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Advancing Women's Social Justice Agendas: A Feminist Action Research Framework

Colleen Reid
Simon Fraser University
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Abstract

Feminist action research is a promising, though under-developed, research approach for advancing women's health and social justice agendas. In this article the foundations, principles, dimensions, promises, and challenges of engaging in feminist action research are explored.

Keywords: participatory research, women's health, feminism

Introduction

In Canada, there is rising poverty, inequality, and unemployment alongside reductions in social, health care, and community services. Socio-demographic changes, aging populations, and rising numbers of lone parents also contribute to social inequalities and a greater proportion of people living in poverty (Reid, 2001). Increasing poverty and income inequality are mirrored by increasing health inequalities (Shaw, Dorling, & Smith, 2000; Wilkinson, 1996); in almost any developed society people lower down the social scale may have death rates two to four times higher than those nearer the top (Wilkinson, 1996). The social and economic structure of society, especially low income, income inequality, and discrimination, can be seen as the ultimate determinants, the "causes of the causes," of disease and death (Deaton, 2002).

Throughout life, the human experiences of birth, death, illness, and disability are embedded in social contexts. In any gender-dichotomized society, the fact that we are born biologically female or male means that our environments will be different, that we will live different lives (Lorber, 1997), and that we will have different experiences of health. All cultures characterize men and women as different types of beings, suitable for different kinds of tasks and entitled to differing levels of economic, cultural and political resources (Doyal, 1995). These differences determine differential exposure to risk, access to the benefits of technology, information, resources and health care, and the realization of rights, all of which can influence health (World Health Organization, 1998). Much like current understandings of health inequalities, women's everyday experiences must be understood within the context of the larger social organization and ideological structures generated from outside experience (Anderson, 1987). Women's health is seen as a continuum that extends throughout the lifecycle and that is critically and intimately related to the conditions under which women live. In examining the relationship between social inequalities and health, it is evident that a systematic focus on gender and women's experiences living in poverty is needed. Not only are more women than men likely to experience deprivation, but women

experience poverty differently (Reid, 2001). The poverty rate for women is higher than for men in every age group and disparity between socioeconomic groups is growing (Health Canada, 1997).

The societal transformations arising from socio-demographic trends and increasing poverty and income polarization are reasons for rethinking and broadening how we conceptualize and study poor women's health. Some researchers argue that poverty and women's health are social justice issues: "it is one of the greatest of contemporary social injustices that people who live in the most disadvantaged circumstances have more illnesses, more disability, and shorter lives than those who are more affluent" (Benzeval, Judge, & Whitehead, 1995, p.1). Social justice concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the conditions necessary for all individuals to exercise capacities, express experiences, and participate in determining actions. It requires not the melting away of difference, but the promotion and respect for group differences without oppression (Young, 1990).

Social justice is not only a way of seeing the world, it can also inform how research is conceptualized and conducted. It is possible to locate issues of social justice front and centre on research agendas through carefully appreciating the political nature of research (Poland, 1998). To develop theories and methods to examine social injustice profoundly influences how we engage with marginalized groups and conceive our role as researchers (Wilkinson, 1996). Feminist action research (FAR) is a conceptual and methodological research framework that is fundamentally about exploring and pursuing opportunities for social justice (Reid, 2004). Through outlining the FAR's foundations, guiding principles, dimensions, and some existing tensions and challenges, in this article I propose a FAR framework for meaningfully examining women's health experiences and for promoting a social justice agenda in research.

