

DIY: TOWARDS FEMINIST METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH¹

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The objective of this article² is to reflect on the potential for creating subversive scientific discourses through the application of feminist research methodology and its posterior diffraction. We start out from our collective experiences within the framework of SIMReF, which includes our participation in various research projects, training and exchange. Based on these experiences, we reflect on distinct possibilities and limitations for the development of a feminist research agenda in the academic and institutional environment of the Spanish State, which has been reluctant to value and incorporate feminist epistemological and methodological viewpoints. Grounded in an understanding of feminist methodology as a practice that is political, processual and discursive, we conclude by presenting a series of concerns about how these limitations also constitute a condition of possibility for the collective construction of a feminist methodology from ‘within’ yet also ‘against’ academic ‘normality’.

Gynealogy in a nutshell

The positivist vision of western science, still taught in our educational institutions, is based on a linear and evolutionary narrative that is closed to any questioning, incertitude or skepticism. By continuously repeating its own doctrine, like a mantra, it seeks to become a reality in and of itself, interiorised by those subjects who seek out ‘knowledge’ (Subramaniam 2000). Through its distinct disciplines, the western scientific worldview has sought to impose itself as the only imaginable truth within the narrow canons of scientific faith (Harding 1996; Haraway 1991).

In contrast to the positivist ideal, feminist epistemology has been a pioneer in challenging the supposed neutrality of knowledge as well as

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² This article is a collective reworking of a book chapter previously published by Biglia (2015).

science's all-encompassing pretensions. One of its first demands was that women be incorporated as a legitimate 'object' of study in order to overcome the androcentrism that was and still is present in much research. In this sense, feminist epistemology questioned the generalisation of research results carried out with exclusively male subjects (needless to say, white too) to the entire population of human beings. However, it soon became evident that widening the object of study alone would not be sufficient, it was also necessary to question the position of the researcher. In fact, if scientific paradigms are what guide our attempts to acquire knowledge and delimit what is knowable, we must also ask: Who has defined the canons of the hegemonic paradigm? Who, by consequence, has awarded themselves the right to prescribe how we look at reality and understand ourselves?

Feminist epistemology not only decried the absence of women among this privileged elite because of the barriers that limited their participation in scientific institutions, they also contested the fact that their presence and contributions were denied or erased, often being attributed to other colleagues or male scientists (Lee 2013). Essentially, the process of invisibilisation of women in science was analogous to those of other fields of social life (Scott 1986). In response to this situation, interesting work emerged (e.g. Fox Keller 1983) that sought to reclaim the legacy of these scientific pioneers and recognise women as subjects capable of producing knowledge (Longino 1983).

In the same vein, the so-called naive empiricists (Campbell 1994) sustained that if the sexist bias in science was to be overcome it was absolutely necessary to increase the number of female researchers. However, this proposal was soon questioned on the basis that a mere growth in female participation alone would not be enough to overcome such bias, without questioning the heteropatriarchal premises on which modern science had been configured.

The debate acquired greater importance through standpoint theory which problematised the notion of scientific objectivity. In accordance with this theory, growth in the participation of women in science would permit a shift from weak objectivity to strong objectivity, for the reason that women, as a marginalised group, held a privileged epistemic position that would allow them to generate less biased knowledge (Harding 2004). Over time, this proposal was also used by African American and lesbian researchers, amongst others, to demand recognition for their research practices, and that their subaltern position be considered an advantage for scientific activity rather than a stigma.

Twenty years later, the debate rages on. There is still no agreement within feminism on the need to attribute a privileged epistemic position to those who find themselves in a subaltern condition. In any case, it is evident that a greater presence of women has facilitated the inclusion of research themes, such as violence against women, that had previously been ignored. At the same time, it has also contributed to the incorporation of the gender perspective to the analysis and understanding of social reality (Schiebinger et al. 2011), which, for example, allowed for an understanding of 'gender-related violence' as a manifestation of gendered power relations and hence the recognition of their structural dimension.

