being said. Riessman expected a linear narrative of the informant’s divorce and at first felt that she didn’t understand the woman’s perspective; but through careful study of the interview transcript, she recognized a different kind of narrative that built meaning by circling around its main themes.

Another important idea is that how stories are told is not just an individual matter; people’s stories are shaped by the formats available to them and reflect the perspectives and values of their communities. Thus, a narrative may be a place to see human agency in play with social structures, expressive activity that is shaped by its social context. The narrative turn brought a new consciousness of such issues to the practice of oral history and life history interviewing, and feminist scholars began to write much more reflexively about how such interviews are negotiated between the parties and how the researcher produces a representation of the encounter. One excellent source on such issues is the collection produced by the interdisciplinary Personal Narratives Group (1989); their title, *Interpreting Women’s Lives*, puts the emphasis on interpretation, signaling the shift from an approach that emphasized collecting material as if that were a simple and straightforward process (see also Gluck & Patai, 1991).

Judy Long’s (1999) book, *Telling Women’s Lives*, provides a more theoretical and epistemological discussion of these issues, formulating an interpretive prism of sorts with four facets: subject, narrator, reader, and text. She includes in her discussion not only life history interview

studies, but also the production of biography and autobiography; and drawing from feminist scholars in literary studies, such as Carolyn Heilbrun (1998), she explores the intersections of gender with genre, or the ways that typical or expected narratives may constrain what women can easily tell (and what listeners or readers can easily grasp) about their experience.

Dorothy Smith’s (1987) development of a “sociology for women,” based on a mode of inquiry she calls “institutional ethnography” or “IE” research (Smith, 2002), provides a method explicitly focused on the ideological practices of “ruling” that shape women’s experiences and how they recount them (in interviews and elsewhere). Smith has formulated IE as a “feminist method” arising from the change in women’s consciousness associated with the women’s movement of the 1970s, and more broadly as a “sociology for people” or “alternative sociology,” and her writing about the approach touches on much more than just interview research. However, interviews are often quite important in feminist IE studies (see DeVault & McCoy, 2002), and Smith’s writings on the theoretical foundations of IE research have broad implications for interview research of many sorts.

Briefly, the IE approach takes up some “stand-point” as a point of entry to inquiry. Interviews are often used to explore activities of a particular group and to produce a full picture of their experiences at that point of entry. However, IE researchers are committed to looking beyond local experience, and the next step in the research is to examine local activities to see how they are connected with or “hooked into” activities occurring elsewhere. This “hooking in” or alignment is typically accomplished in contemporary societies through various texts, such as time cards and job descriptions, mission statements and strategic plans, databases and the statistics compiled from them, media portrayals and the conceptual framings they employ, and so on. These texts allow for coordinated action in the complex and interlocking institutional formations that coordinate contemporary societies, putting in place “ruling relations” that reach into people’s daily (and nightly) activities. The “problematic,” or question, posed in an IE study is how a particular piece of “everyday life” is organized, extralocally. Often, IE

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researchers find that institutional practices produce difficulties in everyday life, because institutional ideologies fragment “what’s actually happening” for the person. It may be, for example, that only part of a battered woman’s story is written up in the police report (Pence, 2001) or that only part of what the clerical or health care worker does is recognized in her job description (Diamond, 1992; Reimer, 1995). Thus, only part of that experience is accountable in other places—in the sentencing or probation hearing, for example, or in the calculation of wages, or promotion and managerial policy.

Smith (1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1999) has developed these ideas in a series of essays on women’s perspective as a critique of conventional sociology, and on text-mediated social organization and what she calls “conceptual practices of power.” Many of her arguments rest on a distinction between “primary narratives”—told by an embodied narrator, from an experiential point of view—and various institutional narratives produced from the “raw materials” of primary storytelling: how a single observer’s account of a political demonstration compares with the official account in the voice of the authorities, for example; how a woman’s behavior is worked up by acquaintances as “mental illness”; how a death becomes an officially warranted “suicide”; or how Virginia Woolf’s state of mind before she killed herself is read as insanity. The logic of these essays suggests an approach to interview data, based on the idea that one can find social organization “in talk.” At some points, people will narrate what they do, specifically and straightforwardly; a researcher can encourage that kind of reporting through the questions she or he asks. At other points, the interviewee’s talk will draw on institutional categories and concepts, as when teachers refer to “ADHD kids” or make reference to organizational texts, such as grade-specific curricula, or the “IEP” (or Individualized Education Plan) used in U.S. schools to spell out accommodations to be made for students identified as having disabilities. The IE researcher can use both kinds of talk to explore the textual “leap” from experience to “documentary reality”—that is, how the organization “works up” the activities of teachers and students, and how the coordinative texts of the educational system recruit them into relations they may not intend.

