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A feminist approach to research

Leslie Gelling looks at the insights and challenges brought up by methodological studies from a feminist perspective

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FEMINIST RESEARCH focuses on the experiences of women in natural social settings, where the aim is to 'make women visible, raise their consciousness and empower them' (Holloway and Wheeler 2013). Adopting a feminist approach influences what questions researchers ask and how they think about their data, but it does not usually influence how data is managed or analysed. This edition of *Nurse Researcher* includes two themed papers exploring issues around the collection and analysis of qualitative data in research projects that have adopted a feminist approach. The first paper considers methodological issues in a feminist-informed study and the second paper describes how taking account of feminist ideologies might enhance interpretive interactionism.

In the first paper, Blythe *et al* (2013) describe four challenges related to acting as an insider researcher in a study using a 'feminist-informed storytelling research design' to explore the experiences of Australian women providing long-term foster care. The authors argue that this study was ideally suited to a feminist approach because foster care, the focus of this research, is 'heavily gendered' with women providing the majority of care. The challenges explored are not unique to feminist research but are common to researchers adopting an insider approach to data collection.

While insider researchers often adopt or develop into an insider role, the lead researcher involved in collecting data for this first themed paper was firmly embedded in the research setting because she also had considerable experience as a foster parent. This can only have intensified the methodological and scientific challenges associated with being an insider researcher and, it could be argued, make this researcher's personal circumstances a reason why she should not have been leading the research. Blythe *et al* (2013) clearly considered this issue when suggesting that the first of the four challenges for an insider

researcher relates to 'assumed understanding'. The authors argue that being a true insider, where there is clearly a shared experience between the researcher and the research participant, can result in important information being omitted during storytelling in the participant's belief that the researcher already understands the experience being investigated and does not, therefore, need to be told parts of the story being recounted. The strategy adopted to counter this challenge was to probe participants when the researcher recognised that a participant was assuming understanding, demonstrated by phrases such as 'you know what I mean'.

Researchers repeatedly face the challenge of encouraging research participants to share their experiences and perceptions of that experience as freely as possible. This requires that researchers balance the benefits of insider knowledge and understanding (reflexivity) against the need to ensure 'analytical objectivity'. In the example of insider research presented in the first themed paper, it can be argued that the lead researcher was too close to the participants being researched and that creating the necessary balance was bound to be difficult in this situation. What is not clear in reading this paper is whether this data collection could have been performed as effectively by someone who did not share this researcher's personal experiences. Also, might a researcher who did not share this experience have collected more informative data? Would they have found more searching and explanatory responses?

These researchers show both the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking insider research but it is unclear how well they believe they balanced their roles in this research. What is clear, however, is that research informed by feminist theory was the most meaningful approach for this research. It was also reassuring that the authors did not claim that the challenges they explored were unique to feminist-informed research.

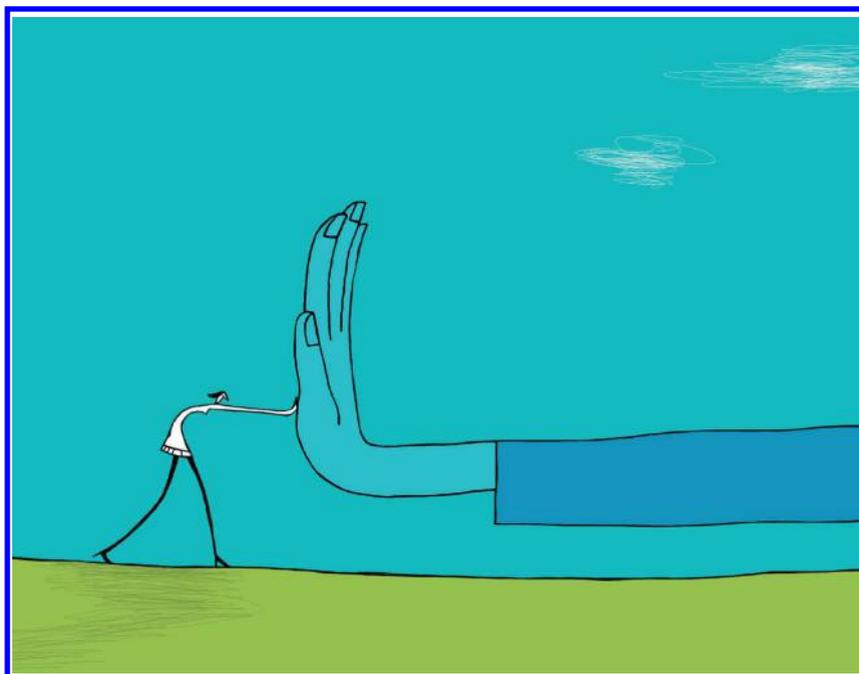
In the second themed paper, Jefford and Sundin (2013) describe an adaptation of interpretive interactionism, which they claim 'incorporates and honors feminist values and principles'. The research example they use was a project undertaken to examine interactions between midwives and women in the second stage of labour. As previously noted, adopting feminist approaches in research usually influences how researchers think about the research and the data collected rather than how the data is collected and analysed. The authors of this paper do not make this distinction and illustrate how they believe feminist theories can influence how research is conducted.

Research exploring interactions between midwives and expectant mothers appear ideally suited to a feminist approach because the experience is one experienced by women. The authors, however, argue against this perspective by suggesting that practice settings in delivery units are 'run by the traditional biomedical-focused, male-dominant profession'. If this were the case then arguments about the need for feminist-influenced research to support the oppressed and dominated gender are relevant. In this clinical environment and in the current political climate, however, this argument for a feminist approach is less than convincing and is not supported by the literature.

Jefford and Sundin (2013) also argue that feminist principles can be incorporated into aspects of research methodology. In the description of how the researchers achieved this, feminist theory influenced the framing of the research question and the identification of research participants, which seems wholly appropriate. Less convincing, however, is how feminist theory influenced the subsequent conduct of the research or how the findings of the research would have been different if the research had not been conducted using a method influenced by feminist theories.

Feminist influences to research undoubtedly have a contribution to make in increasing our understanding of the world. These approaches to research were a reaction against positivism and traditional research strategies, which were perceived to be male-dominated and oppressive of women (Holloway and Wheeler 2013). Feminist researchers focused on research endeavours that would raise issues of power and oppression. The aim was to generate new knowledge and understanding to empower women. It is reasonable to rationalise the need for some research on these grounds but it is unclear how research designs can be influenced by feminist theories, or if they need to be. Rigorous scientific approaches to research, data collection and analysis are important whatever the aims of the research.

The first themed paper in this issue highlights methodological issues of importance in a study



exploring the experiences of Australian women (Blythe *et al* 2013). The need for this research is clearly influenced by a feminist agenda but the design and conduct of that research was not influenced by feminist theories. Existing options for collecting and analysing data were sufficiently rigorous to allow researchers to conduct the research. The findings of the research have potential to contribute knowledge and understanding that will benefit women and can fit into a feminist agenda.

The second themed paper also describes research undertaken from a feminist standpoint. Again the research is undertaken in the belief that knowledge gained will improve the lives of women. In contrast to the authors of the first paper, Jefford and Sundin (2013) suggest that the research design can be influenced by feminist theories. This argument, and the description of how this was achieved, is less than convincing and needs some further development.

Too little is written in the methodological literature about feminist influences on research decision making or how feminist theories might influence the conduct of research. More also needs to be written about how such issues have changed over time. These two themed papers have considered some of the methodological issues.

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