Feminist criticisms of the neglect, distortion, and exclusion of women in psychological research reflect three epistemological positions: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and postmodern feminism. On the basis of these criticisms, some argue that there is a need for a uniquely feminist method. This article critically examines these claims and calls for a new vision of the psychological study of women that construes gender as a product of social interaction and links women's agency with the shaping power of the sociocultural, historical, and political context.

Modern scientific methods, invented in the 16th century, were not only a stunning technical innovation, but a moral and political one as well, replacing the sacred authority of the Church with science as the ultimate arbiter of truth (Grant, 1987). Unlike medieval inquiry, modern science conceives itself as a search for knowledge free of moral, political, and social values. The application of scientific methods to the study of human behavior distinguished American psychology from philosophy and enabled it to pursue the respect accorded the natural sciences (Sherif, 1979).

The use of "scientific methods" to study human beings rested on three assumptions:

1. Since the methodological procedures of natural science are used as a model, human values enter into the study of social phenomena and conduct only as objects; 2. the goal of social scientific investigation is to construct laws or lawlike generalizations like those of physics; (3) social science has a technical character, providing knowledge which is solely instrumental. (Sewart, 1979, p. 311)

Critics recently have challenged each of these assumptions. Some charge that social science reflects not only the values of individual scientists but also those of the political and cultural milieu in which science is done, and that there are no theory-neutral "facts" (e.g., Cook, 1985; Priletensky, 1989; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979; Sampson, 1985; Shields, 1975). Others claim that there are no universal, ahistorical laws of human behavior, but only descriptions of how people act in certain places at certain times in history (e.g., K. J. Gergen, 1973; Manicas & Secord, 1983; Sampson, 1978). Still others contend that knowledge is not neutral; rather, it serves an ideological purpose, justifying power (e.g., Foucault, 1980, 1981). According to this view, versions of reality not only reflect but also legitimate particular forms of social organization and power asymmetries. The belief that knowledge is merely technical, having no ideological function, is refuted by the ways in which science has played handmaiden to social values, providing an aura of scientific authority to prejudicial beliefs about social groups and giving credibility to certain social policies (Degler, 1991; Shields, 1975; Wittig, 1985).

Within the context of these general criticisms, feminists have argued in particular that social science neglects and distorts the study of women in a systematic bias in favor of men. Some contend that the very processes of positivist science are inherently masculine, reflected even in the sexual metaphors used by the founders of modern science (Keller, 1985; Merchant, 1980). To Francis Bacon, for example, nature was female, and the goal of science was to "bind her to your service and make her your slave" (quoted in Keller, 1985, p. 36). As Sandra Harding (1986) summarized,

Mind vs. nature and the body, reason vs. emotion and social commitment, subject vs. object and objectivity vs. subjectivity, the abstract and general vs. the concrete and particular—in each case we are told that the former must dominate the latter lest human life be overwhelmed by irrational and alien forces, forces symbolized in science as the feminine. (p. 125)

Critics see the insistence of modern science on control and distance of the knower from the known as a reflection of the desire for domination characteristic of a culture that subordinates women's interests to those of men (Hubbard, 1988; Reinhartz, 1985). Some go so far as to claim that because traditional scientific methods inevitably distort women's experience, a new method based on feminist principles is needed (M. M. Gergen, 1988). Others disagree, claiming that the problem in science is not objectivity itself, but rather lack of objectivity that enables male bias to contaminate the scientific pro-
cess (Epstein, 1988). The first part of this article summarizes feminist charges against standard versions of science; the second part explores three possibilities for a distinctly “feminist” response to those charges: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and feminist postmodernism. (By feminist, I refer to a system of values that challenges male dominance and advocates social, political, and economic equity of women and men in society.)

**Bias Within Psychology in the Study of Women**

Since Naomi Weisstein denounced much of psychology as the “fantasy life of the male psychologist” in 1971, numerous critics have identified the ways that gender bias permeates social science (summarized in Epstein, 1988, pp. 17-45; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978, pp. 11-27; Hyde, 1991, pp. 7-15; Lips, 1988, pp. 64-75; Millman & Kanter, 1975; Wilkinson, 1986). For many years, subjects of relevance to women, such as rape or housework, have been considered either taboo topics or too trivial to study, marginal to more central and prestigious issues, such as leadership, achievement, and power (Epstein, 1988; McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986; Farberow, 1963; Smith, 1987). Women’s invisibility as subjects of research extends to their role as researchers as well, with relatively few women in positions of power or prestige in science (Rix, 1990). Even today, women make up only 25% of the faculty in psychology departments and only 15% of editors of psychological journals (Walker, 1991). When women are studied, their actions often are interpreted as deficient compared with those of men. Even theories reflect a male standard (Gilligan, 1982). The classic example dates back to Freud’s (1925/1961) formulation in 1925 of the theory of penis envy.