In a nutshell, we can consider that the critiques developed by the feminist epistemologies have managed to problematize positivist

assumptions, as well as sexist and androcentric biases. However, a univocal agenda in response to this challenge is yet to emerge: some argue that the scientific project should be reformed from a gender perspective, while others sustain that any such exercise is destined to fail if it isn't carried out in conjunction with a total deconstruction of heteropatriarchal and decolonial postulates that form the foundations of scientific tradition (Espinosa, 2014; Curiel, 2015).

Hi, we're SIMReF

In 2008, our interest in exploring these epistemological concerns led us to establish SIMReF (*Interdisciplinary Seminar on Feminist Research*)³. Our starting point was the adoption of Haraway's (1991) proposal for the generation of situated knowledge and the multiplicity of partial knowledge production, which recognises that when we come to know something we do so through ourselves. This is to say that when we generate knowledge, we must acknowledge that it is an embodied interpretation of reality, and hence we should take into account how our perspective influences the way that we come to know. At the same time, we also give great importance to the diffraction of feminist methodological knowledge (Haraway 1997). This means that new interpretations can and should be disseminated through multiple narratives (partial and contextual), especially with a view to them being available to other researchers, who in turn can reinterpret and diffract them in their own particular way.

From the outset, our practice has focused on the disarticulation of heteropatriarchal scientific dynamics and on the construction of horizontal spaces for the collective interrogation of how we research. In this sense, it seemed essential to provoke a shift in the work of the critical feminist epistemology. Which is to say, a move from the problematization of the *who* and *what* of knowledge toward a recognition of the importance of process, or to put it another way, *how* we come to know. This perspective implies that as researchers we assume responsibility for our work and recognise that the practice of knowledge production always constitutes a political act that should be addressed conscientiously and with accountability.

In response to the classic question, does a feminist methodology or method exist, and if it does, what makes it different from traditional methods, beyond including the perspective of women or gender? (Barta, 1998), we reply that a feminist methodology can and should exist. However, such a methodology should not be understood as a substitution of conventional research techniques with new ones, but as a commitment to the development of research practices that are coherent with feminist premises. It should also be capable of rethinking itself in accordance with the context where research is conducted, its particularities, objectives and, clearly, the feminist point of view that has been assumed.

However, the step from epistemological theory to methodology is by no means trivial. There is still very little reference material in Spanish that provides us with clues as to how to adopt feminist methodology into research practice. This means that, quite often, we feel like we are

³ For more information on SIMReF, see www.simref.net.

walking in the dark, devoid of a network of peers and mutual support -in the material and figurative sense (Biglia & Jiménez 2012). Similarly, there is a prevalence of the idea that the challenges posed by feminist epistemologies are more easily addressed in theory than empirically. Perhaps for that reason, recent international research (GenSET 2010; United Nations 2010) has recommended “*the development of internationally agreed upon methods for mainstreaming sex and gender analysis into basic and applied research*” (Caprile et al. 2011: 119).

This need to reach certain methodological agreement has become manifestly important in academia where there is a proliferation of researchers and research groups that are supposedly sensitive to questions of ‘gender’, but which in reality seem more interested in accessing finance allocated to high-profile media themes than responding to feminist needs and concerns (Biglia, 2011).

In fact, in Spanish academia claiming to be ‘feminist’ is far less accepted than declaring an interest in ‘gender’ or ‘women’ (Arranz 2004). Also at international level it is common for the term feminist to be disqualified as being politically biased or simply out-of-date (McRobbie 2009). Nevertheless, as we have been able to show in a pilot study (Biglia 2011), many publications that claim to be gender sensitive don’t problematise the values (androcentrism, sexism, heteronormativity and racism, amongst others) that are present in the hegemonic scientific paradigm (Ferrer & Bosch 2005). This should alert us to the neutralizing effect of overusing this term in research. Furthermore, when describing research, the term gender can mean very different things, yet this multiplicity of meaning is rarely recognised. This leads to persistent confusion between what it means to adopt a feminist methodology and doing research with a gender perspective, research about women, or themes commonly associated with gender, such as domestic violence, pay gap, glass ceiling, etc.