Researchers using the IE approach often conduct interviews with people working in several different sites, rather than designing studies limited to one particular group. Because IE researchers are seeking connections across sites, their research designs focus on translocal “regimes” of social organization. Once the researcher has identified significant texts, she may want to interview those who produce or work with that text. Ellen Pence’s (2001) “audit” studies of the processing of domestic violence cases, for example, involve extensive interviews with 911 operators, police dispatchers and responding officers, advocates, judges, and probation officers; each contributes a locally grounded piece of the “processing” picture, and seeing how each works with a particular case shows how a woman’s experience gets transformed as it becomes a “case.” In addition, IE researchers often combine interviewing with textual analysis, as Kamini Maraj Grahame (1998) does in a study of a feminist community organization’s “outreach” to women of color, and Rosamund Stooke (2003, 2004) does in her study of the gendered work of children’s librarians. And sometimes, they may use interviews to explore how people use visual texts, as in Liza McCoy’s (1995) study of the interpretation of wedding pictures. More on the IE approach can be found in Campbell and Gregor’s (2002) “primer,” Smith (2005), and DeVault and McCoy’s (2002) discussion focused specifically on interview research.

Feminist anthropologists have also adopted innovative “multisited” approaches that involve interviewing to investigate cultural discourses. Emily Martin (1994), for instance, interviewed scientists and laypeople to explore the common social metaphors that appear in their talk. And Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) used observation and interviewing to examine the production of *National Geographic* images and then interviewed lay readers about how they saw those images.

### Appropriation and the Ethics of Interview Research

What analytical and strategic knowledges and conceptual tools do we need to not relive the violence of our inherited histories? (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003, p. 187)

All qualitative researchers are, of course, bound by the codes of ethics of their disciplines: Those conducting interviews are required to secure informed consent from participants, to conduct the interview in ways that are sensitive to participants' concerns and feelings, and to protect the identity of interviewees by using pseudonyms and, if necessary, changing some details when representing them in research reports. The costs of participation in the research, for informants, are to be weighed against potential benefits of the research for participants and others. Feminist researchers, acutely aware of the harms produced by generations of male-centered research that distorted women's realities, have set themselves an even higher ethical standard. In some cases, they have challenged disciplinary codes of ethics.

A group of feminist scholars who called themselves the Nebraska Feminist Collective (1983) developed an early statement of feminist research ethics, arguing that from a feminist point of view ethical conduct is not just a procedural matter, but also a matter of content and, ultimately, allegiance. They insisted on an allegiance to women first, even if that sometimes puts feminist researchers in conflict with their disciplinary standards. Confidentiality, for instance, does not always seem to serve feminist goals. Linden (1993) provides a provocative discussion of routine procedures for protecting subjects' identities, suggesting that such practices may not be appropriate for her participants, whose survival through the Holocaust is itself a testimony. Given their history and its meaning, assigning pseudonyms (or worse, numbers) to these people, in the name of protection, may seem more like another erasure of their existence. Such discussions have encouraged feminist researchers to be flexible about confidentiality and to negotiate procedures for identifying participants individually, respecting each participant's wishes.

As feminists have become increasingly concerned with building knowledge inclusive of all perspectives, and attentive to differences of power and privilege among women, they have developed constructions of ethics that address how interview material is used—issues of “appropriation.” The question here is whether the interview is a one-way or reciprocal

exchange: When the participant offers up her story, does the researcher simply take it and disappear? To what use does she put the data—does it serve only the researcher's career, or also people in the informant's group or community? These concerns might perhaps be construed in the “cost-benefit” terms of the ethical review board, but these institutionalized procedures have not historically emphasized such concerns, focusing instead on rights and harms as individual matters. Feminist constructions of research ethics are sharpened by an acute sensitivity to a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990) within which research is conducted and by an awareness of collective interests in researchers' representations.

