For some time now feminist geographers have been engaged in a lively debate about research methods and methodology. Debates are an important part of knowledge production, and feminist geographers have not (and do not) all agree on the best way to produce feminist understandings of the world. In part this is because there is not a singular feminist geography but rather several strands existing simultaneously. So there are multiple, even competing visions of feminist geographies, with disagreements, negotiations, and compromises around different approaches to practising and producing feminist geographies. That said, there are commonalities among the strands of feminist geography. At the heart of feminist geographical analyses are the complexities of power, privilege, oppression, representation, and gender foregrounded as the primary social relation (although gender is increasingly understood as constructed across a multiplicity of social relations of difference). Feminist geographers expose the (often ‘naturalized’) power relations in past and contemporary constructions of gender. And feminist geographers share the political and intellectual goal of socially and politically changing the world they seek to understand.

Feminist research challenges and redefines disciplinary assumptions and methods, and develops new understandings of what counts as knowledge. In this chapter I discuss one of the most important aspects of ‘the feminist challenge’: our debates about methods (techniques used to collect and analyse ‘data’) and methodologies (the epistemological or theoretical stance taken towards a particular research problem). The task of the first feminist geographers was to recover women in human geography and to address geographers’ persistent erasure of gender differences. Thus early feminist scholarship closely focused on challenging male dominance, making women’s lives visible and counting and ‘mapping’ gender inequalities. Debates about methods and methodologies were about the usefulness for feminists of existing (gender-blind, sexist, malestream) methods of inquiry, especially quantitative methods, standardized surveys and ‘traditional’ interviews conducted ‘objectively’. Debates focused on ‘Is there a feminist method?’ and ‘Which method is most feminist?’ Feminist here is adjectival in the sense of whether certain research methods are ‘feminist’ in the way that some are ‘quantitative’ or ‘qualitative’. Qualitative methods, especially interactive interviews, were generally considered best suited to the goals and politics of feminist analysis (Reinhart, 1979; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993). In their recollections about these early feminist debates, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993) assert that they were not really about method as such, but about sexist methodologies and competing epistemologies. In fact they and others argue that there is nothing inherently feminist in either quantitative or qualitative methods, but that what is ‘feminist is the epistemological stance taken towards methods and the uses to which researchers put them. No single method provides privileged access to the truth, and as it becomes less imperative (and less expedient) to associate certain methods with particular epistemologies, there has been a move towards the choice of appropriate method depending on the research question being asked.

The argument I make in this chapter is that feminists’ contributions to research practices in human geography are generally more about epistemology (ways of knowing the world), methodology, and politics than about inventing new research methods. In the first section I discuss the various epistemological claims feminist scholars make about research methods and methodologies. In the second section I turn to the methods feminist geographers rely on to produce and represent feminist understandings of the world.

Methods and Methodology in Feminist Geographies

Since its inception in the 1970s, feminist geography has deconstructed the ‘taken-for-granted’ and offered profound and influential critiques of conventional concepts and categories in human geography (see Chapter 4). Across the academy, feminist scholars challenged conventional wisdom that ‘good research’ requires impartiality and ‘scientific’ objectivity. Since then feminist scholars have continued to challenge conventional wisdom and to develop feminist approaches to knowledge. Feminists have produced a sizeable literature about feminist methods and methodologies, and in the last several years geographers have published many book chapters and journal articles on this topic (e.g. McDowell, 1992; special issues of The Canadian Geographer, 1993; The Professional Geographer, 1994; 1995; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Jones et al., 1997; Moss, 2001; 2002; ACME, 2003). In this section I describe the major elements of the discussion regarding the epistemological claims and politics of practicing feminist research that are entwined in the ongoing process of feminist knowledge creation and feminists’ commitment to progressive research practices. (Much of my description of this discussion is about face-to-face research encounters, but similar arguments are made about other methods: see Gillian Rose, 2001 on visual cultures and methodologies; and Mona Domosh, 1997 on feminist historical geography)

Critique of positivism and situated knowledges

The ‘western industrial scientific approach values the orderly, rational, quantifiable, predictable, abstract and theoretical: feminism spits in its eye’ (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 66). Early on, feminists raised suspicions that ‘good research’ could be produced only by unbiased ‘experts’ seeking universal truths by using value-free data where ‘the facts speak for themselves’. Research informed by the ‘western industrial scientific approach’ is anchored by a positivist epistemology of objectivity. Positivism, what it values (rationality, etc.), and the search for universal truths and all-encompassing knowledge constitute an approach Donna Haraway describes as all-seeing ‘god trick . . . seeing everything from nowhere’ (1991: 189). No research inquiry, whether positivist or indeed humanist or feminist, exists outside the realm of objectivity and politics; research is never value-free (even ‘hard science’ research). Instead, feminists understand research to be produced in a world already interpreted by people, including ourselves, who live their lives in it. By becoming ‘researchers’, whether physicists or feminists, we cannot put aside common-sense
understandings of the world. Instead, feminists argue, "good research" must be sensitive to how values, power and politics frame what we take to be "facts", how we develop a particular research approach and what research questions we ask and what we see when conducting research.

