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The emerging importance of feminist research paradigms in built environment research

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to establish and demonstrate the relevance of feminist research methods within built environment research. While no one definition of feminist research exists, many feminist researchers identify characteristics which distinguish it from traditional social science research; it is research that studies women, or that focuses on gender.

Design/methodology/approach – There is a growing body of research into women and the built environment adopting feminist paradigms. This paper explains the dynamic, evolving philosophical basis of feminist research methods drawing comparisons to traditional positivist methodologies and demonstrates that feminist research has characteristics that can be imported into other research paradigms.

Findings – The paper shows that there is much to be learned from an understanding of feminist research for all researchers in the built environment and that by adopting different approaches to research, researchers may find new and original ways of examining complex issues.

Research limitations/implications – The implications are that all researchers in the built environment should consider the benefits of adopting a feminist approach in their research especially where the researcher is seeking to gain a deeper understanding of peoples’ experiences.

Originality/value – This paper seeks to raise awareness of the benefits of adopting feminist research methods in a discipline dominated by traditional approaches to research.

Introduction

Every research project begins with a question or a problem and researchers have to decide which method to use to answer the question or solve the problem. Though feminist research paradigms are relevant and can be applied in built environment research, traditionally researchers have not adopted the paradigm and there may be a lack of understanding of the term and the techniques used with this approach. This paper provides an explanation of feminist research and what it means, demonstrating how feminist research fits with broader social theories. Discussions about “subjectivity” and “objectivity” are raised along with the position of the researcher. Issues concerned with participatory research and insider research are also raised. Examples are drawn from built environment research.
Meaning and the relevance of feminist research

What makes research feminist? One answer is that it is research done by, for, and about women (Burns and Walker, in Somekh and Lewin, 2005, p. 66). While no one definition of feminist research exists and some argue a universal definition is not wanted, many feminist researchers recognise basic attributes. These attributes differentiate feminist research from traditional social science research; that it is research that studies women or focuses on gender. Feminist research is more than method because it raises questions about ontology, that is one's view of the world and how this shapes what can be known about the world and what it means to be human, and epistemology, that is what counts as knowledge and ways of knowing (Code, 2000). On the other hand Reinarz (1992, pp. 243-4) saw feminist research as a “perspective” and not a method. It is the types of questions, methodologies, knowledge, and purpose brought to the research process that makes feminist research distinctive and unique.

Feminist research was informed by women's toils against oppression and adherence to feminist values and beliefs. A fundamental feminist tenet is a; “belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men” (Freedman, 2002). Three key features of feminist research are identified. The research is:

1. Characterised by objectives to build new knowledge and to achieve social change.
2. Based on the values and beliefs of feminism and includes feminism within the process, for example to centre on the meanings women give to their world, and simultaneously accept that research is often undertaken in patriarchal organisations or environments. Here feminist values inform the research, starting from selection of the research issue to data presentation and adopting a feminist paradigm invokes a structure which leads the researcher's decision making.
3. Diverse, and both interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary. Feminist research adopts various methodologies and is continuously redefined by concerns coming from different viewpoints or perspectives. Thus it requires that issues such as the empowerment of women, including those traditionally excluded, are attended to as well as issues of diversity, racism and democratic decision making.

Globally, social change during the late twentieth century increased the amount of legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender and women now play an equivalent part in working life. It is worth noting that it was not possible for a woman to join the UK surveying profession until 1922 (Thompson, 1968). However, women still experience barriers to progression in the workplace, inequality of opportunity and discrimination. In a survey of women in the professions carried out in 1990 (UKIPG, 1990) the percentage of women in the professions was only 5.7 per cent. Since 1992 the expansion of tertiary education to the masses has led higher numbers of females to participate in higher education (HE) with some increase in enrolment in non traditional study such as built environment courses. Awareness raised among academics (Turrell et al., 2002; Wilkinson and Turrell, 2005; Dainty et al., 2004, Gale and Davidson, 2006) about the experiences of women in education, academia and the workplace has become the focus of research and there is a growing body of research into women's experiences in built environment disciplines (Greed, 1991, 1999; Wilkinson and Turrell, 2005; Lingard and Sublet, 2002; De Graft-Johnson et al., 2003) which adopt feminist paradigms and can be understood more fully with an understanding of the
paradigm. Thirdly the European Union and UK Government aware that some employment sectors have failed to make progress in women’s equality and participation to the detriment of the economy have funded resources such as the UK Resource Centre (UKRC) for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (www.setwomenresource.org.uk). The UKRC was set up in 2004 by the Department of Trade and Industry to provide a source of information and advice to all those who aim to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of women in science, engineering and technology including the built environment. These schemes work with employers, professional institutions, policy makers and other stakeholders as well as women to bring about change. Feminist research informs strategic developments and appropriate support mechanisms and, of course, with their goal to change social conventions as a key characteristic, they conform to the paradigm. The professional institutions and organizations have shown interest in women members of the surveying profession before and issues like the skills shortages have again contributed to activity. The Raising the Ratio Task Force is a global group within the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) led by a former President (Jonathan Harris) which draws on research to inform its activity (Ellison, 1999). The International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) has had a task force looking at under-represented groups in surveying (including women) since 1996 and the group have drawn on research and projects around the world that examine ways of both encouraging greater participation, but also greater integration in the surveying profession as a whole. The activities of the group have been led by a number of women activists and researchers in the field. All of these initiatives are seeking change for the better and these feminist approaches have attributes that can be imported into other research paradigms such as the focus on deep, rich qualitative data. For example standpoint theory can be applied in research on organisational culture and issues relating to ethnicity and race or on environmental issues – all of which feature highly in current built environment research concerns.