Feminist theorists have contributed to methodologists' heightened sense of the stakes in research ethics. Calling attention to the politics of any representation, they remind us that writing responsibly calls for a cautious and careful approach: Researchers must be continually mindful of the power relations organizing our actions at every stage of the research process. The participants in our scientific investigations must be understood as “subjects in their own right,” instead of being made “into mere bearers of unexplained categories” who have no existence outside those categories (Lazreg, 1988, p. 94). They must not be violently abstracted into categories that presume a universal, ahistorical reality. Instead, women must be acknowledged as agents actively located in history—as makers of the worlds around them rather than mere victims of an overarching patriarchy.

Antiracist feminists, particularly women of color, have critiqued and continue to challenge knowledge that presumes to be outside history, beyond the contexts and workings of actual people (Bannerji, 1995a; Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997). These writers suggest that analyses of the experiences of non-white and Third World women are often problematic because they are organized around stereotypes and assumptions, for example, that Third World women are victims of backward, uncivilized traditions and cultures (the same assumption that has been and is being used to justify imperialism and the violent colonization and appropriation of seemingly untamed bodies and territories). For

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instance, Uma Narayan (1997) has argued that white Western feminist representations of sati as an uncivilized Indian practice replicate what she terms a “colonialist stance” toward Third World cultures and communities (p. 43). These representations suggest that “Third-World contexts are uniform and monolithic spaces [unaffected by historical change] with no important internal cultural differentiations, complexities and variations” and falsely homogenize Indian women as “victims of their culture” (p. 58). Representations emanating from this “colonialist stance,” she argues, erase the work and agency of women and others involved in the transformation of their worlds, legitimize efforts to economically exploit and politically dominate India, and stifle transnational feminist coalitions and cross-cultural communities of resistance (p. 126).

Practically, such critiques suggest that, too often, well-meaning feminist researchers embark on projects involving other women without a thorough and grounded knowledge of their contexts and the histories that have produced those contexts. They suggest that feminist researchers should carefully think through the purpose of interviewing; that they must study and learn as much as possible before approaching others. In particular, feminist researchers should avoid using interviews—especially with women in vulnerable or marginalized social locations—as a way to learn things that could be gleaned from available sources. Taking care in that respect is one way that researchers can display respect for the time, effort, and, often, pain involved in sharing experiences. In a critique of the continued tokenist treatment of women of color, Lynet Uttal (1990) argues that researchers should not presume a monolithic experience of racism. Rather, she suggests, “Anglo feminists and feminists of color who are concerned about women of color from different racial/ethnic groups than their own need to more actively seek out information about women of color and relate it to their particular interest” (p. 44). Researchers should go to the library, search through online databases and periodicals, and become better informed “about different groups and their critiques” (p. 44). Uttal argues, before recruiting women of color to fill the gaps in our understanding. Only by doing such “homework” (p. 44) will the process of inclusion of women of color in feminist scholarship be more productive.

Another strategy for avoiding discursive colonization (Mohanty, 1991) is to analyze and present interview material with an eye to its historical context. What is often lacking in colonizing social scientific analyses is a presentation of women research participants as agents active in transforming their surroundings and shaping their experiences. Says Marnia Lazreg (1988, p. 98): “To take intersubjectivity into consideration when studying Algerian women or other Third World women means seeing their lives as meaningful, coherent, and understandable instead of being infused ‘by us’ with doom and sorrow.” Often, such a goal may be achieved by combining interview data with other kinds of material, as in Lisa Law’s (1997) study of women’s entry into sex work in the Philippines; setting the women’s stories against a political-economic history of U.S. military presence and state sponsorship of tourism, she challenges conventional, dichotomous thinking about choice or coercion, agency, and structure. Studies of paid domestic workers in the United States (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotela, 2001; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992) have also fruitfully set women’s accounts of that work within a broader historical context.

It is also useful to be mindful of women interviewees as agents in their own lives. Sometimes, feminist researchers accomplish this goal by seeking out women who are challenging oppressive conditions, either individually or collectively. Two volumes that include such studies—some based on interview research—are Kimberly Springer’s (1999) *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*, which includes studies of African American women’s activism, and Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai’s (2002) collection *Women's Activism and Globalization*, which deals with the activist efforts of transnational feminist organizations. In other studies, treating women as agents is more a matter of how the researcher interprets their struggles. For example, Ellen Scott, Andrew London, and Nancy Myers (2002) look searchingly at interview accounts from welfare-reliant women in the recent period of U.S. welfare “reform” and find that, as benefits are withdrawn, some of them are drawn into “dangerous dependencies” on violent partners; despite the women’s circumstances, the researchers do not see them only as



vulnerable victims, but rather treat their actions as decisions they make about how to survive.

