



# Thinking/Doing the ‘F’ Word: On Power in Feminist Methodologies<sup>1</sup>

**Sarah Jenkins**

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales-Aberystwyth,  
Aberystwyth Wales, SY23 3DB, UK, Email: [skj@aber.ac.uk](mailto:skj@aber.ac.uk)

**Verity Jones**

Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, Powys, SY20 9AZ, UK  
Email: [verity.jones@cat.org.uk](mailto:verity.jones@cat.org.uk)

**Deborah Dixon**

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales-Aberystwyth,  
Aberystwyth Wales, SY23 3DB, UK, Email: [dxj@aber.ac.uk](mailto:dxj@aber.ac.uk)

---

**Abstract** In this introduction, we provide a context for the following collection of papers, noting the impetus behind our call for submissions for a paper session on ‘Feminist Methodologies,’ to be presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Institute of British Geographers, as well as the ensuing debate in Belfast. We provide a brief summary of each of the following papers, highlighting the ways in which each invokes power as a key component of feminist research.

---

<sup>1</sup> © Sarah Jenkins, Verity Jones and Deborah Dixon, 2003.

We are pleased to introduce this collection of papers on feminist methodologies initially presented at the Institute of British Geographers' (IBG) Annual Conference in Belfast 2002.<sup>2</sup> Feminist geography has been and, we hope, continues to be an arena of critical thought and practice that drives productive research in all senses of that term: thinking and doing the 'F' word implies a sensitivity to power relations within the field, an awareness of the ethical role of the researcher and a commitment to the progressive deployment of research *as well as* an understanding of how the researcher and the researched have been gendered, sexualised, raced and classed. And yet, given this intellectual, political and ethical agenda, is there, we wonder, a *distinct* critical edge to feminist research? This question arose for us from discussions over our own research projects, which we outline briefly below. As we sought to define where our work was situated within a feminist research agenda, we found ourselves struggling to pick apart how a feminist project differed from what might be termed a 'critical human geography' project and, indeed, the broader, interdisciplinary arena of social theory.

This struggle can also be discerned in Jones, Nast and Roberts comprehensive introduction to *Thresholds in Feminist Geography*, wherein they note that all who claim the label "feminist" have as a goal, "the social and political transformation of the world that feminist theories aim to understand" (1997, xxii). Such a goal in and of itself does not differentiate "feminist" research from the broader arena of social theory. For these authors, such "unfixity" arises from the fact that methodology, understood as the conceptualization and design of a research project, is situated between theory and method; in as much as feminist theory is a dynamic and contested field, so to is methodology (1997, xxix-xxx).

Certainly, our own research deploys quite different theoretical and topical fields within the geographical discipline. Sarah's (2003) research explores the spatial variation in the participation of women in the labour market. Her work suggests that the national scale of analysis currently deployed within labour market theory and policy conceals important regional and local differences in participation rates, and that future policy and practice must take account of the complex, locally-based social networks that give rise to such disparities. Using extensive in-depth interviewing, particular attention is paid to the work-life balance envisioned by a wide range of women, indicating the need for locally-sensitive policy initiatives rather than a one policy fits all model. Deborah's research revolves around development practices arising from contemporary processes of uneven development and the re-theorization of the social production and consumption of representations, such as film, video games and the internet (for example, Dixon and Cresswell, 2002). A critical attention to the social construction of gender has been key in both of these areas, initiating not only a deconstruction of gender-laden norms and mores in

---

<sup>2</sup> Rather than provide an "overview" of feminist methodologies, our aim is merely to introduce the following papers, noting the disciplinary context within which they were produced. As such, we detail our own, personal rationale for the initial call for papers for a session on feminist methodologies and outline the character of the session itself, as well as the contribution the following papers have made to our "partial" understanding of feminist methodologies. Excellent overviews of feminist methodologies can be found in McDowell (1992, 1997), Eyles (1993), Pratt (1993), Nast (1994), Hanson (1997), Jones, Nast and Roberts (1997), and Moss (2002).

policy documents as well as popular culture, but also an exposition of the power relations that produce and ensue from such artefacts. Verity's (2003) work concerns itself with how people come to identify with, and learn about their environment. In considering the theoretical models of knowledge communication, she has been critical of past environmental education research that has tended to focus on policy, rhetoric, and theory rather than lived experiences. Using a variety of qualitative methodologies she demonstrates how various everyday practices, performed through temporal and geographical scales, influence environmental action.

The first two projects explicitly address gender and have been able to take advantage of more conceptually developed methods within feminist geography. The third project, however, does not fit quite so easily into the feminist pantheon, and so makes us think more critically about what it is we mean by feminist and what we expect a feminist project to be able to address and achieve. Does feminist necessarily imply an investigation of gender inequities or gender constructions, as Hanson (1997, 121) suggests? Or, as Jones, Nast and Roberts (1997, xxii) imply, does feminist equate with a broader appreciation of the power relations at work in the field, and an ethical regard for the inclusion of the thought and concerns of the researched into the project? To reiterate our key concern: is there a distinct critical edge to feminist geography?

