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Collaboration or collusion? Involving research users in applied social research

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the difficulties of pursuing a research agenda firmly based on women's reproductive rights, whilst working in the context of a sexual health policy framework that has different priorities. Drawing on the experiences of two applied social research projects in the area of sexual health, the paper considers the tensions and challenges associated with maintaining a feminist conceptual framework, and simultaneously striving to undertake research that would have an impact on policy and practice. The first project studied young women, abortion and 'repeat' abortion: the word 'repeat' carries with it notions of a repeat offender, and has been identified as contributing towards abortion stigma. The second project examined why young women may have their contraceptive implant removed 'early': acceptance of this word implied collusion with dominant policy conceptions based on a cost effective approach to contraceptive provision. The researchers had some misgivings about the policy framing, and sought to locate the research within an overarching objective of seeking to understand how women's reproductive control might be improved; a very basic feminist outcome that might be shared (at an abstract level) with policy-makers. Research is, however, a messy complex undertaking: in practice, multiple understandings of similar findings are possible and researchers negotiate their final outputs to suit particular audiences. Both projects involved contradictions, uncertainties and potential for collusions which are explored in the paper.

Introduction

Undertaking applied social research is a hazardous activity for feminist academics who wish to remain true to feminist principles whilst simultaneously seeking to influence policy and practice (Bordo, 1990; Gillies & Alldred, 2012). The difficulties generally start with the way policy-driven research is framed: aims and objectives are often decided by the funders when an Invitation To Tender (ITT) is released. The ITT will be a product of contemporary policy concerns, and the resulting research will be expected to be of use to that policy and resulting practice (policy implementation). A critical approach is seldom required. This is particularly the case when the research is commissioned by a governmental body. For researchers, the best way to ensure that the research serves this purpose is to collaborate with policy-makers and practitioners; indeed this is often a requirement stipulated in the ITT. Whilst such collaboration can be invaluable in helping research 'make a difference' there is a grey area between collaboration and collusion; even - maybe - a slippery slope between the two. Simply defined, collusion involves people cooperating or working together - often secretly - when they should not be. Secret cooperation implies dishonesty, and this is not what is being suggested here. What is being explored is the possibility of an unwitting collusion emerging from collaboration with different stake-holders in the negotiation of research outputs, a collusion that is difficult to avoid in applied social research.

This paper focuses on that grey area through a reflexive account of interpretive processes in two applied social research projects:

- The first study being re-visited in this paper was a research project commissioned by the Government Office for London in 2008. The ITT had two research questions: what are the underlying factors associated with the disproportionately high *proportion* of under-18 conceptions that end in abortion in London? And, what are the underlying factors associated with the disproportionately high under-18 *repeat* abortion rate in London?
- The second study was funded by the London Sexual Health Commissioning Group, and aimed to identify factors associated with the removal of the implant [one form of long-acting reversible contraception (LARC)] by teenagers.

The projects were thus both broadly and implicitly concerned with women's reproductive rights (prompting researcher interest and enthusiasm); but narrowly and explicitly focused on explaining 'repeat' abortions and 'early' contraceptive implant removal in young women (prompting researcher anxiety and disquiet). The underpinning policy concerns were respectively: to provide suggestions as to how 'repeat' abortions may be reduced; and implant retention rates might be

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improved. Our task was to satisfy these requirements whilst remaining true to feminist principles, in this case, of bodily autonomy and reproductive control.[1] We were keen to undertake the research because we also embraced a widely accepted principle of feminist research: that it is politically *for* women and seeks to improve women's lives in some way (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Gillies & Alldred, 2012). Both the researchers and the research commissioners were therefore interested in 'making a difference' but from very different starting points.

These issues have methodological and epistemological implications, many of which have attracted discussion amongst feminist academics, and will now be introduced. The two research projects are then subjected to scrutiny, with a particular focus on data interpretation and reinterpretation. Finally, the implications of the presence of competing knowledge claims on applied social research are discussed.

Feminist research in practice

There is no single model of feminist research, methodology, epistemology or research methods; and how and why feminists should undertake research has long been a matter of dialogue and debate amongst feminist researchers. Although many feminists favour qualitative research methods that facilitate open, in-depth expression of women's experiences and views, others have argued that "[f]eminists should use any and every means available for investigating the condition of women in sexist society" (Stanley, 1990: 12). One prominent feminist, Ann Oakley, has consciously sought to maintain a feminist research consciousness whilst utilising the 'gold standard' of quantitative research – the randomised controlled trial precisely in order to produce research that may contribute to improving women's lives (Oakley, 2005). Feminist research in the new century has become more diversified, as well as increasingly advocating multiple understandings of what is viewed as a complex social world (Olesen, 2007).

