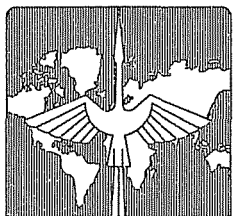


ISSN 0014-1801
OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Towards a Methodology of Women's Studies

Maria Mies



INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES

The Hague The Netherlands

Towards a Methodology of Women's Studies

Maria Mies

Senior Lecturer
Institute of Social Studies

No. 77, November 1979

University of Technology
Sydney Australia

with great

pleasure I have received
your letter of the 12th inst.

and am glad to hear that

TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

Maria Mies

*New wine must not be
poured into old vessels.*

1. Introduction

After more than a decade of mobilization, consciousness-raising and struggles around issues like equal rights, abortion laws, rape and violence against women, the women's movement is still gaining momentum, drawing more and more women into its vortex. This quantitative expansion, particularly in the rich capitalist countries, however, has also given rise to specific problems. There seems to be an ever-rising wave of rebellion against patriarchy and sexism, accompanied by expectations of women's solidarity and emancipation. But this rebellion, these expectations, have not yet led to a clear understanding of the relationship between women's exploitation and oppression (Sexism) on the one hand and the overall class exploitation and oppression of workers and peasants. Many women who have been in the movement since its beginnings feel increasingly worried about this lack of analysis and direction. One of the outcomes of this uneasiness is the recent emphasis on feminist research and theoretical work. In many universities in Europe and the USA feminist women have been able to set up centres for women's studies. In a number of disciplines women have formed feminist groups or associations. In West Germany, for example, feminist social scientists formed an association for 'Feminist Theory and Practice in Social Sciences'. Similar associations were started in other disciplines as well on an inter-disciplinary base. During the summer vacations, so-called Women's Summer Universities in Berlin are being organized which attract thousands of women. This keen interest in the study of sexism and in women's history, women's anthropology, etc. and the endeavours to establish a feminist theory of society, has led to a spate of literature, books, journals, pamphlets on women's issues. Not only are there many feminist publishing houses and bookshops exclusively run by women, but the general bookshops have discovered women as a new market and invariably reserve some shelves for women's literature. This new theoretical thrust, in itself an encouraging sign of the deepening of the movement, has thrown up a number of theoretical questions for which no ready-made answer is available in the existing system of academic work. The main problem that women's

studies face on all fronts is the male bias or androcentrism¹ that prevails in practically all disciplines, in most theoretical work done through centuries of scientific quest. This androcentrism is manifested not only in the fact that universities and research institutions are still largely male domains, but more subtly in the choice of areas of research, in research policies, theoretical concepts and particularly in research methodology. The inadequacy of predominant research methods was first painfully felt by feminist historians, who tried to reconstruct women's history. Women's contribution to history is hardly recorded in the history books. Within a framework of science that is based on written records only, this means that their contribution does not exist for as far as historical science goes. It is this experience which has given rise to the expression, the 'hidden women'. The virtual exclusion of women, of their lives, work and struggles from the bulk of research can be adequately epitomized in Bertold Brecht's phrase: 'One does not see those who are in the dark.' When women now try to bring light into this darkness, they encounter specific methodological problems, because the prominent social science research methodology, i.e. mainly the quantitative survey method, is itself not free from the androcentric bias.² The present paper, therefore, tries to address itself to the methodological problems of feminist social scientists who want to study women's issues. Its aim is to lay down some methodological guidelines, which may be further discussed and developed into a new methodological approach which would be consistent with the social, economic and political aims of the women's movement. The paper was first read at an interdisciplinary feminist seminar on 'Women, Science and Culture' at the University of Nijmegen, Holland.² It is the outcome of my experience as a social scientist and a participant in the women's movement, as well as of many discussions with students and colleagues.

Criticism of the dominant quantitative Social Science research methodology started earlier than the women's movement. My first doubts about the scientific relevance and ethical justification of this methodology were raised when I was working as a teacher and researcher in a Third World country. Here I realized that the research situation as such, due to colonialism and neo-colonialism, was a situation of clear dominance between research subject and research object, which tended to lead to distorted data.³ In the USA, however, criticism of the established Social Science research came up in connection with the protest movement against American involvement in Latin

America and Southeast Asia. Scholars like Horowitz (1976), Wolf and Jorgenson (1970), Huizer (1973) raised their voices against this kind of research as a tactical tool in the 'Counter-insurgency-and-containment-of-Communism' strategy of the US. The emphasis of their criticism was on political and ethical questions.