Since the early 1990s, feminist critiques of objectivity have been enriched by feminist scholars of science and technology studies (e.g., Fox-Keller, 1985; Haraway, 1986; Haraway, 1991). Evelyn Fox-Keller argues that traditional western thought rests on an ontology (a theory of what is, and the relations between what is) of self/other opposition, and a binary opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity. Her alternative is a feminist relational ontology of self-other mutual-ness and continual process (rather than status). Haraway argues for an embodied feminist objectivity where both researchers and participants are appreciated for their situated knowledge and partial perspectives. Situated knowledge means that there is no one truth waiting to be discovered, and those knowledges are temporal, marked by the contexts in which they are produced, by their specificity, limited location, and partiality.

Researcher–researched relationship and power relations

Sensitivities to power relations lies at the very heart of feminists' discussions about method/ methodology. Traditional objectivist social science methods (be they quantitative or qualitative) position researchers as detached, omniscient experts in control of the research process, the (passive) objects of their research, and themselves (remaining unbiased by being detached, unbiased and distant). Feminist relativism and embodied feminist objectivity challenge this strict dichotomy between object and subject. In feminist research, especially in face-to-face fieldwork, the researched are not passive, they are knowledgeable agents accepted as experts of their own experience. Instead of attempting to minimize interaction (in order to minimize observer bias), feminists deliberately and consciously seek interaction. Feminist researchers try to reduce the distance between themselves and the researched by building on our commonalities, working collaboratively and sharing knowledge. By seeking research relationships based on empathy, mutuality and respect, feminists focus on the informant's own understanding of their circumstances and the social structures in which they are implicated (rather than imposing our explanations). In practice, this means being flexible in question asking, and shifting the direction of the interview according to what the interviewee wants to, or is able to talk about. As a research strategy this may provide deeper understandings of the subtle nuances of meaning that structure and shape the everyday lives of informants, and politically it grounds feminist knowledge and politics in women's everyday experiences.

More recent poststructural feminist theorizing sees researchers and the researched as caught up in complex webs of power and privilege. Much feminist research is about marginalized groups, and there is a great deal of social power associated with being a scholar. Thus research strategies based on an embodied feminist objectivity have the potential to minimize the hierarchical relationship between researcher and interviewee, and to avoid exploiting less powerful people as mere sources of data. At the same time, the research encounter is now understood as being structured by both the researcher and the researched, both of whom construct their worlds. Poststructural understandings of the researcher–researched relationship see it as one whose discursive production of 'field' and create a co-produced project. This idea is also useful when considering the power relations and research relation in feminist geographers' interviews with elites (see for example McDowell, 1998; England, 2002). In this case, we are in positions of less power relative to the researched who are accustomed to having a great deal of control and authority over others, but nevertheless the researcher and researched are still engaged in co-produced research.

Positionality and reflexivity

Among of the most influential elements in feminists' theorizing about the research process are the concepts of positionality and reflexivity (Dowding, 1994; Rose, 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002). These concepts raise important questions about the politics and ethics of research, and have been highly influential concepts both within and beyond feminist geography. Positionality is about how people view the world from different embodied locations. The situatedness of knowledge means whether we are researchers or participants, we are differently situated by our social, intellectual and spatial locations, by our intellectual history and our lived experience, all of which shape our understandings of the world we construct the knowledge we produce. Positionality also refers to how we are positioned (by ourselves, by others, by particular discourses) in relation to multiple relational social processes of difference (gender, class, race/ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on), which also means we see differently positioned in hierarchies of power and privilege. Our positionality shapes our research, and may inhibit or enable certain research insights (see Moss, 2001 where geographers discuss their autobiographies in relation to their research). Positionality has been further extended to include considering others' reactions to us as researchers. As researchers we are a visible, indeed embodied and integral part of the research process (rather than external, detached observers). So both our embodied presence as researchers and the participants' response to us mediate the information collected in the research encounter.

