

# **GENDER/BODY/KNOWLEDGE**

**Feminist Reconstructions  
of Being and Knowing**

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# TOWARD A FEMINIST RESEARCH METHOD

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This paper follows the rather rocky progression of my experience in a mainstream setting, as a feminist, from novice to professional social science research methodologist. First, I describe the experience out of which my need to know how to identify feminist research emerged; I then abstract, from a broad review of activities of the contemporary western women's movement, a set of criteria that I consider to reflect current western feminist principles. Second, I describe a research method, an innovative group conceptualization technique. Third, I discuss and examine an illustration of the use of the technique to see if it embodies the set of criteria reflecting feminist principles. Although I do not claim this as the only way to approach issues feminist researchers face when confronting conflicts with current dominant research paradigms, I do believe it offers one way. In conclusion, I discuss my own questions arising from this work to date, including how to translate the group conceptualization technique into an action research method.

## *Beginnings*

As a feminist concentrating on learning research methods in the context of a doctoral program in Program Evaluation Studies, I discovered early on that I was uncomfortable with the boundaries imposed by current research practice. I learned that such boundaries enclosed belief systems sometimes called paradigms and that these paradigms had been created, utilized, and promulgated as the norm predominantly by white western males in academic and other "scientific" settings.

In the social sciences, frequently one is introduced to research methods via

courses in specific statistical procedures. Such courses often present the material according to graduated levels of complexity of analysis but without an overall framework for their use. Little attention is given, for example, to the dynamic interplay between them and other research components such as theoretical conceptualization, problem formulation, design, measurement, data definition, data collection strategies and techniques, and other components of the research process. I did not object to the mathematical procedures employed in statistical analyses; in fact, eventually I found them to be quite tantalizing puzzles. Initially, however, studying such subjects seemed somehow outside the realm of seeking methods by which to understand the world. Although agonizing and time consuming in the intricate calculations required, they seemed to me not to reveal themselves as useful intermediary steps in the overall enterprise of research. I now believe that this was a function of the way in which these subjects were atomistically conceived and taught, that is, as entities unto themselves, with very little connecting them to real life application either through substantive examples or contextual preparation. This type of skill development seems to play a role in the curriculum of many social science advanced degree programs: something peripheral to "real" substantive subjects and, therefore, of secondary interest at best. As a compulsory demonstration of mathematical capability, a rather closed, if not terrified, approach to its study is practically guaranteed, especially for many women. Furthermore, partially because a generally heightened level of fear exists among students, the importance of this quantitative research skill comes to loom larger than its actual value; at the same time its potential for multiple uses in an overall approach to research is unrecognized. For example, by concentrating on the calculation of various ways to *test* for "significance" of research *results*, the usefulness of many statistical procedures for *exploring data* is often overlooked, even lost. As they become ends rather than means in the general research endeavor, these tests, although interesting conceptually and useful in some contexts, can actually block understanding.

### *Transitions*

Once I began to understand the potential uses of such quantitative techniques (e.g., exploring data), I had no interest in throwing the baby out with the bath water. However, I also did not choose to swallow the current meanings without critical attention to their assumptions and practice, especially as viewed from a feminist perspective. Given a specific experience that occurred just as I was beginning to focus on the question, Is there such a thing as feminist research methodology? (Linton 1983), I had become convinced that a feminist perspective could make a difference; it could introduce new ways of

seeing and doing research. I went to a Women's Pentagon Action demonstration in Washington, D.C. As a veteran attendee and organizer of such events in the 1960s and early 1970s, I knew in detail how they worked. At this event, I was thrilled to discover that even the *process*, the *method*, of such things as common as "normal" demonstrations could be radically changed through attempts to embody feminist beliefs (Linton and Whitham 1982). This experience confirmed my need to review and expand from a feminist perspective what I was learning about "normal" research methodology.

I chose conceptualization as my particular area of research method interest because of its fundamental importance to the entire research process. I concentrated on the specific subset of *group* conceptualization because of its potential, as a step in the development of group action, for building women's solidarity to achieve social change. Together with a research methodologist whose specialization is in quantitative procedures, I worked on the development of a specified conceptualization process that combined text and numerical data and that could be used by both individuals and groups. Focusing on the group approach, I decided to explore the process using a subject I both knew and cared about a lot, that is, conceptualizing feminism itself. Furthermore, I was looking for a way to be able to explain why I thought what I was doing *was* feminist. The conceptualization process would produce as an outcome a meaning of feminism for the group participating, but how could I tell if the method itself was feminist? I needed a context, some kind of indicators of conceptualizing feminism, with which to compare my practice.

### *New Beginnings*

Because the last twenty years have given us many and varied meanings of feminism, the question then arose, from which meaning should I choose indicators? Stymied by this question for some time, I finally decided that, although we could easily *theorize* about feminism, what we as self-identified feminists *do* inescapably reveals who we are at a given time. Whether we are conscious of it or not, all practice embodies theory, that is, what we *mean* is revealed by what we do, even when inconsistent with what we *say* we mean. Therefore, I attempted to survey current self-identified feminist practice in order to build a working set of indicators of how I understand feminism's conceptualizations. I realize that my own view is one of many, necessarily limited by my experience as a contemporary western feminist and open to question by others. Thus, I do not claim an absolute sense for my meaning of feminism or what I consider to be activities constituting feminist practice.

