

# Reflections on the Role of Emotion in Feminist Research

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***Abstract:** In this article the author explores the topic of researching the researcher and, more specifically, the role of emotion in researching sensitive issues within the context of feminist research. She offers reflections on the implications of emotionally engaged feminist research for addressing and working through such thorny issues as responsibility and representation with respect to one's research, research participants, and the researchers themselves.*

***Keywords:** emotion, feminist methods, sensitive issues, feminist theory*

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Researching the researcher, a phrase coined by American psychologist Campbell (2001), describes the area of study focusing on the emotional experiences of researchers and especially of those researchers who investigate emotionally charged topics. Campbell has argued that there is a huge void with respect to such work in academic discourse relating in part to the small number of researchers who will openly “admit” that their research affects them on an emotional level. Campbell related this to the underlying bias toward positivist research methods within the social sciences and the entrenched conception of the ideal researcher as an objective, “value-free,” and detached truth-finder.

Although scholars from across academic disciplines can benefit from addressing the emotional and experiential aspects of their research, it is my concern that feminists and those doing women studies should be actively involved in this work. With subject nature so frequently emotionally charged—rape, sexual harassment, femicide, abortion, pornography, domestic violence, and so forth—it seems to me that exploring the emotional experiences of doing research on such sensitive topics<sup>1</sup> is a productive and meaningful project for feminist scholars. It can help to foster intellectual clarity and a deeper understanding of the issue(s) being studied, the research participants, and the researchers themselves. By focusing on the experiences of researching rape, I will demonstrate the need for further inquiries into this emerging field of study and the potential contributions that researching the researcher can offer feminist scholarship. I begin by asking what exactly it means to research the researcher, explore how partaking in this type of emotional reflection moves us closer to emotionally engaged feminist research, and, finally, reflect on the implications this has for feminist research. This discussion takes up the methodological issues of responsibility and representation in the research process.

In this paper I work from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, challenging positions of objectivity, the status of positivism, and “the possibility of accessing truth” (Weedon, 1999, p. 4). I begin with the topic itself, researching the researcher, a subject made possible by problematizing the relationships between theory and the real or between research and experience. The space created allows for new questions, ideas, interpretations and challenges to foundational sociological concepts regarding methodology, research, theory, approaches to knowledge, truth claims, subjectivity, and representational practices. Such space is an important arena for the disruptive voices of feminists (Fine, 1992) to interrogate and transform academic and research sites of knowledge.

## Researching the researcher

Suppose we turn the focus inward, reflecting not on the research but actually on how we respond to our research, and suppose that we feel the research instead of just thinking it? For some this might be difficult to imagine, given the emphasis on detachment and not feeling in the dominant research methods of the social sciences (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). However, for others, I contend that this might be something that they are already doing or have done, whether consciously or not. Perhaps you jot down your feelings during and after the research process in your field notes or in a personal journal, or maybe they are included in the epilogue of your finished work. Perhaps you do not have written notes but have thoughts, afterthoughts, or maybe conversations with a research team member, colleague, or loved one. Perhaps you look to one or more of these people in your network for support through the research process. You might be thinking about your feelings toward the research participants, the research subject, and how this is affecting you and your research. What stirred your emotions, and what were those feelings? What happened during the research process that affected you the most, and how did it make you feel? Do you still feel the same way? Did some of the emotions stay with you after the interviews or the study, and for how long? Which emotions, and why?

The reflections on these questions and the many more that are possible to ask are the materials needed to research the researcher. They are, if you will, the data.

### Emotion and feminist research

The emotionality of researching difficult and sensitive topics is a private issue for most researchers. Feminists in the social sciences, however, have been concerned with questions of methodology since the 19th century, challenging objectivity, rejecting detachment, accepting contradictory readings, and recognizing the presence of emotion within the research process (Reinharz, 1992; Wincup, 2001; Wolf, 1992).<sup>2</sup> This link between feelings and research has been a long-standing interest of feminist scholars and has become an integral part of feminist methodology despite positivist criticisms from within the major academic disciplines (see Campbell, 2001; Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Devault, 1999; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Reinhartz, 1992; Stanko, 1997; Wincup 2001).

When feminist scholars investigate difficult and sensitive topics, they are confounded with emotion-laden material. It is difficult not to be affected, for instance, by a woman’s retelling of her experiences of

domestic violence or, in the case of Rager's (2005) research, women's battles with breast cancer. The research process can be an affective, emotional experience in which researchers attune to the feelings of their research participants and to their own, inevitably shaping the research itself. Roberts (1989) spoke to this connection between emotion and knowledge, commenting on her experiences as a researcher of sexual violence against women.