Another relevant debate relates to whether we can consider research to be feminist just because it is the political position of the researchers that have carried it out. In this sense, we believe that it is limiting to think that a personal or political position can guarantee the avoidance of the reproduction of biases or discrimination; just as the black and lesbian feminists showed when they uncovered the elitism and partiality (when not outright racism or heteronormativity) of many theories and practises that were supposedly feminist⁴. In fact, we have observed, far too frequently, that research projects set out with the objective of “helping” other collectives, but are incapable of respecting their agency or evaluating the secondary effects of their actions on others. For this reason, it is fundamental that we don’t “rest on our laurels” and that we always maintain a self-critical perspective of our research processes.

Similarly, we want to emphasise how many researchers who state that their approach is based on situated knowledge in fact just limit themselves to specifying their position as researchers without analysing how such positions influence the production of knowledge. Thus they reduce the concept of situated research to a simple process of ‘navel

⁴ For an overview of these critiques, see e.g.: Angela Davis (1981), bell hooks et al. (2004) and Mercedes Jabardo (2012).

gazing'. What is more, the interest of late⁵ in self-focused research, such as autoethnographies, could be viewed as contributing to a strengthening of the individualist neoliberal model of science, confusing it with the feminist perspective of "starting from the self". In fact, one of the consequences of incorporating postmodern language to academic rhetoric has been to generate the impression that the use of complex and lofty terminology is sufficient to generate situated knowledge, which leaves those who are serious in their desire to apply these epistemological proposals without any guidelines. In this sense, experimenting with these practices and disseminating examples, both successful and mistaken, is an important part of continuous learning.

In addition to the production of knowledge, another concern that has been central to our debates is the dichotomisation of quantitative and qualitative studies. Based on the criticisms that have been levelled at positivism, a general mistrust of quantitative methods has set in amongst critical studies, including in feminism. This has been accompanied by a belief that qualitative or participative approaches are in and of themselves more critical (Pedrero 2010; Westmarlan 2001). While it is true that statistics, as the name implies, was invented as a "science of the state" for the control of populations, it is no less true that qualitative methodologies have frequently been used for purposes that are alien to feminist practices. In this sense, we believe that it is necessary to revalue the use of quantitative studies in the feminist field. For example, the measurement of victims of gender violence has been fundamental for political recognition of this social ulcer⁶. While on the other hand, some qualitative studies, such as the ones used to justify the nosologisation of the parental alienation syndrome (Baker 2005), are clearly not feminist. Another problem associated with this dichotomy is the erroneous believe that qualitative research is easier to carry out than quantitative, which can lead to its pernicious use. To give an example, great harm can be caused by carrying out a heterogenous and multiethnic discussion group on racism without having experience in the moderation of such groups or situated knowledge of the topic. For these reasons, breaking with this dichotomy is a continuing challenge for feminist research, along with having the know-how to properly choose the techniques and approaches most suitable for the research objectives and the specific context of production.

In SIMReF we have created spaces for interdisciplinary exchange and learning where more experienced researchers give insights into their "research kitchens". We exchange experiences on the practical implementation of feminist learnings and epistemology, and together we analyse the contradictions and difficulties that we come across (Martínez et al. 2014; Zavos & Biglia 2009). At the same time, these encounters aspire to being a sort of peer validation process for projects developed by colleagues through the use of a traditional feminist tool: the collective construction of knowledge and meaning (Puig de la Bellacasa 2002).

⁵ With respect to traditional science the first autoethnographies were extremely subversive, however, now it is an accepted technique in disciplines such as anthropology, and, as such, its transformative nature must go beyond the mere decision to use it.

⁶ Although it is clear that there is plenty of room for improving the way that we define quantitative research parameters as well as data collection techniques (Casado et al. 2012; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014), it is undeniable that they have been extremely useful.

Another issue that we have been concerned with is the problematization of linguistic imperialism in the scientific field and the effect it has on the dissemination of feminist methodologies in the non-English speaking world. The majority of manuals and articles on training and education in feminist methodology are published in English, and in many cases they are not available in the libraries of educational institutions in Spain or Latin America. For this reason, one of the most ambitious projects that we have undertaken is the elaboration of a methodology manual, whose purpose is to serve as a guide to young researchers on how to design their own research projects from a feminist perspective⁷.