In fact, I see my work as "in process," as part of a dynamic movement—a huge joint effort to create, understand, and exchange not only *what* we know

but also *how* we know. I tried to include a variety of ways of knowing about the concept feminism in the survey of feminist practice, for example, books, articles, studies, film, video, music, theater, pamphlets, personal recollections, meeting minutes, speeches, service program reports, and so on. I then formed broad categories of feminist activities: consciousness raising, for example, small groups, large groups such as speak-outs and teach-ins; service programs, for example, reproductive rights clinics, rape crisis lines, battered women's shelters, displaced homemaker centers; both direct and indirect social and political action, for example, electoral and legislative campaigns, court cases, public education on specific issues, demonstrations, rallies, marches, camp-ins; cultural expression, for example, music, art, spirituality, literature, revitalization of traditional women's crafts; theory building and education, for example, women's studies programs, internships; and theoretical and applied research, for example, anthropological, historical, psychological, literary, program evaluation. This categorization was meant neither to be absolute nor to imply priority among activities. Furthermore, it was clear to me that the connections among the categories revealed that their separation was somewhat artificial, reflecting more a variation in my designated viewpoint than the activity itself. The categorization was meant to reflect my understanding of the many and varied ways meanings of feminism have been conceptualized—separated by permeable boundaries but not mutually exclusive.

#### *Characteristics of Feminist Principles/Activities*

In order to establish a set of criteria for comparison, I identified several characteristics, including both process and content, which I thought these feminist activities most generally had in common:

1. women are the *active* central focus/subject;
2. cooperative group activity is the predominant modus operandi;
3. there is a recognized need for liberation from the oppression of the status quo;
4. issues affecting women are identified, and strategies for action are developed;
5. there is an open, inclusive, accessible, creative, dynamic process between people, among activities, or in relation to ideas; and
6. there is a commitment to respect and include women's ideas, theories, experiences, and action strategies from diverse experiences that appear to be, and sometimes are, in conflict (Linton 1985).

The conceptualization method may be measured by or evaluated against these characteristics. I did not claim a definitive view of feminism; indeed, many possible conceptions of feminism are emerging out of different contexts. I wanted to establish indicators, not hard-and-fast requirements. If the characteristics identified across general current western feminist practice were embodied in the conceptualization methodology, I would know why I thought my work was feminist.

### A GROUP CONCEPTUALIZATION METHOD

The three-step specified group conceptualization process described here (Trochim and Linton 1986) simultaneously incorporates conflicting as well as similar ideas, all in relation to each other. The product of this method is a map of ideas (i.e., a concept map), contributed, organized, and interpreted by a specific group of participants. The method can be used by either individuals or groups; however, my interest in the method is in its usefulness to groups of great diversity that have one or more common goals. Concept maps developed by such groups can provide a conceptual framework in which participants can see their aggregated similarities and differences in relation to each other. The map is, in essence, *a picture of the thinking of the group*. This picture can reveal not only what participants know they think but also thinking of which they may not be aware, particularly the thinking that shifts when trying to incorporate diversity. The map can reveal *how* the group thinks as well as indicate on what underlying dimensions members organize their thinking.

In addition, the method provides a relatively nonthreatening initial process for a diverse group that is working together or plans to work on a joint effort, especially a controversial or potentially volatile one. It can reveal a broad view of participants' individual ideas, can flatten out power relations and their influence in the group while each member decides how to organize not only her own but every other member's ideas, and can produce a conceptual framework, an organization of the group's ideas, in which the group can see its organized sameness and difference, be stimulated by its analysis and interpretation, and be free to build its action upon a commonly constructed and understood foundation.

The method's three steps are: expansion, contraction, and interpretation. A computer software program, *The Concept System*,<sup>3</sup> has been developed to process both text and numerical data generated by these three steps. Time for the processing required between the steps depends upon the size of the group

and the number of ideas generated for use; the system can accommodate up to 100 ideas. The three steps can usually be accomplished in a one-day session, or they can be broken into two half-day sessions.

### *Step 1: Expansion*

In this step, participants create the conceptual domain; that is, they contribute the ideas that constitute the meaning of the concept to be developed. The group agrees upon a question or statement of what is to be conceptualized. Brainstorming is used in this step in order to encourage participants to let go of strictly organized approaches to the concept. The object here is to get the broadest possible view of what is involved in the concept. Ideas in the form of phrases or short sentences can be brainstormed first individually on paper and then by the group by voice and recorded on a chalkboard or a flip chart. Asking participants to think about the question before the session and setting time limits for the actual brainstorming may be useful. Participants can give their individually written ideas during the group vocal brainstorming session or turn them in on paper after the session. The latter is especially recommended in groups where power differences exist or where sensitive topics might otherwise restrict some individuals' contributions.

