Summer 1980

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Charol Shakeshaft

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A Report on Research Sessions at the 1980 NWSA Convention

By Charol Shakeshaft

I cannot stress how important for . . . the future of human experience it is to take the development and explication of a feminine perspective in . . . research seriously and to devote all our talents and energies collectively to its accomplishment.

—Jane Anton

As research on women has increased, researchers have become increasingly concerned about how appropriate the existing research methodologies are for the study of women. In one of the earliest critiques, Rae Carlson argued that current research paradigms, which she characterized as involving manipulation, quantification, and control, not only impose restraints on the understanding of female psychology, but also lead to a general impoverishment in the capacity to say anything meaningful about human personality. Concomitantly, feminists began to question the widespread use of socioeconomic status as an independent variable. Marie R. Haug, for instance, pointed out that traditional measures of social class misclassify about a third of all families because the characteristics of women, particularly working wives, are neglected in the allocation of class position to individuals and families.

Barbara Lloyd documented the impact of societal norms on the definition of sex differences in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. She emphasized a number of methodological issues: the survival of spurious facts through repeated publication, the failure to report sex differences, and the consequences of employing the traditional null-hypothesis strategy. Jane Anton echoed the inappropriateness of the null hypothesis for the study of sex differences: In the null hypothesis, we assume things are the same and are surprised if they turn out to be different. In research on sex differences, we should be surprised if they turn out to be the same. We should talk about not one normal distribution, but two; and develop quantitative methods for comparing, contrasting, finding, and proving similarity rather than proving differences.

Thus, within a number of disciplines researchers are rejecting present methodologies for conducting research on women. Participants in this methodological journey were represented at seven sessions at the 1980 National Women's Studies Association Convention, where they met to share ideas of alternatives to male-defined research models.

The seven sessions on feminist research methods were: Research Methods in Psychology: Are They Anti-Feminist?; The Discovery of Feminist Theory: Applications of Qualitative Methods and Analysis; Workshop: Research Methods for Non-Social Scientists; A Workshop on Feminist Fieldwork: Issues for Social Scientists; Feminist Methodology; Feminism and Scientific Inquiry; Women's Studies: Methodology and Research. More than thirty researchers participated in these seven sessions.

A thread running through the seven sessions was the emphasis on qualitative research, that is, research which may be characterized by sustained contact between the researcher and the subjects, research that is built on direct experience, and research that produces data descriptive of events, people, places, and conversations. Many of the papers called for research in which women's experiences are taken into account so that theories will be grounded in them.

Another point of agreement echoed throughout the sessions was that feminist work is for, rather than about or on, women. The former suggests the importance of research in social change, while the latter may be used by feminists for social change, but may not have been undertaken explicitly for this purpose.

Other aspects of a feminist methodology that were discussed in the sessions were an emphasis on hypothesis generation rather than hypothesis testing; the need for the research to grow out of the personal experiences, feelings, and needs of the researcher; the necessity for truth to be reinvested in those on whom the research is being conducted; the need for a heavy reliance on the oral tradition, rather than the written one, both in gathering data and in reporting the results; and the use of research as an instrument for social change.

Charol Shakeshaft is an Assistant Professor of Educational Administration at Hofstra University and a Pre-K-12 Caucus representative to the NWSA Coordinating Council.

NOTES


5 Anton, op. cit.

A preliminary survey of NWSA members' "Research in Progress" will be undertaken in the fall as part of the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on Research and Grant Sponsorship. Donna Wood, Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, will coordinate this project. —E.R.