

CHAPTER 10 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH AMONG RURAL AFRICAN WOMEN IN TRANSKEI

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Introduction

The question of whether feminist social scientists should use a distinctive methodology has been a concern of some scholars and has been debated at length. At the centre of such debates is the question of positive and value-free science. The philosophy of positivism is based on Comte's view of a science of society that has formed the basic foundation for subsequent development of the social sciences (Babbie 1995).

It is true that alternative approaches to research that will give voice to women's experiences have been offered. Methods like those used by cultural anthropologists based on participant observation, case studies or biographies. However in this paper I argue for a feminist methodology that combines three imperatives: sensitivity to the spontaneous cultural formations and philosophies that are part and parcel of rural localities; a shift to an Afro-centric view of the role of women in rural societies and a localised notion of the role of gender in social relations.

Background to the Paper

This paper has grown out of doing research among rural women in the Transkei. The paper is based on two studies conducted in the villages of Transkei on "women and poverty and resource development". From the experience gained from undertaking such studies, what emerged could be properly integrated to form anew take on a feminist methodology that is a departure from Euro-centric notions. The processes embarked upon in an attempt to enter the social realities of the researched (indigenous rural women) by focusing closely on the songs that they sing and which form such a central aspect of their working and communal life.

Often during the course of data collection as we moved in and out of the homes in the villages, we found the women immersed in their work around the homestead and in the fields. As this was during the ploughing season, most of them were in the fields (which are a distance away from their homesteads), tilling the soil. Those that were not in the fields were either at home engaged in house work, cleaning their homes with cowdung that is used for polishing the floors, or

plastering the walls of their huts with the same mixture; or out in the forests fetching fire-wood and collecting water for their households' needs. A common feature with all these activities was that most of them were engaged in singing. They seemed to carry their music everywhere they went. Everywhere they were together as a group, never mind how small the group was, they sang. Singing appeared to be part and parcel of their daily involvements. At times the singing would be accompanied by dancing, dancing that went along with the rhythm of the songs.

It seemed to me that our presence as researchers was disturbing their world- a world of production. Production in this context was multifaceted. Firstly, there is the production of music itself. Secondly, there were also the tasks that were accelerated by the songs they sang, be it washing, cleaning, ploughing, plastering, polishing and/or cooking. The singing helped in the production of work. Lastly, but not the least was the production of knowledges - knowledges about our own societies and those societies we know so little about.

As one listened to the music one was able to learn a lot from the songs that were sung. The songs are about their experiences, their lives in the villages and a processing mechanism of old and new normative assessments. And in these three "nodes" and specifically in the analysis of the songs that a new grounded methodology can emerge- indeed a feminist research process.

What is Feminist Methodology?

Feminist methodologies emerged as a result of the criticisms of feminist researchers and philosophers who questioned the exclusivity of empiricist science and the absence of practices of critical reflection on and analysis of research techniques and processes (Fonow and Cook 1991). The issue of methods became necessary as the distortions that had been created by traditional science had to be corrected. This was sought from feminist methodologies. Harding (1987, p.3) defined methodology as:

a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed: it includes 'accounts of how the general structure of theory finds its application in particular scientific disciplines'.

Both Fonow and Cook as well as Harding understand methods to refer to techniques and procedures used in data collection during the research process. Feminist methodology looks at the experiences of women from the women's point of view and contributes alternative approaches to the study of social life that can give a better understanding of reality. Collins (1991) describes the benefits of conducting research using what she calls the "outsider within" position. "The 'outsider within' position has provided for the African-American women a special perspective on self, family, and society" (Collins 1991, p.41). For her this position allows the 'outsider' to see the patterns in situations that are not observed by

the 'insiders' or those involved in the situation. Collins (1991, p.55) quoting Schutz says:

The stranger...does not share the basic assumptions of the group. He becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group...To him the cultural patterns of the approached group do not have the authority of a tested system of recipes...because he does not partake in the vivid historical tradition by which it has been formed.