Finally, feminist interview researchers often strive to share or negotiate interpretive authority with research participants. Ultimately, the researcher makes decisions about producing the final text, but feminists have involved interviewees in decision making about representation in various ways, primarily by asking for commentary on developing analyses or feedback on representational decisions. While such practices parallel qualitative researchers' traditional reliance on "member checks," the feminist emphasis is not only on "getting it right," but also on the politics of representation. Oral history researchers, who address such issues frequently by virtue of their sustained contact with informants, and those using narrative methods, by virtue of their sustained attention to particular stories, have produced a large and fascinating literature on dilemmas and strategies (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Riessman, 1987). Some feminists adopt participatory research methods to share research decision making more fully (Campbell, Copeland, & Tate, 1998; Naples, 1996), but their discussions frequently point to practical barriers and often question whether full sharing is always desirable.

Feminist theorists have shown us that texts produce and carry ideology (Bannerji, 1995b), and the research texts we produce do so no less than the texts we critique. As researchers, therefore, we must be cognizant of how our representations of other women will operate and travel as ideology. Interview researchers can use an emergent corpus of critical writing on scholarly textual production (Clough, 1992; McCloskey, 1990; Richardson, 1997; Smith, 1999) to develop an awareness of the politics carried in research texts; we urge interview researchers to continue such reflective consideration and to devote more attention to the reception and uses of interview research, an area that has been less explored.

### **Feminist Perspectives on Survey Research**

We are researchers trained and primarily interested in relatively unstructured interview techniques and in qualitative, interpretive analysis

of interview material; these are also the approaches that feminist scholars have taken up most enthusiastically—to such an extent that many associate feminist with qualitative research and some practitioners insist explicitly on that linkage. We do not: We have emphasized qualitative interviewing here, but we also recognize the possibility and, more important, the desirability of developing more structured feminist interviewing methods that will contribute to quantitative research and analysis.

Historically, writing on feminist methodology has emphasized qualitative interview techniques. Some have asserted that open-ended interviews, involving relatively intimate face-to-face relations, fit best with feminist commitments because they allow women to speak more freely than in structured interview situations. Yet any interview is an artificial, constructed encounter. Despite a relative paucity of writing on feminist uses of quantitative, survey-type interview data, many feminist researchers do take up those techniques. They argue that feminist scholars and policymakers need various kinds of data, and that often quantitative results carry more weight in public discourse. Certainly, survey techniques are superior when one needs to know about the prevalence of some condition or perspective in a population.

The challenges facing feminist survey-interview researchers are quite different from those that arise in open-ended interviewing. Qualitative interviewing is often improvisational: The researcher can adapt the agenda and questions asked to a particular informant, and adjust the interview strategy over time as she or he begins to develop an analysis. But quantitative analysis depends on uniformity in the conditions and conduct of a large number of interviews. The analyst needs a reasonable confidence<sup>4</sup> that a particular question was asked of each participant in the same way. Because of the need for uniformity, quantitative researchers must make sure they know ahead of time what they wish to learn from interviews and how best to achieve that—they devote a great deal of time and effort to planning the interview and standardizing a protocol for administering it. Because surveys require large numbers of participants, they may be administered by an interviewing staff, and researchers must train interviewers so as to ensure consistency.

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In addition, surveying a large sample of some population is an enormous endeavor, and, as a result, many quantitative researchers use data produced by others in large collaborative surveys mounted by various government agencies and other groups. For feminist researchers, these data sets provide both challenges and opportunities. From a feminist point of view, there are several problems with producing large survey data sets: Issues and questions are limited by the concerns of those who design the survey, and the exclusivity of the discipline is reflected in the composition of such committees. For surveys that are administered regularly to allow analysis of trends over time, there may be conflicts between the need to maintain consistency over time and the need to reflect and incorporate new issues or language. Thus, large surveys may be marked by a kind of cultural lag—a gap between the questions on the page and the pressing issues at the time when the researcher begins to work with the data. As feminists have moved into positions of power and influence within the discipline, they have had more opportunities to introduce women's issues and perspectives into decisions about survey design. The effects of this work can be seen in areas such as women's health, sexual assault, work-family issues, and so on.