Over the last two decades, critics have compiled a long and continually growing list of threats to the validity of research on women and sex differences (see Jacklin, 1981). For example, a great many studies have included only male samples. Sometimes women are included only as the stimulus, not the subject of study—they are seen but not heard—but conclusions are generalized to everyone (Meyer, 1988). Sex-of-experimenter effects contaminate virtually every area of research (Lips, 1988), and field studies yield different findings than laboratory research on the same phenomenon (Unger, 1981). Multiple meanings of the term sex confound biological sex differences with factors that vary by sex (i.e., sex-related differences) and are more appropriately labeled gender (McHugh et al., 1986; Unger 1979). Sex is treated as an independent variable in studies of gender difference, even though people cannot be randomly assigned to the “male” or “female” group (Unger, 1979). The emphasis on a “difference” model obscures gender similarities (Unger, 1979); this emphasis is built into the methods of science because experiments are formally designed to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the experimental group and the control group. When a difference is found, it is usually small, but the small size is often overshadowed by the fact that a difference exists at all (Epstein, 1988). A focus on between-gender differences and a lack of attention to within-gender differences reflects a presupposition of gender polarity that frames this research (Fine & Gordon, 1989).

Findings of the magnitude of sex differences have diminished over time, perhaps because of an increasing willingness to publish results when such differences are not significant (Hyde, 1990), or perhaps because of a reduction in operative sex role stereotypes. For example, findings of differences in cognitive abilities appear to have declined precipitously over the past two decades (Feingold, 1988), and researchers have found greater influenceability among women in studies published prior to 1970 than in those published later (Eagley, 1978). Carol Jacklin (1981) pointed out that the more carefully a study is carried out, the less likely it is that gender differences will be found: “With fewer variables confounded with sex, sex will account for smaller percentages of variance. Thus, paradoxically, the better the sex-related research, the less useful sex is as an explanatory variable” (p. 271). The decline in findings of difference suggest either that increasing care in designing studies has eliminated differences that were artifacts of bias, or that historical factors, rather than ahistorical, universal laws, shape behavior, whether of subjects or experimenters. In fact, so many studies find no sex differences that this research might more appropriately be called the study of sex similarities (Connell, 1987).

Psychological research on women often contains another source of bias, the lack of attention to social context. The purpose of the laboratory experiment is to isolate the behavior under study from supposedly extraneous contaminants so that it is affected only by the experimental conditions. The experimental paradigm assumes that subjects leave their social status, history, beliefs, and values behind as they enter the laboratory, or that random assignment vitiates the effects of these factors. The result is to abstract people’s action from social roles or institutions (Fine & Gordon, 1989; Parlee, 1979; Sherif, 1979). Instead of being contaminants, however, these factors may be critical determinants of behavior. By stripping behavior of its social context, psychologists rule out the study of sociocultural and historical factors, and implicitly attribute causes to factors inside the person. Moreover, an absence of consideration of the social context of people’s actions is not limited to laboratory research (Fine, 1984). In an ironic reversal of the feminist dictum of the 1960s, when social context is ignored, the political is misinterpreted as personal (Kitzinger, 1987).

Ignoring social context may produce a reliance on presumed biological causes when other explanations of sex differences are not obvious, even when the biological mechanisms that might be involved are not apparent (Lips, 1988). Social explanations become residual, although sociocultural determinants may be just as robust and important as biological causes, if not more so (Connell, 1987). Although biological differences between the sexes are obviously important, it is critical to distinguish
between biological difference and the social meaning attached to that difference ( Rossi, 1979).

Alice Eagley (1987) raised a different objection to experimentation. She disagreed that the psychological experiment is context-stripped, and contended instead that it constitutes a particular context. An experiment typically consists of a brief encounter among strangers in an unfamiliar setting, often under the eye of a psychologist. The question is whether this limited situation is a valid one from which to make generalizations about behavior. To Eagley, the problem is that social roles (such as mother, doctor, or corporation president) lose their salience in this setting, bringing to the foreground gender-related expectations about behavior.

