

Personal Experience as Evidence in Feminist Scholarship

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IN A COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS at Bryn Mawr, Le Guin (1989) declared, "Offer your experience as your truth" (p. 150). Her statement captures the value placed on personal experience as evidence in feminist scholarship, and this will be our focus in this discussion of admissibility of evidence and methodology.

Two tenets that characterize feminist scholarship are of particular relevance to the use of personal experience in feminist scholarship. One is that women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences are taken seriously and valued. The second is that the information gathered about women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences cannot be understood within constructs and theories that were developed without a consideration of women's perspectives; thus, new methods are needed to understand these perspectives, and new theories are needed to account for them (e.g., Foss & Foss, 1991).

These two tenets have led to the use of accounts of personal experience as data by many feminist scholars. By *personal experience*, we mean the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events. The data of personal experience in feminist scholarship usually assume the form of women's personal narratives about the events of their lives, their feelings about those events, and their interpretations of them. They reveal insights into the impact of the construction of gender on women's lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression, and their perspectives on what is meaningful in their lives.

The question of what criteria should be used to judge the admissibility of personal experience as evidence is irrelevant in feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars view personal experience as always admissible because they are unwilling to declare some experience to be better than others—to make qualitative judgments about the nature of those experiences. This view is summarized, once again, by Le Guin (1989) when she says, "how, after all, can one experience deny, negate,

disprove, another experience? Even if I've had a lot more of it, *your* experience is your truth. How can one being prove another being wrong?" (pp. 150–151). Each participant in the research project is viewed as the expert on her own life; thus, to make the judgment that one participant's experiences are superior to those of another violates her integrity as an active agent in her world. As Johnson (1991) explains:

And I also trusted that other women were doing the best they could at the moment, as I was, and that, like me, all they needed from others in order to get on with their personal work was to be unconditionally accepted as the experts on their own lives. (p. 162)

Although feminist researchers do not make qualitative judgments about personal accounts, they engage in processes of discrimination, organization, and interpretation; involvement in these processes raises two issues about the use of personal accounts as data. One concerns the stance adopted by feminist researchers toward the personal stories of others. Are not researchers, by virtue of the control exercised over the research process, privileging their own experiences or at least their interpretations of experience over those of their participants?

We recognize that researchers do have special expertise and privilege that distinguish them from those whose experiences they explore by virtue of their education and training. But their expertise is a presentational expertise rather than an experiential expertise (Foss, 1989). Their authority derives not from the superiority of their experiences over those of their participants. Using presentational expertise, feminist scholars make use of their special skills as researchers to present to the public information about women's lives. This expertise involves using their critical and analytic training to clarify problems; to organize accounts; to locate relevant theories, materials, and funding; and to access publishing outlets. As presentational experts, researchers play a role very much like a midwife, coaching and assisting others to give voice to their experiences. Myerhoff as quoted in Prell (1989) describes it in this way: "If I can in my work make it clear to others what they are, what they feel, what they do [*sic*]. If I can pass that through me and out to others, then my work is done'" (p. 256).

A second issue feminist researchers face as they work with personal accounts is how to make the choices among these accounts that are necessary at all stages of the research process. Although researchers value personal accounts equally in terms of what they suggest about the experiences reported, they discriminate among them as they choose what to study, select the kinds of personal experiences that best will allow an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, find participants, and collect personal narratives. As feminists analyze, theorize about, and report their data, linking personal experiences to larger patterns, they necessarily sort and organize the personal accounts in particular ways and feature some participants over others. These choices again involve presentational expertise—selecting accounts that

clarify, increase understanding of, and engender an appreciation for the experiential evidence of participants.

A distinction between experiential expertise and presentational expertise does not diminish the difficulties feminist researchers who use personal experience as data encounter. In their attempts to enact presentational expertise, they may be confronted by different versions of events told by the same participants—either in the events recounted or the participants' interpretations of them—or by different versions of events told by several participants. Researchers may find themselves disliking a participant or judging that person's actions as unethical or misguided. Perhaps scholars are placed in the position of revealing information not previously disclosed in public that makes participants vulnerable. In other cases, a researcher's interpretation of an experience may differ dramatically from that provided by the participant.