In West Germany, at about the same time (1967-72) the positivist and functionalist theory of society, propagated throughout the Anglo Saxon world, and the quantitative, analytical research methodology were being attacked by the theoreticians of the so-called Frankfurt School: Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Habermas et al who evolved the Critical Theory of Society from a dialectical and historical point of view. The focus of their criticism was the claim of value neutrality and the structural separation between theory and practice of the positivist approach. They attacked the scientific irrelevance, the elitism and inherent class bias of this approach and tried to revive the emancipatory potential of social theory which it had in the 18th century, the beginning of the bourgeois epoch. The criticism of the Critical Theory, however, remained confined to the magic circle of academic institutions. It did not reach the working masses and thus reproduced the structural separation between theory and practice, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. In the mid-1970s an effort was made to bridge this gap by the proponents of action research, first evolved by Lewin (1953).

My following thoughts on a methodology for Women's Studies grew out of the debates on these three waves of criticism against positivism as the dominant Social Science Theory and its accompanying methodology. Therefore, they will repeat many points which are already known. On the other hand they are the outcome of my involvement in the women's movement and of my experience in action research projects. They are not to be understood as prescriptions to be followed dogmatically, but as an invitation for methodological experiment and innovation. The assumption underlying these guidelines is the following: *There is a contradiction between the prevalent theories of Social Science and methodology and the political aims of the women's movement.* If Women's Studies are to be made into an instrument of women's liberation, they cannot uncritically use the positivist, quantitative research methodology. If they do, they will again be turned into an instrument of repression. New wine should not be poured into old vessels.

THESIS: *When women begin to change their situation of exploitation and oppression then this change will have consequences for the research areas, theories, concepts and methodology of studies that focus on women's issues.*

'Women Studies' means more than the fact that women have now been discovered as a 'target group' for research, or that an increasing number of women scholars and students are taking up women's issues. If women studies are to contribute to the cause of women's emancipation, then women in the academic field have to use their scholarship and knowledge towards this end. If they consciously do so they will realise that their own existence as *women* and *scholars* is a contradictory one. As women, they are affected by sexist oppression together with other women, and as scholars they share the privileges of the (male) academic elite.

Out of this split existence grows a double consciousness which must be taken into account when we think about a new methodology. Women scholars have been told to look at their contradictory existence, i.e. at their subjective being as women as an obstacle and a handicap to 'pure' and 'objective' research. Even while studying women's questions they were advised to suppress their emotions, their subjective feeling of involvement and identification with other women in order to produce 'objective' data.

The methodological principle of a value-free, neutral, uninvolved approach, of an hierarchical, non-reciprocal relationship between research subject and research object - certainly the decisive methodological postulate of positivist Social Science research - drives women scholars into a schizophrenic situation. If they try to follow this postulate, they have constantly to repress, negate or ignore their own experience of sexist oppression and have to strive to live up to the so-called 'rational' standards of a highly competitive, male-dominated academic world.

Moreover, this methodological principle does not help us to explore those areas which, due to this androcentric bias have so far remained 'invisible'. These include: women's social history, women's perception of their own situation, their own subordination and their own resistance. Women in the universities have shown a tendency to ignore these areas also out of motives of self-preservation.

The contradictory existential and ideological condition of women scholars must become the starting point for a new methodological approach. The postulate of objectivity itself makes it necessary that those areas of the female existence which so far were repressed and socially 'invisible' be brought into the full daylight of scientific analysis.

In order to make this possible, feminist women must deliberately and courageously integrate their repressed, unconscious female subjectivity, i.e. their own experience of oppression and discrimination into the research process. This means that committed women social scientists must learn to understand their own 'double consciousness' as a methodological and political chance and not as an obstacle. Leavitt et al wrote about this double consciousness which women have in common with other groups who have suffered from oppression: 'members of subordinated groups must, if they are to survive, develop to those who control them, at the same time as they are fully aware of the everyday reality of their oppression, a quality the superordinate groups lack' (Leavitt, Sykes, Weatherford [1975] p.112).

