

Chapter 1

Feminist Research and Composition Studies at a Crossroads

Over the last several decades, feminist scholars have begun to articulate a number of feminist principles of research. These principles are often called “feminist research methods,” although no single method or methodology is feminist in itself.¹ Rather, a feminist theoretical and ethical framework distinguishes feminist research from other forms of inquiry.² In the social sciences, many books have been written about the nature of feminist research and methodology which often feature similar arguments but use discipline-specific examples to advance them.³ My purpose here is not to review these many books and their similar claims, but rather to outline some of the most important and frequently discussed principles of feminist research in order to examine their relevance to composition studies. In this chapter, I examine the origins of feminist principles of research, describe their most common features, and consider the benefits and limits of feminist approaches to research.

Feminist principles of research first arose in critiques of objective, positivist methods in the social sciences, especially in research on women. The most pressing criticism to emerge early on had to do with how research *on* women was not necessarily beneficial *for* women. Concern *for* women is tied to the sort of ethical consideration not typically in the foreground of most objective research. In

theorizing this ethical concern, feminist scholars have proposed a variety of concepts, such as reflexivity, that can lead researchers to understand the consequences of their inquiries for those they study. The outcomes of such theorizing are many, including the democratization of relationships between researchers and those being researched.

There is now a growing body of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities that attends to feminist principles. Some of this work has special implications for composition researchers, and some of it is produced by composition researchers. Much of this work is qualitative in nature, primarily because the principles that guide the work are amenable to qualitative inquiry. But feminist research can be quantitative, as Davida Charney and Sandra Harding, among others, have argued. (I return to this point below.)

Describing Feminist Principles of Research

One of the earliest critiques of objective research methodology in the social sciences was launched by Ann Oakley. Her interview-based study of working-class, pregnant women set the stage for development of feminist principles of research. Oakley arrived at her critique after having been unable to follow traditional interview procedures—to deflect questions, withhold information, and maintain distance—in encounters with women who asked about prenatal care and other medical information. Oakley decided that she had a moral obligation to assist these women in their quest for information, and so changed her interactions with them. Among other things, she discussed medical concerns with her interviewees and helped them obtain prenatal care. Guided by her sense of obligation, Oakley's stance toward her interviewees became more interactive, collaborative, and less hierarchical.

Emergent in Oakley's pioneering critique is an important principle of feminist inquiry: that research on women should also be for women (see also Fonow and Cook; Gorelick; Harding; Langellier and Hall; D. Smith). This principle has been amplified and refined by a number of feminist scholars over the years. For example:

- Kristin Langellier and Deanna Hall, two communication scholars, argue that “research *for* women . . . does not simply generate new knowledge about women for the sake of knowledge, but conducts research with the purpose of empowering women . . .” (195);
- Sociologist Sherry Gorelick suggests that “merely collecting descriptive statistics or experiential data about women does not constitute feminist research. Feminist research must be part of a process by which women’s oppression is not only described but challenged.” (462)

Feminist scholars, then, have called for more research *for* women in order to honor the voices of participants, to create opportunities for reciprocal learning, and most importantly, to empower participants to change the conditions of their lives.

This call to research has led to the development of various strategies useful in the planning and conduct of feminist inquiry. In their oft-cited collection *Beyond Methodology*, Mary Fonow and Judith Cook list four characteristics as typical of feminist research: “reflexivity; an action orientation; attention to the affective components of the research; and use of the situation-at-hand” (2). The first characteristic, “reflexivity,” is important because it allows researchers to engage in the kind of critical reflection and analysis that motivated Oakley to change her research procedures.⁴ It enables researchers to be introspective, to analyze the research process in response to participants, and to adjust and refine their research goals as they learn more about those they study. An “action orientation” matters because it keeps the research project focused on emancipatory goals, allows the feminist researcher to engage in political action, to influence public policy, and to create “the potential ability of feminist research to change the lives of women” (7). “Attention to the affective component of research” can help scholars discover an important vantage point from which to understand the lives of participants. If scholars ignore the emotional dimensions of their work, they are also likely to ignore important aspects of people’s lived experience and may miss crucial elements in the

interpretation of interviews and other data. Affective components of research can become an important occasion for reflection and insight, thus working hand in hand with the first characteristic mentioned by Fonow and Cook—reflexivity. Finally, “making use of the situation-at-hand” means studying common environments such as domestic settings, and paying attention to everyday events, all of which can help to valorize the lives of ordinary women and acknowledge the significance of daily lived experience. Fonow and Cook suggest that “creativity, spontaneity, and improvisation” characterize feminist researchers who make use of the situation-at-hand (11).