There is nothing which can make an understanding of rape less subjective or partial . . . I am not outside or aloof from the subject, because I am involved in a relationship with the woman who is sharing her account, and do not remain unaffected by it. (p. 45)

About a decade later, Campbell (2001), in *Emotionally Involved*, reflected on interviewing rape survivors for the Women and Violence Project at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It is a comprehensive study of researchers' emotions in social science research based on the experiences of a research team of 15 women who interviewed 168 rape survivors in the greater Chicago area.

We were studying something from which we have no immunity. There is no line that separates us, the researchers, from them, the survivors. We knew we could be or could have been on the other side of the interview—telling a story of surviving rape, not listening to one. It became more and more difficult to “think” about rape when the very things we were hearing and learning in our research project reminded us of our own vulnerabilities. (p. 39)

Of the academic literature that can be deemed to be researching the researcher, most of it has arisen from feminist research on violence against women, particularly on rape (see Alexander et al., 1989; Campbell, 2001; Fine, 1992; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Hippensteele, 1997; Huff, 1997; Kelly, 1988; Mattley, 1997; Stanko, 1997).<sup>3</sup> A number of factors could account for this—some psychological, sociological, even political—but what I think is important here is the testimony that this offers to the level and power of emotions that the issue itself evokes particularly from women researchers. The emotionality is such that it prompts, even compels, women researchers to express the feelings from their research. In other words, the significance resides not in what drives women studying rape to research the researcher but that they are driven to do so.

Some of the documented emotional effects on researchers of sexual violence against women include acute feelings of anger, sorrow, shock, guilt, loss, pain, fear, and hope; the occurrence of nightmares, flashbacks to incidents of rape or childhood abuse, violent nightmares, sleeplessness, heightened feelings of insecurity about safety, sexuality; and a whole host of other physical, psychological, and practical (i.e., lifestyle adjustments) effects.

The study of the researchers' emotional experiences from the Women and Violence Project, for instance, suggests that the trauma of rape extends far beyond its victims. The reactions of the researchers were strikingly similar to those of survivors, and although the intensity and duration of the researchers' emotions paled in comparison to the survivors', it provides evidence of the potential for there to be secondary victims of rape: researchers, therapists, family, friends, intimate partners, and so on (Alexander et al., 1989; Campbell, 2001). The relationship between the study of rape and the experience of rape is clearly one that needs more analysis, and, as illustrated by the research team from the Women and Violence Project, it is intimately connected to the research process.

#### Emotionally engaged feminist research

Researchers' emotions are a natural part of inquiries. Taken as a whole, they are an untapped resource of information, lending insight into the research process, the findings of the study, and the issue of sexual violence against women. Careful documentation and thoughtful reflection on these feelings, how they have changed, intensified, lessened, and so forth, enables researchers to examine the connections between their emotions and the research outcomes (Campbell, 2001; Gilbert, 2001; Harris & Huntington, 2001), thus providing a more holistic study, a richer and more accurate analysis of the research, and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of the construction of knowledge on emotionally charged topics like rape.

It also gives rise to reflection about the literature in the field of sexual violence (Stanko, 1997), prompting, I hope, revisitations to past research with new sets of questions about the role of emotions in the studies. How is emotion translated (or not) into the published narrative? How are the researchers' emotions represented, or, perhaps, how are they detached? Are there patterns in the literature on rape in how they deal with emotionality, for instance among radical feminist readings, by women of color authors, or by rape survivors themselves? There is much to be explored here.

The project of researching the researcher offers the possibility for what Campbell (2001) called “emotion-

ally engaged research” (p. 123) within feminist methodology. This approach incorporates both emotions and intellect working together to co-inform the study. Researchers attune to their emotional experiences and needs as well as to those of the participants during the actual research process. In this way emotions are reconceptualized as a tool of investigation and as a source of data to be used and examined as part of the inquiry.

It is helpful to think of emotionally engaged research as a process approach or method. Reinharz (1992), Kleinman and Copp (1993), Devault (1999), and Campbell and Wasco (2000) discussed doing research and writing the eventual research narrative in a “journey” format. As Reinharz explained, “The work process of the research becomes an integral component of the issues studied. *The process becomes part of the product*” (p. 212, emphasis in original). Within a process approach, emotionally engaged researchers weave their emotions into the analysis so that these findings and experiences are absorbed as part of the larger project instead of being treated as separate from the study and/or relegated to the beginning or the end of the research narrative.

### **Implications for feminist research**

Campbell’s (2001) conception of the emotionally engaged researcher enters into uncharted territory, transcending modernist notions of the role of the researcher. Building on her discussion, I incorporate feminist poststructuralist ideas, demonstrating the future possibilities for feminist research, methodology, and theory.