This extra quality consists mainly in the fact that women and other oppressed groups, out of their subjective experience, are better sensitized for psychological mechanisms of dominance. As objects of oppression they are forced out of self-preservation to know the motives of their oppressors. At the same time they have experienced in their own psyche and bodies how oppression and exploitation feel on the side of the victims, who permanently have to respond to demands made on them. Due to this 'inner view of the oppressed' (Nash, 1974), women social scientists are better equipped than their male counterparts to make a comprehensive study of the exploited groups. Men often do not have this experiential knowledge, and therefore lack empathy, the ability for identification and also social and sociological imagination. If women social scientists take their own subjective experience of sexist discrimination and their rebellion against it as a starting point and guiding principle for their research, they first become critically aware of a number of weaknesses of the established research which, according to Gerrit Huizer, is characterized by a lot of ego-tripping, slander, power intrigues and lack of equal participation (Huizer, 1975). Moreover, they discover the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of androcentric concepts of science. Thus Leavitt, Sykes and Weatherford criticise the Aristotelian dichotomization that is characteristic of structuralist and functionalist theories. Another instance of a pervasive androcentric scientific manipulation is the 'Man the Hunter' paradigm, propagated by behaviourists and neo-evolutionists. According to this paradigm all human social development began with the (male) hunter and his invention of arms. Although a mass of evidence shows that the human race could not have survived if it had not been fed by 'Woman the Gatherer', this paradigm has been accepted by most social scientists including most Marxists as an established truth (cf. Martin

& Voorhies, 1975).

Women scholars who are committed to women's liberation, however, cannot stop at criticising and exposing these androcentric manipulations. It is necessary to develop a new methodological approach and new research tools to prevent such manipulations.

In the following I shall try to lay down some methodological guidelines for Women's Studies. These will be followed by an account of an attempt to put these guidelines into practice in an action research project.

II *Methodological Guidelines for Women's Studies*

1. The postulate of *value freedom*, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by conscious *partiality*, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects. For women who deliberately and actively integrate their double-consciousness into the research process, this partial identification will not be difficult. It is the opposite of the so-called 'Spectator-Knowledge' (Maslow, 1966:50) which is achieved by showing an indifferent, disinterested, alienated and reified attitude towards the 'research objects'. Maslow calls the objectivity thus achieved scientific not scientific.

The researcher will be rather scientific than scientific, he may think it necessary to drown his human feelings for the people he is studying, he may quantify, whether it is appropriate or not, and his results may be accurate details and a wrong whole (Ibidem: 114-118).

Conscious partiality, however, not only conceives of the research objects as parts of a bigger social whole but also of the research subjects, i.e. the researchers themselves. Conscious partiality is different from mere subjectivism or simple empathy. On the basis of a limited identification it creates a critical and dialectical distance between the researcher and his 'objects'. It enables the correction of distortions of perception on both sides and widens the consciousness of both, the researcher and the 'researched'.

2. The vertical relationship between researcher and 'research objects', the *view from above*, must be replaced by the *view from below*. This is the necessary consequence of the demand of conscious partiality and reciprocity. Research, which so far has been largely an instrument of dominance and legitimation of power elites, must be put to serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups, particularly women. Women scholars, committed to the cause of women's liberation, cannot have an objective interest in a 'view from above'. This would mean that they would consent to their own oppression as women, because the man-woman relationship represents one of the

oldest examples of the view from above and may be the paradigm of all vertical hierarchical relationships.

The demand for a systematic 'view from below' has both a scientific and an ethical-political dimension. The scientific significance is related to the fact that despite the sophistication of the quantitative research tools, many data gathered by these methods are irrelevant or even invalid because the hierarchical research situation as such defeats the very purpose of research: it creates an acute distrust in the 'research objects' who feel that they are being interrogated. This distrust can be found when women and other under-privileged groups are being interviewed by members of a socially higher stratum. It has been observed that the data thus gathered often reflect 'expected behaviour' rather than real behaviour (Berger, 1974).

Women, who are committed to the cause of women's liberation, cannot stop at this result. They cannot be satisfied with giving the Social Sciences better, more authentic and more relevant data. The ethical-political significance of the view from below cannot be separated from the scientific one: this separation would again transform all methodological innovations in Women's Studies into instruments of dominance. Only if Women's Studies are deliberately made part of the struggle against women's oppression and exploitation, can women prevent that their theoretical and methodological innovations are misused for the stabilization of the *status quo* and for crisis management. This implies that committed women scholars must fight, not only for the integration of women's issues into the academic establishment and research policies but also for a new orientation regarding areas and objectives of research. The needs and interests of the majority of women must become the yardstick for the research policy of Women's Studies. This presupposes that women in the academic world know these needs and interests. The 'view from below', therefore, leads to another postulate.

3. The contemplative uninvolved 'spectator knowledge' (Maslow) must be replaced by *active participation in actions, movements and struggles* for women's emancipation. Research must become an integral part of such struggles.