It is interesting to note that at least three of the four characteristics described by Fonow and Cook—an action orientation, attention to the affective components of research, and use of the situation-at-hand—represent qualities which in traditional research designs would have led to sharp critiques, if not dismissal of researchers’ work. For example, attention to the affective dimensions of research would have been (and sometimes still is) used to criticize research as subjective and flawed. Use of the situation-at-hand would have been dismissed as unrepresentative and anecdotal. And an action orientation would have been (and many times still is) considered inappropriate for researchers because they are supposed to “tell it like it is,” not engage in advocacy or political action.

In addition to those sketched by Fonow and Cook, there are other characteristics typical of feminist research. Below I list several qualities which I have compiled from my readings in oral history, women’s studies, education, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Feminist scholars in these areas have suggested that feminist principles of research include a commitment to

- ask research questions which acknowledge and validate women’s experiences;
- collaborate with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive, and cooperative;

- analyze how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well as participants' goals, values, and experiences;
- analyze how the researchers' identity, experience, training, and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis, and findings;
- correct androcentric norms by calling into question what has been considered "normal" and what has been regarded as "deviant";
- take responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences; and
- acknowledge the limitations of and contradictions inherent in research data, as well as alternative interpretations of that data.

As this brief overview of feminist principles of research implies, no single methodology is feminist in itself, nor have feminists invented new research methods. Rather, it is a feminist perspective, including a commitment to improve women's lives and to eliminate inequalities between researchers and participants that characterizes feminist research.⁵

There is now a growing body of work that exemplifies many of the research principles advocated by feminists, although the researchers may not always describe their work as deliberately feminist. It is useful, then, to distinguish between work that explicitly employs feminist principles of research and work that implicitly incorporates such principles. Elizabeth Wheatley draws such a distinction in her discussion of feminist ethnography:

There is an abundance of work that can produce feminist *possibilities*, or exert variously feminist *effects*, even though the researcher/author does not explicitly designate the work as feminist. In light of this, I think it is helpful to distinguish between work that is self-consciously *feminist in its aims, claims*,

and intentions, and work that can be feminist in its effects or in its production of possibilities. (411, emphasis in original)

I discuss both kinds of work: research that explicitly aims to pursue feminist goals, and research that has feminist possibilities. Indeed, as I explore this latter category of research, it will become clear that many feminist principles of research overlap, to some extent, principles central to new ethnographic, critical, and hermeneutic approaches to research. This distinction between explicit and implicit feminism also underscores the rhetorical nature of feminist inquiry: it may be intended as feminist by authors, or it may be construed as feminist by an audience.

Most feminist researchers seem to have a strong preference for qualitative research methods—and I will discuss these methods throughout. The reason for the preference of qualitative over quantitative research methods, I suspect, has to do with the fact that qualitative methods are more easily adaptable to the principles described above. For example, establishing interactive, respectful, and collaborative relationships with participants is only possible when scholars use research methods that call for close interactions with those they study (i.e., anonymous surveys do not allow for such a possibility). Moreover, qualitative researchers acknowledge that they are “participant-observers” at the scene of research, thus shaping, to some extent, the interactions they observe. In other words, qualitative researchers typically situate their work in its historical and cultural context and acknowledge the complexity and diversity of human experience. Nevertheless, some feminist scholars do prefer to use quantitative research methods—and, I should add, do so with great success.⁶ Those who study medical or legal topics of special concern to women—breast cancer and domestic violence, for example—have found that numerical data and statistical analyses of research results provide powerful ways of representing women’s realities that can influence public sentiment and policy making.