**Feminist research and social theory**

Generally methodology is the study of methods and practices employed in research which involve the gathering of evidence in the process of knowledge and theory formation. “Traditional methodology” is based in liberal‐positivist epistemology using empiricism, objectivity and rationalism as fundamental principles. Feminist research methodology critiques the theoretical principles of the traditional approach from different perspectives. Epistemology is the branch of Western philosophy that studies the nature and scope of knowledge and belief. Feminist epistemology inquires “whose knowledge are we talking about?” and feminist methodology asks “how should we go about producing knowledge?” (Code, 2000).

Traditional approaches adopt androcentric assumptions in the design and application of research projects, and feminist researchers maintain, rely on the over-generalisation of research based on male only samples. Androcentric or androcentrism is a world view that is male centred. Given that around half the population is female this has strengthened the call for feminist approaches. Still feminist research is a recent addition to the lexicon of research, it is also dynamic with ethical and philosophical debates under constant review (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

A review of positivist research methodology is required (Code, 2000) to understand feminist critiques. The foundations and requirements for traditional research processes are based on
the notion of the existence of an objective reality that can be logically and rationally discovered through observation. Here the process is led by the construction of hypotheses and the operation of concepts which are tested against the evidence collected. Researchers must maintain objectivity to determine that their research is not biased, and therefore undermined, by personal values. Thus there are many guidelines in the process of theory development, research design, data collection and analysis to ensure research is not compromised by subjectivity. Positivism makes some assumptions such as knowledge exists outside the lived experience of the objects of study and that truth is revealed through objective rational review of evidence. The objects of study play a limited role in the research process, being unable to achieve objectivity. A final attribute of the approach is that traditional research often desires quantification of data; the most popular method is the survey. Data is aggregated and summarised and the use of statistical techniques is used to reveal causal relationships across variables. However feminist researchers Stanley and Wise (1993) did not accept this model and questioned whether an objective truth could be rationally determined though empirical observation.

Feminists may not agree about defining feminist research, but there is some accord about the epistemological grounding of the research process. Five epistemological principles in feminist methodology were identified by Cook and Fonow (1986) and are as follows:

1. women and gender are the focal point of analysis;
2. the rejection of subject and object;
3. the importance of consciousness raising;
4. a concern with ethics; and
5. an intention to empower, alter power relations and inequality for women.

**Paradigm perspective**

Perspective is a cornerstone of feminist research and epistemology conceives of “knowers” as situated in particular relations to what is known and to other “knowers”. What is known, and the way that it is known, reflects the perspective of the knower. For example, consider how people can understand the same object in different ways that reflect where they sit in relation to it. Bordo (1987) and Young (1990) looked at embodiment; a physical perspective. People experience the world by using their bodies, which have diverse constitutions and are differently positioned in space and time. There is also first-person and third-person knowledge. People have first-person experience to their own physical and mental circumstances, providing direct knowledge about what it is like to live through these states. Third parties may know these circumstances by interpretation, imagination or through written records. For instance it is one thing to know what gender harassment is, and how to identify it in a case described in third-person terms. It is quite another thing to experience harassment on the basis of gender.

As such, women arrive at different subjective identities which can manifest in various ways, for example, an individual may perceive and accept some attributed identities, affirming the roles connected with them or they may see the social identities as unfair and seek change. The most obvious is gender and sociologists and feminists distinguish between sex and gender. Sex is the biological difference between male and female whereas gender is what society makes of sexual differences: the roles, norms, and meanings they assign and therefore gender has many facets (Haslanger, 2000). There are gender roles, traits,
performance, virtues, norms, behaviours, identity and symbolism (Butler, 1990). Gender is a learned and culturally defined context and since the existing history and background of the built environment has been developed from a male perspective, it is unsurprising that women can perceive things differently.