Historically, one important element of feminist methodology was to dispute positivism's claim to objectivity (Eichler, 1988; Harding, 1987). The 'myth' of value-free research was challenged by research in which feminist researchers' values and interpretations were acknowledged as central to the research process (Roberts, 1981). Feminist research can thus involve an open acknowledgement of subjectivity. This has remained a central element of much feminist methodology. The feminist critique of positivism has also involved developing a critical awareness of research processes, with a particular focus on researcher/researched relationships. This entails a challenge to the positivist perception of an objective, neutral observer who leaves the field without influencing the data. This has been characterised as a myth (see for example, Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Ryan-flood & Gill, 2010). This acknowledgement, however, is also troublesome, as subjective knowledge is not generally seen as a satisfactory evidence base for developing policy and practice. Involving research users (primarily policy-makers and practitioners) in collaborative qualitative research projects adds a further complication as it increases the potential to generate competing understandings, and can be viewed as problematic in commissioned research which is inclined to favour positivist research claims.

A further, distinct, claim that feminist research may even be more objective than androcentric traditional research because it produces less distorted knowledge was proposed by Harding (1987), who claimed that knowledge grounded in women's experience of struggles against male domination can produce a more complete knowledge of gendered social lives than that based only on men's experiences. This is a central claim of the much disputed, and also varied, feminist standpoint theory which sought to develop new feminist knowledge of gendered social lives through 'women speaking their truth' (see Hartsock, 1997). Because feminist standpoint theory does make knowledge claims, albeit partial, and yet political, it remains an attractive methodological approach for feminists working in applied social research.

Critics of feminist standpoint, however, have argued that feminists should privilege subjectivity over objectivity; emotionality over rationality; and experience over experiments (Stanley & Wise, 1983, 1993).[2] More recently, it has been argued that it is not enough for feminist researchers to reveal themselves, through reflexive research, but that they should seek to uncover what might be hidden secrets and silences, thus openly reflecting on the significance of their own identities for their research, and indicating how this may have influenced their behaviour in the field (Ryan-flood & Gill, 2010).

Privileging subjective knowledge involves viewing reality as a matter of competing interpretations, a challenging epistemology for applied social researchers because it may undermine the value of social research. It is particularly problematic in sexual health research in which feminists are often seeking to understand, and improve, sexual health services for women, for which clear, unambiguous, messages are preferred. In the two studies, whilst we were aware of our role as interpreters and co-constructors (with the research participants) of knowledge (see Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), we were also concerned to stay close to 'reality'. In both studies, the methodological approach was thus influenced by feminist standpoint theory. Hartsock (2004) argues that because feminists are involved in political activity it is in their interests to strive for truth in their research projects, the assumption being that faulty research may precipitate ineffective political activity. We also felt this to be the case when dealing with sexual health policy and practice.

This paper is located within these particular debates, with a focus on how the researcher negotiates their own identity whilst conducting applied social research. For each of the two projects to be discussed an interpretive turning point is identified: these points are when competing interpretations of the data became evident. It is suggested that these competing interpretations are reflective of different (subjective) opinions, personal histories and priorities represented in the relationships between researchers and collaborative mechanisms established for the research projects, principally the Project Advisory Groups. However, I go further and consider how shifting interpretations can reveal our own subjective shifts and different identities, as researchers, on a collaboration/collusion continuum.

Turning point one. Power or pleasure: interpreting young women's accounts of their sexual activities

The first project studied young women, abortion and 'repeat' abortion in London. The policy context was dominated by new Labour's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, which prioritised interventions that had the potential to 'help' teenagers change behaviour (DfEE, 2000). Concern about teenage abortion, and especially what was labelled as 'repeat' abortion, became increasingly evident as the Strategy was developed, with key policy documents referring to the need to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies, abortions and 'repeat' abortions (IAG, 2009). Characterising an outcome (teenage motherhood or abortion, for example) as an adverse event entails projecting acts of judgement onto such outcomes (Heyman, 2010), implies moral disapproval of such outcomes (Hoggart, 2012), and can facilitate abortion stigma (Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009). The research team did not share these judgements, but could we undertake a piece of work based on research questions that seemed to? After much soul-searching we decided (with encouragement from feminist friends and colleagues) to bid

[1] The first project was undertaken by XXXXXXXXXXXXX and the second by XXXXXXXXXXXX.

[2] Feminist standpoint has also been criticised for its reification of a single, universal feminist standpoint, which allows for the continued marginalisation of a range of perspectives,(including for example, black, lesbian, post-colonial, or working class perspectives) (Hooks, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Recently, such different perspectives have been brought together through the development of intersectionality theory which recognises the multiple intersections in women's lives, including race, gender, skin tone, accent, education level, migration status, language and other life situations (Crenshaw, 2001).

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