Cynthia Fuchs Epstein (1988) stated that "Much of the bias in social science reporting of gender issues comes from scientists' inability to capture the social context or their tendency to regard it as unnecessary to their inquiry—in a sense, their disdain for it" (p. 44). In psychology, this disdain has at least two sources (Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Prilleltensky, 1989). First, psychology focuses on the person as he or she exists at the moment. Such a focus leads the researcher away from the person's history or social circumstances. Second, the cultural context in which psychology is practiced (at least in the United States) is dominated by an individualistic philosophy (Kitzinger, 1987; Sampson, 1985). The prevailing beliefs assume that outcomes are due to choices made by free and self-determining individuals; the implication is that people get what they deserve (Kahn & Yoder, 1989). Not only assumptions of individualism, but also those of male dominance are often so taken for granted that we are not aware of them. Recognition that supposedly scientific assertions are permeated with ideological beliefs produces, in Shulamit Reinharz's (1985) words, a condition of "feminist distrust." Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges facing social scientists is to disengage themselves sufficiently from commonly shared beliefs so that those beliefs do not predetermine research findings (McHugh et al., 1986).

**Feminist Responses to the Criticisms of Science**

Challenges to the neutrality of science have long been a concern to those who study women, and have prompted three different reactions among feminists (Harding, 1986). Some remain loyal to scientific traditions, attempting to rise above the cultural embeddedness of these traditions by adhering more closely to the norms of science (e.g., Epstein, 1988; McHugh et al., 1986). Others seek to redress the male-centered bias in science by giving voice to women's experience and by viewing society from women's perspective (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Smith, 1987). Still others abandon traditional scientific methods entirely (e.g., Hare-Mustin, 1991). Philosopher of science Sandra Harding (1986) labeled these three approaches, respectively, feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint science, and postmodernism (see also Morgan's, 1983, distinction among positivist, phenomenological, and critical/praxis-oriented research paradigms). Next, I examine the manifestations of these three positions in the study of the psychology of women.

**Feminist Empiricism**

The psychologists who identified the problem of experimenter effects did not reject experimentation. Instead, they recommended strategies to minimize the impact of the experimenter (Rosenthal, 1966). Likewise, feminist empiricists advocate closer adherence to the tenets of science as the solution to the problem of bias. From this perspective, bias is considered error in a basically sound system, an outbreak of irrationality in a rational process. Scrupulous attention to scientific methods will eliminate error, or at least minimize its impact on research findings (Harding, 1986). Once neutrality is restored, scientific methods, grounded in rationality, will give access to the truth.

Maureen McHugh et al. (1986) presented a set of guidelines for eliminating bias. In addition to obvious corrections of the problems described earlier, other steps can be taken to ensure that the impact of the researcher's values is minimized, such as specifying the circumstances in which gender differences are found (because contexts tend to be deemed more appropriate for one sex than the other) and assessing experimental tasks for their sex neutrality (because many tasks are perceived to be sex linked; Deaux, 1984). The sex composition of the group of participants in research also may affect behavior because individuals act differently in the presence of females or males (Maccoby, 1990). Finally, attention ought to be paid to findings of sex similarities as well as sex differences, and the magnitude of such differences reported.

These suggestions are intended to produce gender-fair research using traditional scientific methods. The assumption is that a truly neutral science will produce unbiased knowledge, which in turn will serve as a basis for a more just social policy (Morawski, 1990). Yet the continuing identification of numerous instances of androcentric bias in research has led some to conclude that value-free research is impossible, even if it is done by those of good faith (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990). Technical safeguards cannot completely rule out the influence of values; scientific rigor in testing hypotheses cannot eliminate bias in theories or in the selection of problems for inquiry (Harding, 1986, 1991). Hence critics assert that traditional methods do not reveal reality, but rather act as constraints that limit our understanding of women's experiences.

**Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies**

Feminist empiricism argues that the characteristics of the knower are irrelevant to the discovery process if the norms of science are followed. In contrast, feminist standpoint epistemologies claim that we should center our science on women because "what we know and how we know depend on who we are, that is, on the knower's historical locus and his or her position in the social hierarchy" (Maracek, 1989, p. 372). There are several justifications...
for this viewpoint (see Harding, 1986). First, some argue that women's cognitive processes and modes of research are different than men's. It has been suggested that a supposedly feminine communal style of research that emphasizes cooperation of the researcher and subjects, an appreciation of natural contexts, and the use of qualitative data contrasts with a supposedly masculine agentic orientation that places primacy on distance of the researcher from the subjects, manipulation of subjects and the environment, and the use of quantitative data (Carlson, 1972; cf. Peplau & Conrad, 1989). Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) attempted to provide grounds for this position in a psychoanalytic view of child development. She argued that the male child's need to differentiate himself from his mother leads him to equate autonomy with distance from others (see also Chodorow, 1978). The process of developing a masculine sense of self thus establishes in the male a style of thinking that both reflects and produces a psychoanalytic view of child development. She argued that the male child's need to differentiate himself from his mother leads him to equate autonomy with distance from others (see also Chodorow, 1978). The process of developing a masculine sense of self thus establishes in the male a style of thinking that both reflects and produces an appreciation of natural contexts, and the use of qualitative data (Carlson, 1972; cf. Peplau & Conrad, 1989). Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) attempted to provide grounds for this position in a psychoanalytic view of child development. She argued that the male child's need to differentiate himself from his mother leads him to equate autonomy with distance from others (see also Chodorow, 1978). The process of developing a masculine sense of self thus establishes in the male a style of thinking that both reflects and produces the emphasis in science on distance, power, and control. Keller identifies an alternative model of science based not on controlling but rather on "conversing" with nature.