Wanting to generate a broader debate around this concern, we formulated the following questions for the IBG conference in Belfast:

- 1) Has feminist geography been subsumed under the broader project of social theory? Or does feminist thinking impart a distinct critical edge to geographic analysis? What kinds of conceptual decisions are being made around the choice of methods for data collection and analysis?
- 2) In light of developing and emerging economic, political and cultural contexts across the globe, what is the analytic project facing feminist geographers? That is, which objects of analysis do we and should we address as significant? And, how do these changing contexts in turn impact feminist methodologies?

The first set of questions address our own concern over the relationship between feminist geography and social theory, and are somewhat provocatively stated. The second set are more explicitly grounded, in that they focus on how we identify and locate, as well as research, significant objects of analysis. As such, they speak to that aspect of feminist methodology that emphasises the need to interrogate the dialectic between our understanding of the world, and the ways in which those understanding are themselves materially embedded.

In convening a paper session at the 2002 IBG Annual Conference, our aim was to bring together diverse perspectives on the ways in which feminist methodologies are framed and put into practice. We invited contributions from well-known writers on feminist methodology and sent out a general call for participation. The resulting line-up of papers (by Ruth Bankey, Liz Bondi, Kath Browne, Rachel Colls, Isabel Dyck, Sarah Kindon, Jan Monk [and Patricia Manning and Catalina Denman] and Andrea Nightingale) exhibited not only a range of topics, from natural resource management to sexual politics, but also a range of professional positions in the discipline, from postgraduate to professor. With the enthusiastic participation of audience members, the session offered both

insightful and thought provoking work, sparking a wide-ranging discussion of contemporary theories and practices of feminist methodology. All of the presenters were subsequently invited to contribute to this collection. The papers that follow are, however, a selection of those presented in Belfast, as time and work constraints took their inevitable toll on the initial line-up. Following the IBG conference, Mona Domosh was invited to provide a commentary on the paper session as a whole; her essay was subsequently extended for this collection. We should also note that here that a paper by Rachel Saltmarsh initially prepared for Belfast but not presented was to be included in this collection and hence has been commented upon by Mona: however, again due to unforeseen circumstances, Rachel's paper was not converted into a published piece for this collection.

In listening to all the papers in Belfast, and in reviewing the published versions of those that follow, it became apparent to us that interest primarily lay with the second set of questions we had set, that is, those more explicitly focused on grounded research. Given the fact that our own interest in thinking/doing the 'F' word was driven and shaped by our particular research contexts, this focus is perhaps none too surprising: we might well expect other feminist geographers to ground and reground conceptual issues through their fieldwork. And yet, these papers do speak implicitly to the first set of questions by virtue of the fact that there simply is no anxiety apparent as to what constitutes a "distinct" feminist, critical edge to research. Instead, there is a sense of empowerment here in the way that these researchers draw upon a body of work labelled "feminist" that is diverse, at times contradictory and certainly overlaps on occasion with other bodies of work. The result is a collection of papers that attempt to use that work in a productive manner by pushing further feminist debates on a variety of materially-grounded concepts.

What has become interesting to us through the review process is the way in which each paper has taken up the concept of *power* as central to feminist research. For some, power has been linked to an ethical obligation, while for others power has been linked to analytic rigour and to methodological flexibility. In each case, it is the careful interrogation of power relations within the research project that is regarded as the means by which such research can be made *more* feminist.

In the opening paper, Liz Bondi returns to a familiar issue in feminist research, that of interpersonal relationships in the research process and the powers and positionalities associated with these. In focusing on a psychotherapeutic conceptualisation of empathy and identification, she highlights how a practice we use in everyday interaction could be usefully mobilised to reflect upon what happens within fieldwork relationships of all kinds. Liz develops her argument with reference to qualitative interviewing and offers feminist geographers a way of thinking about power and positionality afresh. Sensitive to the questions and dilemmas researchers are confronted with in the field, she provides us with a way of thinking about participation and observation drawing on ideas from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. She encourages researchers to be observers of the process of interviewing and the emotions and stories that ensue, whilst also participating in the interview itself. That is, she suggests, researchers should be more flexible in their practice and attempt to oscillate between participating in processes of identification and observing some distinction between one's own and the other person's inner realities. Her concluding remarks point out that such processes would provide for more rigorous research. She notes that viewing interaction, and the similarities and differences that

empathy insights in the field, are as important as attending to the particularities of similarities and differences of gender, class, race, age, sexuality and so forth.