Developing a framework for studying women's health and social justice

Although health has long served as a barometer of the economic and social conditions under which people live (Walters, Lenton, & Mckeary, 1995), the development of appropriate tools to measure the impact of social inequalities on women's health has lagged behind conceptualizations of social and structural influences (Reid, 2002). Since health inequalities are most often researched by social epidemiologists who favour quantitative studies with large data-sets, a dearth of qualitative studies and narrow gender-blind conceptualizations of women's health and poverty have resulted. Additionally, hegemonic discourses of poverty and health that favour middle-class values and experiences necessitate research efforts that explore poor women's experiences. Feminist action research is a conceptual and methodological framework that attempts to address these needs and limitations and to locate the study of women's health in a broader social justice agenda. Feminist action researchers typically use qualitative research methods to generate in-depth understandings of women's experiences and put women's diversity at the centre of the analysis. FAR strategies attempt to be inclusive, participatory, collaborative, and to elucidate poor women's experiences. Indeed, FAR can be seen as a research tool to better understand the factors that perpetuate women's poverty, to appreciate the diverse and often disparate ways that poor women negotiate their lives, and to respond to social injustices through advocating collective action and social change (Reid, 2004).

Participatory research

Participatory research (PR) arose during an era of reflection and self-questioning within social research.[1] At issue were the purposes of research, definitions of objectivity, power relationships between the researcher and the researched, ownership of research results, and the ethics of data collection and reporting (Fals-Borda, 1991; Green et al., 1995; Maguire, 1987). In response to these issues, PR is value-driven and self-consciously not value-neutral. PR integrates subjectivity into a scientific analysis and to the work of structural and social transformation (Vio Grossi, 1981). Participatory researchers advocate methods of data collection and analysis that are grounded in the context of the community and contribute

something of value to the community in which the research is conducted (Herbert, 1996). Most generally, participatory research is a process that combines three activities: research, education, and action (Hall, 1981).

Participatory research involves a social action process that is biased in favor of dominated, exploited, poor, or otherwise ignored women, men, and groups. Participatory researchers work "with" rather than "for" the researched, breaking down the distinction between researchers and the researched while legitimizing the knowledge people are capable of producing (Fals-Borda, 1991). Consequently, participatory researchers outline and utilize explicit processes to facilitate ordinary people's reflection on and analysis of their reality. They attempt to involve participants in the entire research process, including an action phase, and present people as researchers in pursuit of answers to questions of daily struggle and survival (Fals-Borda, 1991; Nyden & Wiewel, 1992; Tandon, 1988). The people studied make decisions about the study format and data analysis. This model is designed to create social and individual change by altering relationships in the project (Reinharz, 1992).

Participatory researchers see no contradiction between goals of collective empowerment and the deepening of social knowledge (Hall, 1992), and attempt to adhere to the tenets of community empowerment, emphasizing increased power and control across multiple sites of practice. PR involves a critical problem-solving process of diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Freire, 1996; Hall, 1992, 1993; Park, 1993). Participatory researchers espouse that through a dialectical process of collective reflection and action "conscientization" the community and its constituent organizations and individuals foster a sense of identification and shared fate. Through developing the skills and resources to engage in the cyclical process of diagnosing and analyzing problems, they plan, implement, and evaluate strategies aimed at meeting identified needs (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994). Community members, organizations, and the community as a whole gain increased influence and control, that is in turn associated with improved health and quality of life. Together, participatory researchers and community members strive to maximize both increased knowledge and understanding of a given phenomenon and take action to change the situation (Israel et al., 1994). Action and evaluation proceed simultaneously in a fluid approach that is constantly evaluated, rather than a traditional research project where the design is thought out at the beginning, implemented in a carefully controlled way, and finally evaluated (Reinharz, 1992). Thus the credibility and validity of PR knowledge is measured according to whether actions that arise from it solve problems and increase participants' control over their own situation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

The emergence of feminist action research

Despite the ideals advanced by participatory researchers, gender and women's diversity were made invisible by early assumptions that women could be automatically included in terms such as "people," "community," or "the oppressed" (Hall, 1993). In traditional research as well as in participatory research, women have been largely excluded from producing dominant forms of knowledge. Maguire (1987) has pointed out the distinct silence around gender and women in PR discourse, calling it the "androcentric filter." Participatory research is built on a critique of positivism that often ignores and repeats many of the androcentric aspects of dominant social science research. Freire (1996) maintained that domination was the major theme of our epoch, but his conscientization tools ignored men's domination over women. Freire, like others "does not depart from taking androcentricity as the norm, and consequently, feminists need to do the work for women that he did for men" (Klein, 1983). Women's ways of seeing were not mentioned until 1981 and the general discourse of women has been excluded (Maguire, 1987). Without recognition of, and attention to, its male biases, participatory research cannot be truly emancipatory for all people (Hall, 1992).