Our experience shows that the total number of ideas with which a group is comfortable working seems to be 75 to 100. If more ideas are generated, the group can choose a method to select 75 to 100 from the total. For example, a simple random sample could be done from the total; a committee from the group could be given some guidelines for choosing the ideas; or the committee could choose a core of critical ideas and a random sample could be taken from the rest. Given the spontaneity of the brainstorming process, one other procedure may be needed at this point; that is, some minimal editing of the ideas may be required so they reflect the meaning intended by the contributor. The group can decide if this is needed, and it can be done quickly at the end of the session.

### *Step 2: Contraction*

In this step the group participants organize the ideas. Each group member considers all ideas in relation to the others and has equal influence in determining the final location of ideas on the outcome map. The ideas generated by the brainstorming in Step 1 are printed on cards (usually 3 by 5), and *each* group member is given a stack containing *all* the ideas. Each member then

generated for use; the system can accommodate up to 100 ideas. This can usually be accomplished in a one-day session or into two half-day sessions.

### *Step 1: Expansion*

Expand the conceptual domain; that is, they contribute to the meaning of the concept to be developed. The first step is to write down or state what is to be conceptualized. The second step is to encourage participants to let go of preconceptions about the concept. The object here is to get the ideas that are involved in the concept. Ideas in the form of words or phrases can be brainstormed first individually on paper or on a chalkboard and recorded on a flip chart. Before the session and setting the stage for brainstorming may be useful. Participants can give ideas during the group vocal brainstorming session. After the session, the latter is especially recommended where sensitive topics or where individual differences exist or where sensitive topics exist in individuals' contributions.

Limit the total number of ideas with which a group is to work. It is suggested to be 75 to 100. If more ideas are generated, the group should select 75 to 100 from the total. For example, a committee could be formed from the total; a committee of guidelines for choosing the ideas; or the committee could select critical ideas and a random sample could be taken. Simultaneity of the brainstorming process, one after another at this point; that is, some minimal editing of the ideas they reflect the meaning intended by the contributors. If this is needed, and it can be done quickly at the

### *Step 2: Contraction*

Participants organize the ideas. Each group member contributes to the others and has equal influence in determining the ideas on the outcome map. The ideas generated in Step 1 are printed on cards (usually 3 by 5), and each card is placed in a stack containing all the ideas. Each member then

sorts the cards into piles in any way that makes sense to her. With the exception of one or the total number, any number of piles she decides to use is fine. When she finishes sorting, she is given blank cards on which to write a name for each pile, characterizing the meaning of the cards in the pile. She then adds this card to the top of the pile. Each person is given or chooses an identification number to write on the top card of each of her piles to avoid mixing cases. These piles constitute the data used by a statistical procedure, multidimensional scaling, that locates the ideas on the map by searching for the joint occurrence of all possible pairs of ideas among all the members' piles. The final placement of ideas on the map reflects the level of agreement among sorters as to which ideas make sense to put together and which to separate. The closer the ideas appear together on the map, the higher the level of agreement reflected. A cluster analysis procedure further summarizes the data for use in the interpretation step by clustering the individual ideas on the basis of mathematical cutoff points.

The group may also choose to add a third dimension to the meaning of the map by using a simple rating procedure. For example, a list of the ideas can be prepared on which participants rate each one as to level of importance (or on some other criteria chosen by the group) on a scale of one to five. Simple means can then be calculated and added to the map as a height dimension, where "mountains" represent more important ideas.

### *Step 3: Interpretation*

Participants explore the meaning of the map in this final step.<sup>2</sup>

**SESSION AGENDA.** A basic outline of an agenda for the interpretation session usually includes: a review of the process to date; an explanation of the information to be used in the session; a process to name the clusters; a process to identify the regions of the map; a discussion of relationships of individual ideas, clusters of ideas, and regions; a view of the total map; a discussion of the fit of the map to the group's understanding of its view of the concept; and a discussion of how the group may want to use the conceptual framework.

**MATERIALS FOR GROUP USE.** Each person receives a copy of the group's map, produced by an overlay of cluster analysis on a multidimensional scaling plot; a list of the ideas by cluster; and a list of all the ideas with their level of importance value, if the group decides to include the rating procedure. Other information that may be given



includes each idea's correlation with its own cluster value and various numerical indicators relevant to the clusters' placement, their degree of spread, and their overall level of importance value.

