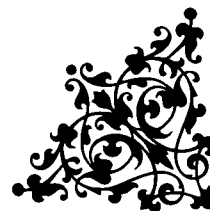


Women's Perspectives in Research

by

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

La méthode de recherche présentée et décrite traite de l'expérience des femmes dans, et envers, la société. Cette expérience sert de point de départ de la description. L'exposé est divisé en deux sections. La première décrit et définit le "point de vue féminin" et la seconde élabore une méthodologie de recherche basée sur ce point de départ.

Nous arguons en faveur de la pleine utilisation de l'expérience féminine dans l'élaboration d'un plan de recherche et du contenu de l'étude qui en découle. Généralement, dans l'élaboration d'un plan de recherche, c'est le chercheur mâle et l'expérience des hommes dans, et envers, la société qui sont les centres nerveux. Par

définition, l'inclusion des femmes est limitée par l'utilisation du "il" pour définir la recherche et les conclusions qui en découlent. Nous apportons des exemples pour démontrer comment cette situation se manifeste dans les analyses du processus de la recherche, dans l'enseignement de la méthodologie et dans le résultat de quelques études choisies. Nous ne disons pas que le point de vue masculin est impropre. Plutôt, nous disons qu'il ne peut pas inclure soit une évaluation de la situation de la femme, soit une compréhension de l'expérience féminine dans la société. Ce qu'il reste à faire c'est élaborer les recherches pour qu'elles tiennent compte des situations et des expériences féminines, et définir, ainsi que souligner, la vie et le travail des femmes, afin que nous puissions rendre

complètes notre analyse et notre compréhension de la société.

La seconde partie explique de façon plus précise quelles sont les questions qui doivent être posées et de quelle façon elles doivent être dirigées et élaborées. Nous élaborons des lignes de conduite pour effectuer une étude à la lumière de la situation et de l'expérience féminine. Nous suggérons une sorte d'étude restreinte, basée sur l'utilisation des connaissances et de l'expérience personnelles. Dans cette section, nous donnons des exemples d'études qui ont été élaborées à partir de la vie et du travail des femmes.

A l'annexe, il y a un cadre pour l'élaboration de questions, une liste de questions possibles et un guide de rapport pour l'étude.

In this study, on research methodology and how women are excluded by the rules which govern it; I want further to define the perspective of women and show how this perspective provides the basis for making a critique of the approaches which exist and for laying the groundwork for a different approach. My task is to look again at what we are taught to take for granted in knowledge and practice. The area of research method with which I initially want to concern myself is that of gathering information. In the conventions which govern the organisation and

production of research those gathering information are the "interviewers" and those providing it the "respondents." Put in this way, it is assumed that these categories include men and women, male and female roles. The abstraction or category created includes both sexes for it names and defines neither. What I shall argue here is that this practice must be questioned and examined again, for if we look closely at what lies behind it we will discover a set of assumptions and cover rules which structure the situation differently. The assumption then is basically that it makes no difference who interviews whom, bias is created out of situation not sex--and the situation of investigation can be controlled in such a way as to minimise personal input and, if you will, in this way maximise objectivity.

We can begin by looking at what this means in the context of an analysis concerned with the interview situation. An analysis is presented by Herbert H. Hyman in his book Interviewing in Social Research, in which he says:

. . . we must inquire, for example, into the social and psychological meaning of an interview for the two parties involved. We shall explore some of the cognitive and motivational processes operating within the interviewer. We shall ask how his behaviour is molded by these processes but in turn modified by the nature of his task. We

shall examine some of the reactions of the respondent when he is confronted by an interviewer. (p. 3)(1)

It is important to be aware how readily the abstract categories take on a personal pronoun and which pronoun that is. The statements always concern him, and focus therefore on his perception of the situation, in content and in analysis. This direction is systematic. Let me give just one more example from the same book:

. . . a variety of gains result from the fact that the interviewer, while he may be a biasing agent, might conceivably be an insightful helpful person. Thus he may be able to make ratings of given characteristics of the respondent, he might be able to explain or amplify a given question, he might probe for clarification. . . or he might be able to persuade the respondent to answer a question he might otherwise skip. . . . (p. 16)

(2)

These quotations come from a section entitled "A Frame of Reference for Interviewer Effect." What I suggest is that it is very important to ask whose frame of reference it is that we are putting forward. If we see the use of the masculine pronoun as reflecting a real perception of the world, real experience and providing for a real set of rules by which to do research, then it is clear that the frame and rules are provided by the men who set them out.