Feminist researchers have attempted to address the androcentric biases inherent in traditional and participatory research, yet have not articulated distinct methods or methodologies. Within "feminisms"[2] there is no single or monolithic method, methodology, or theoretical base of feminist scholarship; in fact, there are competing theoretical foundations and varied methodologies (Maguire, 2001). As well, feminists have not agreed on one definition of research (Maguire, 1987). There has been resistance to a rigid, dogmatic "correct" feminist methodology because it may reinforce domination and limit knowledge. However, there is a great danger in "feminisms" becoming co-opted by mainline methods that reinforce unequal power relations unless we commit ourselves to a distinctive methodology (Cancian, 1992).

Some common features of feminist methodology include focusing on gender and inequality and using qualitative methods to analyze women's experience. However, very few studies adopt the more radical methods of including an action component, using strong participatory methods that give participants substantial control over involvement in the study, and critiquing the power relations in academia (Cancian, 1992). Despite embracing a call for transformational structural and personal action (Maguire, 2001; Mies, 1991), feminists have not outlined a clear strategy for eliminating androcentricism from research, nor have they "given adequate attention to the envisioning of truly emancipatory knowledge-seeking" (Harding, 1986, p. 19). Feminist theories, epistemologies, and methodologies have inspired and grounded many action researchers' work (Maguire, 2001), yet there are only a handful of systematic attempts to link feminism and action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Aspects of participatory research and feminist research cohere ontologically and epistemologically as both seek to shift the centre from which knowledge is generated (Hall, 1981). As well, they share an avowed intent to work for social justice and democratization (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lather, 1991; Maguire, 2001). By combining feminist research's critique of androcentricism with participatory research's emphasis on participation and social change, feminist action research provides a powerful approach to knowledge creation for social and personal transformation (Maguire, 1987). As Maguire wrote: "Participatory research taught me the necessity of being explicit about personal choices and values in the research process. Feminism taught me to recognize that the personal is political" (1987, p.5).

I defined feminist action research as a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works toward inclusion, participation, action, and social change while confronting the underlying assumptions the researcher brings into the research process (Reid, 2004). Feminist action researchers facilitate building knowledge to change the conditions of women's lives, both individually and collectively, while reconstructing conceptions of power so that power can be used in a responsible manner (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Feminist action research is a tool, not a panacea, that involves a particular way of looking at the world and thinking about research and research participants (Maguire, 1987). Since many poor women are excluded from social processes and their communities, open and flexible theory-building grounded in a body of empirical work ceaselessly confronted with, and respectful of, women's day to day experiences is needed (Lather, 1991).

Praxis: Developing a feminist action research framework

Participatory research and contemporary feminism share a number of major underlying features centering on the analysis of political economy and praxis (Maguire, 1993). The notion of praxis challenges the theory-practice relationship and raises problems associated with value-free science. The term "praxis" originates from the Greek word prasso meaning "doing" and "acting," in contrast with the theoretical designs of epistemology; theoria [3] (Audi, 1995). Lal (1996) refers to pedagogical praxis the erasing of the boundaries between theory, methodology, and practice, and between field and home (Lal, 1996). Other researchers define praxis as a dialectical process of collective reflection and action (Israel et al., 1994; Kirby & McKenna, 1989), the joining of theory and action so that each is informed by and changes

through its relation with the other (Ristock & Pennell, 1996), and the integration of knowing and doing (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

For praxis to be possible, theory must not only illuminate the lived experience of social groups, it must also be illuminated by their struggles (Lather, 1991). Theory is thought of as experience-based (Park, 2001), and reflection itself is embedded in praxis, not separate from it. Action upon reality and analyses of that learning may change awareness of the nature of problems and the sources of oppression (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). The processes of uncovering marginalized knowledges, giving priority to these knowledges, and enabling the collaborative development of action strategies are simultaneously theoretical and methodological. Woven within and between each of the following characteristics of a FAR framework is the notion of praxis theory, methods, and practice in dynamic interplay.