**NAMING THE CLUSTERS.** Clusters are named by the group in a two-step process. First, small groups (chosen randomly by numbering off) review the ideas in each cluster, discuss cluster meanings, and decide on names for each cluster. Second, in the context of the total group, small groups contribute their suggestions, and the whole group comes to agreement on names for each cluster. Based on the cluster meanings, distance, and direction, the group can then explore the map for regional meaning, underlying dimensions that can represent lines along which the group organizes its thinking, of which it may or may not be aware, and dynamics of movement revealed by placement of ideas and clusters in relation to each other. Further meaning can be found by comparing ideas within one cluster to ideas within another cluster. For example, in a group conceptualization of feminism done in 1984 clusters of ideas about theory and clusters of ideas about practice appeared on opposite sides of the map. Because feminist thought is both derived from practice and feeds practice cyclically, a question raised by this relationship of clusters is, how does this cycle operate? There are other questions that could be asked: Do the theories match the activities? Are there any indications among the ideas themselves that give direction to understanding the interaction of theory and practice? Are there action statements in the theory clusters and vice versa? In addition, ratings of these clusters give priority to the practice clusters that contain action-oriented ideas relating to specific practical needs and demands, rather than the theory clusters that contain more passive ideas. This indicates that participants in this 1984 group appear to value action on specific issues more than thinking about them, including, perhaps, thinking about the *meaning* of those actions. This raises another question: does an emphasis on changing what has been labeled passivity and resulting victimization lead to action on a short-term, short-sighted basis in ways that conflict with long-term, more theoretically stated beliefs?

Clusters can also be explored for amount of spread, an indicator of the degree of agreement about the cluster's meaning. Comparisons of degree of agreement and level of importance of ideas and/or clusters can also be made. Checking the location of outliers, those ideas in a given cluster located far away from the cluster can also stimulate ideas about what and how the group thinks. If it seems useful, the map may also be flipped or rotated for further exploration of its meaning.

## TOWARD A FEMINIST RESEARCH METHOD

**GENERAL COMMENTS.** This conceptualization process can be used as a research method for purposes of clarifying concepts at the stages of forming theory, of collecting data, of developing basic measurement, and in many other ways. Its flexibility and capacity for adaptation to specific situations is one of its positive characteristics. The fact that, unlike many research methods, the process can easily be understood and used by participants adds to its value.

### AN ILLUSTRATION

Twenty-five members of the Feminist Ways of Knowing Seminar at Douglass College, Rutgers University in fall 1985 participated in the three conceptualization steps. The idea of conceptualizing feminism was agreed upon at an early date, the brainstorming (expansion) was done on October 4, organizing the ideas (contraction) took place one week later, and the meaning of the map (interpretation) was discussed on November 22, covering a seven-week time period.

#### *Step 1: Expansion*

Brainstorming, which took approximately forty-five minutes, was done individually in writing first and then verbally as a group. All ninety-five ideas contributed were used in the study; forty-six came from the group session, and forty-nine were taken from ideas written by individuals but not offered during the group session. This seeming reluctance of seminar members to speak out could indicate the existence of feelings of unequal power relations in the group. In fact, although this issue was not discussed formally by the group, a few members did subsequently mention to me that they did not contribute their ideas verbally in the group setting for fear of being considered silly, naive, or "politically incorrect."

#### *Step 2: Contraction*

During the contraction step, which also took approximately forty-five minutes, each seminar member was given a set of ninety-five cards with the ideas printed on them. The members were asked to sort them into piles that "made sense" to them and to characterize each pile with a short name or

description. Any number of piles was acceptable except a single pile or 95 piles; the range was from 3 to 20 piles, with the average number being 7.88 per person. Participants also rated each idea on a scale of one (least) to five (most) according to its level of importance to feminism. These values were simply entered on a separate list of all ninety-five ideas. Some members commented that the sorting exercise alone was provocative and mind-stretching because it forced them to grapple with various relationships among the ideas contributed by the group that they themselves would not have chosen to be part of the conceptual domain (e.g., ideas they had not thought of in relation to feminism). Others reported feeling challenged to understand enough about how they decided which ideas went together in which piles so they could characterize each pile with a name or description.

### *Step 3: Interpretation*

At the interpretation session, which lasted about ninety minutes, I expected to follow this agenda, as far as time would allow:

1. Brief review
2. Name the clusters
  - small groups negotiate a name for each cluster
  - whole group negotiates a name for each cluster
3. Discuss relationships
  - locate clusters on the map
  - check outliers for location, meaning, ambiguity, confusion
  - top to bottom? side to side?
  - underlying dimensions?
  - movement, dynamics?
  - overall?
4. What is missing (meaning)?
5. Revelation of suggestions for directions, strategies, and so on for development of the conceptualization?
6. What makes it feminist? Or perhaps better, how is it consistent with feminist activity/principles?
7. How can it be used?

**MATERIALS FOR GROUP USE.** The week before, in preparation for the interpretation session, I had distributed a summary of the data analysis. These materials contained the ninety-five ideas listed by the clusters

formed as a result of the sorting by group members. Each idea had several numbers following it on the list, each of which had a separate, specific meaning. I included a sheet identifying these numbers and explaining these meanings. I also compiled a list of all the characterizations of each member's piles to provide data for exploring underlying dimensions in the map. In retrospect, given that the procedures and graphics of this particular conceptualization method as well as its potential for investigating, explaining, or contributing to knowledge creation are in the early stages of development, I think my enthusiasm clouded my judgment of what was possible to accomplish in the session, especially given the short amount of time available. I cautioned in my "brief review" that, due to our time constraints, the session should be viewed only as a sample of what the interpreting experience could be; in regular situations, groups actually take hours doing this step. However, it soon became clear that we would not have time to experience even an adequate sample interpretation process, as questions and feelings that I had not anticipated began to spill out. Group members were primarily concerned about what all the numbers listed on the handout materials meant and how the actual computer process had worked to produce the map. Several people commented that they immediately felt distrustful and intimidated when they saw all those numbers.

