

Questioning Collaboration in Feminist Research: A Women and Poverty Research Model Reconsidered

Katherine A. Rhoades, Dean and Professor Emerita, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract

Poverty in the United States remains an issue that predominately, though not exclusively, affects women and children. According to a study released in 2006 by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, since 1995 the poverty rate among women in 15 of the states in the United States has increased, and in another 15 states women's poverty fell by less than 1.0 percentage point, compared with 1.0 percentage points nationally (Hartmann, Sorokina, and Williams 2006). These statistics cast a foreboding shadow on the purported success of "work not welfare" reforms that swept the United States beginning in the mid 1990s.

Drawing on a decade of efforts by the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative (WPPEI), established by the University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Consortium Outreach Office in 1994, this essay analyzes the feminist collaborative research model that framed WPPEI's longitudinal, in-depth interview study of 160 women who were transitioning off welfare in eight Wisconsin communities at the dawn of these reforms. Ultimately, the analysis supports calls for women to unite across their differences to collaborate for political and public policy change, even as it weaves a cautionary tale about the ubiquitous force of power imbalances that may tarnish this ideal.

Introduction

Psychologist Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, suggested in *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (1996) that there are only three questions worth asking—What? So What? and What's next? These deceptively simple questions provide the framework for the three sections that comprise this essay. The first section initiates a conversation of thoughts about collaboration and charts my experiences with and investments in feminist research methodology that is collaborative in spirit and intent. The subsequent section underscores the tango of tension and play of power that characterize collaborative processes by analyzing a collaborative feminist research project that paired eight women's studies professors at University of Wisconsin university campuses with community women who lived in poverty to conduct a longitudinal, in-depth interview research study documenting the early effects of welfare reforms initiated in the mid-1990s. The concluding section invites continued conversations about collaboration as a beneficial, though problematic, component of feminist methodology and calls for a commitment to place questions about power imbalances at the center of these conversation.

What?: Exploring The Contextual Contours Of Collaboration

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As a citizen of the Western world who works in what some dispassionately call the “knowledge industry,” I am perpetually bombarded with messages inviting me to cultivate innovative ways of thinking, behaving, and interacting in order to thrive in the new global economy that promises to dominate the 21st century. Collaboration is touted as a vitally central strategy for successfully surviving in this far from halcyon era. And yet, as Irish philosopher and theologian John O’Donohue (2007) observes, one of the greatest problems in postmodern culture is the abundant presence of disjointed monologues to the exclusion of a more genuine and sustained conversation that promises to foster the kind of collaboration from which we may all benefit. This essay is intended to serve as one modest step toward stimulating this kind of conversation.

Drawing on my involvement as one of the lead researchers in a qualitative research study of 160 women who were transitioning off welfare in Wisconsin in the mid 1990s, I will “poke and pry” —as anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston (1991) suggested all researchers must do— into the ethics and efficacy of feminist collaborative research methodology. The following overarching question guides my inquiry: What are the limits and possibilities of feminist collaborative research efforts among women who represent a range of differences that include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, social class, educational background, and theoretical allegiances?

This question is inextricably linked with my lifelong curiosity about the complex ways that power—and by that I mean discursive power in terms of who speaks for whom as well as materialistic power including status and human capital— circulates in collaborative interactions and processes. My interest also is informed by my troubled awareness of the ways that history generates countless examples illustrating that, despite our best intentions, those of us who seek social change may run the risk of recreating the very systems that we set out to dismantle and change.

I was reminded of this gnawing reality when John O’Donohue commented in a recent interview that extremes create a mirror of themselves. Subsequently evoking Plato’s notion that to practice philosophy is to follow a question wherever it leads, O’Donohue suggests that loyalty to a question will create what he describes as a wise middle ground, providing a safe zone from

extremes (Covington 2007). Such a loyalty to questions leads me to desire an epistemological oasis where the thorny complexities of feminist collaborative methodology can be viewed with stark clarity, ever realizing that my own and others' subjectivity will inevitably shroud, at least partially, this possibility.

I was first awakened to the need for such an oasis when I was conducting a qualitative study involving recent refugees from South East Asia who were students at two high schools in the Midwest. After interviewing a 15 year-old Hmong woman student who had fled the highlands of Laos with her family in the aftermath of the Vietnamese war, she challenged me by asking, "What makes you think you can study Hmong people? What right do you have to speak for Hmong women?" These questions, and various versions of it, have continued to shape my evolution as a feminist researcher who is committed to, but simultaneously wary of, collaborative inquiry.

Ironically, I reconnected with this student when she attended the university where I was a professor and dean, and we collaborated on an undergraduate student/faculty research project that interrogated collaborative research possibilities from feminist as well as intercultural perspectives (Rhoades and Lor 2001). This research afforded more nuanced understandings of these possibilities, but fell short of providing definitive answers. And so I continue, in the words of O'Donohue, to follow my questions where they lead.