A Feminist Action Research framework

FAR guidingPrinciples

Through integrating participatory research with feminist theory and research, the following guiding principles for FAR emerged: inclusion, participation, action, social change, and researcher reflexivity.

Inclusion

The first principle of feminist action research is inclusion. To include is to cause to be a part of something, to consider with, or to put into a group (Morris, 1982). Feminist action researchers contend that no social practices or activities should be excluded as improper subjects for public discussion, expression, or collective choice; no one should be forced into privacy (Young, 1990). Gender and women's daily experiences are central in the construction of theoretical frameworks and feminist action research methods. Women's experiences are central in several ways in understanding patriarchy as a system of domination and oppression, in identifying key issues and questions in all phases of the research process including action and evaluation, and in giving explicit attention to how women and men as groups benefit from the project.[4]

Feminist action researchers expose the inadequacy of androcentric research and its partial, inaccurate, and incomplete representation of human experience when women are muted (Maguire, 2001). By beginning with the experiences and research needs of women who have traditionally been silenced, the process of knowledge production is transformed and the ideological power base is challenged (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Feminist action researchers seek to connect the articulated, contextualized personal with the often hidden or invisible structural and social institutions that define and shape our lives. Feminist action researchers attempt to make possible the development of strategies and programs based on real life experience rather than theories or assumptions, providing an analysis of issues based on a description of how women actually experience those issues (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992).

Participation

Inclusion is a precursor to the second principle of feminist action research participation. To participate is "to take part, join, or share with others" (Morris, 1982). Feminist action researchers are committed to making women's voices more audible and facilitating women's empowerment through "ordinary talk" (Maguire, 2001). Some researchers have attempted to outline different kinds and levels of participation. Herbert (1996) discussed levels of participation as the "seven Cs," ranging from collusion, co-opting, coercion, convincing, coordination, and cooperation, to true collaboration. It is essential that researchers in partnership with communities be clear about the level of participation they are expecting and inviting (Herbert, 1996). It is also important to question who is participating, why they are participating, to what

degree and in what phase of the project they are participating, and where the true power lies (Wallerstein, 1999).

Feminist action researchers contend that at all stages of research, full collaboration and participation should occur between the researched and the researcher and among the research participants. Shared decision-making must be promoted. Collaboration is seen as central to building knowledge and co-creating meanings that will engage the researcher and the research participants in mutual dialogue (Van Den Bergh, 1995).

Individual and collective action

The third principle of feminist action research is individual and collective action. Action is defined as "the transmission of energy, force, or influence" (Morris, 1982, p.13). Action is a dynamic process (McWilliam, 1996); what action looks like is based on one's social, economic, and political situations; and action can occur on both individual and collective levels. People with problems figure out what to do by first finding out their causes and then acting on insight (Park, 2001). Through action we learn how the world works, what we can do, and who we are we learn with mind and heart and this is how we become aware and emancipated, or how we learn our powerlessness. Action is an integral part of reflective knowledge, and can be conceptualized as speaking, or attempting to speak, to validate oneself and one's experiences and understandings in and of the world (Gordon, 2001). Lorde (1984) advocates turning silence into language and action.

Action can produce changes in participants that go beyond intellectual understandings. Thus the processes of individual and collective action can encompass a wide range of endeavours leaving the house, managing one's day-to-day life and health issues, attempts at negotiating the welfare and health care system, the development of an identification and shared fate with a group, the growth of a sense of self and collective efficacy, the belief that action is possible, and the capacity to develop individual and collective strategies for action (Israel et al., 1994).