Keller's (1985) argument that science need not be based on domination is salutary, but her explanation is problematic. She presumes, first, that male and female infants have quite different experiences and, second, that those early experiences shape the activities of adult scientists, but she does not substantiate these claims. The supposedly masculine emphasis on separation and autonomy may be a manifestation of Western mainstream culture rather than a universal distinction between women and men. Black men and women who returned from northern U.S. cities to live in the rural South manifest a relational as opposed to autonomous self-image (Stack, 1986), and both Eastern and African world views see individuals as interdependent and connected, in contrast to the Western emphasis on a bounded and independent self (Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Identifying a masculine cognitive style as the grounds for scientific methods seems to doom most women and perhaps non-White men to outsider status. Furthermore, an emphasis on cognitive style ignores the role played by social structure, economics, and politics in determining topics and methods of study (Harding, 1986). Experimental methods in psychology characterized by control and objectivity are accorded prestige partly because they emulate the highly valued physical sciences (Sherif, 1979). Within social science, the prestige of a study mirrors the prestige of its topic (Epstein, 1988). Sociocultural factors such as these seem more likely as determinants of the shape of science than individual psychology.

A more plausible basis for a feminist standpoint epistemology is the argument that women's life experiences are not fully captured in existing conceptual schemes. Research often equates male with the general, typical case, and considers female to be the particular—a subgroup demarcated by biology (Acker, 1978). Yet analytical categories appropriate for men may not fit women's experience. Dorothy Smith (1987) argued that women are alienated from their own experience by having to frame that experience in terms of men's conceptual schemes; in Smith's terms they have a "bifurcated consciousness"—daily life grounded in female experience but only male conceptual categories with which to interpret that experience. Starting our inquiries from a subordinate group's experience will uncover the limits of the dominant group's conceptual schemes where they do not fully fit the subordinates (see also Miller, 1986). Accordingly, a science based on women's traditional place in society not only would generate categories appropriate to women, but also would be a means of discovering the underlying organization of society as a whole (see also Code, 1981).

In contrast to traditional social science in which the researcher is the expert on assessing reality, an interpretive-phenomenological approach permits women to give their own conception of their experiences. Participants, not researchers, are considered the experts at making sense of their world (Cherryholmes, 1988). The shift in authority is striking. Yet phenomenological approaches are limited in at least two ways. First, they require that the subjects studied be verbal and reflective (Reinharz, 1992); second, they run the risk of psychological reductionism (attributing causation simply to internal, psychological factors; Morawski, 1988).

Carol Gilligan's (1982) theory of women's moral development is the most influential psychological study in this tradition. Her work asserting that women stress caring in the face of moral dilemmas in contrast to men's emphasis on justice has been criticized because other researchers have found no sex differences in moral reasoning using standardized scales (e.g., Greeno & Maccoby, 1986; Mednick, 1989). Gilligan (1986) retorted that women's responses on those scales are not relevant to her purposes:

The fact that educated women are capable of high levels of justice reasoning has no bearing on the question of whether they would spontaneously choose to frame moral problems in this way. My interest in the way people define moral problems is reflected in my research methods, which have centered on first-person accounts of moral conflict. (p. 328)

Although standardized scales might tell us what women have in common with men, they will not reveal the way women would define their own experiences if given the opportunity to do so. The absence (and impossibility) of a comparison group of men in Gilligan's definitive study of 29 women considering abortions raises questions about whether moral orientations are sex linked, however (Crawford, 1989; Epstein, 1988, pp. 81–83). The feminist standpoint epistemologies aim not simply to substitute "woman centered" for "man centered" gender loyalties, but rather to provide a basis for a more accurate understanding of the entire world. Howard Becker (1967) claimed that

In any system of ranked groups, participants take it as given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are. . . . Credibility and the right to be heard are differentially distributed through the ranks of the system. (p. 241)
Feminist standpoint epistemologies argue that traditional methods of science give credibility only to the dominant group's views. Listening to subordinates reveals the multifocal nature of reality (Riger, 1990). The term subjugated knowledges describes the perspectives of those sufficiently low on the hierarchy that their interpretations do not reflect the predominant modes of thought (Foucault, 1980, p. 81). Giving voice to women's perspective means identifying the ways in which women create meaning and experience life from their particular position in the social hierarchy.