Furthermore, and in agreement with the principle of collective knowledge production, we have set up various initiatives that are focused on making the debates on feminist research methodology more visible by publishing material under open-access licensing such as Creative Commons. For example, we published a monograph in the journal *Athenea Digital* (2014) entitled *Experiences of feminist research: methodological proposals and reflections*⁸, and a book in collaboration with the Hegoa centre for studies called *Other forms of knowing: Reflections, tools and applications for feminist research*⁹. We have also generated three repositories of open-access knowledge to facilitate the dissemination of materials and bibliographies: the first one hosts audiovisual content on various presentations, debates, roundtables and conferences organised by SIMReF¹⁰; the second one contains grey literature and materials produced within the framework of the seminar¹¹; and the third one, focuses on bibliography with the objective of generating an accessible online database of articles and books on feminist research methodology¹².

Finally, we believe that a key factor for strengthening the development of networks of feminist researchers is a commitment to provide spaces for training and exchange of knowledge that encourages not just the dissemination of knowledge but co-learning from the experiences between researchers from different geographic realities. For this reason, we have undertaken a number of initiatives, such as: online training courses (we organised the 9th edition this year); blended courses¹³ focused on specific methodologies such as discourse analysis, the development of indicators, and quantitative analysis; three major

⁷ For more information, see: <http://www.simref.net/2014/03/manual-metodologias-feministas-en-practica/>

⁸ The monograph can be accessed at: <http://atheneadigital.net/issue/view/v14-n4>

⁹ The book, where the original version of this text was first published, can be downloaded from:

http://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.es/assets/pdfs/269/Otras_formas_de_reconocer.pdf?1488539836

¹⁰ The audiovisual repository can be accessed at: <https://vimeo.com/channels/simref>

¹¹ The documentary repository can be accessed at:

<https://es.scribd.com/user/131297914/Seminari-Interdisciplinar-de-Metodologia-de-Recerca-Feminista>

¹² Developed within the framework of the project on innovation in teaching FAAMEF (Vergés et al. 2016), whose main aim is to facilitate autonomous and collaborative learning of feminist research methodologies through the construction, use and dissemination of an online repository on Zotero. The repository can be accessed at: <http://www.simref.net/faamef/>

¹³ Blended learning is an education method that combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods.

international conferences on feminist research methodology¹⁴; as well as collaborating with universities to increase the use of the feminist perspective (Biglia & Vergés 2016). In all these initiatives we have tried to problematize academic hierarchies and to encourage the disarticulation of the dichotomy between theory and practice by incorporating and systematising the very valuable experiences of feminists activists who work in intervention, which are rarely materialised in forms that are acknowledged and/or recognisable.

Along with these co-learning processes, we are also promoting a strategy to develop international networks through a number of initiatives focused on academic exchange. One such project, of which this article forms a part, is *Boosting methodological accuracy in gender studies through international learning* (Euin2015-62590). This project also formed the basis of the recent funding submission to the E.U. RISE project (Research and Innovation Staff Exchange), called *Integrating feminist criticalities throughout the research process: An international collaboration to enhance methodological rigour in the social sciences*, which includes the participation of 10 universities across 7 countries (Spain, the U.K., Canada, Ecuador, Chile, Mexico and Australia) and aims to facilitate cross-country exchange and learning processes between feminist researchers. Through these initiatives, we hope to encourage greater levels of rigour and validity in research practise, as well as social and political commitment in “the belly of monsters”¹⁵ at local and global level.

When you cook with passion, you tend to get dirty

As we highlighted in the previous section, it is common for debates on feminist methodology to focus more on theory and abstraction than on practice. In our opinion, it is necessary to rethink this dynamic. With a view to extending the dialogue on the challenges and difficulties of putting a feminist research methodology into practice, in this section we provide some brief embodied reflections based on our experiences.

Research for institutions and the question of representation

Our first reflection contemplates the difficulties and challenges of working on projects commissioned by institutions. By way of illustration, we'll refer to a study conducted in 2008 for the Local Authority of Barcelona. The overall objective of the project was to formulate recommendations so that public services could respond to the needs of young migrant women aged 18 to 35 through group-based *socio-educational interventions in Women's Information and Care Centres (PIAD [acronym in Catalan])*¹⁶. The first step was therefore to carry out a needs analysis.