In a stratified society it is impossible to have impartial disinterested individual creators of knowledge. Each person can only see life from their however impartial, *distorted* view. Feminist methodologies give us a variety of approaches and perspectives with which to study social life.

Feminist epistemology draws attention to the benefits of an increasingly diverse pool of labourers that scientists can draw from. Harding (1991) argues that the vision that women bring to knowledge, which is supposedly pure and fresh is not valued not because they are women but because it is new. This is largely so because it does not subscribe to the traditional norms of methodology. Anything that is different is uncomfortable because it suggests a different or a new avenue that others view as reality.

Towards an Indigenous Method

My purpose in assembling my experience and those of the sociology students who did the research into this paper is to enable a better understanding of a possible methodology in feminist research. This view is from a rural perspective and does not only encapsulates the world view of the researched but also allows the researcher to enter the world of the researched. The studies that were done in Transkei among rural women were conducted from the women's perspectives from an indigenous Afrocentric standpoint. The need for this methodology or analysis comes from the limitations placed on the non-positivistic methods by positivistic ones and other traditional research methodologies based on a Eurocentric approach. The researchers have continuously debated the question of 'what methods should be used in feminists analysis of society?' Are other methods, other than the traditional research methods, appropriate for a feminist analysis of rural women? Such questions have been raised and debated by feminists critics of the social sciences (Mowrey 1995, bell hooks 1993.)

Postmodernist debates have had a powerful impact on the nature of the assumptions that have emerged on the use of other methods other than the traditional methods. They argue for the relevance of a postmodernist philosophy that is necessary for a creation of a feminism that is "more inclusive in both theory and practice by directing attention to previously silenced voices and challenging the assumptions..." (Mowrey 1995, p.275).

This view is meant as an attempt at transforming the research process in particular that of the indigenous cultures. What stands out from the experiences gained in this type of research is the fact that rural women's experiences of oppression afford them a better insight into their problems that they can articulate this in a manner that will convey their lived experiences, unconsciously, through for example, song and dance. The following song describes some aspects of rural women's experiences:

He wethu, awuyazi oyifunayo (repeated in soprano)
 He wethu, awuyazi oyifunayo (repeated in alto and bass)
 Ndikunike'isandla, ndikunika nengalo, ndikunik'amabele
 Awuyaz' oyifunayo

The English translation would read like:

Hey friend, you don't know what you want (repeat)
 Hey friend, you don't know what you want (repeat)
 I give you my hand, I give you my arm, I give you my breast
 You don't really know what you want.

This is a song of protest, commonly sung by women with a rhythm. The dance that accompanies the song is very graphic and informing. From merely watching the dance and the actions that go along with the song one gets an informed view of the situation under which women live. The interpretation again can be confusing and misleading if taken literally. The song has a power dimension to it, the power that women have, that has not been acknowledged. It spells out the women's protest against men's controlling and sexual behaviours. It's a warning against those who want to own, possess and exploit women's friendships. From the song one gets to understand the problems that women experience in their relationship with men.

Thus song and dance give us that ability to comprehend expressions of people's innermost feelings. They show us how those concerned are shaped into a community and are urged into action. Be it at a funeral, a wedding, a circumcision ceremony, a graduation or at work, a complex set of codes are being communicated and enforced. Singing in African culture is found in all walks of life, it occupies a centre stage. It is a form of innate art and has an aesthetic value, as part of the aesthetic knowledge of the African people. It needs no practice. When African people celebrate anything they sing, their celebration is expressed through songs. When they perform their daily tasks working at the mines, in prison, at church, at political rallies, in war, in the fields. Singing is the corner stone of their existence. It is about who they are and what they do. Why should we not therefore use such opportunities as methods to capture what the women are about? The songs reveal a certain approach to life which is descriptive, analytical, systematic and reveals the innermost feelings. This power to convey how one feels and how one has internalized, and is able to project, one's experiences in a manner that is rather

disturbing to the positivistic methodologists has led to the debate on: "Are there different ways of knowing?"