As Women's Studies grew out of the women's movement, it would be a betrayal of the aims of the movement if academic women, who were never involved in any struggle or were never concerned about women's oppression and exploitation, should try to reduce Women's Studies to a purely academic concern, restricted to the ivory tower of Research Institutes and Universities, thus blunting the edge of all this discontent.⁴ To avert this danger, Women's Studies must remain closely linked to the

struggles and actions of the movement.

The concept of integrating praxis and research was first concretely formulated by Mao-Tse Tung in his essays on contradiction and praxis. It must be emphasised that this concept goes beyond the prevalent understanding of action research. Action research has not been able so far to solve the dilemma of trying to establish a materialist praxis and theory which integrate the understanding of science and knowledge within the framework of a system of science which is organized along idealistic and contemplative lines, and in which the separation from praxis is one of the most important structural prerequisites. But the demand to link praxis and research consistently follows anhistorical dialectical and materialist theory of knowledge. According to this concept, the 'truth' of a theory is not dependent on the application of certain methodological principles and rules, but on its potential to orient the processes of praxis towards progressive emancipation and humanization. This potential, however, is not acquired in the sheltered world of academic institutions but in participation in the processes and in reflection about them.

Max Weber's famous principle of separating Science and Politics (Praxis) is not in the interests of women's liberation. Women scholars who want to do more than a mere paternalistic 'something for their poorer sisters' (because they feel that, as a privileged section, they are already liberated) but who struggle against patriarchy as a system, must take their studies into the streets and take part in the social actions and struggles of the movement.

If they do so, their contribution will not be to give abstract analyses and prescriptions but to help those involved in these struggles to discover and develop their own theoretical and methodological potentials. The elitist attitude of women social scientists will be overcome if they are able to look at all those who participate in a social action or struggle as 'sister-or-brother-sociologists' (in adaptation of Gouldner). The integration of research into social and political action for the emancipation of women, the dialectics of doing and knowing, will not only lead to better praxis but also to better and more realistic theories. According to this approach, the object of research is not something static and homogeneous but an historical, dynamic and contradictory entity. Research, therefore, will have to follow closely the dynamics of this process.

4. Participation in social actions and struggles and the integration of research into these processes, further implies that the *change of the status quo* becomes the starting point for a scientific quest. The motto for this

approach could be: 'If you want to know a thing, you must change it.' ('If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change it, i.e. you must chew it in your mouth', Mao Tse Tung, 1968). If we apply this principle to the study of women, it means that we have to start fighting against women's exploitation and oppression in order to be able to understand the extent, the dimensions, the forms and causes of this patriarchal system. Most empirical research on women has concentrated so far on the study of superficial or surface phenomena such as women's attitudes towards housework, career, part-time work, etc. Such attitude or opinion surveys give very little information about women's true consciousness. Only when there is a rupture in the 'normal' life of a woman, i.e. a crisis such as divorce, the end of a relationship, etc., is there a chance for her to become conscious of her true condition. In the 'experience of crises' (H.Kramert, 1977) and rupture with normalcy, women are confronted with the real social relationships in which they had unconsciously been submerged as objects without being able to distantiate themselves from them. As long as normalcy is not disrupted they are not able to admit even to themselves that these relationships are oppressive or exploitive.

This is the reason why in attitude surveys women so often are found to subscribe to the dominant sexist ideology of the submissive, self-sacrificing woman. When a rupture with this normalcy occurs, however, the mystification about the natural and harmonious character of these patriarchal relations cannot be maintained.

The motto of changing a situation in order to be able to understand it applies not only to the individual woman and her life-crises, but also to collective processes. The very fact that today we are talking about a methodology for Women's Studies is the result of a change in the *status quo* that was brought about by the women's movement and not by intellectual endeavours in universities.

If women scholars begin to understand their studies as an integral part of an emancipatory struggle and if they focus their research on the processes of individual and social change, then they cannot but change themselves also in this process, both as human beings and as scholars. They will have to give up the elitist narrow-mindedness, abstract thinking, political and ethical importance and arrogance of the established academician. They must learn that scientific work and a scientific outlook is not the privilege of professional scientists, but that the creativity of science depends on its being rooted in living social processes. Methodologically this implies the search for techniques with which to document and analyse historical processes of change.