That the framework is given to us in this way is not in itself a problem. What constitutes the problem is that this perspective goes unrecognised. It is assumed that providing the framework in this manner constitutes an objective frame through which we understand the world. That men name it, create it, discuss it and define it, is disattended. But when we read the instructions for carrying out research we assume that there is only one frame of reference, that which is before us and we, in turn, disattend the pronominal usage. It is defined as irrelevant that "he" rather than "she" is used. We are told that "he includes she." What I am arguing here is that the use of the masculine pronoun is relevant for it reflects the perspective and view of the world of the user. This is not to suggest that we, as women, cannot include ourselves; we can and do, indeed, it is our training to engage in this practise. What we need to do now is to recognise what the practise is, to understand that it is only one view of the world that is commonly presented, that there is a complementary picture to be presented from the perspective of women, and that this involves doing more than substituting the pronouns, though that substitution is a good beginning. If it does not matter which pronoun is used it cannot alter anything if we speak as ourselves, and if something is altered by introducing this practise then we know that indeed there is work to be done.

I hold the view that presenting women's perspectives on the world and experience in it from our perspective is a different and separate task and one that urgently needs to be undertaken. Referring to women, recognising that women are present is not sufficient to this endeavour. Hyman, in his book, does mention women's participation in the process of gathering data and of interviewing. I want briefly to show two contexts in which he does so and then discuss why this is insufficient.

Hyman, in discussing rapport during an interview, makes the following observations:

. . . women interviewers are more competent and more experienced than the men interviewers, and older interviewers are at least more experienced than the younger ones. For women and older interviewers . . . group membership character of their respondents seems to make little difference. . . . (p. 156)(3)

In connection with another survey focussed on attitudes towards a campaign against VD in Britain, all the interviewers were female though there were both male and female respondents. Hyman concludes as follows after discussing some of the problems in response:

. . . while such results do not prove interviewer effect, they do suggest that in "delicate" matters of this kind there may be interaction affects when the sex of

the interviewer and respondent are different. (p. 167)(4)

In the first quote the problem is that there is no discussion of why it is that women interviewers are more "competent" and more "experienced." If this is a consistent pattern in the structure of research then it would tell us something crucial about male and female roles in the enterprise, the differential roles of men and women in the context of interviewing. As it is such questions are not asked and we, therefore, take for granted the differential roles and rules for participation, so to speak, in passing. I shall return to this point again shortly. Secondly, in this quotation it is implied that sex and age have an equivalent explanatory value. One is not more crucial than the other in understanding how an interview situation is structured and how it "works." Again this is a point with which I take issue since I am arguing that to fully understand the practices and principles involved in setting up a project and carrying out an interview we must look at differential sex roles and differential participation by men and women. In the second quotation the conclusion is that it is only in very specific situations, that is, those concerned with sexual behaviour, that we need to be concerned with "interviewer effect" or male-female interaction in an interview. A somewhat narrow understanding of the different positions of men and women in our so-

ciety. It does exemplify the point made earlier, that the frame of reference we are given asks us to ignore sex differences in all but specific situations.

Where we are dealing with interview situations in which women are interviewing women it is important to be aware that the rules which govern the interaction are of the same order. They teach what to attend to and what is important; they define what is trivial. In general the rules of attention to what is important in an interview follow a covert rule, namely that the concern must be with issues in the public world. Where women introduce their concerns that may have to do with a different reflection of that world, or with the household, their comments are generally dismissed as trivial--an example will follow later. The former is made evident in the following discussion by Hyman:

. . . the magnitude of underenumeration of workers in the MRLF (Monthly Report on the Labour Force) prior to 1942 was of such an order that a change in the procedure increased the estimate of employment by about one million, this increase coming mainly from people formerly classified as students or housewives (his italics). . . Another experiment revealed that about one-half million people engaged in unpaid farm work, each of whom contributed a substantial amount (nineteen hours

or more) of work per week. . . approximately one million women were classified as engaged in their own home housework who were actually doing a substantial amount of unpaid work in agriculture. . . .
(pp. 96-97)(5)

We can see here how the world is divided into "working" and "non-working" where the latter is the household. What is at issue is not the question of how women's work might be more adequately made visible as a whole but how we can fit the work it turns out that women do into an already established framework which defines both labour and the labour force. It is also worth noting in this example that the "people" that the discussion turns on are "women." "People" work in the labour force carrying out tasks which define them as "working," "employed" or as having an "occupation." These definitions excluded the work women do as housewives. Women only become "people" in this sense when they carry out appropriate tasks such as unpaid agricultural labour. The generalising category here again conceals the fact that we are essentially talking about men's work in the public world, and the recognition and definition of this work is what provides the framework for defining what is and what is not work.