It is a method that approaches the informant in a comfortable, non-threatening manner, starting from where the informant is. I have often wondered what went wrong with our African civilization system. The problem, I would want to believe is partly found in our failure in marginalising those members of our society (viz the rural, old, less formally-educated people, who can meaningfully contribute to the epistemological foundations of our cultural development. These people have been marginalised by western epistemological ways of knowing. It is lamentable that even the African gate-keepers of knowledge seem not to desire to centre the rural and old people and to include them as sources and creators of knowledges.

In allowing people to use the traditional way to share what they know, allows us the opportunity to enter their world views. When the women sing and dance, they in a way re-live their lives. They get into their world and express their innermost emotions. Getting into their worlds at such moments can be a productive experience for any researcher provided the correct approach is used.

For me doing research among rural women in Transkei has called for a methodology that approaches the study from the informants' position, 'going native' in a manner that will not cloud or confuse one's ultimate goal. Listening to their songs and watching their movements as they have allowed me to enter their space and attempt to learn of their experiences and also to understand them better has given me a better understanding of their lives and experiences.

Listening and analyzing the songs that women sing as they go about their daily tasks, be it in agricultural work - working in the fields, or performing daily tasks like fetching water from the rivers, doing washing at the river site, collecting wood from the forests, has allowed me to get a better perspective of their lives and enter their world views. In fact it has also helped me in the process of gaining entry into their world because I began my interviews by asking what the songs were about. Often this has been met by laughter and more singing and at times I got explanations of what the songs were about their meaning. But often the interpretation of the songs was left to me. And the interpretation of the songs can be problematic if not properly handled. For instance, the song which follows depicts exactly what I'm talking about when I make reference to misinterpretations that are often made by outsiders when interpreting songs.

Wathinta umfazi, wathinta imbokodo

This is a very popular song which has even become a slogan for African women. The Eurocentric translation that has been imported is:

"You strike a woman, you strike a rock"

This is obviously, seriously flawed, and gives a wrong contextual meaning for the African women. In the first place, the literary translation does not convey what the song/slogan is about. Second, the linguistic equivalence of "thinta" is not "strike" as it is made to be or to mean. Again, "imbokodo" is not "a rock" in this context. Properly interpreted the song should mean: *Touching a woman is*

like touching a crushing stone - "imbokodo". The "imbokodo" is a smooth, roundish, stone that is used for crushing mealies on a grinding stone. The grinding stone has a hollow shape in the middle to allow for the grinding of the mealies. What is used to crush the mealies is the roundish crushing stone called "imbokodo". The grinding of mealies is an art that not every woman has. The song conveys the power that the women have. The fact that when the women take over, then we must know that they will perform the task with precision and the end results will be good.

Historically, African songs of rural people, especially women have been dismissed on the basis of their verbal texts, and yet it has been shown that the texts are in fact complex and require careful decoding and a critical analysis in order that they portray symbolic meanings (Stewart 1995).

It is worth noting that in the textual analysis of the songs one can gain a lot of things. Women use songs to air their grievances and begin to negotiate for better resolutions of conflict. It provides a type of healing for the singers. I would like to agree with Stewart (1995) who suggests that women display a profound insight into their subordinate position in a patriarchal society and have found creative ways of resisting domination by using song as a voice. Referring to rural Zulu women, Stewart (1995, p.10) attests that:

songs recorded while the singers were cutting cane or hoeing fields, demonstrate that the rural Zulu women have adopted and adapted the tradition of corn threshing or corn pounding songs as a means of finding an individual and collective voice of a social protest against male domination and their state of powerlessness.

There are a number of benefits in using this type of analysis:

First, there is the ability to know what the women are experiencing and how, without them consciously making an effort at doing so. Second, from the informants, the easiness with which they relate to the researchers is further proof of the importance of the method. Third, the importance of this methodology is seen in the production of work (around the home as they plaster (*ukutyabeka*) their huts and in the fields as well). One can think of how production occurs at many levels. There is also the production of knowledge as we get to know their world better, understand their frustrations and concerns through the songs they sing. For the social scientist the method is descriptive, however for the ordinary person this is subject to many interpretations and misinterpretations as well.