¹⁴ For more information see the following link: <http://www.simref.net/ediciones-antiores/>

¹⁵ An adaptation of Donna Haraway's (1991) term “the belly of the monster”, original coined to in reference to academia in the U.S.

¹⁶ *Group-based socio-educational interventions in Women's Information and Care Centres (PIAD [acronym in Catalan]: Needs analysis and proposals for action* was coordinated by Barbara Biglia and Trinidad Donoso, and carried out thanks to the “Francesca Bonnemaison Research Fund (2008)” from the Provincial Government of Barcelona. The project report can be downloaded [in Catalan] through the following link: <http://www.diba.cat/documents/233376/233762/dones-descarrega-barcelona-pdf.pdf>

The initial difficulty that we encountered was structural, as we only had twelve months to complete the project and insufficient funds to hire someone to do the fieldwork. Soon, questions arose about the purpose and content of the report. For example, differences with respect to priorities came to light. While the researchers thought that it was essential to complete a detailed analysis of needs before starting to write the recommendations, the managers in the local authority urgently required practical results that were applicable and hypothetically transferable to the entire service. The pressure to fulfil this requirement constrained our methodological possibilities, and we had to limit our work to two short, time-bound stages. In the first exploratory phase, we interviewed the politicians and managers in charge of the administration of the service and we carried out a discussion group with the practitioners responsible for front-line service provision. In the second diagnostic phase, we designed and administered a survey to PIAD users as well as youth and migrant associations, which was complemented by interviews with the coordinators of these entities. As we considered it important to take into account the situated position of the subjects, we set out to gather input from as many points of view as possible during the time available.

From the analysis of the interviews with experts we found that the migrants and/or young-people often went to services and NGOs to ask for help with material needs (work, housing, social services, legal rights, etc.). However, these necessities couldn't be handled through the group work of the PIADs, and, therefore, a detailed analysis of such issues didn't make much sense, which meant we had to focus on less material needs. As such, based on feminist literature and the opinions collected during the exploratory phase, we focused on those areas that were directly related to gender roles and power relations. However, this would cause tensions around several important and interrelated areas.

Firstly, focusing our attention on needs in the symbolic field, while material necessities are not being met, could result in the public services not taking on responsibility for essential needs. In this sense, we were worried that our results could be used to justify a "Band-Aid" approach to intervention, and so act to divert attention away from important structural inequalities.

In fact, paying little attention to the material concerns of these women could result in a failure to appreciate the connection between these needs and the difficulties that the women had in participating in PIAD working groups. From an elitist and paternalistic perspective, this could subsequently be interpreted as disinterest, disaffection, absence of motivation and a sign that they had little desire to empower themselves.

Another tension that ran through the entire research was the impossibility of having more direct and in-depth interaction with the service's users, as we had to limit the interviews to the practitioners that worked with the women. Adopting the feminist critique of the principle of representation (men representing women, white women representing black women, those that provide interventions representing those who receive interventions, etc.), as well as our condition as white female westerners, this factor clearly biased our work. In fact, the impact of the limited input of the migrants' voice became particularly evident in the

interviews with the professionals whose discourse was loaded with prejudice as well as gendered and racist stereotypes¹⁷:

- *These type of women*
- Normally what they want is help getting work... but *we are the ones that understand* that first what they really need is an education
- None of them are openly saying that what they really need is to widen their social network, but I think it's important, because *some women from certain cultures* only relate to people from their own cultures and their own families
(emphasis added)

Amongst the various questions that emerged during this process, we want to highlight the following: to what degree can a research study with an empowering perspective be transformed into a new resource for social control? Or, to put it another way, should we just stop conducting studies with subjectivities that we don't belong to, given the risk of supplanting their voice?

We believe that there is no unequivocal response to these questions for a number of reasons. Firstly, we can't ignore the fact that the majority of social researchers are from a higher socio-economic stratum than the people being researched, which contributes to an accentuation of inequality between the subjects and subjectivities being researched. In fact, there have been many attempts at co-research by different subjectivities that have broken down due to the impossibility, and to a degree disinterest, of taking on the task in a truly collective manner (Pantera Rosa 2004). Secondly, from an intersectional perspective, the particular way in which the axes of discrimination intersect in our bodies makes us 'unique'. Which is why, even when we are studying collectives to which "we belong", we can't ignore the fact that in some way we are "representing them".

