



# Designing Feminist Methodologies:

Foregrounding Gender, Positionality,  
and Justice in Research



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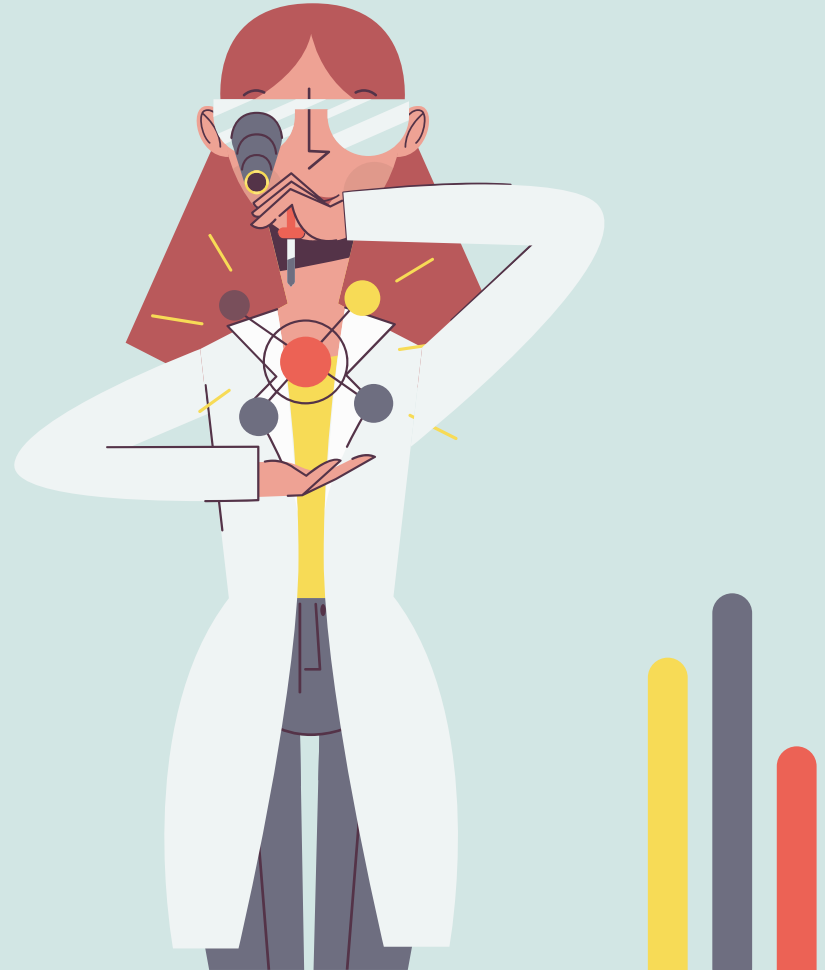
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# Origin story:



ACM-SIGDOC and *Communication Design Quarterly* (CDQ) authors frequently use feminist research methodology as a frame.

However, there's no clear definition of feminist methodology within the SIG (e.g., foundational work, methods texts or best practices, etc.).



# Defining terms



## Method

The tools used to conduct research—e.g., data collection procedures, tactics, processes, techniques

Surveys are a method. Interviews are a method. A/B testing is a method.



## Methodology

The frameworks that guide the use of these tools—e.g., theories, philosophies, schools of thought, sets of accepted tools, etc.

Action research is a methodology: a stance that guides choices of research tools. Usability testing is a methodology, or set of methods governed by a particular philosophy.



A quick way of  
thinking about this:

**methods** + **ideology**  
= **methodology**

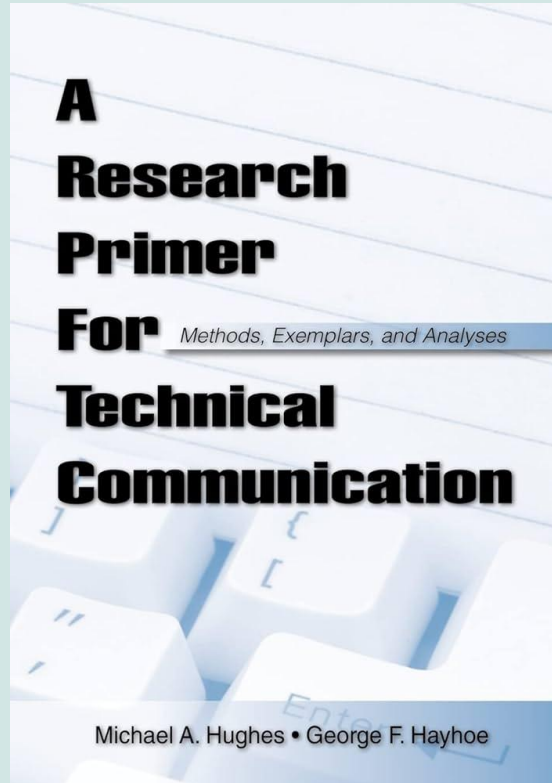


# So what?



Why care about the distinction between these terms—especially if our orientation is undergraduate education (i.e., we teach at R2s or regional comprehensive universities and the more theoretical questions of methodology don't seem to be as pressing)?





## Methods Texts

For undergrads (like Hughes & Hayhoe's, left) tend to collapse "method" and "methodology"



## The *What*, but Not the *How*

This leads to research that is *descriptive*, but not *evaluative* or *action-oriented* (see Grabill, 2006; Jones, 2016)



## An Ethical Imperative

A humanistic TPC or UX that designs for social change must engage both method and methodology



# Feminist methodology:

Interrogates researcher “neutrality” and recognizes that knowledge production is a social process. Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p. 240) lists ten “themes” of feminist research:

1. Feminism is a perspective, not a research method
2. Feminists use a multiplicity of research methods
3. Feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of nonfeminist scholarship
4. Feminist research is guided by feminist theory
5. Feminist research may be transdisciplinary
6. Feminist research aims to create social change
7. Feminist research strives to represent human diversity
8. Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person
9. Feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the people studied (in interactive research)
10. Feminist research frequently defines a special relation with the reader.

# Feminist methodology in SIGDOC and CDQ

## Crisis communication

Sparby & Cox (2022), "Investigating Disembodied University Crisis Communications during COVID-19"

## Design thinking

Ghimire (2022), "Argumentation Mining: Design Thinking from a Feminist Perspective;" Tham (2019), "Feminist Design Thinking"

## Health & medicine

Novotny (2015), "ReVITALIZE Gynecology: Reimagining apparent feminism's methodology in participatory health intervention;" Amidon et al. (2017), "Usability in the communication design of health wearables"

## Identities & networks

Shafer (2021), "Substance Abuse: Avenues for Identity Articulation, Coalition Building, and Support During COVID-19;" Smith et al. (2021), "Methodological considerations for audience advocacy"

## International analyses

Chen (2021), "A Comparative Design Analysis of Supporting Documentation for the Chinese Anti-Domestic Violence Law;" January & Matheson (2017), "Following the research internationally: what we learned about communication design and ethics in India"

## Law, policy, & ethics

Altamirano (2022), "Intersectional Feminism as a Theoretical Framework for Navigating Bias in the Technical Communication Workplace;" Edenfield et al. (2021), "Trans\*Vulnerability and digital research ethics"



# Study Method

## 5-question survey:

1. What keywords would you use to describe feminist research methodologies? (*short answer*)
2. In your view, what differentiates feminist research methodologies from other types of research methodologies? (*short answer*)
3. Do you use feminist methodologies in your own research? (*multiple choice, with options "yes," "no," or "maybe/unsure"*)
4. One of three *short answer* questions displayed depending on answer to Question 3:
  - a. If you responded "yes" to the previous question, how do you use feminist methodologies in your research?
  - b. If you responded "no" to the previous question, why do you not use feminist methodologies in your research?
  - c. If you responded "maybe/unsure" to the previous question, please explain your response. Why do you feel that you may use feminist methodologies in your research, or are unsure whether you do?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to add on this topic? (*short answer*)