All the same, it is important not to conflate feminist principles of research with qualitative research methods and not to

describe them in opposition to quantitative, empirical methods, as happens in some discussions of feminist research (e.g., Burnett and Ewald 25). Along those lines, Charney observes that “[i]t seems absurd to assume that anyone conducting a qualitative analysis or ethnography must be compassionate, self-reflecting, creative, and committed to social justice and liberation. Or that anyone who conducts an experiment is rigid and unfeeling and automatically opposes liberatory, feminist, or postmodernist values” (568). In other words, at a time when qualitative research is receiving renewed interest and special attention in the field of composition, it is important that we do not vilify quantitative researchers and their work. As I have argued elsewhere, composition studies is a field that encourages “methodological pluralism”—and should continue to do so—because different research questions invite different research methodologies (Kirsch, “Methodological Pluralism”).

Tracing Feminist Principles of Research

What distinguishes feminist research from other traditions of inquiry, then, is its deliberate focus on gender combined with an emphasis on emancipatory goals. Feminist researchers contend that gender is an important aspect of lived experience, not just another sociological “variable.” But feminist scholars are not the only ones to question the hegemony of positivist research methodology. Scholars in the critical, hermeneutic, and postmodern traditions have long called into question such valorized concepts as objectivity, neutrality, and reliability and argued for research that embodies many of the qualities advocated by feminists. Some feminist principles are similar to those principles motivating researchers working in the postmodern tradition. One thing shared by feminist and postmodern scholars, for example, is the antifoundational critique of knowledge. But one thing that is not shared is the tendency for some postmodern theory to drift into pure relativism. Feminist principles of inquiry enable researchers and readers to discern degrees of value; and feminist principles name these valuations as social constructions, not essential qualities.

Feminist scholars take the postmodern critique of knowledge as a starting point for developing their research agendas, but add a distinctly feminist goal: that research not only be *on* women, but also *for* and *by* women. For instance, Frances Mascia-Less, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Cohen, three feminist anthropologists, distinguish feminist from postmodern research.

Both postmodern anthropology and feminism assume a self-consciously reflexive stance toward their subjects, but there are significant differences between them. . . . [A]t the moment that feminist scholars begin to address themselves to women's experiences, their inquiry necessarily becomes concerned with questions of power and political struggle, and their research goals become defined by that struggle. (23)

Clearly feminist scholars join others in acknowledging that their research programs are socially situated and thus profoundly influenced by the cultural, ethnic, and gender biases that researchers inevitably carry. What sets feminists apart from others, however, is their history of also attending to the patriarchal, hierarchical, and colonial features of much traditional social science research. Through their efforts, I argue, we have arrived at a much more reflective, introspective, and self-critical view of research processes and methodologies.

Feminist social historians, for instance, have pointed out time and again how research in the sciences, social sciences, education, and humanities often *misrepresented, belittled, ignored, or silenced* women's experiences, although some of this history remains veiled even today.⁷ One of the clearest—and, for me, most startling—examples of how women's experiences have been misrepresented can be found in the history of electric shock treatment as traced by Phyllis Chesler. In her landmark study, *Women and Madness*, Chesler examines why (mostly white, middle-class) women were treated with electric shock in the 1950s. She observes that (mostly white, male) psychiatrists and physicians diagnosed women's "problems" as rooted in an inability to accept domestic duties, confounded by

a desire to escape those duties by following artistic or career aspirations. Psychiatric professionals believed that shock therapy and prescription tranquilizers would help women reconcile themselves to domestic obligations. At least through the 1950s, this course of treatment carried the full authority of the medical establishment.

If this example strikes readers as one from the “bad old days,” consider a situation more recently discovered: the omission of women from most medical research. Until very recently, most medical studies—including studies of breast cancer—omitted women as participants because medical researchers did not want to complicate their studies with such factors as hormonal cycles and pregnancies. Thus, to date—in 1999—most medical knowledge we have about illnesses, treatments, and medication is based on studies of men. Not until 1993 did federal law require that all research funded by the National Institutes of Health represent the population it hopes to serve.⁸