In my attempt to provide the participants with all the information available for interpretation (i.e., in my view this meant equalizing the power between researcher and participants), and in my rush to accomplish as much of the agenda as possible, more confusion than clarity resulted. I think the idea was too unfamiliar, the context was not developed, and the data was overwhelming. Unfortunately, all this operated to prevent an adequate grasp of the meaning of the map's fundamental components that, in turn, for many, undermined the ultimate understanding of the conceptualization process. Because I believe that one contribution of a feminist approach is to be explicit about researcher impact on the research process, I think it is important to record my own feelings, in addition to the questions and feelings of the group members, which I received both in the session and for several weeks after.

RESEARCHER RESPONSE. From my position as an experienced user of this conceptualization process, I wanted to present it in a *participatory* fashion so that others would understand it from an *experiential* perspective and be stimulated to see how it might be used in their own situations, creating *reciprocity* among all those involved. I also wanted to incorporate the use of statistical procedures and computer technology

in what I view as their appropriate role in research, that is, as sets of tools to accomplish specific tasks in a broad search for understanding.

When the questions and feelings about the numbers, the statistical procedures and the computer came up, I had four responses, of which I am aware. One, I felt attacked for using them at all and resentful of that attack; and two, I felt I was failing to keep them, that is, the numbers, in their role and was instead allowing them to occupy a central focus. Furthermore, I felt amazed that group members had such resistance to using numbers as one means to understanding ideas, and last, I was disappointed in myself for not having anticipated that this might be the case. Although my feelings of resentment, failure, and inadequacy were mitigated in retrospect by subsequent discussions with group members who saw very different group dynamics occurring, some of which had nothing to do with the conceptualization process, they certainly influenced the outcome of the session. I should also note that this study provided me with an intense and valuable learning experience, both about this methodology and about the concept of feminism as developed by this group.

GENERAL COMMENTS. For the remainder of the interpretation session, although the group's comments and observations about both content and process responded specifically to some questions on the agenda (see appendix for reference to specific ideas contributed, cluster names, and group commentary about both meaning of the map and the conceptualization process in general, as well as Figures 1 and 2 depicting the actual concept map for the group), time did not allow a thorough interpretation of the meaning of the group's map. Most comments were of a descriptive rather than an analytic nature. Our similarities, differences, conflicts, and so on as a group were not addressed. Time may not have been the only reason: perhaps the composition or the central purpose of the seminar was not conducive to seriously producing the group's conceptualization of feminism; perhaps the several and varying activities of the methodology were too inconsistent with other presentations or too different from the more accepted methods of social scientific inquiry to be considered a serious intellectual endeavor; perhaps my presentation was unclear or did not make sense to participants; perhaps by the time of the interpretation session, the group had established lines of agreement and disagreement among the members that a serious discussion of the meaning of feminism would test, provoke overt dissonance, or otherwise create discomfort or be threatening to or among individuals or subgroups; or perhaps it was a combination of these and/or other reasons.

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In any case, I was left feeling incomplete in relation to both substance and process. I do not think there was a good synthesized meaning for the concept chosen by the group to conceptualize, nor was I satisfied that participants had a thorough enough experience to adapt the method to their own use. I was, however, stimulated to think about several ways to improve my presentation and choice of appropriate settings for use of the methodology. First, I must carefully consider the purpose of the group and make sure the concept chosen to work on will actually yield useful information for that purpose. Second, when time is short, I might opt for presenting the methodology in a lecture format, using an example of a previous study. Third, I might eliminate some numerical indicators with groups to whom they are confusing rather than illuminating.<sup>3</sup> And fourth, I must be aware of the difference in my approach and responses when I am a part of the group as opposed to being an outsider.

COMPARISON OF GROUP CONCEPTUALIZATION METHOD TO CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST PRINCIPLES/ACTIVITIES. Although the experience was incomplete, it still provides a valuable way to compare the method to the characteristics of feminist principles/activities presented above (see Characteristics of Feminist Principles section). I should note that some characteristics relate to process and some to content/substance. Therefore, I will cite references to both from the current illustration in this comparison. I found the process and reflections of this group to be especially rich in relation to some characteristics and regret that space does not allow for a more in-depth exploration. However, in an attempt to have the participant voices speak for themselves in order to access the richness, I have chosen to include many phrases contributed by group members when brainstorming responses to feminism.

A potential problem with this comparison is directionality. That is, upon accepting the characteristics as indicators of feminist principles/activities, one could claim that the *method* is not feminist, or one could claim that the *group* is not feminist. However, group contextual factors should provide a framework within which an assessment of directionality can be determined.