In a research context, reflexivity means the self-conscious, analytical scrutiny of one's self as a researcher. Within feminist methodologies, reflexivity extends to a consideration of power and its consequences within the research relationship. Gillian Rose (1997) raises concerns about a possible emerging feminist orthodox about reflexivity. She argues that being reflexive cannot make everything completely transparent and we cannot fully locate ourselves within research, because we never fully understand (or are fully aware of) our position in webs of power. Her concern reminds us to constantly interrogate our assumptions and remember that knowledge is always partial, including that about ourselves. Nevertheless, reflexivity gets us to think about the consequences of our interactions with the researched. For instance, is what we might find actually worth the intrusion into other people's lives? Are we engaging in appropriation or even theft of other people's knowledges? However, while reflexivity can make us more aware of power relations, and asymmetrical or exploitative research relations, it does not remove them, so we alone have to accept responsibility for our research.

Politics and accountability

Feminist geographers argue that we must be accountable for our research, for our intrusions into people's lives, and for our representations of those lives in our final papers. We still need to acknowledge our own positionality and our locations in systems of privilege and oppression, and be sure that we write this into our papers. As Lawrence Berg and Juliana Mansvelt argue, 'The process of writing constructs what we know about our research but it also speaks powerfully about who we are.
and where we speak from' (2000: 173). We need to be accountable for the consequences of our interactions with those we research (and many university ethics review boards require this). This is acutely important where our research might expose previously invisible practices to those who could use that information in oppressive ways, even when our goal was to make systems of oppression more transparent to the oppressed (Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994). For example, some researchers studying lesbian communities do not reveal the location of their fieldwork (see for example Valentine, 1993), out of respect both for the participants’ desire not to be ‘outed’, and for the participants’ concerns about reprisals, including physical attack.

Feminist geographers share the political and intellectual goal of socially and politically changing the world our research seeks to understand. The increased popularity of reflexivity and positional research has raised serious political and ethical dilemmas, a crisis even, about working with groups we do not belong to. This raises difficult questions about the politics of location (both socially and geographically, including white women from the global north researching women from the global south). This has been an especially contentious and even painful debate for feminists, both inside and outside the academy. Some academic feminists have abandoned research projects involving groups to which they have no social claim, leaving them to those with ‘insider status’. This discussion escalated just as (or because?) feminist geographers are becoming increasingly committed to taking account of the diverse positionings of women (and men and children) across a wide range of social and spatial settings.

This impasse is especially troubling for those feminists wishing to address multiple and cross-cutting positions of privilege and oppression, and who are committed to effect change. However, Audrey Kobayashi argues that ‘commonality is always partial ... [and so] field research and theoretical analyses have more to gain from building commonality than from essentializing difference’ (1994: 76). This is not to suggest that problematizing essentialism (reifying categories and naturalizing difference) means ignoring difference or dismissing the experiences of marginalized groups, quite the opposite. Rather it means building on the notion that everyone is entangled in multiple webs of privilege and oppression, so that there are really few pure oppressors and pure oppressed. Materially engaged transformative politics can emerge from accepting that privilege results from historical and contemporaneous conditions of oppression, and people are variously located in the resulting webs of power. This means for instance that whether I acknowledge it or not, as a white woman I participate in and benefit from white privilege. For those of us with more social privilege (including being scholars), rather than contesting over our culpability, it may be more productive to address our complicity, to make our lives as sites of resistance and to work hard to unlearn our privilege (Peake and Kobayashi, 2002). Feminists argue that we are committed to the political and intellectual goals not only of exposing power and privilege, but also of transforming them. An important part of that is to understand how the world works, and to theorize how power operates and expose it, because this means we are better able to gauge the possibilities for transformation, and provide situated knowledge that can most effectively produce change.

Producing Feminist Understandings

In this section I discuss how methods are employed by feminist geographers to produce and represent feminist understandings of the world. Generally, methods are described as either qualitative or quantitative, so I begin with broad definitions of each. Then I will provide some examples of how methods are used in feminist geographers' research (see Box 26.1). Finally I address the so-called ‘quantitative–qualitative debate’.

Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods

Quantitative research focuses on questions like ‘how many?’ and ‘how often?’ and seeks to measure general patterns among representative samples of the population. Statistical techniques are used to analyze data, for example, descriptive statistics, spatial statistics and geographic information systems (GIS). The data are often second-hand and usually collected in an ‘official’ capacity, like the census and are based on standardized measures (again like those in the census). Primary data may also be used; the researcher collects their own data usually based on large samples using highly structured questionnaires containing easily quantifiable categories. For examples, see Box 26.1.

