

RH: On Listening

On Listening as an Integral Element of Praxis in Feminist and Womynist Research

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I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Elizabeth Sharp and Shannon Weaver's thoughtful and honest appraisal of themselves as works in progress in the developmental process of feminist research. It is heartening to know that *aluta continua* ("the struggle continues") proceeds forward to refine conceptual frameworks and methodological strategies and critique old paths while forging new ones. I am honored to realize that I was present for and contributed to some of the discussions leading to the creation of the knowledge cited by the authors, particularly as I move out of the academy and into new ways of cocreating and disseminating knowledge.

The following comments are designed to encourage feminist and womynist scholars who hope to produce scholarship that has meaning outside of the academy. In most of my own work, I have noted my commitment to praxis as integral to producing new knowledge. Engaging in praxis means the development of critical thinking combined with action to enhance social justice. The authors give excellent examples of the ways they have engaged in conscientization in their development of theory and research methods over their careers. They are established scholars who recognize how much more we have to learn to effectively integrate the complexities of intersectional family life in the United States.

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LISTENING

As I reflected on “Feeling Like Feminist Frauds,” however, I came to a recognition that there is a precursor to conscientization and action in praxis: listening to the real experts—those research participants who have lived the experiences researchers want to understand. It occurs to me that those of us who have practiced with people in the helping professions, or with people who have been excluded from academic knowledge development, have had access to unacknowledged experts whose voices and lenses are often missing from research and scholarship. These experts ask us in different ways to incorporate their perspectives, to listen and then redevelop our theoretical paradigms and methodological strategies. Following are some illustrations of the role of listening in the process of critical thinking.

In the first semester of my own doctoral program in 1981, I took a comprehensive seminar on poverty and public policy taught by a world-renowned scholar. At the end of the semester, I returned to my community on the South Side of Chicago for a visit with friends. Some of these friends had advanced degrees in a variety of disciplines, while others had found positions after high school and continued to work in them. As real people do every day outside of academia, my friends and I had a conversation about poverty’s differential effects on families in the city, based on ethnicity and geographic location. I launched into my newly acquired knowledge of absolute and relative measures of poverty, and their impact on populations in the aggregate. At some point in the conversation, one of my friends looked at me and said, “But Edith, did you forget what it’s like to be poor?”

What that person was asking me was whether I still remembered the complexities of actual versus conceptualized experience. Did I remember what it was like to expend enormous amounts of energy attempting to feed myself and my children with very limited resources? Did I remember attempting to maintain civility when people confronted me erroneously about my childhood poverty being a result of the lack of a father in my home? (My father was, in fact, continuously present in my family of origin.) I had failed what later became Seccombe's (1999) test of incorporating lived experience into any aggregation of knowledge constructed outside of that experience. I had not integrated my own lived experience into my academic training.

That 1981 experience has continued to shape my ways of soliciting and understanding information I have received. It also blended with my practice experience. As a new social worker in the early 1970s, I was told by those whose cases I was assigned to that I was a good listener and, as a result, could help them resolve their problems. Failing to integrate this listening process into research and theory building deprives us of important information. It is the unexplained variance in our statistical models.

This error of failure to really hear what people are saying to us is easy to make because many of us do not spend our time in conversation or interaction with people who are not a part of our disciplines or lifestyles. We do not know the names of the support staff who work in our departments or of the maintenance staff who have developed ways to enhance the quality of life for ourselves and our colleagues. These individuals and groups are experts, too, on family life variables such as income, age, educational background, and the differential outcomes due to

intersectionality. Without incorporating their stories into our work, we produce inadequate information.

While participatory action research, in my opinion, offers the most comprehensive manner of gathering valid and reliable data on these realities, I am aware that not all academics across disciplines have the resources or ability to engage in this strategy of knowledge development. Elizabeth Sharp provides excellent examples of attempting to incorporate lived experiences while simultaneously using a standardized scale. This passage included her use of two open-ended questions at the close of her instrument, to solicit more comprehensive information about the topic. What might have happened if those two questions about what the person providing information thought was important had begun the survey rather than ended the data collection? If we ask people what is important to them, they can give us insights into realities we may never have thought about.