Early on in the development of feminist methodology, Margrit Eichler (1988) examined a range of social science journals and identified particular forms of sexist error that were often built into the wording of survey interviews (e.g., asymmetries in the way questions were asked) or the analysis of data (e.g., universalizing claims made on the basis of investigations with one group). Her discussion is mostly based on the straightforward assumption that scholars should treat men and women research participants similarly, and some might now question or trouble that assumption, but it is still illuminating to discover the kinds of unexamined gender truisms that were (and in many cases, continue to be) routinely built into data collection. Eichler's discussion is shaped by its moment in feminist studies, but it remains a useful tool for bringing sexist assumptions (and by analogy other discriminatory practices) to light.

In a more recent discussion, Assata Zerai and Rae Banks (2002) consider how one might

analyze existing survey data through an "intersectional" feminist lens. Noting that race, class, and gender intersectionality is properly a "heuristic device" that means more than simply including these variables, they explain how, in a study of social policy on maternal drug use, they built contextual variables from a "data set which focuses almost solely on the individual woman" (p. 25). Including analyses of income inequality and the "hostile climate" produced by some state policies allowed them to discuss the contexts that shape women's behaviors and the outcomes of their drug use. They also analyzed interactions between class and hostile climate, and those analyses allowed them to discuss women's agency, showing that women with more resources were able to buffer the effects of a harsh social context. These creative analytic techniques illustrate the possibilities for feminist analysis of existing survey data; they also suggest that survey research would be stronger and more useful if interview data were more frequently produced so as to include material that would facilitate analyses of contextual circumstances.

### Accountability

Are my hands clean? (Sweet Honey in the Rock)

Feminist interview research is often characterized by a desire to make change or produce material results. That is to say, most feminist researchers aim to do more than merely stimulate contemplation about women's status locally and abroad. The challenge, then, is to make the knowledge produced through interviewing applicable to the worlds that women live in. Some interview studies are designed so as to lead to quite specific modifications of institutional practice. For example, Ellen Pence's (2001) institutional audits of domestic violence case processing are designed to discover how changes in institutional practice might enhance women's safety; she works with a team of community responders and finds that they not only have the expert knowledge of those actually doing the work of processing, but are often quite interested in discussing modifications of their practice. In other projects, researchers develop ways of disseminating information gleaned from interviews to nonacademic audiences who

might have use for it. After interviewing paid domestic workers in Los Angeles, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotela (2001) worked with an advocacy organization to produce materials about these workers' rights and how they might address exploitative situations, distributing them in an accessible graphic format modeled after the culturally familiar *novela*. It is important to note that these explicit efforts at social change require a phase of activity not typically considered part of the research process; these researchers not only speak and write about what they have learned from others, but also commit time and energy to activities that will carry research results beyond the academy. Such efforts are relatively rare, because they are not so consistently rewarded as more academic forms of disseminating results.

Another goal shared by many feminist researchers is that of producing "relational knowledge"—that is, showing how the varied circumstances of women (and others) are related through the web of social organization that connects us all. It is not only our status as "women" that matters, but understanding the unequal, uneven, complex relationships between women—locally and abroad—and our relationships to histories of colonialisms, patriarchies, imperialisms, and racisms that is key to any liberatory feminist project (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Power is multifaceted and complex; therefore, if our aim is to understand how power works, we need to make a concerted effort to map the relations among people's activities, experiences, struggles, histories, and broader geopolitical and economic systems. Such mapping might entail illuminating Third World women's engagement with feminism and resistance to oppressive regimes in relation to states and histories of colonization, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) did in "Cartographies of Struggle," or taking on a more technical approach, meticulously detailing how the everyday lives of people and the textually mediated activities of organizations and institutions are "connected into the extended relations of ruling and the economy" (Smith, 1987, p. 188), as evidenced in Gillian Walker's (1990) *Family Violence and the Women's Movement*. Mapping is fundamental to any project seeking to explicate relationships

among groups, histories, and contexts. As a methodological tool, it brings the social (i.e., historicity, activity, and agency) back to the knowledge we produce. We cannot understand the worlds we live in, comprehend how power works, or create meaningful change without making our connectedness to people and economic, geopolitical, and historical processes clear. Moreover, because we are always located (in terms of our race, class, nation, ability, sexuality, and age, and as employees of institutions of higher learning), we must also map the political, intellectual, and institutional context in which we write (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224). In our interview studies, it is our responsibility not only to report back on what our respondents said, but also to locate our informants' responses in a particular historical context and to recognize each response as emerging from a very complex set of local and global raced, classed, and gendered relationships. Our emphasis should not only be the "micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle," but "the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" as well (p. 223).