Using the method to conceptualize feminism itself, as in this instance, guarantees that women are the "active central focus/subject"; women participated in naming their own reality. Examples of ideas showing this are "way of looking at the world with women as central vision," "the study of what women do and think," and "attempting to identify with all women; being a woman-identified-woman." Although the group setting was predetermined, its generally cooperative spirit was

consistent with "cooperative group activity" as "the predominant modus operandi" of feminist practice. Some participants resisted the statistical and computer aspects of the process, those methods that many feminist researchers view as "masculine," "objective," "linear," and so on, and thus unable to explain women's reality. Overcoming this resistance to work with the group could be viewed as a strong indicator of commitment to group cooperation. Examples of specific ideas related to this characteristic are "validating other forms of knowing and communication," "unifying, creative, emotional approach to knowledge rather than an (masculinist) analytically dissecting, categorizing, strictly "objective" approach," and "smash the computer."

Moving from process to content, ideas contributed, such as "rejection of the negative images of women and feminine things that pervade our culture," "commitment to liberation (end of oppression) of women," and "liberation from male domination and patriarchal forms from most intimate and personal to most abstract and structural" reflect agreement with the "recognition of the need for liberation from the oppression of the status quo." Such ideas as "reproductive choice," "end of sexual division of labor," and "end of compulsory heterosexuality" clearly are identified as "issues affecting women," while "ideology and analysis for a political movement which advocates (and directs) political/economic/social control by women and in the interests of women (as a group)," "stop judging by gender," and "take back the night" show directions for the development of "strategies for action."

Although the experience was "an open, inclusive, accessible, creative, dynamic process between people, among activities, and in relation to ideas" for some participants, it seemed to fail to embody part of this characteristic for others. This was especially apparent in the *inaccessibility* of the materials that extensively used numerical indicators resulting from statistical procedures. The map itself, however, seemed easily accessible to interpretation, even in the brief time the group had to explore it. The main source of diverse and conflicting ideas seemed to be differing academic disciplines. Some participants noted that they were challenged to grapple with integrating the diverse ideas contributed by group members. Other comments indicated that some participants saw no place in feminism for some ideas contributed. These two perspectives seem to indicate the existence of respect for "women's ideas, theories, experiences, and action strategies from diverse experiences which appear to be in conflict (and sometimes are)" on the part of some, but not all, of the participants.

## WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

The illustrated use of the group conceptualization method described above was situated in a somewhat theoretical setting. However, the group really had no specified use for the conceptual framework developed. It was more an exercise to demonstrate the use of the method than to produce a meaning of feminism for the group. I think the method could be useful in a purposeful theory-building setting, especially if it were done with a group combining both theoretists and activists. Not only could a general map be constructed but also different clusters could be expanded and contracted to refine further the various regions of the map. One benefit of that approach would be revealing the form and structure of a group's current thinking; another would be pushing that thinking beyond current boundaries, using the map as a base. An additional theory-building use for the method could be to chronicle the meaning of feminism (or other theoretical concepts) either across time by constructing a map annually with the same group or across space by constructing feminism maps with varying groups.

I would like to translate the technique into an action research method. It has already been used by human service agencies as a way of involving entire agency staffs in conceptualizing program mission, goals, problems, and implementation strategies. Resulting maps have been used as a basis for both program planning and evaluation efforts (Trochim and Linton 1984). My particular interest is in making the method available as one of various tools to be used in action research settings, especially those addressing questions important to women. Given the current attack on such hard-won, although limited, benefits for western women as affirmative action, reproductive rights, public funding of service programs from battered women's shelters to child care, building women's solidarity is ever more critical. We must find ways in which differences such as race/ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and ableness can be viewed as diverse resources to be tapped to enrich our joint efforts, not as a source of divisiveness that prevents building our power into an unified force. I hope that this method can be improved and added to other research and action methods to construct common understandings that will contribute to our continuing feminist struggle for social change to benefit all people.

## APPENDIX

(See agenda listed under Step 3: Interpretation section)



*Naming the Clusters*

The interpretation session contained some discussion about the location of ideas on the map. Figure 1 shows the location of each idea both by its identification number and a symbol revealing to which cluster it belongs. For example, idea number 34, in the upper right side of the map, is represented by a square. Locating the symbol in the legend on the lower right side of the map, the square is found to represent the ideas in Cluster 2. The cluster list can then be consulted for the meaning of idea number 34. Other ideas in Cluster 2 can be identified similarly. Naming the ten clusters of ideas depicted on the conceptual map followed. Small groups were formed by random num-