What I suggest, is that if we follow these instructions then we as women,

ignore our participation in the world, its character, its definition and our experiences. Women play different roles, hold different positions, carry out different tasks, have different upbringings and different expectations. We do not experience the world in the same way nor do we understand it from the same perspective as do men. What we need to do then is to claim our own perspective, speak our own experience, essentially we must organise our own participation and structure our own enterprises. Let me be clear here, participation in this approach by men is not impossible nor precluded by the nature of the enterprise. I do, however, think that women must begin the process for it is ourselves we are talking about and we must develop the framework for understanding the world from our perspective.

That this has not been seen as a problem, let alone been undertaken as an enterprise, is not surprising given the rules for allocating authority in the world and for recognising authorities. Women and men participate differently in the world and the research enterprise reflects this in the context of the way in which research is structured and organised. Again, this is a feature that is taken for granted. In his book, The Uses and Abuses of Statistics, W.J. Reichman makes clear what it is that is taken for granted. Speaking of interviewing, he says:

. . . it is not uncommon for male respondents to be particularly

susceptible to the charms and general appearance of an interviewer. . . . (p. 265) (6)
and he goes on to note:

. . . interviewing is not an easy task. . . It can be very exasperating indeed. An interviewer's patience may suffer if she meets too many people who cannot make up their minds. . . . (p. 268) (7)

Here it is taken for granted that women are the interviewers. The masculine pronoun is given to those who govern the enterprise:

. . . the statistician is often thought of as a man of another world. . . even if he is personally accepted as beyond reproach, the statistics in which he deals are themselves liable to be suspect (p. 12) (8)

Again this fits with the previous quotation from Hyman who raised no questions about women being the more experienced and competent interviewers nor did he ask why this should be the case. What is taken for granted here is the subordinate role of women in the enterprise. Since this role fits well with the conventions of the society and the accepted patterns of authority and organisation, questions do not "naturally" occur. In structuring our own enterprise we have to begin by questioning what we normally take for granted.

Since this discussion has focussed on

male-female differences as they are perceived and presented in the research framework we are given, I want to stress again that women interviewing women or controlling the research enterprise are subject to the same rules. We learn to fit the frame and indeed to use it as if it were our own. Therefore, unless the frame is altered, the enterprise remains the same regardless of who plays the central or governing roles.

In another example, again from Hyman's book, an interviewer makes the following statement:

. . . she spontaneously remarks in the beginning of her account "The average woman thinks only of her job, or if she's a professional woman of her profession. I just don't think the average woman has as much social consciousness as the average man." (p. 58) (9)

Hyman makes the following comment on this statement:

. . . some of these beliefs might well occur because of traditional role prescriptions characteristic of all societies as illustrated in the above remark. . . . Some role expectations might well be posited on the basis of an oversimplified belief, a stereotype about some ethnic group. (p. 58) (10)

This analysis in no way challenges the statement made as a general characterization of "women." It underlines the

fact that we may expect women to appear as having "less social consciousness than men," because "all societies" have "traditional role prescriptions." A marked contrast to ethnic groups which may be characterised by oversimplified beliefs or stereotypic definitions. What I want to draw attention to here is the mode of arguing as much as the content of the statements. Statements made about women are not questioned. They are assumed to be derived from some basic characteristic of the society (and/or of women themselves), in this case of all societies, a statement that is questionable in its own right. Such assumptions are not based on oversimplified beliefs or even stereotypes. The discussion which follows in Hyman (pp. 62-64) focusses exclusively on racial stereotyping; sex-role stereotyping is not mentioned.