As universities and colleges become more and more corporatized, the challenges to antiracist feminism and oppositional knowledge production grow. Feminists in the academy continue working to transform dominant ways of thinking and acting, confronting processes of administration and governance designed to manage difference-affirming efforts and "dialogic spaces of dissent and transformation" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 185). Like educators elsewhere, we are also required to be more accountable to a production-oriented administrative regime; and our heightened accountability to these institutional concerns makes holding ourselves accountable to the communities and people we write about all the more difficult. Still, to succumb to the bureaucracy of the academy, to shortchange our hopes of changing the world around us, and to forget the brutal realities and histories of subaltern peoples is to become the colonizers we've been so adamant to critique. When we write for, rather than about, the people we study, we begin to redefine the relationship between our work in the academy and the world we live in, reorienting the knowledge we produce to attend to "the needs

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and interests of . . . people” rather than “the needs and interests of ruling” (Smith, 1999, p. 16). As feminist researchers, we need to use interviews to facilitate our participants’ and their communities’ understanding of the social world and their efforts to change it.

## CONCLUSION

Interviewing is a powerful research tool for feminist researchers interested in exploring women’s experiences and the contexts that organize their experiences. Interviewing is powerful in part because it involves relatively direct exchanges of views and perspectives among researchers, participants, and readers. Because those exchanges are mediated by the language and discourses that shape experience and knowledge, interviews can also be seen as occasions that put those discursive operations in view. Feminist scholars have used interviewing, in various ways, to challenge received knowledge about women’s and other lives, and we have no doubt that interviewing will continue to be significant for creative, critical feminist work.

We have tried to consider interview research as part of an “apparatus of knowledge production,” a site where women’s oppression is “constructed and sustained,” but also resisted (DeVault, 1999, p. 30). Dorothy Smith (1996) argues: “Knowledge is socially organized; its characteristic textual forms bear and replicate social relations. Hence, knowledge must be differently written and differently designed if it is to bear other social relations than those of ruling” (p. 187). Feminist research is a process that is situated and carried out in a larger historical context. Like knowledge, it, too, is socially organized. If we acknowledge that the “cognitive domain of social science is itself a social relation” (Smith, 1987, p. 72) and that “knowledge is a social accomplishment,” then as social scientists we are also responsible for continually questioning the methods we use to establish our findings and develop our analyses.

We would also insist that, given our “historical and positional differences” (Mohanty, 1990, p. 180), there is no commonality of

gender experience across “race and national lines”; our experiences as women are ineluctably complex and varied. Assuming that there is a unified common experience among all women violates and ignores women’s differences. Ignoring or dismissing rather than affirming women’s differences produces divisions and hinders coalition efforts. Thus, while making generalizations about groups of women can be useful (particularly in the social sciences where one goal is to identify domestic and cross-cultural trends in human behavior), such generalizations can also be used to reinforce the very power structures feminists in the academy have sought to dismantle. Indeed, it was the critique of abstract, generalized forms of knowledge as lacking the complexity and contradictions that characterize women’s lives that pushed feminists to acknowledge that representing others is no objective, benign process; therefore, understanding how we represent others, who has the power to represent others, and the implications of our representations of others is imperative to any feminist research project. We suggest that it is in continuing to work out the implications of these ideas that scholars will sustain the political force of feminist interview research.

## NOTES

1. On the history of U.S. feminism, see Freeman (1975), Rosen (2001), and Springer (1999).
2. This book is also very useful as a source on life history methods, both traditional and experimental.
3. Bigby, an Australian scholar, uses the term “intellectual disabilities,” whereas U.S. scholars would likely use “developmental disabilities.”
4. Of course, what is “reasonable” is a collective construction. Opening up the “black box” of survey interviewing, as in Cicourel (1964, chap. 3), reveals a great deal of undesirable inconsistency as a routine feature of data collection. Specialists recognize this fact and adopt various safeguards to minimize its effects on findings. The requirement for consistency, then, is not absolute, but rather reflects the shared standards of a research community. Feminists might want to debate some of those shared standards, to the extent that routine practices

introduce androcentric biases (Eichler, 1988). But in other contexts, feminist researchers may accept the messiness of survey research as the price of deploying its social power.

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