Feminist scholars attempt to deal with the difficulties that emerge in the gap between valuing experience and presenting that experience in several ways. They constantly monitor their own perspectives in regard to the personal experiences they gather. They make every effort to facilitate the emergence of the experiences they report through presentational skills that honor and do not violate those experiences. Constant dialogue, negotiation, and critical reflection occur at every stage of the process as researchers seek understanding of the participants' positions. Researchers share interpretations and seek confirmation for their interpretations from participants, explain their choices about which stories to include and which to leave out, and continually remind themselves and participants that the research product is a joint construction of the participants' experiences and interpretations and researchers' presentational expertise.

While the process of negotiation that characterizes feminist scholars' use of personal experience as evidence is complex, it produces many benefits. First, it provides for a multiplicity of truths and a valuing of diversity not possible with many other kinds of evidence. Personal accounts offer researchers the opportunity to assume multiple spectator positions—to see the world through the eyes of each individual participant. As a result, they cannot, without difficulty, essentialize, categorize, and dismiss differences among participants. Feminist scholars are forced to take into account the fullness of different experiences and to attempt to see how those differences are enacted in individual lives.

A second benefit to feminist scholars who use personal experience as evidence is that it produces not only knowledge—information about others' lives—but understanding—a capacity for insight, empathy, and attentive caring—that emerges from interaction with participants. The details of the personal accounts help researchers connect with participants, often across enormous differences. As a result, researchers do not simply learn about what happened to participants but are able to glimpse

participants' feelings, motives for action, world views, and constructions of self. They become what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) call "passionate knowers" (p. 141) who, using the self as an instrument of understanding, fully participate with that which they study.

But scholars are not the only ones who benefit from using personal experience in research. Feminist research is conducted for the purpose of improving women's lives. It is done to empower women—to assist them in developing strategies to make sense of and make choices about the world in which they live. When personal experience is the basis of research, that research contributes to the improvement of participants' lives by encouraging them to discover their own truths. When researchers listen to their stories, participants are allowed to experience a process that Gendlin (1978) calls "absolute listening" (p. 116) or what Morton (1985) describes as "hearing to speech" (p. 202). When individuals tell of their experiences, without listeners inserting anything of their own, they come to discover their own stories and perspectives and to speak "new speech that has never been spoken before" (Morton, 1985, p. 205).

The act of talking to a listening researcher is not the only source of learning for participants. Because the speaking occurs in a context in which women are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and to interact with others as they attempt to interpret them, they are able to move beyond the mere telling of their stories to the development of critical consciousness. Bell hooks [sic] (1989) warns that one of the dangers of the confession is that the self "stays in place, the starting point from which one need never move" (p. 106). As a result, the goal may become "not to radically change our relationship to self and identity, to educate for critical consciousness, to become politically engaged and committed, but to explore one's identity, to affirm and assert the primacy of the self" as it already exists (hooks, 1989, p. 106). With the presentational skills of the researcher, however, the participants may develop other interpretations and insights on their perspectives—insights that allow them to move to critical consciousness.

The exploration and use of personal experience as data is a significant and subversive act in the process of constructing new methods and theories that truly take women's perspectives into account. Because women's first-person accounts traditionally are not listened to, believed, or taken seriously, women themselves often come to distrust and suppress their own knowledge claims: They "fear that they may be wrong after all, that they have missed the important point, and that the experts—who determine the norm from which women's perceptions diverge so radically—*must* be right" (Code, 1991, p. 217). The epistemic challenge for women, then, is to "claim their cognitive competence and authority, their knowledgeable ability, and their right to know" (Code, 1991, p. 218). The use of personal experience as evidence is one of the ways

feminist scholars and their research participants are actively collaborating to achieve epistemic empowerment.

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