Before engaging with the subsequent section of this essay, I want to define two terms that have at once become too large and too small for their compasses. The first is "feminism," a term that in its multiplicity connotes different meanings. Not all versions of feminism will necessarily fly under the banner that my definition unfurls, making it perhaps all the more important to contextualize my use of the word. Borrowing liberally from historian Linda Gordon's definition of feminism as "a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable" (Dolan, 1988, 3), I have cobbled together the following definition that serves as a touchstone for my feminist understandings and practice: Feminism is a critique of society's gender and other socially constructed hierarchies, forged with a will to change these hierarchies, and based on a belief that they are in fact

changeable. The coupling of critique with change is particularly salient to feminist collaborative praxis.

The second term, “collaboration,” is akin to democracy to the extent that everyone seems to be for it, even though they often are unsure about what it really is or how it can be achieved. The following definition, derived from my entry on collaboration/collaborative research that appears in Lorraine Code’s *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* continues to serve as the foundational definition that frames my understanding:

Collaboration encourages shared decision-making, prizes cooperative initiatives, strives for egalitarian interactions, values multiple perspectives, and attempts to mediate power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. It extends from a conviction that feminist research for and about women is most effectively accomplished when women join forces with each other to form communal rather than hierarchical models for scholarship (Rhoades 2000, 126).

With the contours of collaboration charted and my investment in following questions that may lead to understanding how collaboration can enhance feminist research identified, the following question begs consideration.

So What?: Analyzing Collaboration In Action

Observed in its most positive light, collaboration honors the needs and aspirations of all collaborators and conjoins their efforts in achieving mutually beneficial outcomes. Despite its generally embraced benefits, collaborative work is fraught with implicit and explicit collisions of power. Even in optimal situations collaboration involves a continual tango of tension as individuals seek to achieve common rhythms and directions. The negotiations that fueled the women and poverty research project illustrate one version of this tense tango.

The Women’s Poverty and Public Education Initiative (WPPEI), sponsored by the University of Wisconsin System Women’s Studies Outreach Office, began in 1994 as a collective project of academic and community women across the state (Rhoades and Statham 1999; Rhoades, Statham and Schleiter 2002; Schleiter, Rhoades and Statham 2004; Statham and Rhoades 1999 and 2006). One major collaborative project that emerged from WPPEI was a

longitudinal, in-depth interview study of 160 diverse women in eight communities, conducted during the first three-year period when women in Wisconsin, a major test-site for national reforms, were required to transition off welfare.

Critics viewed Wisconsin Works (W-2) as one of the most draconian program reforms in the country because of its stringent requirements. Interestingly, Tommy Thompson, then governor of Wisconsin, subsequently ascended to the position of Secretary of Health and Human Services when Republican George W. Bush became the U.S. President. Thompson's appointment to this cabinet position was in large part due to his efforts to implement W-2, a policy that promoted work at any cost. Whereas W-2 justifiably can claim some success, it has failed to curtail the cycle of poverty for many families. Under W-2, many individuals have been relegated to part-time, low-paying, dead-end jobs, leaving them with limited or no options for work-related benefits, occupational advancement, or postsecondary educational access.

Responding to the need for data to document the early effects of W-2, WPPEI created community leadership teams by pairing women's studies faculty members at eight University of Wisconsin universities with community women who were living in poverty. The teams collectively designed an in-depth interview study to determine how women transitioning off welfare were managing changes over time by gathering detailed information about their lives over a three-year period. This research design evolved from an overall goal of gathering data that could inform public policies and programs in ways that would enable them to more effectively move families out of poverty and simultaneously address root causes of poverty. Fueled by a commitment to collaboration, WPPEI also was determined to assist the women impacted by poverty who served on the community leadership teams to become informed advocates and leaders who could join and influence policy debates (Rhoades, Statham & Schleiter 2002; Schleiter, Rhoades & Statham 2004; Statham and Rhoades 2006).

Members of the community leadership teams individually interviewed women, selected to participate in the study through purposeful random sampling. Most women were interviewed twice, and many were interviewed three times. Throughout the study, the teams communicated and compiled their findings and discussed the details and the challenges associated with the research process. Monthly phone conversations were convened by the WPPEI Coordinator, a

women's studies faculty member, and at least two annual face-to-face meetings involving all leadership teams were held. Women from the poverty community were paid for their work, for attending meetings, and for all of their travel and research-related expenses.