**Ethics and insider research**

As with traditional research, feminist research is concerned about privacy, consent, confidentiality, deceit, and avoiding harm to those involved in research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Many feminist researchers have led the development of these issues as their research often involves at risk groups such as women’s health and homelessness. Over time and as with social science research methods, ethics has become more complicated and differentiated. Recent issues sit uneasily with older ethical concerns such as informed consent for example. Traditionally it was assumed that consent once given did not fade or change over time; now this is contested (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Another example is that the requirement that the researcher carry out the research in an open and honest manner around data collection, analysis and publication are now closely linked for feminist researchers with issues of how and where knowledge is created. Greed (1994, p. 119) has openly referred to the difficulties faced when one chooses to adopt an openly feminist approach in being “doubly damned in that it is openly feminist in perspective, and based on an ethnographic approach, and therefore presumed by some to be biased and anecdotal.”

Insider research can be problematic and the researcher needs to carefully consider the ethics and the risks concerned. The risks here are not simply to the research subject(s) such as selection of participant, power, consent and confidentiality, but the risk to the researcher in the choice of subject as well as the approach.

Wilkinson and Turrell's (2005) study of culture was an example of insider research with risks. The researchers were academics within the culture and aimed to maintain objectivity by constant questioning of findings and exploring the relationships that existed. This approach tackled the methodological approach, but the risk of being attacked for being anecdotal and biased remained. In fact, there was no such attack and the findings were accepted and recognised in other academic institutions.

**Subjectivity versus objectivity and standpoint**

Cook and Fonow (1986) argued for the rejection of subject and object; this means valuing the knowledge held by the participant as being expert knowledge and acknowledging how research valued as “objective” always reflects a specific social and historical standpoint. Any consideration of sociological theories needs to consider where they came from and science has developed as an attempt to strive for rational and objective explanations, whether in nature or society. However scientific knowledge is always being developed and re-interpreted according to current cultural perspectives and traditions. Procedural objectivity – or a methodology that guards against bias or personal judgment is important here (Eisner, 1993). The aim must be to minimise bias in procedures to achieve reliability. In rejecting the traditional approach, Stanley and Wise (1983, 1993) argued for a methodology that validates women’s subjective experiences as women by merely recounting them without imposing any alternative interpretations. However Stanley and Wise (1983, 1993) maintain their notion of objectivity by requiring investigation of the relationship between the subject
and the object of the research. Thus, they promote the existence of a relationship rather than failing to mention any link or position. According to Silverman (2000) methodologies that celebrate subjectivity, acknowledge the standpoint of the researcher as significant. Those critical of subjectivity, acknowledge the viewpoint of the researcher, but warn that it may cause weakness of findings and contamination of results. The debate about subjectivity and objectivity is complex without consensus within the social research community. Whatever the standpoint of a researcher, they need to follow a critical path of enquiry that seeks the best possible understanding of the data being investigated.

Standpoint theories characterise the world from a specific socially situated perspective that can lay a claim to epistemic privilege or authority (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). It grew from a set of theoretical positions from numerous disciplines but takes the perspective of the marginalised woman's experiences. Reason and Rowan (1994) promote their emerging new paradigm for research and promote its challenge on objectivity. They suggest an objectively subjective method of enquiry that is a synthesis of naive enquiry and orthodox research. The argument is for researchers to do research that matters to them. Two characteristics are held in common: minimizing the manipulation of the research subject, and attempts to develop a genuine relationship with the subjects. The researcher in effect becomes the subject's partner. Standpoint theories as set out give a clearly involved approach to practice, with a concern for the topic and the outcome, and a view that the research should bring about change to practice, as Reason and Rowan (1994, p. 136) assert “we have a special responsibility to choose research topics which are healthy for us – likely to lead to our own growth – and healthy for our subjects and co-researchers too.” Standpoint theory is drawn from ideology that influences ideas and beliefs and can also be applied in other areas such as anti-racism, anti-globalisation and environmentalism. The standpoints of the researchers should be clearly stated. Problems can arise when a standpoint is not pointed out, but the readers of the research perceive the data as being influenced by a standpoint i.e. bias.

**Some methodological tools adopted**

**Oral histories and diaries**

Oral history is used on biographical or autobiographical research projects. It enables the researcher to collect stream of consciousness information related to the research topic and the research participant's feelings in an uninhibited setting (Wilkinson and Turrell, 2005). A similar method is the use of reflective diaries (Morton, 2006) allowing participants to record their experiences openly and easily. Greed talked to women surveyors about their experiences and reported that she only had to ask them why they went into surveying and “they were under starter's orders and off, with no stopping them” (Greed, 1991, p. 15). Morton's (2006) work on the experiences of females students on built environment courses in the UK showed how reflection was used to gather rich, deep data recording experience and perceptions. Students are asked to reflect on a number of issues raised by researcher in a written form. The reflections were collected by the researcher, interpreted and then discussed further with participants to explore meaning and identify significant aspects that impact on higher education experience.