Social change

The purpose of feminist action research is to create new relationships, better laws, and improved institutions (Reinharz, 1992). Social change can be envisioned as the outcome of deliberate individual and collective actions. Many feminists envision social change as moving toward "a society that would develop individuality but shift the balance from individual rights towards the rights of the majority and the collective, and that would validate the pursuit of the common good rather than individual self-interest" (Adamson, Briskin, & McPhail, 1988, p.101). Social change is the process of altering the initial situation of a group, organization, or community in the direction of a more liberated state (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Maguire (2001) envisions social change as "the long haul struggle to create a world in which the full range of human characteristics, resources, experiences, and dreams are available to all our children" (p.66). It is important to note that although most feminist action researchers avow social change as the ultimate goal of their research endeavours, it remains poorly understood and conceptualized. More work is needed to theorize and describe the work of social change and the relationship between diverse actions and social change.

Researcher reflexivity

The final principle of feminist action research is researcher reflexivity. Feminist action researchers advocate high standards of reflexivity, openness, and transparency about the choices made throughout any empirical study (Coleman & Rippin, 2000; Edwards & Ribbens, 1998; Hertz, 1996; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Reay, 1996; Rose, 1997; Tom, 1997). Reflexivity is the capacity to locate one's research activity in

the same social world as the phenomena being studied and to explain the nature of research within the same framework as is used to theorize about the objects of study (Reason, 1994). Feminist action researchers need to openly and honestly recognize their "conceptual baggage" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), and to consider the implications of their power. Feminist action researchers are expected to be transparent and to appreciate methodological, epistemological, and political influences, contradictions, and complexities in all stages of research (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

Researchers who adopt a reflexive stance do not see themselves as occupying a privileged position outside the world they study. The research they engage in is not a neutral procedure for discovering an "objective" external reality that exists independent of human perception and interpretation. The aspects of the environment that are noticed and singled out for inquiry, and the procedures which are used to describe and explain phenomena, are ideological in the sense that they are socially constructed in a particular time and place (Poland, 1998).

At its core, reflexivity is about reflecting on power a researcher's power to perceive, interpret, and communicate about Others. In her discussion of developing authentic student-faculty relationships, Tom (1997) writes about being "deliberate." A "deliberate relationship" is one that is entered consciously and ethically. Often the reasons for wanting and entering a relationship are unclear and very different "because I have initiated the relationship, they may not be as clear about what they want as I am about what I want" (p.4). Feminist action researchers must strive to be "deliberately reflexive," to take responsibility for thoughtful and reflective practice, and to remain conscious of the inherent power dynamics in the research process (Reid, 2004).

Dimensions of FAR

The dimensions of feminist action research are essential considerations at any stage of a project. The questions posed in each of the following dimensions raise important considerations for a feminist action researcher and her research community. These considerations are also relevant for any researcher who wishes to conduct systematic, thorough research. Although these questions can be relevant to many community-based research initiatives, given the FAR guiding principles they are particularly relevant to the feminist action researcher since they provide a starting point for analysis and can generate insight into the varied and multiple outcomes of any FAR endeavour.

Membership dimension

- Who is this project for? Who is currently involved? Has anyone dropped out?
- How are the roles of people involved in this project rationalized and justified?
- Who should or could be involved who is not involved at the present time, and why?
- Is the membership diverse? In what ways is it diverse and in what ways homogeneous?
- Are there power differences between the members? How do these power differences "show themselves" and play out?

Organizational structure and group configuration dimension

- Are there different levels of organizing (a ruling group, a board of directions, an advisory group, etc.), and what is each level's function?
- What is the influence of different stakeholders (researchers, community workers, community members, etc.) in the group(s)? How do their own values influence the group dynamic and processes?

- In what ways do the research participants and researchers engage in the research process? Do they participate as one large group or have they divided themselves into subgroups?
- What are the group divisions based upon (common interest, geography, political orientation, identity, other?)