Moreover, women (and minorities) sometimes have a better vantage point to view society than do majorities because minority status can render people socially invisible, thus permitting them access to the majority group that is not reciprocated (Merton, 1972). Accordingly, incorporating subordinates' experience will not only "add" women and minorities to existing understandings, it will add a more thorough understanding of the dominant group as well. For example, Bell Hooks (1984) described African Americans living in her small Kentucky hometown as having a double vision. They looked from the outside in at the more affluent White community across the railroad tracks, but their perspective shifted to inside out when they crossed those tracks to work for White employers. Movement across the tracks was regulated, however: Whites did not cross over to the Black community, and laws ensured that Blacks returned to it.

The arguments for feminist standpoint epistemologies have stimulated rich and valuable portrayals of women's experience. Yet there are problems with a feminist standpoint as the basis for science. First, assuming a commonality to all women's experience glosses over differences among women of various racial and ethnic groups and social classes (Spelman, 1988). The life experience of a woman wealthy enough to hire childcare and household help may have more in common with her spouse than with a poor woman trying to raise her children on a welfare budget. Standpoint epistemology can recognize multiple subjugated groups demarcated by gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and so on. Yet carried to an extreme, this position seems to dissolve science into autobiography. A critical challenge for feminist standpoint epistemology is to identify the commonalities of subjugated experience among different groups of women without losing sight of their diversity. Moreover, those who are subjugated may still adhere to a dominant group's ideology.

Furthermore, we each have multiple status identities (Merton, 1972). The poet Audre Lorde (1984) described herself as "a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple" (p. 114). Each of these identities becomes salient in a different situation; at times, they conflict within the same situation. The hyphenated identities that we all experience in different ways—Black feminist, lesbian mother, Asian American, and so on—call into question the unity of the category of woman, making it difficult to generalize about "women's experience" (Harding, 1987).

Nonetheless, feminist standpoint epistemologies do not claim that social status alone allows the viewer clarity. Reasonable judgments about whether views are empirically supported are still possible. Rather than proclaiming the one true story about the world, feminist standpoint epistemologies seek partial and less distorted views. These partial views, or situated knowledges, can be far less limited than the dominant view (Haraway, 1988).

**Feminist Postmodernism**

A number of perspectives, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism, share a challenge to the primacy of reason and the autonomy of the individual. Here I focus on postmodernism and, in particular, poststructuralism, because of its influence on an emerging stream of feminist psychology (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Wilkinson, 1986). A traditional social scientist entering the terrain of poststructuralism at times feels a bit like Alice falling into a Wonderland of bewildering language and customs that look superficially like her own yet are not. Things that seem familiar and stable—the meaning of words, for example—become problematic. What once were nouns (e.g., privilege, valor, foreground) now are verbs. Even the landscape looks different, as words themselves are chopped up with parentheses and hyphens to make visible their multiple meanings. What is most unsettling, perhaps, is the fundamental poststructuralist assertion that science does not mirror reality, but rather creates it (i.e., making science a process of invention rather than discovery; Howard, 1991). Many scientists would agree that an unmediated perception of reality is impossible to obtain, and that research findings represent (rather than mirror) reality. However, they would maintain that some representations are better than others. The traditional scientific criteria of validity, generalizability, and so forth determine how close research findings come to actual truth. In contrast, poststructuralists reject traditional notions of truth and reality, and claim instead that power enables some to define what is or is not considered knowledge. Expressing our understanding of experience must be done through language, but language is not a neutral reflection of that experience because our linguistic categories are not neutral:

If statements and not things are true or false, then truth is necessarily linguistic: if truth is linguistic, then it is relative to language use (words, concepts, statements, discourses) at a given time and place; therefore, ideology, interests, and power arrangements at a given time and place are implicated in the production of what counts as "true." (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 439)

Or, as Humpty Dumpty said to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more or less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (Carroll, 1872/1923, p. 246)

The central question in poststructuralism is not how well our theories fit the facts, or how well the facts produced by research fit what is real. Rather, the question is which values and social institutions are favored by each of multiple versions of reality (i.e., discourses). Of critical concern is whose interests are served by competing ways of giving meaning to the world (Weedon, 1987). Feminists of a postmodern bent claim that positivism’s neutral and disinterested stance masks what is actually the male conception of reality; this conception reflects and maintains male power interests (Gavey, 1989). As legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon (1987) put it, “Objectivity—the nonsituated, universal standpoint, whether claimed or aspired to—is a denial of the existence of potency of sex inequality that tacitly participates in constructing reality from the dominant point of view” (p. 136). In MacKinnon’s view, rather than being neutral, “the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women” (p. 140). The same criticism can be made about traditional social science in its exclusion, distortion, and neglect of women.