Examples of how women’s experiences have been trivialized or belittled can be found closer to home. In literary criticism, for example, historically male values and experiences have dominated the field for many years. This criticism has celebrated literature of the battleground more than that of the domestic sphere; the hero leaving home to seek adventure has been deemed more noteworthy than the heroine remaining home to care for the family. And while the domestic concerns of privileged white women have found their way into literature at least a century ago, the experiences of women (and men) of color or of working-class background have only recently been considered worthy of study. There are, of course, notable exceptions to these trends, as has been documented in numerous feminist contributions to literary study.⁹

Finally, feminists have also worked hard to identify and name aspects of women’s experiences which until recently had been silenced, taboo, or unnamed. For example, Betty Friedan spoke of “the problem that has no name”: housewives who find themselves isolated in their homes, cut off from community, creativity, and career opportunities. More recently, feminists have identified the experiences of “sexual harassment” and “date rape.” Not until these

terms were introduced into public discourse did the experiences described by these terms become recognized as “valid” and “real.” Now named, these experiences provide grounds for complaints, disciplinary action, and lawsuits. And they continue to be the subject of debate in the workplace, on college campuses, and in the media.

Even in educational research, where gender has not usually been ignored, girls and women are still often treated as “others” who do not fit in, who have or who cause problems, or who need special support. Today, we hear that it is women who disrupt discipline and morale at the Virginia Military Institute; we do not hear that men lack the discipline and character to treat women as equals. Or we hear that it is girls who need “extra support” to do well in math and the sciences; we do not hear that the cultural climate of teaching math and sciences must change because it now dissuades most girls and almost as many boys from pursuing scientific interests.

As these examples illustrate, there are many historical reasons why feminists are highly critical of traditional, so-called objective research across the disciplines, especially in instances when male scholars have attempted to represent women’s experiences, goals, and lived realities. It is little surprise, then, that so much early feminist scholarship has focused on revaluing women’s experiences, on recovering women’s contributions to public life and discourse, and on naming experiences that were silenced or omitted. This important work continues today, contributing to new insights and interpretations of history, culture, and society. More recent feminist scholarship has begun to focus on the uses of research methodology itself. Important here are studies of the ethical implications and political dimensions of particular methodologies, and of researchers’ motivations and assumptions in choosing methodologies.

Assessing Feminist Principles of Research

As someone who has used feminist principles of research, I have often discussed with enthusiasm the ways in which these prin-

ciples create exciting new possibilities for collaboration with participants, as well as the ways in which they challenge our most basic assumptions about research methodologies. In a talk I delivered at the Ohio State University, I was asked by a member of the audience—Roger Cherry, to be specific—whether I thought feminist principles of research lead to “better” research, that is, whether they produce more thorough, more detailed, and more insightful work. In an e-mail correspondence later on, Cherry phrased his question this way:

I embrace all the features [of feminist research] . . . on *ethical* grounds rather than on *empirical* or *epistemological* grounds. That is to say, I think one can make a compelling case, for example, that researchers should examine the impact of their research on subjects and if possible, research should give back something in return. This, however, is an ethical argument rather than an epistemological one. It says something like, “the activity of research is better if conducted this way” rather than “the information derived from the investigation, if conducted this way, is inherently superior to information that would be generated otherwise.” (Personal electronic communication, Jan. 29, 1996, emphasis added)

Cherry is correct to note that many feminist scholars justify feminist principles of research on ethical, not epistemological grounds because they strive to produce research that empowers participants and their communities. In that sense, many feminists define “better” in ethical terms—as research that is meaningful, empowering, and beneficial to participants, research that has the potential to improve participants’ lives.

While the driving force behind feminist principles of research is certainly an ethical imperative, I would argue that the same principles can, and usually do, lead to better empirical information, information that is more detailed, rich, and nuanced. But as I engage in this discussion, I am aware that the distinction between ethical and epistemological grounds is not a clear one. In fact, some

feminists would argue that it is precisely because of this kind of reasoning—an artificial distinction between ethics and epistemology—that we have arrived at research that justifies research for its own sake and fails to examine its ethical dimensions. Still, I would answer Cherry’s question about the quality of feminist inquiry in the affirmative: it can and often does lead to “better” data than do traditional approaches to social research. First, by getting to know research participants in the context of their daily lives (instead of observing them from a distance), researchers are more likely to observe and collect data that reflects participants’ perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. Second, by involving participants in formulating research questions and by asking them for feedback on data collections and interpretations, researchers are more likely to investigate questions that are relevant to participants’ lives. Thus, researchers are more likely to understand participants’ experiences, motivations, and values within their social milieu. Third, by designing research that benefits participants and the communities in which they live, researchers are also likely to gain trust and credibility among community members, thereby gaining access to additional sources of information as well as to other community members. In short, researchers guided by feminist principles are likely to ask “better” questions, which, in turn, can lead to “better” answers.