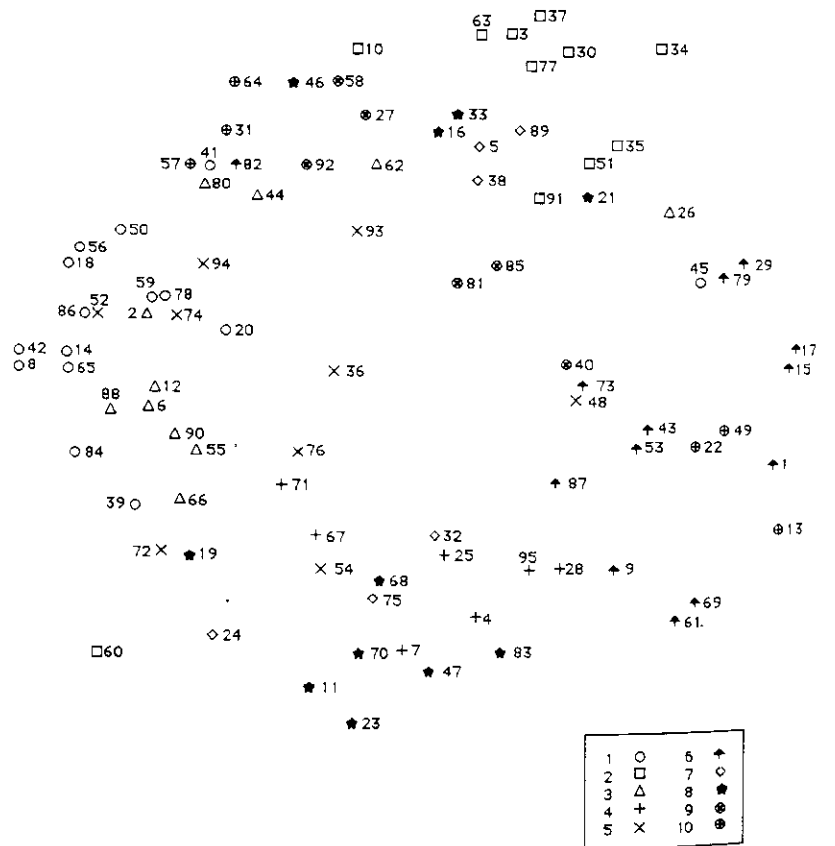


Figure 1. Feminism Conceptualization Map with Idea Identification Numbers.

being, and each group negotiated a name for each cluster based on the ideas in that cluster. Upon reassembling, the entire group then chose a final set of names for each cluster. For example, the ideas constituting Cluster 2 were:

- new relationship between seer and seen;
- validating other forms of knowing and communication;
- no subject-object split; emotional integrated with rational;
- continuities versus dichotomies; beyond dichotomies or tolerance of contradiction;
- a unifying, creative, emotional approach to knowledge rather than an (masculine) analytically dissecting, categorizing, strictly “objective” approach;
- knocking down old categories and filling up the void;
- not exploiting nature;
- real/utopian vision;
- women’s rights.

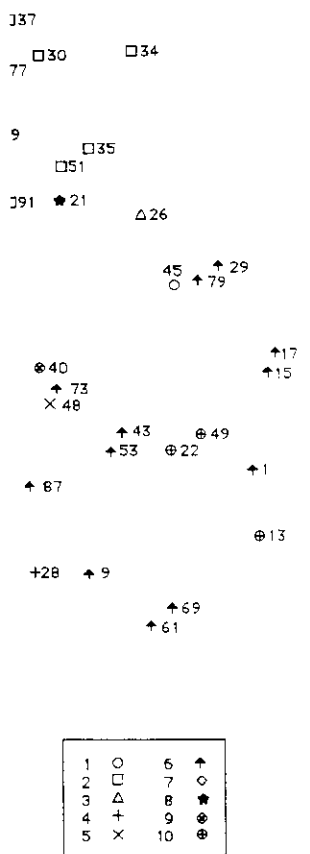
The five small groups negotiated the following names for Cluster 2:

1. nondualistic ways of knowing;
2. transcending dualism;
3. antidualistic ways of knowing;
4. nonexclusive knowing;
5. knowing.

The name chosen by the entire group for Cluster 2 was: Transcending Dualism. As a result of this process, the final set of cluster names, as shown in Figure 2, was:

- Cluster 1: Politics, Power, and Freedom*
- Cluster 2: Transcending Dualism*
- Cluster 3: Beyond Gender*
- Cluster 4: Womanlove*
- Cluster 5: I Am Womanist*
- Cluster 6: Going over the Edge*
- Cluster 7: Woman’s Standpoint*
- Cluster 8: Taking Control of Our Lives*
- Cluster 9: Revolutionary Vision*
- Cluster 10: A Womb of One’s Own*

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Idea Identification Numbers.