The social constructionist stance, as poststructuralism is known within psychology (K. J. Gergen, 1985), offers a particular challenge to the psychology of women. In contrast to feminist empiricism, the central question no longer asks whether sex or gender differences exist. Knowing the truth about difference is impossible (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990). Varying criteria of difference can produce divergent findings, for example, when conclusions based on averages contradict those based on the amount of overlap of scores of men and women (Luria, 1986). When an assumed difference is not scientifically supported, the argument simply shifts to another variable (Unger, 1979), and similar findings can be interpreted in opposing ways. Given the impossibility of settling these questions, poststructuralism shifts the emphasis to the question of difference itself (Scott, 1988):

What do we make of gender differences? What do they mean? Why are there so many? Why are there so few? Perhaps we should be asking: What is the point of differences? What lies beyond difference? Difference aside, what else is gender? The overarching question is choice of question. (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990, pp. 1–2)

One goal of a feminist constructionist science is “disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” in part by articulating the values supported by alternate conceptions of reality (Gavey, 1989, p. 462). An analysis of contrasting perspectives on sex differences demonstrates the relationship among values, assumptive frameworks, and social consequences. According to Rachel Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Maracek (1988), the received views of men and women tend either to exaggerate or to minimize the differences between them. On the one hand, the tendency to emphasize differences fosters an appreciation of supposedly feminine qualities, but it simultaneously justifies unequal treatment of women and ignores variability within each sex group. The consequence of emphasizing difference, then, is to support the status quo. On the other hand, the tendency to minimize differences justifies women’s access to educational and job opportunities, but it simultaneously overlooks the fact that equal treatment is not always equitable, because of differences in men’s and women’s position in a social hierarchy. Gender-neutral grievance procedures in organizations, for example, do not apply equally to men and women if men are consistently in positions of greater power (Riger, 1991).

Researchers have widely different interpretations of the implications of poststructural critiques for social science methods. Some use empirical techniques for poststructuralist ends. Social constructionists see traditional research methods as a means of providing “objectifications” or illustrations, similar to vivid photographs, that are useful in making an argument persuasive rather than in validating truth claims (K. J. Gergen, 1985). Traditional methods can also help identify varying versions of reality. For example, Celia Kitzinger (1986, 1987) used Q-sort methodology to distinguish five separate accounts of lesbians’ beliefs about the origin of their sexual orientation. Techniques of attitude measurement can also be used to assess the extent to which people share certain versions of reality. Rhoda Unger and her colleagues used surveys to assess belief in an objectivist or subjectivist epistemology, finding that adherence to a particular perspective varied with social status (Unger, Draper, & Pendergrass, 1986).

Others propose that we treat both psychological theories and people’s actions and beliefs as texts (i.e., discursive productions located in a specific historical and cultural context and shaped by power), rather than as accounts, distorted or otherwise, of experience (Cherryholmes, 1988; Gavey, 1989). Methods developed in other disciplines, particularly literary criticism, can be used to analyze these texts. For example, through careful reading of an interview transcript with an eye to discerning “discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies,” Nicola Gavey (p. 467) identified cultural themes of “permissive sexuality” and “male sexual needs” in statements by a woman about her experiences of heterosexual coercion (see also Hare-Mustin, 1991; Walkerdine, 1986). A particular technique of discourse analysis, deconstruction, can be used to expose ideological assumptions in written or spoken language, as Joanne Martin (1990) did to identify forces that suppress women’s achievement within organizations. Deconstruction highlights the revealing quality not just of what is said, but rather of what is left out, contradictory, or inconsistent in the text. Deconstruction offers a provocative technique for analyzing hidden assumptions. Yet it is a potentially endless process, capable of an infinite regress, inasmuch as any deconstruction can itself be deconstructed (Martin, 1990).