Qualitative research focuses on the question of ‘why?’ and seeks to decipher experiences within broader webs of meanings and within sets of social structures and processes. Techniques are interpretive and meanings-centered, like the oral methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and oral histories), participant observation and textual analysis (of, for example, diaries, historical documents, maps, landscapes, films, photographs, and print media). Samples are usually small and are often purposely selected (to relate to the research topic), and if oral methods are used it is not uncommon for researchers to ask informants to help find other participants (known as snowballing). For examples see Box 26.1.

In some instances, feminist understandings of the world are best produced with a politically informed combination of research methods, variously described as mixed methods, multiresearch or triangulation. In human geography we commonly think of mixed methods as mixing qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary strategies. For example in their extensive study of gender, work and space in Worcester, Massachusetts, Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt (1995) sought to understand more fully the complex links between domestic responsibilities, occupational segregation, job search and residential choice. Their research involved statistical analyses and mapping of census data; and the quantitative and qualitative results of semi-structured questionnaires gathered in interviews with 700 working-age women and men from across Worcester, and 150 employers and 200 employees in four different Worcester communities.

‘Mixed methods’ also refer to mixing methods or a variety of ‘data’ within a broadly qualitative or quantitative research project. In the examples in Box 26.1, Richa Nagar’s Dar es Salaam project includes oral histories, interviews and participant observation; and Sara McLafferty’s breast cancer project involved statistical techniques and GIS. Mixed methods can also involve a research design with different investigators coming at the research question from different fields of research or epistemological positions. For example, Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt describe how their collaborative research was not only on their ‘shared interest in feminism and urban social geography but in our differences: one of us having roots in transportation and quantitative geography; the other in housing and cultural geography’ (1995: xiv).

Mixed methods can allow all of these sorts of differences to be held in productive tension, and may keep our research sensitive to a range of questions and debates.

The quantitative–qualitative divide?

The sorts of epistemological claims I described in the previous section mean that feminists do tend to use qualitative rather than quantitative methods. But Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993: 188) point out that even in the early 1980s, few feminist scholars called for an outright rejection of quantitative methods,
BOX 26.1 SOME EXAMPLES OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH IN FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

An example of qualitative feminist research is Richa Nagar’s work on the gendered and classed communal and racial politics in South Asian communities in postcolonial Der es Salaam. Richa’s fieldwork in Tanzania included analyzing documents from Hindu and caste-based organizations and the Tanzanian government; gathering 36 life histories and 98 shorter interviews with Hindu and Jhuna Aisheri (Muslim) women and men of South Asian descent; and conducting participant observations of communal places, homes and neighborhoods. In her paper “I’d rather be rude than ruled” (Nagar, 2000), she tells the stories of four economically privileged women and focuses on their spatial tactics and subversive acts against the dominant gendered practices and codes of conduct in communal public places. Another example of qualitative feminist research is Gillian Rose’s research about interpreting meanings in landscapes and visual representations. Gillian’s recent work investigates visual culture, especially contemporary and historical photographs (see her 2001 book on reading visual culture). In a recent paper (Rose, 2003) about family photographs she explores the idea that the meanings of photographs are established through their uses, in this instance being a ‘proper mother’ and the production of domestic space that extends beyond their house to include, for example, relatives elsewhere (in other places and other times). She conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 white, middle-class mothers with young children. The women showed Gillian family photos, and she took note of where and how the women stored and displayed the photos.

Both Richa and Gillian are posing ‘why?’, questions, and seek to understand meanings within broader social processes and structures. Richa looks at the creation and modification of social identity in context of rapid political and economic change, while Gillian explores the multiple meanings of mothering, ‘the family and domestic space. In each project the samples are small (four women in Richa’s case, 14 in Gillian’s) and the research strategies were based on the participants’ own understanding of their circumstances, which Richa and Gillian interpret in relation to broader social structures and processes. Also, as is common in qualitative research, they write about the research using extensive quotes from the participants, and detailed textual descriptions of the cultural codes and webs of significance evident in and beyond the research setting.