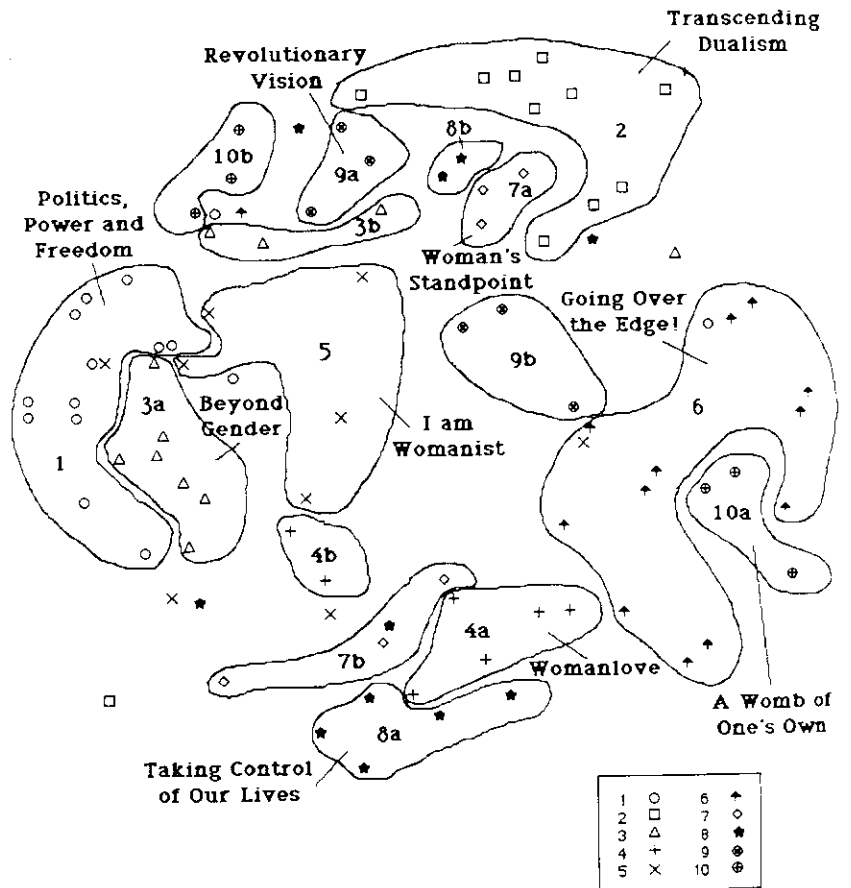


Figure 2. Feminism Conceptualization Map with Cluster Names.

*General Observations on the Meaning of the Map*

In the discussion about the relationships of ideas and clusters, some examples of initial general observations about the meaning of feminism in the group's thinking as expressed by group members were:

- Politics is generally to the left!
- The visionary/transcendental portion is at the top.
- Body issues are at the bottom while political/theoretical issues are at the top.



—The fact that “Beyond Gender” and “I am Womanist” are next to each other on the map suggests a possible contradiction in the thinking of the group.

—A literal interpretation of the map could mean that Woman-identification is most central to our politics.

Examples of observations about the conceptualization process as expressed by group members included the following:

—One participant commented that although she really liked the parts of the process where the group members interacted face to face, when she viewed the map as a whole, she felt that her ideas had been lost and that the computer had eaten her identity.

—It was suggested that since no serious agenda depended on our classification [interpretation], it was easier for us to agree across our differences/ conflicts.

—It was remarked that this process was very similar to the process in many political groups, and we could learn a lot from studying it.

—The process allows for the group to step back from itself and see what is going on in its own process. Although we were all dealing with our own ideas, it could free us from our personal “investment” in our own specific ideas.

—Statistics may hide meanings.

—The interpersonal exchange felt better than the results of the statistical procedures—which felt like an averaging of the meaning and produced a sense of loss of self.

—Mention was made that we had a really good time doing this process, and sometimes this is taken as a sign of not being serious. But one participant thought in this case Creativity was a result of our ludic approach!

The scaled values indicating the level of importance to feminism of each idea were color coded on the map. Some examples of observations about these values by group members were:

—The ideas with higher values were concentrated in the left-hand top space (i.e., Politics, Power, and Freedom; Revolutionary Vision; and Beyond Gender clusters).

—Items with the lowest values were concentrated in the lower right-hand space (i.e., Going Over the Edge and A Womb of One’s Own clusters).

—The item with the highest value, “liberation from male domination and patriarchal forms from most intimate and personal to most abstract and structural,” seems isolated from its own cluster. Although there is agreement

that it is the most important idea in the study, there is less agreement about whether it belongs in Cluster 1, "Politics, Power, and Freedom".

## NOTES

I wish to thank Alison Jaggar for her continuing helpful critique and belief in my work; both Alison and Susan Bordo for their guidance in editing; Dorothy Dauglia and Ferris Olin for their generosity in logistical assistance; and to give my very special thanks to Berenice Fisher, Uma Narayan, and Joan Tronto for their friendship and support throughout the seminar.

1. Developed by William M. K. Trochim for IBM compatible and Apple Macintosh computers; information available by writing him at N137 MVR Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 14853.

2. Due to new developments in the computer software, it is now possible to increase the power of the group participants vis-à-vis the researcher in the interpretation step through on-the-spot manipulation of the cluster analysis procedure. This allows the group decision-making power over the choice of the number of clusters they think best represents their ideas. Because the illustration described below was done before this new development, the description of the interpretation step here will follow the original method where the researcher decided on the number of clusters based on statistical critical values.

3. In the new developments in the software mentioned earlier, the numbers used in describing cluster relationships are automatically eliminated by the changes that enable participants to choose the number of clusters.

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