The absence of any criteria for evaluation means that the success of accounts of social construction “depend primarily on the analyst’s capacity to invite, compel,
stimulate, or delight the audience, and not on criteria of veracity” (K. J. Gergen, 1985, p. 272). This raises the possibility that what Grant (1987) said in another context could apply here: “Such theories risk devolving into authoritarian non-theories more akin to religions” (p. 113.) The relativism of poststructuralism can be countered, however, by the identification of moral criteria for evaluation (K. J. Gergen, 1985; Unger, 1983). Theory and research can be assessed in terms of their pragmatic utility in achieving certain social and political goals, rather than the allegedly neutral rules of science (Gavey, 1989). However, because feminists disagree about whether celebrating women’s difference or emphasizing the similarity of the sexes is most likely to change women’s basic condition of subordination (Snitow, 1990), agreement about criteria for evaluation seems unlikely.

What poses perhaps the greatest dilemma for feminists is the view of the subject advocated by poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralists consider the attribution of agency and intentionality to the subject to be part of a deluded liberal humanism, complicit with the status quo. The multiple discourses of selfhood, intentionality, and so forth that are present in our culture compete for dominance; those that prevail constitute individual subjectivity. Social cognition on the part of the individual is channeled into certain ways of thinking that dominate society (although resistance is possible). Those discourses antedate our consciousness and give meaning to our experience, which otherwise has no essential meaning (Weedon, 1987). In contrast, feminist standpoint epistemologies consider individuals to be the active construers of their reality, albeit within a particular social and historical context; women’s subjectivity is considered an important source of information about their experience. Poststructuralism’s rejection of intentionality on the part of the individual seems to deny the validity of women’s voices, just at a time when women are beginning to be heard (see also Hartsock, 1987).

Poststructuralism offers a provocative critique of social science and makes us critically aware of the relationship of knowledge and power. Yet the focus on “problematizing the text” of our disciplines, although admirably self-reflexive, can lead to an inward emphasis that neglects the study of women in society. In a parallel manner, poststructuralism’s emphasis on language as determining consciousness can lead to the disregard of other determinants, such as women’s position in a social hierarchy (Segal, 1986). Furthermore, Rhoda Unger (1988) identified a dilemma for social scientists who reject traditional empirical methods:

The attempt to infer cause-and-effect relationships about human behavior using the tools of empiricism is one of the few unique contributions that psychology as a discipline can offer to the rest of scholarship. If such tools may not be used by feminist psychologists there is little likelihood that their insights will be taken seriously by the rest of the discipline. (p. 137)

Feminist foremothers in psychology, such as Helen Thompson (Woolley) and her colleagues, at the turn of this century, used traditional scientific methods to contest social myths about women (Reinharz, 1992; Rosenberg, 1982); they may still serve that purpose today. Poststructuralists would likely retort that the fact that Thompson’s insights have had to be repeatedly rediscovered (or, rather, reinvented) demonstrates that power, not truth, determines which version of reality will prevail.

Is There a Feminist Method?

On the basis of multiple critiques of the social sciences, some propose an alternative research method based on feminist values. The lack of consensus on what values are feminist makes this a daunting project, yet many would agree on the need for more interactive, contextualized methods in the service of emancipatory goals (cf. Peplau & Conrad, 1989). A feminist method should produce a study not just of women, but also for women, helping to change the world as well as to describe it (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Wittig, 1985). Mary Gergen (1988) advocated the following as central tenets of a feminist method (see also Wilkinson, 1986):

1. recognizing the interdependence of experimenter and subject;
2. avoiding the decontextualizing of the subject or experimenter from their social and historical surroundings;
3. recognizing and revealing the nature of one’s values within the research context;
4. accepting that facts do not exist independently of their producers’ linguistic codes;
5. demystifying the role of the scientists and establishing an egalitarian relationship between science makers and science consumers. (p. 47)

Joan Acker et al. (1983) attempted to implement some of these principles in a study of women who had primarily been wives and mothers and were starting to enter the labor market. Interviews became dialogues, a mutual attempt to clarify and expand understandings. Often friendships developed between researchers and the women in the study. Acker and her colleagues discovered that these methods are not without problems, however. The researcher’s need to collect information can (perhaps inadvertently) lead to the manipulation of friendship in the service of the research. Methods that create trust between researchers and participants entail the risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher (Stacey, 1988). Acker’s study took place over a number of years, and participant’s interpretations of their lives were constantly changing in hindsight, raising problems of validity in the research. The desire to give participants an opportunity to comment on researchers’ interpretations of the interviews became a source of tension when disagreements arose. The solution to these dilemmas reached by Acker and her colleagues—to report the women’s lives in their own words as much as possible—was not satisfactory to the women in the study who wanted more analysis of their experience. Finally, it was difficult to determine if this research experience had an emancipatory effect on participants. Intending to create social change is no assurance of actually doing so.
The conflict between the researcher's perspective and that of the participants in this study raises a critical issue for those who reject positivism's belief in the scientist as expert. Because a feminist method (at least according to the principles listed) assumes that there is no neutral observer, whose interpretations should prevail when those of the researcher and the people under study conflict? Feminism places primacy on acknowledging and validating female experience (Wilkinson, 1986), yet postmodern perspectives challenge the authority of the individual (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). Consider, for example, Margaret Andersen's (1981) study of 20 corporate wives. She disbelieved their claims of contentment and ample, Margaret Andersen's (1981) study of 20 corporate wives. She disbelieved their claims of contentment and instead of treating them as deluded or insincere, she looked for sources of their contentment in their position in the social hierarchy. Lather (1986, 1988) recommended this kind of dialogic process to avoid imposing on research participants interpretations that disempower them (see also Kidder, 1982). Without it, we grant privilege to the authority of the researcher, even if on postmodern rather than positivist grounds.