Emotionally engaged research is guided by an ethic of caring: caring for the research (or the issue/topic itself), the research participants, what becomes of the research (including the eventual narrative, research notes, all of the data), and the researcher and the research team. Quite simply, caring, in this context, involves an emotional connection and concern for an issue, person, or persons (Campbell, 2001).

This broad understanding of caring is important as a departure from previous interpretations of “caring” in research relationships within feminist methodology. Reinharz (1993) called reciprocity, empathy, rapport, mutuality, and others “excessive demands” (p. 72) on feminist researchers. They are methodological myths about nonhierarchical research relationships that pose unrealistic, mostly impossible expectations on researchers.

Thus, caring within emotionally engaged research enables researchers to express their emotional connec-

tions and concerns toward the issue and research participants without expecting them to form unattainable research relationships. It also requires them to engage with difficult questions, questions that arouse feelings of unsettledness, uneasiness, and anxiety, forcing researchers to address issues of responsibility and representation within their research.

### **Responsibility**

What is responsibility in research, and what does it mean to be a responsible researcher? As Flax (1992) wrote,

To take responsibility is to firmly situate ourselves within contingent and imperfect contexts, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender . . . We need to learn to make claims on our own and others’ behalf and to listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person’s own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, and legitimated. (p. 460)

To take responsibility in the context of emotionally engaged research involves recognition of ourselves as imperfect or as thinking and feeling, emotional researchers in imperfect contexts (i.e., settings or studies). Our research is and can be only partial in its outcomes, data, method, design, and setting as well as in its understanding of the research participants and the studied subject itself. Flax (1992) would argue that through these acknowledgements we presume our non-innocence, which is, for her, responsible knowledge.

This loss of innocence is a process of disillusionment. For the emotionally engaged researcher the illusions of stability, certainty, security, and safety are eroded. The positivist myths of objectivity, value neutrality, and emotional detachment are debunked, leaving the researcher without the comforts of believing in the possibility of achieving objectivity. Researchers are left with their partial perspective (Code, 1995). Thus, taking responsibility as a researcher involves giving up this illusion for the uncertainty of emotionally involved research.

Thus, with respect to responsibility, the emotionally engaged researcher will ask many questions. What are my responsibilities to the research, to the research participants, to myself, and to my audience? What is a responsible use of the data and the conclusions? What will become of the research, for instance, after the study ends or after publication? Have I conveyed to the

research participants and to my audience the partiality of my research, understanding of the issue, emotions as a researcher, and presentation of the material? Is my “reading” or contribution to the topic of study responsible knowledge, and do the research participants and audience feel that it is? In what ways have I as the researcher been irresponsible, and what are some strategies that will help to address these shortcomings?

Although there are many more questions for this list, it is important to remember that these are not prescriptions for what emotionally engaged researchers should ask. Rather, they are starting points, questions to provoke thought about what it means to take responsibility in research.

### Representation

“In our concern for representing the voices of others, we sometimes fear to explore and develop our own voices” (Devault, 1999, p. 190). Through emotionally engaged research these anxieties can be addressed by questioning how we represent (and represent responsibly) the subjects of our research, the topic of study, and ourselves in the research. Concerns about representation and the ethics of representation are an integral part of emotionally engaged research. Dealing with sensitive, difficult issues intensifies the researcher’s feelings of obligation and the participants’ expectations of the representation of data, experiences, emotions, and the subject of study. How do we address these needs and expectations and come to terms with our limitations and shortcomings as researchers?

Working through such questions of representation in research requires reflection on language, subjectivity, and experience as they enter into the research process.

### Language

As feminist researchers we employ methods of inquiry, record data, analyze findings, and offer discussion and conclusions. We are positioned to interpret, translate, and make sense of our research, and as such we will always be at risk of mislabeling, misinterpreting, mistranslating, and misunderstanding that which and whom we hear, record, and analyze/interpret (Devault, 1999). Thus, the potential for misrepresenting our research, research participants, the topic, and ourselves has a fixed presence in our work.<sup>4</sup>

The emotionally engaged researcher must be keenly aware of the incongruence of language, the problems of translation, and her choices of language: how words are put to emotions, how experiences and feelings are named, and the risks involved with these

choices. In addressing issues of representation, language offers the emotionally engaged researcher the possibilities for extending texts, finding alternative ways for representing data and research, and infusing emotions into the study, for instance by using non-academic language or writing emotion into the narrative or into the interview questions. Thus, language from a feminist poststructuralist perspective is not simply a tool but a site of struggle where subjectivity and consciousness are produced (Orner, 1992).