5. *The research process must become a process of conscientization*, both for the so-called 'research subjects' (social scientists) as for the 'research objects' (women as target groups). The methodology of conscientization was first developed and applied by Paulo Freire in his problem-formulating method. The decisive characteristic of the approach is that the study of an oppressive reality is not carried out by experts but by the objects of the oppression. People who so far were objects of research become subjects of their own research and action. This implies that scientists who participate in this study of the conditions of oppression must give their research tools to these people. They must animate them to formulate the problems with which they have to struggle in order that they may plan their action. The women's movement so far has understood the process of conscientization largely as that of becoming conscious of one's individual suffering as a woman. The emphasis in consciousness-raising groups was on group dynamics, role-specific behaviour and relationship problems rather than on the social relations that govern the capitalist societies.

The problem-formulating method, however, sees the individual problematic as an expression and manifestation of oppressive social relations. Whereas consciousness-raising groups often tend to psychologize all relations of dominance, the problem-formulating method considers conscientization as the subjective precondition for liberating action. If processes of conscientization do not lead subsequently to processes of change and action, they may lead to dangerous illusions and even to regression.

6. I would like to go a step further than Paulo Freire, however. The collective conscientization of women through a problem-formulating methodology *must be accompanied by the study of women's individual and social history*. Women have so far not been able to appropriate, i.e. make their own, the social changes to which they have been subjected passively in the course of history; nor have they subjectively appropriated, i.e. integrated into their collective consciousness for themselves, those changes for which they have actively fought, such as the Women's Vote.

The theoretical analysis of such movements was usually done - if at all - *post festum* and the results of these analyses were not fed back to the movements. This lack of historical documentation and analysis may be responsible for the fact that in subsequent waves of women's movements in the course of the last 100 years, the same questions were raised, the same issues were taken up (i.e. the struggle for equal wages, or for the abolition of abortion laws).

The women were not aware of an historic continuity of their struggles, therefore, they could not learn from their successes or mistakes and these past struggles did not become part of their collective consciousness. Thus, women do make history, but they do not *appropriate* (make it their own) their own history as subjects. Such subjective appropriation of their history, their past struggles, sufferings and dreams would lead to something like a collective women's consciousness (in analogy to class consciousness) without which no struggle for emancipation can be successful.

The appropriation of women's history can be promoted by feminist scholars who can inspire and help other women to document their campaigns and struggles. They can help them to analyse these struggles, so that they can learn from past mistakes and successes and, in the long run, may become able to move from mere spontaneistic activism to long-term strategies. This presupposes, however, that women engaged in Women's Studies remain in close contact with the movement and maintain a continuous dialogue with other women. This in turn implies that they can no longer treat their research results as their private property, but that they must learn to collectivize and share them. This leads to the next postulate.

7. Women cannot appropriate their own history unless they *begin to collectivize their own experiences*. Women's Studies, therefore, must strive to overcome the individualism, the competitiveness, the careerism, prevalent among male scholars. This has relevance both for the individual woman scholar engaged in research and for her methodology. If she is committed to the cause of women's liberation, she cannot choose her area of research purely from a career point of view but must try to use her relative power to take up issues that are central to the movement. Therefore, she needs dialogue with other feminist scholars in the field of methodology. The emphasis on interviews of individuals at a given time must be shifted towards group discussions, if possible at repeated intervals. This collectivization of women's experiences is not only a means to get more and more diversified information, but it also helps women to overcome their structural isolation in their families and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes.

III *An attempt to apply these postulates by the action group: 'Women help Women', Cologne 1976-77*

These methodological guidelines were not evolved merely through the study of Social Science literature but also through my participation in a few social actions and the

discussion of these experiences with women students and colleagues. I had a first chance to try out some of these guidelines in an action research project which grew out of an initiative against violence to women in the family. This initiative was started by women students of Social Pedagogy in Cologne in Spring 1976. They founded an association called 'Women help Women' and started a campaign to get a house where women who had been beaten by their husbands or friends could find shelter. Similar Women's Houses for battered women had already been established as projects of women's self-help in London, Amsterdam and Berlin.

Although this initiative did not start with an explicit interest in research, in the course of its development the need for documentation and analysis became urgently felt. The following description of our attempt to link social research to the requirements of this social action will give an idea of how some of the guidelines mentioned above can be put into practice. It should be kept in mind that it was not a systematic attempt to apply a certain methodology of social research, but that the main motive was to further the objectives of the action group. The following should, therefore, be understood as a sharing of our experience rather than as a systematic study. The aim is to invite others to experiment along similar lines.