Among the most impressive gains from the interviews conducted by the women who were living in poverty were the richness and openness of the data they gleaned. Because they had "walked the walk" of poverty, they were often very adept at posing follow-up questions that provided insights that the women's studies faculty members, who were primarily responsible for designing the interview protocol, would never have thought to include. Trust and transparency also were much more readily achieved among these interviewers and the women they interviewed. As a result, a number of issues came to the forefront that might not ever be considered in a more dispassionate policy discussion. For example, women's anxiety about leaving their children in low-quality child care settings to go to dead-end jobs with no benefits and their fears that they may lose their children if they participate in research were themes that permeated our findings (Schleiter, Rhoades, and Statham 2002).

The collaborative approach yielded rich qualitative data, but may have raised more questions than it answered. Persuasive evidence was generated to present to policy makers, but to date nothing has succeeded in reversing or swaying the swelling tide of reforms. Moreover, multiple struggles and intense obstacles accompanied WPPEI's collaborative process. Several of the women leaders from the poverty community, including the woman with whom I worked, became angry at various points in the process because they felt silenced, misunderstood, or undervalued. By association, the women's studies faculty members were sometimes perceived as oppressors rather than collaborators working for social change. Negotiations over these issues were tense and resolution of the conflicts was difficult, and often impossible, to achieve (Statham and Rhoades, 1999).

Consequently, despite attempts to infuse "power-sharing" and "power-shifting" (Maguire, 1996, 108) into the collaborative model, challenges associated with real and imagined power differentials remained rampant. For example, I recall vividly the helplessness I experienced as I attempted to make sense out of the stark inequities between my material world and that of my co-leader. I would leave her trailer after a meeting to return to my comfortable home while she had to figure out how to negotiate her single-parenting role with a job that would

never offer the benefits or the salary to enable her to move out of poverty. In the end, it was our differences that charted the demise of our collaborative engagement.

What's Next?: Living The Questions Toward A Conclusion

Over a decade ago, feminist philosopher and political scientist Linda Alcoff argued for a model of feminist research that placed those who were oppressed at the center of an agenda for change:

The study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must come to be done principally by the oppressed, and we must finally acknowledge that systematic divergences in social location between speakers and those spoken for will have a significant effect on the content of what is said (Alcoff 1991, 5).

But does this position abdicate responsibility for those who have the expertise and the will to work with those who are oppressed? What is the role of academic feminists who are committed to working against oppression in its many forms and are equally dedicated to seeking ways to work and speak across differences?

Educational theorist Michael Apple (1993, 7) offers one possible solution to this quandary by urging researchers to engage in critical work, a category where feminist collaborative research resides, that is conducted in an “organic way” by connecting to those progressive social movements and groups that continue to challenge the multiple relations of exploitation and domination that exist. Everyone—the researcher and the researched alike-- is implicated in these relations. Building on these “organic” approaches, feminist theorist bell hooks (1994b, 130) reminds us that dialogue is one of the simplest ways that we can cross boundaries, forge discussions, foster solidarity, and disrupt the very assumption that we can ever unequivocally meet across boundaries (Rhoades, Statham and Schleiter 2002, 232).

Viewed through an organic, dialogic prism, feminist collaborative research appears as a fragile possibility for enacting the kind of social science for which feminist sociologist Sherry Gorelick advocates:

To understand the different milieus in which women experience their oppression and to trace their connections with each other, we need a social science produced by women of various social conditions (race, class, sexual preference, nationality, or ethnicity), a social

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science that reveals the commonalities and structured conflicts of the hidden structures of oppression, both as they are felt and they are observed (1991, 474).

Defining the contours of feminist collaborative research within the social science paradigm that Gorelick suggests, represents a necessary first step in plotting a feminist collaborative methodology where theory and practice coalesce with a cautious eye toward power relations. But more must follow.

First, those who have been invited to sit in institutional circles of power must use this position as a way to speak on behalf of those who have been excluded from these circles. More importantly, we must diversify these circles, making them more inclusive of underrepresented groups. Second, standing on the shoulders of those who have shaped the contours of feminist methodology to date, those of us who wish to advance feminist collaborative research are compelled to heed the call for reconfiguring it by being vigilantly aware of how power both constitutes and is constituted by individuals and social relations. This journey will be arduous, but perhaps those who choose to join the pilgrimage can be sustained by the knowledge that much can be gained by “living the questions,” as German poet R.M. Rilke (1984) urged us to do, as we work our way toward answers in some distant future. But dwelling within the terrain of questions requires a particular kind of attention and response, as cultural anthropologist and writer Mary Catherine Bateson explains:

Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity...We are all called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond. Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our steps (emphasis added) (2003, 75).

Finally, if women leaders agree that advancing a liberal agenda of women’s equality still matters, and, by extension, we embrace the merits of a feminist methodology that honors collaboration among and between diverse women, then I conclude that we must initiate and sustain a lively conversation of thoughts driven by questions that will aid us to honor this agenda, assist us to assess what differences our actions make, and inspire us to continue envisioning what can and must happen next. Will you join this conversation?

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