

Unisex Research

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The purpose of this treatise is to recognize the inherent bias of feminist research and to propose that it move on to unisex research. Unisex research is proposed to be an overarching value on top of mature research methods to ensure that those methods are not distinguished or distinguishable on the basis of sex.

There are two big ideas about research that have been with me since my formal introduction to research methodology: researcher bias, and honoring the chosen research methodology to limit researcher bias. For me, these two ideas have grown in significance over the years. The purpose of this short treatise is to discuss these two ideas, to hold them up against feminist research thinking, and to propose unisex research as an alternative.

The first big idea is that researchers have biases and passions around the topic being researched. To think this is not the case would be foolish. These passions motivate a person to do research in a particular domain, and this motivating passion is essential. For example, I really like HRD and think HRD is important. This motivates me to focus my inquiry on HRD. I can easily acknowledge that although there are other realms more important than HRD, they do not hold my interest. I am simply biased toward HRD.

The second big idea is that if we choose the appropriate research methodology and honor its tenets, our human biases have a chance to be kept from influencing the research questions, methodology, and interpretation of the findings. Our ability to acknowledge, understand, and attempt to manage our biases remains a constant threat to the integrity of the researcher and the research. In the end, it is one of the key differentiators between good research and using data collection to support our own agendas. Not honoring the tenets of an appropriate methodology is a threat to the pursuit of new knowledge. It trips up researchers, particularly neophyte researchers. Probably the most obvious failing among beginning researchers is overinterpreting their data. In this last research step, the voice of the researchers is potentially the loudest, and the interpretation often goes beyond the data.

Clearly, the two big ideas of passion and bias can collide. They create a tension that the researcher needs to manage. It is not an easy task. At the University of Minnesota a researcher was found to be overinterpreting the success data that resulted in his medical fame over a period of several decades. When his world crashed, a bit of the world of research crashed. In a less publicized case, columnist George Will reported on the integrity of scholarship at the time of his father's death. His father, a University of Illinois professor of history, had been working on a historical study for many, many years. Just as he completed his manuscript, a rival historical research book was released to the academic world. Will's father read the book and simply threw his manuscript away—acknowledging the superior rival work.

The Problem

Researcher bias and honoring the chosen research methodology so as to limit researcher bias are two big ideas that relate to my concern about feminist research and my proposal for unisex research. The dictionary defines feminism as the “belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.” There is no question here—rather, there is a commitment to an answer. The ideological bias of believing that there should be social, political, and economic equality of the sexes is in itself not a research question, and if kept in that stance, has the potential of being anti-intellectual if it is carried into the research methodology. On the one hand, such ideology could harmlessly result in the pursuit of a trivial problem. On the other hand, such bias could produce conclusions based on flawed data that end up affecting many lives.

The same points noted here can be made about any bias in relation to the conduct of research. The problem of bias only highlights the need for the choice of a rigorous research methodology that addresses this problem. Furthermore, the simple act of researchers stating their biases, although revealing, does nothing to manage those biases during the research process. Such open statements of bias create an illusion of maturity or objectivity that may never carry over into the research. Not making an effort to be aware of and manage researcher bias is simply anti-intellectual.

Alternatively, unisex is defined as “not distinguished or distinguishable on the basis of sex.” This sounds right to me in terms of our research methodology demands. No ideological starting point bounds the research. Equality or differences may be discovered through the research, but no ideological belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes is carried into the inquiry. Should the research methodology be biased toward one sex or the other? Should the methodology be inherently biased toward underlying ideological assumptions? My position is to say no to both these questions. I would further advocate that the researcher's personal passions and biases be held at bay by the appropriate research methodology.

Please do not misinterpret my position. Do I think that there are problems related to the social, political, and economic inequality of women? Yes. Do they

deserve to be researched? Yes. Do they need a research methodology that is biased and has the ideological predisposition of starting off with the answer? No. In fact, back in 1984 I proposed that research focused on women in the workplace should take place. Back then I also proposed that gender-focused research might be better served by female-male research teams. "Having both a female and a male on a research team somehow provides the balance of perspective that one alone may never have" (Swanson, 1984, p. 2).

The Solution

The solution as I see it to the inherent bias in *feminist research* is to move on to *unisex research*. Unisex research is proposed to be an overarching value on top of mature research methods to ensure that those methods are not distinguished or distinguishable on the basis of sex. Once in place, unisex qualitative research projects, unisex case study research projects, unisex theory building research projects, and so on, can take place with the threat of bias under better control. Thus, generating significant new knowledge without a sexual bias will advance our scholarly understanding of phenomena being investigated.

In closing, I am reminded of the now-famous "twins" studies done at the University of Minnesota—large-sample studies of twin children who were separated at birth (see Bouchard, 1998; Bouchard & Propping, 1993). On the nature-nurture argument, the researchers' bias was heavily weighted toward nurture. The shock of the findings was to demonstrate convincingly just the opposite: the dominance of the genes. Although clearly taken aback, the principal investigator, trusting and honoring the research methodology, reported the findings worldwide and went about altering some of his own biases. And his passion for studying human development and human behavior only increased.

Ah, the life of a scholar is to start with important questions, use strong research methods, and be delighted in the findings (above and beyond personal biases). I hope that a unisex research perspective will help us to hold on to these basic tenets.

References

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