

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Methodological and ethical issues in feminist research with abused women: Reflections on participants' vulnerability and empowerment[☆]



Amanda Burgess-Proctor

Oakland University, 525 Varner Hall, Rochester, MI 48309, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 5 December 2014

SYNOPSIS

This essay provides reflections and insights on the sometimes complicated methodological and ethical issues involved in conducting feminist interviews with abused women and other trauma survivors. I begin by summarizing the development of conventional, positivist-informed standards of research methods and ethics as represented by federal regulations and university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Next I describe the post-positivist feminist critique of these standards and highlight several guiding principles of feminist research methodology. I then consider whether survivors of violent victimization are appropriately considered vulnerable research populations, and provide examples from my own research with abused women that allow for researcher reflexivity about the ethical considerations of researching traumatic topics like intimate partner abuse (IPA). Finally, I conclude by offering suggestions for feminist interview strategies designed to help empower rather than simply protect participants.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Social scientists historically have been trained in the positivist tradition of interacting with human subjects from a hierarchical position of detached neutrality and objectivity (Harding, 1991; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Hvlaka, Kruttschnitt, & Carbone-Lopez, 2007; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1990; Stacey, 1988), and regulatory agencies governing ethical standards in human subjects research generally reflect this orientation (Halse & Honey, 2005). Prompted by ethically dubious biomedical research like the Nazi wartime experiments and the Tuskegee syphilis study, as well as by controversial social experiments by Stanley Milgram and others (Berg, 2004; Birch, Miller, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Jonsen, 2005), concerns about the risk of harm to human subjects gave rise to a developing professional dialog about

research methods and ethics throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, special attention was paid to vulnerable populations of human subjects – including prisoners, children, and pregnant women – for whom concerns about exploitation and harm were especially acute (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009). While not federally recognized as such, abused women and other survivors of violent victimization often are considered vulnerable research populations due to concerns that recalling traumatic experiences like rape, abuse, and incest are distressing and may prompt secondary trauma, or “revictimization” (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2010; Hvlaka et al., 2007; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2011).

Beginning in the 1980s, feminist scholars began to question the hierarchical and detached orientation of positivist human subjects research standards (Gorelick, 1991; Kirsch, 1999; Oakley, 1981). Post-positivist feminist critiques – particularly of social science research on women – gave rise to the development of unique feminist methodologies that emphasized concern for women (Kirsch, 1999). Some feminists also noted that the hierarchical view of the researcher-subject

[☆] Note: Special thanks to Jo Reger for her support and encouragement as I prepared this manuscript.

relationship *itself* could be exploitative: “The [protectionist] principles themselves may be inoffensive, even desirable, given our history of research abuses, but they assume a relationship and an ethics governing relationship that many feminist scholars have found problematic” (Preissle, 2007, p. 524). Consequently, post-positivist feminist methodologies generally endorse a non-hierarchical standard emphasizing care, compassion, connectedness, and collaboration between researchers and participants (Campbell et al., 2010; Harding & Norberg, 2005; Irwin, 2006; Kirsch, 1999; Oakley, 1981; Reinhartz, 1992; Westerveldt & Cook, 2007). This is especially true of feminist research involving abused women and survivors of other forms of violent victimization.

Both the positivist conventional and post-positivist feminist frameworks identify a power differential between researchers and participants, and seek to avoid exploiting or harming human subjects, especially those from vulnerable groups. Where these approaches diverge is in the strategies deployed to accomplish these aims. Conventional positivist approaches often leave unchallenged researchers' position of power – i.e., the “all-knowing” expert” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 785) – and instead emphasize use of safeguards and protocols for protecting participants (e.g., see Bond, 1978). In contrast, post-positivist feminist approaches typically emphasize strategies designed to reduce this power differential and empower research participants (e.g., Jansen & Rae Davis, 1998).

Still, contemporary regulatory agencies like university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) typically reflect conventional, positivist standards (Halse & Honey, 2005), and consequently may be unfamiliar with the types of methodologies frequently embraced by feminist researchers (Bell, 2014; Olesen, 2011). These issues are relevant for all feminist researchers whether utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods study designs, and regardless of research topic. However, the conventional orientation of IRBs may pose particular challenges for feminist scholars doing qualitative research (Olesen, 2011) and research involving survivors of violent victimization (Clark & Walker, 2011). This reality yields a perplexing paradox: the safeguards feminist researchers often are required to employ in order to protect our participants may actually serve to reinforce participants' disempowerment, thus replicating the very problems these safeguards seek to remedy. Thus, feminist interview strategies that go beyond simply protecting participants and that instead create opportunities for participant empowerment may be especially welcome, especially for research involving survivors of violent victimization.

To examine these issues, I begin by summarizing the development of conventional, positivist-informed standards of research methods and ethics as represented by federal regulations and university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Next I describe the post-positivist feminist critique of these standards and highlight several guiding principles of feminist research methodology. I then consider whether survivors of violent victimization are appropriately considered vulnerable research populations, and provide examples from my own research with abused women that allow for researcher reflexivity about the ethical considerations of researching traumatic topics like intimate partner abuse (IPA). Finally, I conclude by offering suggestions for feminist interview strategies designed to help empower rather than simply protect participants.

The development of contemporary research ethics: protecting vulnerable participants

The development of federal standards for research ethics began in earnest in the 1970s. Passage of the 1974 National Research Act authorized creation of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. In 1978, the Commission published a report of its findings, “Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects Research” – also known as the *Belmont Report*. Of particular concern in the development of these standards was research involving vulnerable populations. Between the mid 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. government identified certain categories of human subjects as vulnerable, including pregnant women, human fetuses, neonates, children, and prisoners (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009). Concerns about vulnerable populations were likewise addressed in the *Belmont Report* (Jonsen, 2005), as evidenced by its three fundamental principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (The Belmont Report, 1978). Thus, federal standards for human subjects research gave rise to the development of guidelines for identity protection, informed consent, and other safeguards for human subjects (e.g., see Bond, 1978; Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Logically, these protections were considered to be especially necessary for vulnerable populations, due to the increased potential for research participation to be exploitative and/or harmful to them. Human subject protections also are addressed by university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which ensure that academic research conforms to ethical and professional standards. For obvious reasons, IRB protocols may be especially stringent with research proposals involving vulnerable populations, as “institutional gatekeepers” may wish to limit researcher access to these groups (e.g., see Bosworth, Hoyle, & Dempsey, 2011).

As feminist scholars have observed, these standards of research ethics are rooted in – and continue to propagate – the hierarchical, objective traditions of the positivist paradigm:

Ethics committees grew out of a positivist tradition of biomedical research that evolved in tandem with the theoretical-juridical model of ethics ...The conceptual foundation of positivism has been widely challenged, but its assumptions continue to underpin the philosophy and processes embedded in regulatory frameworks for research ethics...The ethics approval process also creates a hierarchical power relationship between researchers and participants when it constructs researchers as objective, dispassionate scientists with the knowledge and expertise to reveal “truths” about their research “subjects.” Bestowing such an identity positions researchers as superior to their participants, who become the less knowledgeable, passive “objects” of the research and of the “researcher” (Halse & Honey, 2005, pp. 2153–2155).

To be clear, it is not the case that positivism is necessarily or universally incongruent with feminism. As Hesse-Biber (2007, p. 8) notes, “positivism per se is not the enemy of all feminist inquiry; rather, the problem is with certain practices arising from how the method is carried out by some mainstream social researchers.” For example, conventional informed consent protocols aimed at full disclosure of risk emphasize an

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/375929>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/375929>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)