1. *A problem must be created* (Postulate 4: In order to understand a thing, one has to change it). After the action group, which included 15 young women, had been constituted, a position paper was drafted on its objectives, methods and organizational principles. The group then approached the Social Welfare Department of the Municipal Administration and asked for a house for battered women. There had been reports in the press about increasing wife-beating in German families and about houses for battered women in England and Holland. The reply of the Social Welfare authorities, however, was that there was no need for such a house in Cologne; there were various homes for destitute and poor women to which battered women could go. The fact that there were hardly any battered women in these homes was sufficient proof that the problem did not exist on any large scale. The group was advised first to make a survey and to give the authorities exact figures about the extent of wife-beating in Cologne in order to prove the need for a special house for this target group.

Such surveys are usually made by commercial research institutes with the help of professional Social Scientists, using the technique of questionnaires and interviews. They not only cost a lot of money (which the group did not have) but they also have the political effect that no action is taken before the results of the studies are available. In this way, a problem is often swept under the carpet.

The action group therefore chose another method of proving the need for a house for beaten women. It organized a street action with posters, photos of battered wives, newspaper-cuttings and signatures collected from passers-by, about the need for a Women's House for ill-treated women. At the same time, people who came to their stand were interviewed about their experiences with and their views on wife beating. These interviews were recorded and provided firsthand data about the existence of this problem in Cologne.

These interviews also gave the group a first feedback about people's reactions to private violence in the family, about the class position of men who beat women, about their opinion as to the causes of this private violence, about police indifference towards the problem.

This information helped the group to plan their next steps, but it was also a bit of social research which could immediately be used to further the action. The whole action was reported in the press, including some of the statements made by the people. This publication of a problem which so far had been considered a purely private affair mobilized many people to discuss the question of a Women's House.

The municipal authorities found it difficult to maintain their indifference and had finally to mobilize their own research cell to investigate the problem of wife beating. This was the first time that any attempt had been made to obtain statistics about cases of wife beating in the city. Neither the police nor the various Social Welfare Homes had kept statistics about women who approached them for help. The Social Welfare Department carried out this enquiry only in the homes under their control, not in private homes. The results of the study showed that on average 100 women per month approached these homes because they had been beaten by their husbands. The homes have no means by which to help such women quickly and unbureaucratically, however, and therefore sent them back to their husbands.

With the aid of systematic publicity work in the press, on the radio and TV, the organisation grew and became known in the city. Many women who had been ill-treated by their husbands rang the telephone number given in the press. Three months after the start of the project, women began to ask the group for help. At that time the group did not yet have a house, however, and its members therefore began to give shelter in their own homes to the women who asked for help.

This made the need for a Women's House all the more urgent. When the Social Welfare Department published the results of its own investigation, the action group stated that they had given shelter to about 30 women between June and September 1976. It could no longer be said that the problem of private violence against women did not

exist in Cologne. Eventually the members of the group clubbed together to pay the rent of a suitable house, and the municipality provided a subsidy from the end of the year.

2. *Partiality and egalitarian involvement in a social action* (Postulates 1 and 3)

Members of the action group clearly stated in their position paper that they did not want to allow new hierarchies to grow or experts to dominate the organization. Therefore, they made it a precondition for membership that women who wanted to join 'Women help Women' had to do any type of work that came up. In the long run this proved to be a correct decision. The women Social Scientists who joined the organization had to give up their status of uninvolved, neutral, scientific observers or experts; they not only had to take sides with and for the ill-treated women, but also to participate actively and on an equal footing with non-academic women in all the work. Some pressure was exercised by the public to elect these eminent women as members of the Board of the Association. Officers of the Social Welfare Department would have felt more at ease negotiating with academics than with unknown and inexperienced young women. The action group did not yield to such pressure, however, and stuck to its egalitarian principle of organization. This had the effect that all members had to feel actively responsible for the progress of the movement. There was no bureaucratic centre of authority to which responsibility could be delegated.

This had the effect for the academic women that their horizon in day-to-day struggles was immensely broadened. In their discussions with women who sought shelter in the Women's House they learned more about the true social conditions of German families than from any number of quantitative surveys. For the women who had started the action group, the decision that there should be no hierarchy or bureaucratism meant that they had to learn many things that women usually do not know: from dealing with officials, lawyers, policemen, speaking at press conferences, studying Social Welfare Laws, to whitewashing and painting, driving alone at night to unknown places to meet women who sought their help, etc. The principle of action and egalitarian participation was also applied to the women who sought the help of 'Women help Women'. After a time of rest and recovery in the Women's House, they were encouraged to participate in all the activities of the organization. This was not always easy because the women who sought shelter had run away from an acute crisis situation. They expected help and looked upon

the organization as an ordinary Social Welfare institution. It was difficult to get them to understand gradually that women's liberation rather than social welfare and charity was the aim of the action group. This understanding was furthered by the principle of active and egalitarian participation of all, including the academic women.