As such, we have to recognise that all knowledge production implies, one way or another, that we are representing certain realities and subjects. Instead of supposing that we can avoid such representation, we consider that it is more honest to assume responsibility for what it means to represent and the decisions that we make. Recognising the inevitability of representation doesn't mean going back to speaking on behalf of others and negating their voice and agency, rather it acknowledges that when we research we are always mediating and translating messages and information, which means we have to make these processes transparent in our practices.

Applied research, intersectional tensions and theoretical groundings

In spite of being a central issue, the representation dilemma only constitutes one of many difficulties that we face in trying to put a feminist research methodology into practice. In the European action research project GAP Work¹⁸ we have encountered other issues such as

¹⁷ Quotations translated from Spanish and Catalan.

¹⁸ Supported by the EU's Daphne-III Programme, 'GAP Work: Improving gender-related violence intervention and referral through youth practitioner training' (JUST/2012/DAP/AG/3176). Coordinated by Alldred at Brunel University London, UK. The views reflected in this article are those of the authors and not the funders. For more

difficulties coordinating academic and non-academic groups, as well as problems operationalising intersectional research designs (for a more detailed analysis, see: Jiménez, Biglia, Cagliero 2016).

The objective of this project was to develop training programmes for youth workers, so as to improve the identification and questioning of sexist and lesbo-trans-homophobic language, attitudes and behaviour. The principal innovations of the project were: a broad understanding of gender-related violence (Biglia 2007); the importance given to a thorough and systematic evaluation process; the adoption of feminist pedagogic criteria (Luxán & Biglia 2011); and the implementation of an intersectional perspective (Platero 2012).

The first area of tension related to coordination between the researchers and the associations charged with providing the training¹⁹. In this sense, we were rather naive in believing that our shared activist feminism would mean a common conceptual understanding of how to implement the project. Nonetheless, it is quite frequent to find that the practical needs and lexicon of those who work in universities and those who work in the third sector tend not to coincide. There were also distinct ways of doing things in relation to timing, understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, ways of engaging with the project and with overall expectations. This made it difficult to balance power relations in a project that wanted to function without a hierarchy, but which couldn't be completely horizontal, due to its set up.

Some of the factors that made it difficult to maintain balance in the project included: the persistence of attitudes towards the university as a space that absorbs and neutralises social experiences, which on occasion led to the researchers and the institution being identified as one and the same; external pressures that conditioned work at local level, such as international deadlines; lack of previous experience, which made it difficult to plan and organise the distinct tasks and responsibilities that each participant should take on, meaning that in some cases roles remained very fuzzy or poorly defined.

These were some of the embodied difficulties that we lived through while coordinating the project, in particular the great need to find new ways of managing power relations in contexts where action (practice) and reflection (theory) wish to work in parallel.

Another challenge was to transpose complex theory, the basis of how we interpret reality, to training practices for Critical Feminist Activist Research. In academic work it is common to have discussions on the subtleties of interpretations and terminology, which are difficult to translate to training practices and interventions. For example, the painstaking analysis on the multitude of terminologies used to describe some of the phenomena and expressions associated with gender-related violence is extremely fascinating and politically relevant. Nonetheless, when you attempt to introduce these subtleties into training over just a few days, you run the risk of confusing the participants. For example, in our case, in the majority of training sessions, the participants understood and were receptive to our proposal that gender-related violence can happen in non-heteronormative contexts. However, some of them came to think that adopting a broader view of the phenomena made

information, see: <http://sites.brunel.ac.uk/gap>.

¹⁹ The feminist associations were Candela and Tamaia.

it unnecessary to analyse the structural and cultural asymmetries of heteropatriarchal systems. In fact, due to these misunderstandings, we began to contemplate to what point our conceptual proposal was counterproductive. This to say, instead of generating a more in-depth situated understanding of the multiplicity of situations that can manifest gender-related violence, overloading participants with conceptual nuances could lead to an individualisation or decontextualisation of the phenomenon. Even worse, it could support the notion that it isn't necessary to distinguish between gender-related violence and other forms of violence.