Illustrating Feminist Principles of Research

Let me briefly illustrate how feminist research principles can lead to better research by turning to Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s reflection on her early work, “a set of case studies” completed at a time when the cognitive research paradigm was prevalent (117). Chiseri-Strater, like many researchers, felt compelled to use cognitive research methods when she set out to study the nature and contexts of students’ revision processes. Reflecting on her work more than a decade later, she notes that she neglected to study one of the most important contexts in which revision takes place: the classroom. She relied solely on interviews with student writers during

which she followed a set of predetermined questions. Thus, she gathered the same information from all students but left herself few opportunities to learn about differences among students' backgrounds, motivations, home life, racial and gender identities—all of which can influence students' use of revision strategies in powerful ways. Chiseri-Strater prematurely limited the information she collected, and consequently, she gained fewer (and perhaps less accurate) insights into students' revision processes than she would have had she allowed herself to interact more closely with students in and out of class. Chiseri-Strater concludes in her retrospection:

By situating myself—both in my research approach and text—as objective and detached from my informants, I actually *distorted* my data through omissions about my research context and my researcher self. My rereading of this earlier research shows that objectivity and detachment in reporting data are *neither possible nor desirable* because many important insights about students' revision processes were excluded from my findings on that topic. (118, emphasis added)

Chiseri-Strater suggests that her early work suffered from her attempt to be objective and distanced, and that she would have served participants better if she had allowed herself to get to know them in the contexts of their daily lives. Had she done so, she could have created a more textured portrait of students' revision processes, and students, in turn, could have improved their revision strategies by receiving valuable feedback from Chiseri-Strater. As this example suggests, interactive, collaborative relations between researchers and participants—the kind of relations promoted by feminist (and other) scholars—can work to produce better, more detailed empirical data.

When I speak about better research, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that we aim at discovering singular truths, or that we describe these truths in a singular voice. Instead, we should attempt to reveal, as much as possible, the conflicting points of view emergent in our data. This might include information from

multiple perspectives that makes us feel uncomfortable, that portrays realities we may dislike, or that reveals our fears and biases. The purpose of exploring multiple perspectives is not to eliminate so-called rival hypotheses, but rather to add depth to our research enterprise. Nedra Reynolds explains that feminist and postmodern scholars

weave into their discourses explicit acknowledgments of their own positionality and the limits to their claims, but at the same time, these “limits” are not—as they are in traditional Western epistemology—blocks to the “truth” to be eliminated. They are instead incentives to see differently, to shift position, to make adjustments. (332)

The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits—an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write. That kind of knowledge can help readers understand (rather than second-guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand; it also helps ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment. Of course, no amount of situating oneself or one’s research guarantees more thoughtful and sensitive work. But it remains a critically important step in pursuing ethical research.

Indeed, feminist standpoint theory explains why writing oneself into the scene of research remains a crucial move for feminist researchers. In brief, this theory postulates that what we believe counts as knowledge depends heavily on our cultural, social, and historical location (see Collins; Harding; Hartsock; D. Smith). More specifically, standpoint theory holds that people who occupy marginalized positions in a culture acquire a “double perspective”—often as a matter of survival—and, subsequently, understand the workings of both the dominant culture and their own marginal one.¹⁰ Thus, the reasoning goes, people who occupy marginal po-

sitions in a culture can offer more insightful, more complete interpretations of that culture than those who do not possess the double perspective. “Can” is the operative word here because feminists are careful to note that women are not automatically imbued with a double perspective that is characteristically feminist. Lynn Worsham explains:

A feminist standpoint is not “my life as a woman,” though it necessarily begins there. It takes shape in those moments where experience gets politicized by the hard edges of material life. It is an achievement, given neither by biology nor mere socialization, yet it recognizes that a woman is born *and* made—an embodied, female-sexed subject. (569)