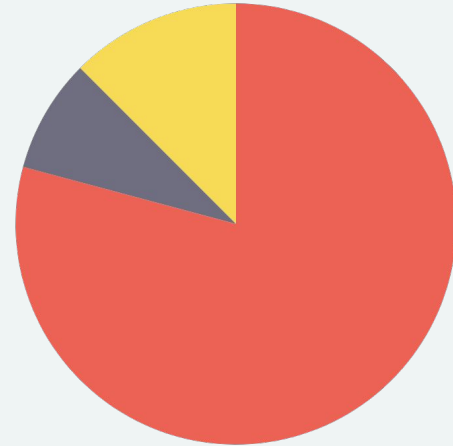


# Results: Use and Non-Use of Feminist Methodologies

79% (n = 19) used  
feminist methodology

13% (n = 3) maybe used feminist  
methodology, or were unsure

8% (n = 2) did not use  
feminist methodology



# Data: Keywords for Feminist Methodology




# Keyword Categories and Frequencies

<b><i>Category</i></b>	<b><i>Keywords</i></b>	<b><i>Mentions</i></b>
Orientations Toward Justice	intersectional (x9), equity (x6), inclusive (x3), activist, anti-oppressive, antiracist, diverse, emancipatory, empowering, social justice	25
Feminist Praxis	collaboration (x6), caring/humane (x4), ethical (x3), participatory (x3), reflexive (x3), reciprocity (x2), integrated, intentionality	23
Research Paradigms/Stances	critical (x4) qualitative (x3), empirical (x2) community-engaged, people-oriented, post-positivism, rigorous, queer, social	15
Social Location/Positionality	identity (x3), positionality (x3), embodied (x2), perspective (x2), empathy, polyphonic, standpoint, voices	14
Gender	feminist (x4), gender (x4), women (x2)	10
Goals of Feminist Research	awareness of gender bias (x2), consciousness of power (x2), recovering unheard or silenced voices (x2), centering non-dominant voices	7
Research Methods	ethnography (x2), discourse analysis, multi-method, narrative, rhetorical listening	6

# Feminist Methodology (Q2 + Q4) Responses





# Toward a Typology of Feminist Methodological Values and Tactics



# Value I: Action-Orientation



## Definition

Feminist research aims to create social change



## Tactics

- Action or activist research
- Public scholarship



## Quotes

“The aims of research include redressing inequity”

“Beyond ‘do no harm,’ feminist methodologies implore researchers to actually ‘do good’”

# Value 2: Beginning from Marginal Lives



## Definition

Feminist research traditions address women's oppression and the intersecting oppressions of other marginalized and minoritized groups



## Tactics

- Amplifying knowledges underrepresented or underserved through TPC/UX
- Rhetorical listening and other modes of cross-cultural engagement



## Quotes

"Ensuring that marginalized voices are well represented"

"We forefront women's POV"

"Identifying and intentionally centering those voices which have been excluded"



# Value 3: Ethic of Care



## Definition

Grounded in humanity and relationships, feminist research attends to the whole person and engages with accountability



## Tactics

- Foregrounding participant consent
- Encouraging self and community care



## Quotes

“I... hear and value opinions and seek to engage in positive, constructive work”

“Carefully constructed to protect research participants”