Conclusion

Although the strategies intended as a feminist method overcome some of the objections to traditional social science, they raise as many problems as they solve (see Reinhartz, 1992). No method or epistemology seems devoid of limitations or perfectly true to feminist values, which are themselves contested (e.g., Jaggar & Struhl, 1978). Feminism is most useful as a set of questions that challenge the prevailing asymmetries of power and androcentric assumptions in science and society, rather than as a basis for a unique method (Reinhartz, 1992). Feminism thus identifies "patterns and interrelationships and causes and effects and implications of questions that non-feminists have not seen and still do not see" (Lorber, 1988, p. 8).

The psychological study of women emerged from the field of individual differences. Dominated by the question of sex differences, this tradition assumes that an inner core of traits or abilities distinguishes women from men (Buss, 1976). Such a conceptualization no longer seems useful. Few gender differences in personality or abilities have been reliably demonstrated (Feingold, 1988; Hyde, 1990), and factors other than individual dispositions influence our behavior (Maccoby, 1990). A more appropriate strategy for the study of women would consider the ways in which gender is created and maintained through interpersonal processes (Deaux & Major, 1987).

From this perspective, gender does not reside within the person. Instead, it is constituted by the myriad ways in which we "do" rather than "have" gender; that is, we validate our membership in a particular gender category through interactional processes (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is something we enact, not an inner core or constellation of traits that we express; it is a pattern of social organization that structures the relations, especially the power relations, between women and men (Connell, 1985, 1987; Crawford & Maracek, 1989): "In doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing deference" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146). Transsexuals know well that merely altering one's sex organs does not change one's gender. Membership in the category of "male" or "female" must be affirmed continuously through social behavior (see, e.g., Morris, 1974).

Each of the epistemological positions described can contribute to this perspective, despite their contradictions. An interactional conceptualization of gender recognizes that the behavior and thoughts of men and women are channeled into certain sociocultural forms, as poststructuralism claims. As Peter Manicas and Paul Secord (1983) stated:

Social structures (e.g., language) are reproduced and transformed by action, but they persist for individuals. They enable persons to become persons and to act (meaningfully and intentionally), yet at the same time, they are "coercive," limiting the ways we can act. (p. 408)

The dominant ideology of a society is manifested in and reproduced by the social relations of its members (Unger, 1989). Unlike poststructuralism, however, an interactional view of gender also acknowledges individual agency in the production and transformation of social forms. Such a perspective would regard the person as an initiator of action and construer of meaning within a context composed not only of varying modes of interpreting the world but also of structural constraints and opportunities (see, e.g., Buss, 1978; Riegel, 1979; Sampson, 1978; Unger, 1983), as standpoint epistemologies claim.

Diverse methods, evaluated by reasonable criteria, are needed to capture the rich array of personal and structural factors that shape women and girls, and in turn are shaped by them. What is critical is that we are aware of the epistemological commitments—and value assumptions—we make when we adopt a particular research strategy (Unger, 1983). Moreover, rather than abandoning objectivity, systematic examination of assumptions and values in the social order that shape scientific practices can strengthen objectivity (Harding, 1991).

Epistemological debates in recent years have shattered the traditional picture of science as neutral, disinterested, and value free and have replaced it with a view of knowledge as socially constructed. Feminists' contributions to this debate highlight not only the androcentric nature of social science, but also its collusion in the perpetuation of male dominance in society. To assume that the multiple voices of women are not shaped by domination is to ignore social context and legitimate the status quo. On the other hand, to assume that women have no voice other than an echo of prevailing discourses is to deny them agency and, simultaneously, to repudiate the possibility of social change. The challenge to psychology...
is to link a vision of women’s agency with an understanding of the shaping power of social context.

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