Dominant processes and values dimension

- What are the values and vision of this project?
- Are there rules and regulations for being involved?
- What are the dominant decision-making processes? Are they adhered to at all levels of the project? Are they uniformly agreed upon?
- Who are the major decision-makers?
- How is group process discussed and adhered to?
- How are the values and the vision implemented and operationalized? Is it driven by all or by a select few?
- How is diversity understood and practiced?
- Are there different forms of organizing within the project? Are there different values within the project?
- What are some examples of power being negotiated? (i.e. sharing and abuses of power)
- What are some examples of collaboration and participation?

Critical events and conflicts dimension

- What has happened in the course of the project that has changed or shifted the overall direction of the project?
- How is conflict managed and discussed?
- Were the critical events or conflicts considered to be important at the time they occurred or are they seen as critical retrospectively?

Broader context and environment dimension

- Where is the project taking place? What are the demographics and characteristics of the local environment?
- Who are the influential actors and organizations? Are they directly involved or more peripheral?
- How does the environment in which this project takes place affect group decision making, group processes, and outcomes?
- Are there several contexts or environments to consider? Do they interact or act alone?
- What is the dominant social, economic, and political context at the time of the project? Has it shifted over time, and if so, how has the project been affected?

Temporal dimension

- When did this project begin, and how?
- At what stage is the project currently?
- What is the projected timeline for the project?

The delineation of these FAR dimensions, through asking key questions, can act as a starting point for understanding the factors that influence the trajectory of any FAR endeavour. Since FAR is explicitly aimed at being relevant to, and integrated into, community issues and concerns, factors such as group

process, broader social and cultural influences, and the location of the project in time and space must be considered. The dimensions listed above are meant to be understood as a starting point and developed more fully in relation to specific FAR projects.

A caveat: The marginalization and co-optation of FAR's ideals

In describing and promoting a FAR framework, an important caveat remains: tensions have surfaced in marrying PR with feminist theory and methods. This integration has been riddled with challenges around the inherent contradiction in values and goals between academic feminism and feminist and participatory processes that advocate the democratization of knowledge. It is important to note that anyone, not just feminists, interested in social change, action research, or emancipation, regardless of theoretical frame, is marginalized to some degree within the academy. There have been many criticisms lobbied against feminist scholars for advocating the democratization of research but who practice in more traditional, top-down ways. Some academic feminists have tended to maintain control over research projects and knowledge creation as have conventional non-feminist researchers, rarely empowering the women they study (Maguire, 1987). By maintaining this control and distance, feminist scholarship can end up furthering the gap between the researcher and the researched and benefiting the researcher more than those studied. This behaviour undercuts some of the goals set forth by feminist action researchers and reproduces aspects of traditional academic research.

As well, some feminist fieldworker-scholars have tended not to take up the call of more participatory research and have held on to the reins of research and writing (Wolf, 1996). At times the esoteric language of much feminist scholarship keeps feminist researchers from putting their research to use. Esotericism effectively keeps the knowledge constructed by feminist scholars out of the hands of feminist activists and practitioners. It can also keep feminists inside the academy from understanding one another (Martin, 1996). Research with a more participatory component, like feminist action research, challenges feminist scholars to practice what they believe and may preach more egalitarian approaches to empowerment that are with, and not simply for, the researched population. While this is deeply connected to the structure of power and privilege in the academy, it nonetheless points to a highly problematic contradiction among feminist scholars (Wolf, 1996).

Such difficulties arise in part because there are different uses of knowledge in the academy from those in community or workplace situations. Knowledge is a commodity by which academics do far more than exchange ideas it is the very means of exchange for the academic political economy (Hall, 1992). Academics are under economic, job survival, or advancement pressures to produce in university-approved ways. The dominant methodology of an academic discipline usually supports the existing power structure of the discipline and its environment. Often, leaders in academia favour complex methods that outsiders cannot use or understand and devalue the knowledge of lower-status colleagues and the general public (Cancian, 1992). Public confidence in scholarly objectivity has consequently been eroded by growing awareness of the material interests and ideological prejudices that have a profound influence on the consciousness and practices of researchers and on the conclusions drawn from their work (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