# Value 4: Positionality



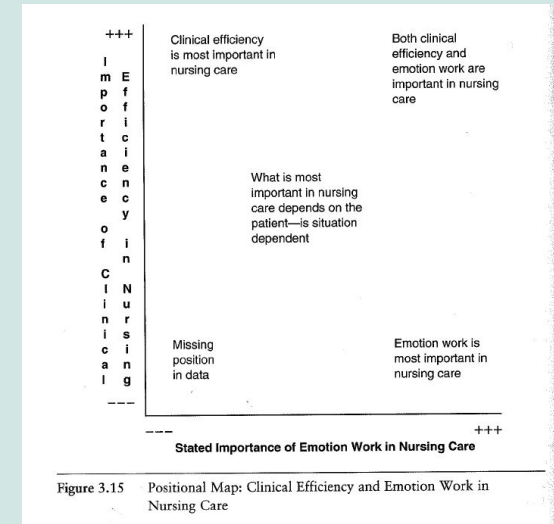
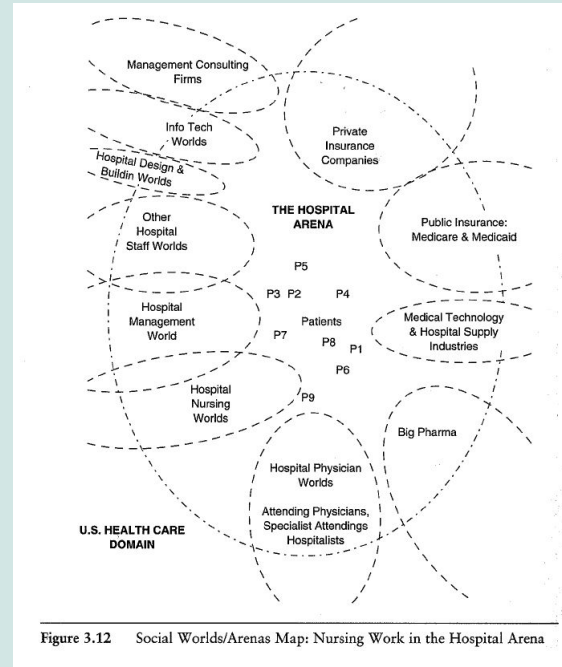
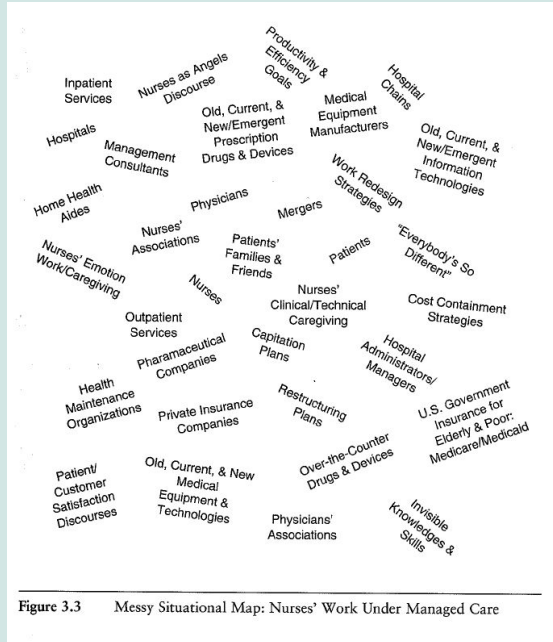
Invoked more than nearly any other term;  
however, participants, offered no definitions or  
insights into application

Positionality statements or disclosures can offer  
transparency as to their social location(s)

Situational mapping techniques (Clarke, 2005;  
Sullivan & Porter, 1997) may also engage with this  
feminist value



# Situational Mapping (Clarke, 2005)



# Value 5: Reciprocity



## Definition

To facilitate a more just power dynamic (or collaboration), feminists may give back to the people or communities that they research



## Tactics

- Integrating practitioner theory
- Publishing with partners
- Giving time, expertise, resources
- Member-checking data codes



## Quotes

“Working to address community needs (not being extractive)”

“Ensure that research neither continues nor develops results on the basis of unexamined, disproportionate power”

# Value 6: Reflexivity



## Definition

Feminist researchers think about their own place in their research; they cannot bracket their standpoint or subjectivity



## Tactics

- Acknowledging standpoint
- Deliberately taking on projects (or not) based on researcher position
- Reflective journaling or research memos



## Quotes

“Every time I design a research study, I aim to start from a place questioning what brings me to that study, if I’m the right person—given my identity and positionality—to conduct this research.”

# Value 7: Revision

Feminist research adopts a critical stance to revise nonfeminist scholarship and existing systems of power.

- Apply cultural frameworks justly and with care; centering narratives of marginalized groups, rather than de-contextualizing or co-opting
- Citational justice
- Revisionist research



Itchuaqiyag and Matheson (2021) describe the misuse of decolonial theory in TPC scholarship

“I think most research methods can be framed through feminist research methodologies, since they are about a worldview and a practice, not necessarily any particular method”



– **STUDY PARTICIPANT**

# Thanks!



Questions? Ideas?

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