Andrea Nightingale's paper provides two key points that provide feminist geographers with pause for thought. Firstly, Andrea wishes to challenge what she views as the insistence that qualitative research methods are more suited for in-depth, feminist work. With the note that quantitative techniques are not necessarily positivist, she suggests that we be more flexible in regard to our choice of methodologies by giving further consideration to how particular kinds of questions can be researched via the use of quantitative techniques. Secondly, Andrea goes on to argue that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques affords the researcher a sense of empowerment in that they can interrogate more carefully the partiality of knowledge provided by such techniques.

Jan Monk, Patricia Manning and Catalina Denman focus on the power relationships at work in collaborative projects, in terms of trust and "turf," but also extend this discussion to a consideration of the positionality afforded such participants within diverse university and disciplinary reward systems, as well as diverse cultural and political contexts. In particular they draw attention to the ways in which diverse people – from librarians, to clerical staff to reviewers – play a significant, and yet largely unremarked, "collaborative" role in the research process. Using their own membership of a particular network to discuss these sets of power relations, Jan, Patricia and Catalina stress the varied emotional as well as academic output of such projects: "human relationships in collaborative projects can be fulfilling and harmonious or fraught with tensions which may or may not be successfully negotiated" (Monk, Manning and Denman, this issue).

In her consideration of the power relations between the researcher and the researched, Mona Domosh believes that while recent methodological commentary has addressed the subjective position of the researcher, there has been slight attention given to the position of the researched. That is, while feminist geographers have endeavoured to assess how their personal, emotional, political and cultural agendas shape the way in which they view or interpret our research, an equal consideration of what might be termed the 'social construction' of the researched has not been forthcoming. If we are to gain, and provide, a more rigorous form of research, Mona believes we need to scrutinize these "other" personal knowledges; if we do not, then we "deny our interviewees the subjectivity we have accorded ourselves, and we deny ourselves a potentially more critical understanding of others" (Domosh, this issue).

As a collection, we think these papers provide an interesting entry point into current debates on feminist methodologies. We are grateful to the individual authors for their continued interest in the overall project initiated at the Belfast IBG, as well as the editors and reviewers at ACME. We also thank all presenters and audience members at the Feminist Methodology session and look forward to future debate.

## References

- Bankey, Ruth. 2002. *Feminist methodologies, research positionality and community activism*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.

- Bondi, Liz. 2002. *Positions, politics and practice in feminist fieldwork*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- Browne, Kath. 2002. *Friendships, feminisms and fieldwork(ings)*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- Colls, Rachel. 2002. *Bodies, methods and messiness*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- Dixon, Deborah P. and Tim Cresswell. 2002. Introduction: Engaging Film. In, Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (eds.), *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity*. Rowman and Littlefield: Mass, pp. 1-10.
- Dyck, Isabel. 2002. *Embodied knowledge in place: Body, gender and space in immigration research*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- Eyles, John. 1993. Feminist and interpretive method: How different? *The Canadian Geographer* 37, 50-52.
- Hanson, Susan. 1997. As the World Turns: New horizons in feminist geographic methodologies. In, John Paul Jones III, Heidi Nast and Susan Roberts (eds.), *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation*. Rowman and Littlefield: Mass, pp. 119-128.
- Jenkins, Sarah. 2003. *The Geographies of Women's Participation in the Labour Market*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales-Aberystwyth, Aberystwyth, Wales, UK.
- Jones III, John Paul, Heidi Nast and Susan Roberts. 1997. Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation. In, John Paul Jones III, Heidi Nast and Susan Roberts (eds.), *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation*. Rowman and Littlefield: Mass, pp. xxi-xxxix.
- Jones, Verity. 2003. *Young People and the Circulation of Environmental Knowledges*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales-Aberystwyth, Aberystwyth, Wales, UK.
- Kindon, Sarah. 2002. *Participatory video as geographic research process: A feminist practise of looking?* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- McDowell, Linda. 1997. Women/gender/feminists: Doing feminist geography. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 21, 381-400.
- McDowell, Linda. 1992. Doing Gender: Feminism, feminists and research methods in human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 17, 399-416.
- Monk, Janice, Patricia Manning and Catalina Denman. 2002. *Working Together: Feminist perspectives in collaborative research and action*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.

- Moss, Pamela. 2002. Taking on, thinking about and doing feminist research in Geography. In, Pamela Moss (ed.) *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford and Malden MA: Blackwell, pp. 1-20.
- Nast, Heidi. 1994. Opening Remarks on 'Women in the Field.' *The Professional Geographer* 46, 54-66.
- Nightingale, Andrea. 2002. *Situated knowledges and mixing methods: Insights from research on natural resource management*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, Belfast, January.
- Pratt, Geraldine. 1993. Reflections on poststructuralism and feminist empirics, theory and practice. *Antipode* 25, 51-63.
- Saltmarsh, Rachel. (2002) *Time, Travel, Journey, End: An Autobiographical Investigation Into Class-Cultural Change*. Unpublished paper. Institute of Geography and Earth Science, University of Wales-Aberystwyth, Aberystwyth, Wales, SY23 3DB, UK.