Standpoint theory makes a significant contribution to feminist thinking because it illuminates flaws in supposedly objective research projects which have misrepresented women’s experiences and those of other marginalized groups. Moreover, standpoint theory has also invited those on the margins to come to the center of research, both as participants who can make their voices heard and as researchers in their own right who can study their own communities and cultures. Patricia Hill Collins offers herself as an example; she describes herself as an “outsider within” academic culture, well positioned to do research that offers valuable insights about both academe and those communities the academy does not typically esteem.

In recent years, though, feminists have also examined the limits of standpoint theory, noting the essentialism inherent in claiming a standpoint. Since individuals have multiple (and sometimes competing) allegiances to different groups, it is often neither possible nor desirable to identify with a single standpoint. To build this critique, feminists have worked to document the many overlapping identities we all occupy, with special attention to the factors that unite and divide marginalized groups.

Further, standpoint theory seems to suggest that one can only study or know about experiences in which one has partaken; that

only those who have been oppressed can know about or study oppression, that only those who have been marginalized can know about or study marginalization. This reasoning implies that only insiders can offer valuable perspectives, and that little can be learned from outsiders—those who do not share ethnic, gender, or class ties with those they study. Taken to its logical conclusion, this reasoning would suggest that we can only study ourselves or the groups to which we belong, and further, that we cannot understand those who do not share our values or culture. Drawing this kind of conclusion, however, is solipsistic and dangerous because it narrows the world we can study and learn about, thereby cutting us off from important sources of insight and inspiration. Diane Wolf cautions in this regard:

If the argument is that knowing oppression firsthand helps one more fully understand (an)Other's oppression, then standpoint theory raises questions about epistemic privilege, or whether it "takes one to know one." Taking feminist standpoint theory one step further might lead to a claim that only those who are of a particular race or ethnic group can study or understand others in a similar situation, or that only those who are women of color or lesbian can generate antiracist or antihomophobic insights. (13)

This kind of reasoning limits opportunities to learn about precisely those others who do not share our values, background, or interests and, therefore, may have the most to teach us about different ways of knowing, thinking, and seeing the world. Responding to these potential shortcomings of standpoint theory, Harding suggests that there is a next step feminists should take: "to try and rethink how one's social location can *nevertheless* be used as a resource in spite of the fact that we're members of dominant groups" (interview with Hirsh and Olsen 206, emphasis added). Harding goes on to suggest that those in dominant positions should use their access to power and privilege to engage in political activism and collaborative work with those who enjoy fewer privileges. Standpoint theory remains

a valuable tool for feminist researchers in that it urges us to acknowledge that participants' identities, backgrounds, and locations—as well as our own—can serve as powerful sources of knowledge. Standpoint theory is less helpful when it leads to limiting, essentializing, or totalizing claims.

Scrutinizing Feminist Principles of Research

I will now turn briefly to my own work—an interview study with academic women, *Women Writing the Academy*—in order to address some critical questions raised by scholars either skeptical of or unfamiliar with feminist approaches to research. In doing so, I focus on Mark Thompson's review of my book in the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, a review which raises key questions about the principles guiding my study. Because these questions are not unfamiliar—they have been put to me after various presentations of my work—I have found it instructive to consider what they tell us about the legitimate concerns of those who scrutinize feminist research principles. Specifically, I want to consider the following queries:

- Did my feminist approach to research lead me to conclusions I was looking for? In other words, does feminist inquiry necessarily lead to biased findings?
- Why did I exclude men in my study? How can claims about women in the academy hold up without balancing them against findings about male academics?
- By focusing only on women academics, do I not contribute to the sense that women are victims of patriarchal institutions rather than independent and capable agents within them?

I think it is important to address these questions briefly in order to clarify some common misperceptions of feminist principles of research.

Finding what one is looking for. To some extent, all researchers find what they are looking for. We cannot help but be influenced

by our own experiences, training, and ideological allegiances. Feminist researchers incorporate this truth into their work with participants and readers, whereas other researchers do not necessarily do so.