In feminist geography, quantitative methods are frequently employed in what can broadly be described as accessibility studies (such as access to child care, jobs and social services). For example, in a series of papers, Oma Blumen uses census data for Israeli cities to measure quantifiable aspects of gendered intra-urban labor markets (e.g. commuting distances). In a paper with Iris Zamir (Blumen and Zamir, 2001), Oma used census categories of occupations to look at social differentiation in paid employment and residential spaces. They analyzed the data using a weighted index of dissimilarity (a commonly used measure of occupational segregation that captures the segregation of one group relative to another) and smallest space analysis (to produce a graphic presentation—a sort of map—of relative occupational segregation). and they urged feminists to use any and every means possible to produce critically aware feminist understandings of the world. Since the mid 1990s there has been a spirited discussion among feminist geographers about employing quantitative methods, but adapting them as appropriate (The Professional Geographer, 1995; Gender, Place and Culture, 2002). Vicky Lawson argues that ‘feminist scholars can and should employ quantitative methods within the context of relational ontologies to answer particular kinds of questions’ (1995: 453, emphasis in the original). Some feminist geographers argue that certain long-standing feminist critiques of quantitative methods need reconsidering. For example, one criticism is that quantitative research can only analyze a particular cross-section in time (e.g. the census), whereas qualitative research captures changing historical and social contexts. Damaris Rose (2001) suggests that recent innovation in quantitative techniques blurs this distinction. For example, event history analysis involves longitudinal studies and documents the historical sequencing of events to predict statistical probabilities of a particular event generating a particular action. Others claim that critically aware quantitative methodologies are possible. For instance, Sara McLafferty (2002) describes how she was approached in West Islip, New York by women for help in analyzing their breast cancer survey and conducting further statistical analysis (see Box 26.1). Thus, Sara argues, GIS has potential as a tool for feminist activism and women’s empowerment. And Mei-Po Kwan (2002a; 2002b) makes a case for feminist GIS (especially 3D visualization methods), arguing that converting quantitative data into visual representations ‘allows, to a certain extent, a more interpretable mode of analysis than what..."
conventional quantitative methods would permit' (2002b: 271).

My descriptions of qualitative and quantitative methods at the beginning of this section were represented as dichotomies, which is often the way they are represented in method/methodology debates. Potent dichotomies structure our concepts of research (object/subject, researcher/researched) and for feminist geographers an enduring dualism is the quantitative-qualitative divide. But disagreements over methods are often really disagreements about epistemology and methodologies, and the use to which the methods are put. Quantitative and qualitative methods do have different strengths and weaknesses, but rather than a clear epistemological break between quantitative and qualitative methods, there is a fundamental link between the two, because, for instance, one often involves an element of the other. For example, interview data can be coded using both qualitative and quantitative techniques and the same data set can be analyzed using qualitative and quantitative analyses (e.g. Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt's project described above). Rather than assuming that qualitative and quantitative research methods are mutually exclusive, it is more productive to think of methods forming a continuum from which we pick those best suited to the purpose of our inquiry. So although qualitative methods continue to be favored by feminist scholars, since the early 1990s feminist geographers have employed an increasing range of methods, including quantitative techniques, and 'newer' qualitative techniques such as textual and visual analysis.

Conclusion

Today, feminist geography strides confidently across human geography's terrain. Because of feminist theorizing, it is now common (and increasingly expected) for all human geographers to locate themselves socially, politically and intellectually within their research. Human geographers are now likely to consider themselves producing partial, embodied, situated knowledges rather than fixed, universal truths. Feminist geographies have transformed human geographies. Feminist reconceptualizations have also transformed our understandings of ways of knowing and seeing the world. So feminist geography has not only extended human geography's research agendas, but redefined what human geographers do and how they do it. Looking to the future, feminist geographers will continue to produce new understandings and to engage politically in the progressive use of research. But we do need to be more open to 'negative' findings and to evidence that runs counter to our point of view. Like Susan Hanson, I hope 'to see us devise methods and methodologies that maximize the chance that we will see things we were not expecting to see, that leave us open to surprise, that do not foresee the unexpected' (1997: 125). By thinking critically about epistemologies, methodologies, and methods, feminist geographers have already created richer, more complex human geographies; and feminist meditations on the research process have transformed the way human geography is practiced, produced and taught. By asking incisive questions and by seeking to develop the very best approaches to knowledge production in the future, the explanatory power of feminist geography will become even stronger and more compelling.

NOTE

1 I choose to use 'we' and 'us' throughout this chapter, but not because I speak for all feminist geographers (or you the reader). I am also mindful of concerns raised by, for instance, women from the global south/Third World who argue they are excluded from the 'we' of many feminists (for example see Mohanty et al., 1991). I avoid the third person because it distances me from what I am writing, and I am certainly not (and do not wish to be) disconnected from feminist knowledge creation (Berg and Mansvelt, 2000).

References