The difficulties that arose from this struggle towards inner democracy and integration of praxis and theory were caused by the contacts with the outer world, i.e. mainly the municipal authorities, with their highly hierarchized and bureaucratized organisations. Constant friction was caused by the fact that these bureaucracies have no latitude for egalitarian initiative.

3. *Discussion and 'socialisation' of life-histories as therapy, as basis for collective women's consciousness and as starting point for emancipatory action* (Postulates 5, 6 and 7)

In the first phase of the action, intensive individual and group discussions took place with women who had run away from their homes because their husband or fiancé had beaten them black and blue. These intensive talks were institutionalized after the group had rented a house (in November 1976) and many more women rang up. (Only the telephone number was known, not the address, in case the men should follow their wives and harass them and the children.)

At first these informal yet intensive talks were mainly about the forms, duration, extent and repercussions of male violence in the family. They necessarily emphasised the psychological dimension of a woman's individual history. Since no amount of psychological counselling could solve the practical and material problems that these women faced after leaving their husbands, however (no job, no flat, insecurity of income, no training), it became evident that psychological introspection alone could not lead to deeper understanding of the social forces which had put women into such a state of dependency on men that the latter could treat them as they liked.

It became necessary to help women to understand that their own experience of male violence was not just their individual bad luck or even their fault, but that there is an objective social basis for this private violence by men against women and children. This meant that they had to understand the sociological and historical dimensions of male violence if they were to get out of the masochistic tendency to attribute the failure of their marriage to their own failure as women.

The best method by which to make women in this crisis situation aware of the sociological and historical roots

of their suffering appears to be the documentation, analysis and socialization of their life histories. This method, evolved as a technique of action research (Osterland, 1973), is not only an effective way by which to integrate the time dimension into social research, it is also an excellent method of conscientization. The methodology of a small-action research project which grew out of these informal talks in the Women's House is described below.

It was our objective to document, analyse and discuss the life histories of a number of women who came to the Women's House. We wanted to publish these life histories because it was our aim to conscientize and mobilize the public at large about the problem. To achieve this, much more information was needed on this hidden side of our society, which professes to be democratic and peaceful. It is the task of social researchers to provide this information.

Methodologically, the small group of people who started this project (myself and six students) tried to follow the postulates laid down above.

3.1. The starting point for the documentation of a life history is the break in the woman's so-called normal life. The facade of normalcy which these women have desperately maintained for perhaps 10-30 years of married life - in the face of brutal violence and humiliation - breaks down as soon as they come to the Women's House. The structural violence, or the actual structure of domination which is the basis of the bourgeois, patriarchal family, has become manifest and open violence, and the women are able to admit it. This rupture with oppressive continuity usually does not occur until women see a realistic alternative. Before they see such an alternative, no amount of persuasion will convince them that they are oppressed. In fact, they cannot allow their own oppression and humiliation to come to the surface of their consciousness if they want to preserve a minimum of self-respect. Therefore, they try to find any conceivable rationalization for the fact that they have tolerated masculine brutality for so long. As soon as the rupture has taken place, however, their whole life of repression and humiliation gushes forth like a stream whose sluices have been opened. As soon as they realize that there are other other women who will listen to them with sympathy and understanding, they begin to talk about their life, their husbands, their marriage, spontaneously they try to understand why this has all happened to them. We realized that the need of these women to talk and to communicate their experiences to us and to their fellow sufferers was boundless. For most of them it was the first time that there had been anyone who was willing to listen to them.

3.2. This first stage of sharing experiences and of spontaneous solidarity, however, does not lead automatically to an analysis of the social causes of private violence or to a new consciousness. Women are usually not able to transcend the horizon of their subjective suffering. They tend to go round and round in circles and finally end up in resignation. This was when we interviewed individual women and asked them to tell us their whole life history from their childhood up to the time when they had come to the Women's House. Most of them were very eager to do so. We first recorded their stories individually, then we wrote them down. After a number of such biographies were written down, we organized a group meeting. We gave those written life-stories to the women, asked them to read them and to see whether they wanted to alter or to add anything. After a cursory analysis of the biographies we wanted to have a group discussion with all the women on some of the salient points that came up in many of the cases. As we wanted to avoid a discussion in which only a few people would participate, we suggested that we should make a role play based on problems and incidents that were most common to their histories. The women themselves suggested what should be included in the play, and some also volunteered to stage it. We invited all women to see the play and then to discuss it, and made a video-film while it was being staged. After it was all over, we asked the women to talk about the play, and this discussion was also filmed.