I want now to amplify this argument in a slightly different context. As with the gathering of data, so the posing of questions is also effected by the kind of assumptions I am talking about. It is necessary to be aware that the rules survey research has given us for structuring research questions also exclude women, exclude us in the sense that our views, opinions, experiences, do not have any value nor are they seen as being relevant. A very clear example is the following, again it is an interviewer talking about her work and is taken from Hyman's book:

. . . once they start talking I can predict what they'll say. . . . I could just about tell which people would say they hadn't heard of the Marshall Plan - lower income housewives. Very rarely you get a lower income housewife who is well aware of things - they don't have the time. And asked what attitudes housewives exhibited she said: "On a series of questions about approving sending of food to Europe, if she's said earlier she didn't know about the Marshall Plan, she will be the one who wants to take care of her family and no one else." When the matter was pursued by asking her what constellations of attitudes they exhibited, she replied "Ignorant, narrow, uninformed." (p. 58) (11)

This kind of thinking exemplifies what I mean by "exclusion." Women, lower income housewives, housewives in general have, it is assumed, no interesting opinions on anything outside the household. The household and what goes into its making, we take for granted, is not itself "interesting," it is seen as being "trivial." In this quotation, and the previous one, women's views are indeed doubly dismissed for "the average woman" thinks either of her "job" or of "her profession" or of her "house" or "household." The question that is not raised here concerns the content of the statements. Unlike statements that show racial bias,

statements revealing biases based on sex-role stereotyping are not questioned. As the discussion proceeds the problem of expectations based on sex-role stereotyping disappears, immediately becoming a problem of ethnicity, and his problem at that. (pp. 61-62) (12)

It is this kind of "slippage" we must seek to prevent--when women address themselves to issues, in their own terms, it is their words we must hear, even if what is said essentially provides us with a critique of the question. This critique is the first step towards hearing what women have to say and to generating the questions that women want to have answered. In the "Marshall Plan" example quoted previously, instead of assuming that the women responded out of the lower class ignorance of their kind, an alternative would have been to take the response seriously as coming from women to whom providing for their own families posed a more immediate, serious and equally legitimate problem as providing for European families.

If we want to change the frame in which we work to one that more fully includes us, we must focus our attention on women in various roles and occupations, as housewives, as mothers, as workers, as professionals, and define these positions and the statements made from and about them as legitimate. When women speak from their places in the world a different reality appears.

In conclusion I want to read a quotation from a book called Norma Jean The Termite Queen, a novel by Sheila Ballantyne:

. . . number 29 is the home of Norma Jean Harris and her family. On application forms Norma Jean has referred to herself variously as: Housewife; Homemaker (mentally adding "Creative"); and Mother. Of course, those terms do not belong under the heading Occupation; they never did, because they do not describe adequately what you do. Doctor, teacher --these terms are descriptive; they carry an imprint that fixes readily in the mind. . . Housewife? We all know how sloppy that one is, the tendency it has to evoke a kind of back-room imagery, where all the trivia is stored. . . .

So you see, while something always has to go on the dotted line under Occupation, it's obvious that the term assigned to me doesn't say much. . . . What could they possibly make of the one consistent thing I do. . . ? If I put down: Reads the newspaper, what would that explain?

The kitchen is where Norma Jean sits by the window and reads the San Francisco Chronicle each weekday morning, after the children have been delivered to school. It required three months of planning to co-ordinate a schedule by which they would all be in school or

nursery school during the same two and a half hours, so she could read the newspaper without interruption. . . . (pp.4-5,13)

Norma Jean is a character in fiction but her problems are based in a social reality, a reality that we can all understand and that needs to be spoken. We can do worse than look at this picture and learn from it.

What I have set out to show in this presentation is:

First, that the structure of the research enterprise excludes women through a series of assumptions that underlie its rules of operation. These assumptions, in addition, provide a framework for analysis to which women, women's work and experience are irrelevant.

Second, that we must re-examine this framework and through our critique of it provide an alternate, or complementary one that includes the perspective of women.

Third, that including women's perspectives begins with hearing and validating what women have to say, with the recognition that women's work is socially relevant--indeed that the work that women do in household and society is work.

Finally, that by recognising the importance and value of women's work we provide an account of the world which comes from women and which fully includes our work, lives and experiences, as we describe them.

NOTES

1. Herbert H. Hyman et al., Interviewing in Social Research (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 3.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 156.
4. Ibid., p. 167.
5. Ibid., pp. 96-97.
6. W.J. Reichmann, Use and Abuse of Statistics (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964), p. 265.
7. Ibid., p. 268.
8. Ibid., p. 12.
9. Hyman, op. cit.
10. Ibid., p. 58.
11. Ibid., p. 58.
12. Ibid., pp. 61-62.
13. Sheila Ballantyne, Norma Jean The Termite Queen (New York: Bantam Books Incorporated, 1976), pp. 4-5.