In his review, Thompson notes that “feminist methodology includes an open discussion of the researcher’s agenda both with the participants and with the readers of the report” (602). He takes this as acknowledgment that feminist researchers intend to direct participants’ behavior and readers’ understanding of it. I would argue, in contrast, that feminist researchers are cognizant of the cultural situatedness of *all* research; that relations between researchers and participants are *never* neutral, and that research questions are *never* disinterested (Harding 6–10).

Still, the potential problem of researchers finding what they are looking for is quite serious. One way to counteract this—in fact and appearance—is to enlist participants in the formulation of research questions, usually the point of departure for most feminist research projects. Subsequently, participants can be asked to help with analyzing data, during which process they might well challenge researchers’ findings. And, too, participants may be invited to work with researchers on drafting the final reports in which data analyses are presented. Feminist scholars invite participants to collaborate with them during various phases of research so that learning can be interactive and reciprocal, and so that research can truly be for women, engendering social change whenever possible.

Similarly, in my interviews with academic women, I set out to collaborate with participants, asking them for feedback during preliminary and first interviews. Such consultation helped me decide what questions to add, delete, and rephrase. I also shared interview transcripts and preliminary data analyses with women, and, during second interviews, I asked them for feedback on themes that I had identified. I thus engaged participants in a cycle of collaboration that allowed both researcher and participants to shape the interpretation of interviews. Furthermore, I deliberately asked only open-ended questions, requesting that women describe the full range of their writing and research experiences before I invited them to

reflect on and evaluate those experiences.¹¹ Finally, I did not ask questions obviously related to gender until the end of the second interview, this in order to avoid filtering the whole interview solely through a gendered lens.

My interview strategies worked well; I received valuable feedback from women during the first interviews which allowed me to add and refine questions for second interviews.¹² I also learned about a number of issues that concerned women which I had not anticipated.¹³ Moreover, women reported that being interviewed several times was a satisfying experience; it triggered memories that allowed them to reassess their experiences and reexamine their sense of themselves as scholars and writers. Thus, my work suggests that structuring interviews in the ways I have described above (and borrowed from other scholars) allows researchers to conduct open-ended, descriptive, and exploratory work while still revealing their background, research interests, and theoretical frameworks.¹⁴

Exclusion of men. In his book review, Thompson notes that I do not study men and their experiences with academic writing. He suggests that “[Kirsch] convert[s] methodology into an ideological weapon of exclusion, precluding the need to ask whether the problems she addresses are equally important to men” (602). As I explain in my book, I chose to study academic women because their

entrance into the academy, particularly in tenure-track and tenured positions, is still a relatively new phenomenon. . . . Women have been and are often still seen as “others” and “outsiders” in the academic context. This position of difference in the institutional and cultural context is likely to problematize academic discourse for many women writers. (1)

Because so little work has been done on the writing and research experiences of academic women in various disciplines (a fact that fortunately is changing rapidly), I first wanted to learn about women’s concerns and experiences before comparing them to those of men. In that sense, my study is descriptive and exploratory, rather than

hypothesis-driven and argumentative. A comparative study would no doubt yield additional information.¹⁵

Selection of groups for study is a time-honored practice in composition studies, as it is in other areas of the humanities and social sciences. There are numerous studies of basic writers that make only passing reference to experienced writers, yet the binary opposition here is rarely critiqued. And work on technical writing seldom offers observations on the composing practices of essayists or journalists who might occasionally treat technical subjects. But classifying writers by gender tends to bring binary oppositions quickly to mind, though without the further recognition that such classification is generally a part of the research we do.

Finally, it is worth noting that in our gender-stratified society questions which are germane to academic women are not necessarily relevant to men. Academic women, by virtue of their recent arrival and now increasing numbers, occupy a different cultural, social, and historical position than do men in the academy (at least white, middle- or upper-class men). Thus, for example, one can ask a woman faculty member to reflect on her position in academe and how it has affected graduate training, career choices, and disciplinary involvement. Such a question generally evokes responses about career paths open (or closed) to women, gender-tracking in education, sexual harassment, and so on. Further, in the interviews I conducted, academic women spoke about breaking gender stereotypes, feeling marginalized in their departments, being outnumbered in faculty and professional meetings, and about students' reactions to female professors.