In line with this, we also encountered an ethical worry in that we seemed to have generated a false impression of expertise, especially amongst those who had come to the subject for the first time. By the end of the training, we realised that some of the participants thought that they would be able to coordinate therapeutic dynamics, a task that was far beyond the competencies we trained them for. Paradoxically, those participants with a greater knowledge and personal background in this area had more realistic expectations, as they seemed to know their own limits and better understand the complexity of the subject. Based on this we asked ourselves: to what degree can training in AR (action research) have a boomerang effect by accrediting specialities that haven't been acquired, and also justify that people with insufficient expertise trigger processes that they are incapable of controlling, which may subsequently and therefore act to harm those very people that they set out to help?

Finally, another concern was how to deal with the evaluation/progress of the participants in the research oriented toward training/action. In Catalonia, we wanted to find ways to understand the interiorization of the processes, meanings and dynamics of gender-related violence amongst the participants, beyond their mere perception. To do so, we included items on the pre and post training questionnaire about gender violence myths. However, in the first training session we detected that politically correct discourses were particularly well established amongst the participants so we had to discard the questions after the first round of evaluations. For our second attempt, we developed a series of short stories and asked the participants to comment on them, which, while more sophisticated, placed us in the difficulty of verifying the interiorization of content through qualitative analysis.

E.U. funded action research

In this final section we would like to propose some alternate diffractions of E.U. funded action research in relation to the aforementioned GAP Work project and the USVReact²⁰ project, which is still running. We believe that one of the principal difficulties that international projects have to overcome is the development of mutual understanding between the diverse groups of collaborators, given that words, practises and theories all contain culturally embodied meanings. In fact, although we use English as a working language in our international research projects,

²⁰ *Universities Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence: Training for Sustainable Services (USVReact)* co-founded by the DG Justice, Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (DAPHNE strand) (JUST/2014/RDAP/AG/VICT/7401). is coordinated by Brunel University. The views reflected in this article are those of the authors and not the funders. For more information, see: <http://usvreact.eu/>

variations in its idiomatic and culturally influenced use frequently cause communicative difficulties. Furthermore, a power relation can become established as native speakers not only have greater capability for expressing the nuances of their thoughts, but they also tend to identify their own cultural interpretation as the “correct” one. On the other hand, those who have acquired the language from within their own cultural prism find that they are continuously obliged to explain the situated meaning of their assertions. Not only does this create extra work for those that make the effort to communicate in a language that isn’t their own, but it also means that they have to culturally translate collective learning at local level, an additional task.

This difficulty gets worse in a context where time is short and E.U. requirements are more focused on the production of output than on caring about the process of getting there. In fact, we regularly find ourselves trying to balance the diverse demands and interests, such as between the E.U. and different local institutions or between the needs of the researcher and the subjects of the project, to name but a few. As such, time pressure as much as language diversity impedes continuous collaboration between the agents involved. Often, instead of the expected mutually enriching experience that could lead us to collectively define global output, we end up producing situations whereby the people who manage the link between national and international contexts have to continuously perform a balancing act to adapt and narrate the development of the project according to the diverse needs represented.

In this sense, we must recognise that cross-national learning processes can become extremely watered down. To give an example from the GAP Work project: while trying to respect local specificities, we found some difficulties when it came to selecting the content for the comparative analysis of training. In the shared parts of the questionnaire, it was practically impossible to translate some items that were fundamental in one local context to another. Consequently, when it came to the new project USVReact we had to reduce expectations regarding comparative analysis, which meant losing a great deal of the value of having an internationalised study. Furthermore, in USVReact the action research needed the locally situated universities to be strongly embedded in the project in order to implement training with their personnel. In this respect, the most substantial problems we encountered were related to the enormous cultural differences between institutions in different countries. In the case of Catalonia, where there still isn’t any explicit recognition of the problem of sexual violence in universities, we had many problems getting the institutions themselves to take responsibility for the implementation of the workshops. At the same time, compartmentalisation within different organisms in institutions also made it difficult to develop a joint project between teaching/research staff and management/administrative staff.