BACK TRANSLATION

In my earlier work referenced by the authors (Lewis, 2009), I noted that feminist and womynist research enterprises required the inclusion of all people in the acquisition, processing, and dissemination of information. This is a group-oriented, multitiered process, in which information is relayed again and again, continuing until all people involved in the project understand and share its meaning. Back translation is a standard practice among many researchers of color, and it was present in such landmark studies as W. E. B. Du Bois's Philadelphia Project (1899) and the Program for Research on Black American's Black Family and National Black Election surveys (Jackson, 1991). The "experts" who produced the scales were not simply from academic

settings. Those engaged in the research programs went to homes, community centers and churches, meeting with people in small groups to talk about the constructs they were utilizing in the work. The discussions were held in multiple sites within and across urban and rural areas. Most important, as the instruments were crafted, those responsible for the programs returned to the same communities to ensure that the information they had collected possessed construct validity. This back-translation method made a significant contribution to research about individuals and families at the beginning and end of the 20th century. It provides a model set of strategies to offset “neoliberalism.”

WHO BENEFITS?

The authors point out that feminist researchers are always thoughtful about who, besides the researchers, benefits from the research enterprise. Elizabeth Sharp again provides an example of an interaction with the African American male pastor of an urban church who raises the types of questions all of us who engage in research programs with target populations need to ask ourselves. The pastor was concerned about the researchers’ misuse of information provided by church members and was reluctant to agree to his church being a part of the project. As in the earlier example of back translation, these types of issues must be raised and addressed by the researchers *prior* to engaging in research with families and communities, in my opinion.

The context in which the pastor asked the questions is not included in the article, and its absence led me to a series of questions. I wondered how often that church had been approached by researchers. I wondered whether there had been opportunities for Elizabeth and her colleagues to work within the community the church was located in so that a track record had been

established for their work. I wondered whether attempts had been made to determine how that church's members had been explicitly been exploited by past research projects. Three words easily illustrate the distrust many African Americans have with research: the Tuskegee Experiment. For many of us who have been raised to understand and embrace our relationships to our ethnic, racial, or class groups, research conducted by an individually oriented outsider is automatically suspect. The community-wide sensitivity about potential researcher misconduct needs to be addressed in the earliest stages of interaction. Relationship-building activities based on the stated needs of the community may have a higher probability of later participation.

Most important, I wondered whether a request to meet with the Women's Auxiliary, Deaconess Board, or Mothers' Board had been part of the first step to access potential respondents. Research about African American churches for 40 years has pointed to the importance of these groups of women for understanding social justice, social welfare, mutual support and aid, overall well-being, and support across urban and rural communities. Early feminist scholarship stressed ways the abuses of research protocols had negatively affected women, leading to our subsequent mistrust of decontextualized research in which we had no role. When one wants to understand the lives of women, one must access the women. If one wants to know what women think, ask women. Further, when one collects the information, share it with the women and allow for their reflections on and modifications to it.

COMPLEXITIES

On several occasions, the authors raise the complexity of doing useful feminist research. This work is, indeed, often more labor intensive than developing a scale or placing and analyzing a

subset of items on a larger national study. The rewards in terms of relationship building, knowledge development, and validity of findings outweigh the effort spent. I do not suggest this lightly, and I know that the demands of the academic setting often mean that feminist and womynist researchers do this work over and above that supported by their institutions.

For example, I once spent a year teaching an art class to toddlers to demonstrate to their mothers that I was committed enough to their community to be trusted with the intervention research project I eventually conducted. On several occasions I had to defend my choice of doing community-based research rather than simply agreeing to “put a question on the Detroit Area survey study and analyze it.”

My findings in one study were strengthened when one woman insisted that her individual and family problems were so intertwined with her community concerns that she could not separate the two. That meant I had to significantly revise my intervention strategy. The changes supported by listening to the experts of the study were worth the outcomes for the participants and the research enterprise. The highest praise I have ever received about my scholarship came from a woman who did not have a high school diploma. At the end of a research project, as the participants took over the program we co-created for their community, she said, “You are not an educated fool.”

Listening to people who may not be a part of our daily interactions cannot be overstated. Continuing to reflect with these newly significant others reduces the probability of becoming neo-feminists in that our personal knowledge base expands to include marginalized voice, further shaping our disciplines. Listening is an integral part of praxis and must work in concert with our

critical thinking and action. Sharp and Weaver express their conviction that they want to work against being feminist frauds. I am thankful for their efforts. May these comments make a contribution to reclaiming the tools of praxis in feminist and womynist research.

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