In contrast, asking a male (white, middle-class) faculty member about his position in the academy is not as likely to evoke the same range of responses. This is not to say that men cannot or have not reflected on their positions and roles in the academy. Rather, it is to say that the norm for what it means to be a professor is still tethered to the experience of white men.¹⁶ Or, to put it in terms offered by postcolonial theory, the dominant position in cultures (including institutional cultures) is usually unmarked and thus less available to scrutiny. A male professor experiences authority in the

academy because he is both a man *and* a scholar—a linkage rendered invisible because it has long been “normal” for scholars to be male. There is no mismatch between the role the male scholar plays and his gender, a mismatch often profoundly felt by academic women.

Of course, a man entering a female-dominated profession, such as nursing or education, may share this sense of mismatch perceived by female faculty.¹⁷ Hence the need for studies that ask, “What does it mean to be a man in academe?” The seriousness and scope of such a question demands thoroughgoing effort to answer, not the inevitable dilution and narrowing that would occur were it included as part of a study such as *Women Writing the Academy*. Some critical theorists have embarked on just such work as they investigate how culturally dominant positions masquerade as invisible norms in culture.

Women as victims or agents? Scholars who are critical of feminist research have sometimes asked, “Does feminist research set out to characterize women as oppressed, helpless, and victimized?” To be sure, there is research that does just that, though often with good reason. It would be irresponsible to write about domestic violence, for example, without acknowledging that in most cases women are victimized by men.¹⁸ But it is not inevitable that feminist researchers should use gender theory to construct women as victims. Instead, gender stands as a central concept that enables analysis of the social, cultural, political, and material conditions that shape the lives of women. Such analysis often reveals (and does not invent) institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequality and social injustice.

While some feminist scholarship focuses exclusively on the exploitation of women, there are many other kinds of feminist research. In her introduction to *Feminism and Methodology*, Harding distinguishes among three kinds of feminist scholarship: work that begins to “recover and to reappraise the work of women researchers and theorists” which has been “ignored, trivialized or appropriated,” work that examines “women’s contributions to activities in

the public world,” and work that studies “women as victims of male dominance” (4, 5). In rhetoric and composition studies, new work is emerging in all three of these categories: feminists are recovering the contributions of women rhetoricians (see Jarratt; Glenn); they are studying women’s contributions to the history and development of writing studies (see Gerlach and Monseau; Maher); and they are studying how gender inequity affects women professionals in composition (see Enos; S. Miller; Schell).¹⁹

There are important reasons, then, to examine power structures that contribute to gender inequality. But talking about gender inequality is not the same as blaming disadvantage and failure on gender inequality. Thompson implies the contrary:

In Kirsch’s report women are, by virtue of their gender, always and ever more disadvantaged in each academic discourse situation, whether it be reaching out to a broader audience, dealing with negative writing experiences, or identifying with their own texts. (603)

I should like to stress that I selected participants in my study on the basis of their successes—not their failures—as scholars and published writers. I chose my participants because I was interested in learning about the strategies that successful women writers had developed for conducting research, for addressing different audiences, and for establishing authority in their writing and professional communities. In achieving success, the experience of failure is inevitable. For women academics, that failure can sometimes best be understood when viewed through the lens of gender. But not necessarily, and not always—as I make plain in my book.

What I have described in this chapter is the confluence of feminist principles of research developed and refined across many disciplines. Individually, within each discipline, these principles may be considered marginal or relevant only to feminist work. But aggregated across disciplinary boundaries, the principles gain an authority that is formidable. This is where composition studies both benefits from and contributes to the interdisciplinarity fos-

tered by feminist inquiry. At the same time, following feminist research principles increases the chance that researchers will encounter ethical dilemmas. This is because, interacting closely, researchers and participants are apt to hit upon fundamental disagreements about the goals, values, and procedures of a given project. Furthermore, this researcher-participant intimacy can leave participants vulnerable to disappointment when their expectations are not met by the researcher. In the chapters that follow, I turn to specific examples of work that employs feminist principles of research and examine a number of ethical dilemmas that researchers have confronted in the course of their inquiries.