Another frustration that we experienced was not being able to take into account, in a rigorous way, the diverse range of situated experiences of all the participants. As much in GAP Work as in USVReact, we co-produced a huge body of material in different formats. In the case of the first project, we didn’t have time to analyse the material in-depth, and in the second one, we still don’t know if we’ll manage to do all that we’d like. This is a common problem in research, and we should ask ourselves: what information should be part of our body of analysis?;

how far do we go with the analysis?; how can we triangulate data without creating hierarchies and while also respecting the different points of view expressed by the participating subjectivities? For example, how can we manage the different perceptions of trainers/observers and participants with regards to key areas of learning?

Last but not least, the eternal problem: the risk that work undertaken ends up being ephemeral and quickly out of date. Why does the E.U. provide huge funds for a project that has to be completed in two years and which without posterior support won't have much chance of having any lasting impact? In the two research projects that we have carried out we have tried to reduce this problem by making the resultant materials publicly available.

Furthermore, we have managed to achieve a certain level of transferability of learnings. In the case of GAP Work, two examples include: the involvement of the Department of Youth in the Regional Autonomous Government of Catalonia who invested in the improvement and implementation of some of the intervention proposals designed by project participants; and, the use and adoption of some of the materials that were developed and key learnings by the associations that were in charge of training. In the case of USVReact, the sustainability of the workshops was initially considered as an essential element, however this can't be implemented without the collaboration of the university administrators, and it looks like it won't happen, at least in the short-term²¹.

Feminist methodology as discursive practice

In this article we have explored distinct strategies for incorporating knowledge of feminist epistemologies to social research practices. Our approach is based as much on our experiences within the framework of SIMReF as on reflections related to the various research projects that we have participated in. This allowed us to identify some of the limits and possibilities for incorporating feminist methodology into social research. In all of these projects, it is evident that what distinguishes a feminist methodology from other approaches is not the simple ascription of a theory or the use of specific techniques, designs or sampling strategies, rather one of its key elements is the constant role of reflecting on the decisions that have been taken. This requires us to reflect on the entire research process, the objectives, our position as researchers, the strategies employed to produce and disseminate knowledge, as well as the impact of our work on a society where heteropatriarchal and racialised relations of power and dominance are present.

In our opinion, feminist research methodology cannot be defined as a closed body of knowledge, but as a practice whose aim is to constantly interrogate our knowledge production processes. In this sense, we can establish a parallel between feminist methodology and critical discourse analysis, understood as a knowledge production strategy based on questioning the discursive practices that performatively constitute social reality.

²¹ Paradoxically, there is a greater chance that this might be possible in some of the associated universities, fingers crossed!

In addition, if positivism has contributed to the development of a discursive interpretation of science with pretensions of objectivity, neutrality and unique truth, then feminist methodology permits us to dismantle this approach and promote research that allows the construction of multiple discourses viewed through a non-discriminatory optic. The emphasis on process and analytic practice in this text can be conceived as an attempt to diffract scientific discourse so as to generate alternative interpretations and visions that take into account the relations of power and dominance that configure the social world. Furthermore, this approach provides us with the tools that can help us to question and subvert such relations.

From this point of view, feminist methodology is a methodology of suspicion and critique that problematizes the discourses and techniques associated with hegemonic science. Its subversive orientation promotes practices that help to visibilise and undermine gendered and racialised mechanisms of power and dominance that are woven into our social fabric.

Given our desire to encourage further dialogue on this subject, we would like to finish by proposing a series of questions that might allow us to keep advancing this line of research: what alliances can we establish between discourse studies and feminist research methodology?; how can we construct spaces for exchange and feedback between feminist researchers who develop their activities in academia and those that do so in other contexts?; to what degree is it possible to combine the critical approach that promotes feminist research methodology with the dominant academic requirements in academic production (publishing in indexed journals, accreditation systems, etc.)?; how can we move beyond the competitive climate that is dominant in academic and scientific settings to one based on cooperation and open knowledge? How can we construct support networks based on collaboration between young early career researchers and experienced researchers who have overcome institutional and disciplinary segmentation?

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