The emotionally engaged researcher is not bound to any one representational practice or one method of writing; instead, writing is a process of discovery. Richardson (2000) called it a method of inquiry. Emotions serve as a resource in this process for exploring new ways of writing and representing research. One might ask How do I feel about this method or this word in its ability to represent the topic? Comfortable? Uncomfortable? Unsure? and so forth.

### Experience

Experience is of central concern to the research process. What is experience, how is experience made, and how do we come to have experience? What claims can be made with experience(s)? How do we represent experience(s) in our research and furthermore, our own experience(s) in our research? Whose experience(s) “counts” in the research, and whose is excluded?

Scott’s (1992) work problematized the use of experience as an explanation or as evidence about our knowledge. As she wrote, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” (p. 37, emphasis in original). In emotionally engaged research the discursive nature of experience is recognized. The experiences of the research participants and of the researcher are taken as part of the larger project of making experiences visible but without claims to legitimacy on the authority of experiences, particularly on the part of the researcher. In this way experiences are always contestable, offering the emotionally engaged researcher new opportunities for representing data of themselves and their research participants. This adds a whole new dimension to the meaning of responsible and ethical representation.

### Subjectivity

Feminist poststructuralists have expanded and complicated the notion of subjectivity, referring to it as “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). Emotionally engaged research calls for researchers to address the issue of subjectivity.

ity, questioning and examining it throughout the research process.

What is the role of subjectivity in research, and how is it represented and experienced? How is subjectivity formed, reported, and interpreted (Lal, 1999)? How has the researcher's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the research (Richardson, 2000)? What are the researcher's emotional investments in the research. Put bluntly, why does she care? What is the impact of these investments on the work itself?

The emotionally engaged researcher must recognize how both her and the research participants' subjectivities are embodied and discursively constituted while being sensitive to how subjectivity is lived by the participant. Weedon (1999) explained,

The individual is the site for competing and often contradictory modes of subjectivity which together constitute a particular person. Modes of subjectivity are constituted within discursive practices and lived by the individual as if she or he were a fully coherent intentional subject. (p. 104)

Thus, when researching emotionally charged topics, the researcher must address such concerns regarding subjectivity, showing care for the research participants and the topic of study.

### Concluding remarks

Learning more about how and why we see things as we do will allow us to understand more about the meanings others make of their (and our) lives, and to locate ourselves (and others) in more complex and meaningful ways. (Devault, 1999, p. 210).

Emotionally engaged research opens up space for new questions, ideas, and interpretations. It challenges foundational concepts such as claims to truth, subjectivity, objectivity, and experience, allowing new approaches to method, theory, and knowledge to be explored. There is a need for further inquiries into this field of study, especially for feminist scholars, for whom I have argued this to be a productive and meaningful project. Guided by an ethic of care, emotionally engaged research helps foster intellectual clarity and a deeper understanding of our research and research participants. This ethic of care must also, however, be extended to us as researchers. Although much of what I have offered in this article constitutes starting points to generate thinking about the emotional aspects of your research, I have suggested lines of questioning to be

followed by researchers around the issues of responsibility and representation and mentioned journaling and peer support as part of navigating through this difficult terrain of emotionally engaged research.

Rager (2005) tackled the issue of self-care of researchers directly, suggesting a number of strategies to address the emotional costs to the researcher of emotionally charged subjects, for instance through journal writing during the research process, peer or colleague debriefing, and personal counseling. Rager (2005) also discussed member checking or participant verification of transcripts/research in a second meeting for accurate representation and to help bring closure to the discussion. Maintaining balance between work and home life is also emphasized; this includes looking not only to your personal networks for emotional support but also to such practical stress management techniques as exercise.

### Notes

1. I am adopting the definition of a sensitive topic from Lee and Renzetti (1993): "Sensitive research areas include: (a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience, (b) where the study is concerned with deviance and social control, (c) where it impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination, and (d) where it deals with things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned" (p. 6).
2. Reinharz (1992) has uncovered examples of early feminist researchers from the 19th and early 20th century, challenging the dominant methods of the time, recognizing the need to reform research practices as well as raising questions about the relationship between feminism and methodology.
3. Gordon and Riger (1989) briefly remarked on their emotions in their study on rape. Fine (1992) included a short author's note with some of her feelings on the research. Kelly (1988) and Alexander et al. (1989) offered detailed personal writing on the emotional experience of their research on rape, and in Schwartz's (1997) *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women*, authors Stanko, Hippensteele, Mattley, and Huff reflected on this phenomenon in chapters devoted entirely to researchers' emotions.
4. For discussion on questions of language in interviews and translation and issues of responsibility and representation in research, see: Minh-ha (1989, 1995).

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