**Participatory action research**
Participatory action research has evolved and is a methodology for intervention, development and change within the communities and groups such as women in the built environment. The approach is accepted as research which involves all relevant stakeholders in examining together a situation (seen as problematic) to improve and change it; it has much in common with feminist research paradigms. All relevant contexts such as historical, economic, cultural and political are included in a critical review to contextualise the problem. It is iterative, a spiral, whereby participants, with the aid of the researcher, frame and identify the problem(s) and then posit changes to improve the situation, which are further reflected on and refined (Morton, 2006). Action is taken and participants reflect on the new situation and so it continues until change is achieved. This method is active co-research driven by a democratic approach; placing the participant and researcher in very different positions than traditional methods. The different positions researcher and participant find themselves in relate to power and ownership of data noted previously.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is a qualitative method, characterised by a period of close connection with participants; often using interviews to get a deep, rich understanding of participant’s experience. It aims for a meticulous circumstantial understanding of a few subjects and is descriptive and interpretive; as the ethnographer determines the importance of what is studied. As Greed (1994, p. 125) says ethnography is good for understanding what makes a group “tick”. Feminists posit that gender theories show, men reveal their male identity, and women their female identity, differently alone than in mixed company, and differently in these settings than in gender-segregated contexts. Furthermore male and female researchers have access to different information about others and male and female ethnographers may be given access to different social spaces. When admitted to the same social spaces, their presence has different effects on those being observed, because they do not occupy the same social relationships to their subjects. People act differently according to their beliefs about the gender of who is observing them. Given this premise there are significant implications for research that derives data about people through personal contact between the researchers and the subjects especially into issues such as women in the built environment; the issue is how research findings might be influenced by the gendered relations between researchers and subjects? Second is a gender-inclusive research team better placed to perceive this?

**The researcher**

Feminist research is a clear illustration of researchers starting from the viewpoint of their own culture, experience and tradition and carrying out research that matters to them. This is in contrast with mainstream research where it is stated that personal experience may contaminate the objectivity of the project (Hammersley, 1995). There is a risk in becoming a convert to the cause and producing naïve research that is clearly biased. The researcher has to maintain a critical approach to the data and demonstrate this throughout and within their writing up. Stating the position of the researcher as a preface or a postscript, outlining their relationship to the subject matter is an accepted way of declaring interest and approach.

The feminist community are divided over whether men can adopt the role of a feminist (Reinharz, 1992) but there are a few men who profess to label themselves as feminist. The
arguments against men say they can never have a women’s experience and therefore are unable to understand women. Those who support male researchers say that men do not have to experience being female; they can still contribute to the knowledge area. Because they understand and care about the women's experiences and inequality they are a valuable element in work to achieve change and equality.

Gale has been researching gender and construction since 1987, and is a very visible representative of the male construction academic community who cares about equality and women's issues. One of his research papers explored the under-representation of women in construction (1994) focusing at the entry point. The hypotheses for the research stated the position clearly:

*H1.* The image of the construction industry militates against the entry of women.

*H2.* Knowledge of the construction industry discourages the entry of women.

The research methods included action research, questionnaires with school students and undergraduates and construction professionals (male and female) and interviews with female undergraduates. Gale (1994) suggests that the culture of construction not only puts off women, it also puts off a lot of men. He proposes that education is the gatekeeper to the construction culture and he found that the masculine culture was actively and passively promoted.

The attributes of a researcher adopting a feminist approach will be care about the topic of their research, drawing from personal knowledge and experience, wanting to transform the male tradition or male perspective and an interest in women's views. Their research explores issues or topics that relate to the position of the minority group, taking a male centred topic that needs to be rethought in terms of women's experiences and makes visible an aspect of experience that has been unseen. Feminist research is often driven by its subject matter, rather than by its methods (Reinharz, 1992, p. 213) and it is a perspective held rather than a defined method. The built environment professions are an enduring example of a significantly segregated area of study and work where women are generally a minority and/or where the culture is perceived as masculine.

**Conclusions**

This paper commenced by stating that this is a dynamic, highly diversified and thoroughly challenging area of research practice. Feminist research is research conducted for, by, and about women and it attempts to bring about change. An explanation of the terms and the sources of feminist research were outlined with an explanation of relevance. The paper showed that there are lessons to be learned for other traditional approaches with regards to ethics and objectivity. Approaches such as standpoint research, oral histories and diaries, participatory action research and ethnography are important and are used to gain richer, deeper knowledge. The paper shows that while the built environment professions remain a male dominated sector a gender focus on research is much needed and is of utmost importance.

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