This standpoint of analyzing the songs may not find room among the positivist scientists who reduce social science to the natural science model and suppress the hermeneutic and postmodern dimensions (Burawoy 1991). What the paper advocates is the existence of a type of methodology that I refer to as African feminist or better still, indigenous African women research, which is known in other circles as "reality research" (American Indian Research and Policy Institute) (AIRPI 1996). "Reality research" uses methods which respect and incorporate basic tenets of a culture which makes the research more meaningful. It reflects the realities of

an indigenous people and tells their stories as never before, from their own point of view and from an indigenous oral-history standpoint. Doing indigenous research not only affords knowledge to the African women, but to the wider community as well. Indigenous research is a method that is inclusive and reflective of African women's world views. It reflects the reality of African women and allows them to tell their stories in a different manner, from an African women's standpoint.

This method is important for research in rural areas amongst African women because African songs portray a kind of oral history. Using a method of research which respects and incorporates such basic tenets of a people's culture makes our research more meaningful to African communities. Here, sound research is translated into terms understood by Africans and the results are good and benefit our communities (AIRPI 1996).

This standpoint in fact virtually means that even the marginalised are able to contribute to knowledge. Collins (1991), addressing the concept of Black feminist thought talks of "outsider within" pointing out that this position has provided for the African - American women a special perspective of self, family and society. African-American women have been pushed by their marginalization to create Black feminism (Collins 1991).

"Reality research", or emancipatory research or indigenous research is a powerful tool to encapsulate the new ways of knowledge. Shulamit's (1992) comprehensive study of feminist methods examines a variety of traditional research processes: interviews, ethnography, survey, case study etc. She found that feminists tend to use interviews, case studies and oral histories more than other methods as well as a combination of a variety of techniques and processes. This suggests that they are open to innovations in research procedures, designs and techniques appropriate to their research interests (Harris 1995). This indicates flexibility in feminist researchers' use of methods.

Conclusion

For us in South Africa, the shifting political contours, all call upon all South African scholars to rethink and rewrite their epistemological methods for a new South Africa. A tinge of indigenous ways of knowing about Africans may help the whole of Africa at founding emancipatory, inclusionary and liberating epistemologies. It seems from this paper that African rural women can also contribute to knowledge if this knowledge is tapped in a relevant manner, and recognised and validated. Scholars like bell hooks (1993), Collins (1991), Gilligan (1982), Gramsci (1985), Giroux (1983, 1992), Foucault (1985) and many others attest to the existence of a variety of knowledges.

Gramsci (1984, p.34) attests that all persons are intellectuals in that they think, mediate and adhere to specific views of the world. Again he echoes that all persons are philosophers in that they have a spontaneous philosophy contained in language; common sense and good sense; and popular spirituality whether it be beliefs,

superstitions, opinion or ways of seeing things and acting (1988, p.325) In fact to quote him:

I give culture the meaning : exercise of thought acquisition of general ideas, habit of connecting causes and effects. For me, everybody is already cultured because everybody thinks, everybody connects causes and effects, but are...., primordially cultured and not organically (Gramsci, 1991, p.25)

African women's knowledge or "spontaneous philosophy" has much in common with what Foucault' calls "naive knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity, which are directly disqualified knowledges ..." (1980, p.82). These are people's knowledges - local regional knowledge, a differentiated knowledge which only gains its force from the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it.

Feminist methodology allows us to be enriched by experiences in a manner that has been rather disturbing. African women are condemned to the lowest forms of knowledge as mindless and voiceless and subject to the wishes of external authority (Belenky et als 1986). Methodologists too should begin to reconceptualise their methods to be all inclusive of the marginalization.

I would like to believe that this methodology of analyzing songs may greatly benefit and enrich contemporary indigenous methodologies. Bringing such methodologies at the centre, and those others who share similar visions for future research methods may begin to pave ways for views of reality that have previously been marginalized and obscured by the more orthodox methods. The implications of this paper for social science methodology are found in its usefulness for indigenous cultures and other marginalised rural communities who need to be researched.

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