In many cases the academic reward system renders traditional discipline-bound research the main form of legitimate research in the eyes of university tenure and promotion committees (Nyden & Wiewel, 1992). People who challenge this methodology risk being marginalized, rejected, or otherwise punished (Cancian, 1992). These structural pressures impede academic engagement in participatory and feminist action research processes (Hall, 1992). FAR discourse promotes shifting power or structural changes through the knowledge generated. Yet such radical methods directly challenge the system of inequality in academia and may draw opposition (Cancian, 1992).[5]

Paradoxically, despite these challenges and tensions, there are increasing numbers of academic researchers attempting to adopt PR or FAR processes. In Canada, "partnering," "participation," "collaboration," and "community" are terms commonly seen in research grant proposals in the social sciences. In some disciplines the proliferation and popularization of these terms have diluted their meanings; they have become open, multiple, contested, and contestable, and have adopted the appearance of slogans or mantras that are so charged with multiple meanings that they are now empty and almost meaningless (Poland, 1998). "Participation" is often, and erroneously, used interchangeably with consultation, and rarely are research participants, often positioned as "partners" in a research proposal, active in all stages of a research project. The popularization of the core features of PR and FAR has caused many activists to worry legitimately about co-optation of their perspectives for the purposes of obscuring and blunting democratic initiatives (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In many cases participation has been exclusively looked at as a way to improve the final product rather than as a tool for developing a process of social transformation. With new words, but old techniques, the separation between the subject and the object of research persists and the dominant features of such practices continue.

Some final thoughts

Despite the tensions and challenges that exist, the deliberate, authentic, and reflective use of FAR holds many promises. From the outset of any research initiative, it is essential for feminist action researchers to be clear about the promises, parameters, and guiding principles of the research. Through critically examining the dimensions of FAR and the researcher's own ongoing reflexivity, accurate portrayals of the possibilities and limitations of FAR may arise. It is also imperative for researchers and major funding agencies to define their terms, to recognize and resist the rhetoric that abounds, and to demand research practices that reflect FAR's true principles. The use of a FAR framework can open horizons of discussion and create spaces for collective reflection in which new descriptions and analyses of important situations may be developed (Greenwood & Levin, ddd 1998). Adopting a FAR framework can also enable more complete understandings of the factors that perpetuate social injustices while providing strategies for responding such injustices through advocating collective action towards social change. As a postdoctoral researcher who is devoted to examining women's health and is committed to a social justice agenda, I have had to consistently examine my own role in and expectations of any research project and to clearly articulate what it means, both theoretically and methodologically, to be a feminist action researcher and to participate in feminist action research. Indeed, "emancipatory social research calls for empowering approaches where both researcher and researched become the changer and the changed" (Cris Williamson, cited in Lather, 1991).

Notes

1. For clarity and consistency I use the term participatory research (PR). Participatory research includes the sister trends of action research, participatory action research, and other schools of participative inquiry, including co-operative inquiry, participatory rural appraisal, and participatory evaluation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Maguire, 2001).

2. "Feminisms" is a term used to convey the diversity within feminist theoretical and political views on understanding the oppression of women (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

3. Marx and neo-Marxists linked the concept of praxis with a production paradigm in the interests of historical explanation. In more recent times praxis has played a prominent role in the formation of the school of critical theory, in which praxis is seen to be more directly associated with discourse, communication, and social practices (Audi, 1995).

4. Integrative feminism, which recognizes diversity, is central to theoretical discussions on FAR (Maguire, 2001). Multiple inequalities exist on the basis of race, class and other factors (Cancian, 1992). Feminists have clarified how the concept of 'women in general' falsely universalizes and privileges the perspective of middle-class, heterosexual white women and denies and devalues the experiences of other women (hooks, 1984). Gender and women's diversity should be central in emerging explanatory frameworks. Hearing and affirming a multiplicity of voices can 'bridge the gaps' between people from different social positions (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

5. On a personal note, when I was a graduate student and attended academic conferences I was often warned that feminist action research is risky for graduate students, that I may encounter opposition in doing it, and that only tenured academics have the "liberty" or "freedom" to engage in such work.

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