When we planned this small action research project, we had the following objectives in mind, which cover not only our research interests but are closely linked to the individual interests of the women concerned as well as to the broader aims and perspectives of the women's movement.

(a) For the women concerned, the systematic documentation of their life histories has the effect that their own subjective biography assumes an objective character. It becomes something at which they can look from a certain distance. They are not only prisoners of their own past and present sufferings and mistakes, but they can, if they so want, draw lessons from the future from their own past history.

(b) Writing down their biographies also serves a very practical purpose. These women need documentation and hard data in order to re-organize their lives. They need such documents for their lawyers for example, if they want to have a divorce. On the other hand, the action group also needs documentation of women's histories if it is to avoid endless Sisyphus-work of a charitable nature.

(c) From the point of view of research these biographies not only contain data on the individual destinies of the women but also on objective social relations such as class, and the women's reactions towards these. The biographical method also links the individual history to the overall social history of an epoch. The individual's life manifests the contradictions and stresses of an epoch. Many of the women have experienced the war and post-war years; some are refugees from East Germany. Many of the men are workers; many are unemployed and have started drinking. The question of when the man started to beat his wife often gives insight into the interplay between crises: increased phenomena of alienation (work stress, alcoholism, job insecurity, competition) and private violence and aggression. Reflection and appropriation of individual women's histories, therefore, cannot be separated from reflection and appropriation of the overall social history of an epoch.

(d) Apart from the individual, practical and scientific dimensions, the writing-down and discussion of life histories also has political and action-oriented dimensions, aiming at creating a new collective consciousness among women and mobilizing them for further social action. For this it was necessary to socialise the individual life histories, which we tried by staging the play and by the ensuing discussion of the video film.

In the collectivization and discussion of their individual experiences, the women transcend their narrow isolated horizon and begin to understand that women in general have a common social destiny. In fact, most of the women, when they listened to the stories of others, were struck by the similarity of their experiences, i.e. the commonness and monotony of the everyday violence. There was hardly anything individual or extraordinary in their narrations.

(e) Mere scientific documentation and analysis, and even a group discussion on the common destiny of women, does not lead by itself to an active collective consciousness 'for themselves'.

Only when women can use their own documented, analysed, understood and *published* history as a weapon in the struggle for themselves and for all women will they become subjects of their own history. This implies that the documentation of their life histories, the video film, the book, the discussions, have to be integrated into the overall strategy of the women's movement. Although this mobilization of all women who so far had been passive victims of patriarchal structural and direct violence may

transcend the scope of a small action-research project, the fact that the women who took part in it showed keen interest in starting a public campaign against private violence is an indicator that they are moving away from the status of mere objects of charity and social welfare and are on the way to becoming subjects of their own history.

Postscript

I have often been asked whether the guidelines or postulates spelt out above could also be applied to research on women in Third World Countries. In 1978-79 I carried out an ILO-sponsored research project on rural women in India, where I tried to implement some of these methodological principles. A full account of my experience will be given in my report on this subject. Here I wish only to highlight a few necessary points in order to counter certain illusions which may arise regarding the scope of this approach to further social change.

We (the Indian women who assisted me and myself) applied this approach in three rural areas, where we carried out fieldwork among women in the subsistence sector. In one area a social movement for the organisation of landless labourers and for their social upliftment had been in progress for several years. The landless female labourers had already formed their own autonomous organisations which had carried out a number of successful actions (for better wages, work contracts, night schools for women). It was not difficult to use the methodological principles spelt out above and the women participated enthusiastically in our research. They first started doing research *on us*, however, asking all sorts of personal questions regarding our husbands, children, our bodies, clothes; what we did during menstruation; whether we used cotton or cloth; and above all, why we were interested in them. In other words, they did not uncritically accept the hierarchical research situation but turned it into a dialogue. This was facilitated because we lived among them and needed to be helped in many ways. In their songs, dances, dramas, role plays, group discussions, the recording of their life histories, in mass meetings, it became evident that they were not only quite capable of analysing and understanding their own situation, but also of drawing practical conclusions from this analysis. The project provided a forum for discussions and meetings and, as such, not only helped to conscientise these women (they hardly needed conscientisation), but created a wider network of communications for women from different villages, thus giving them a new sense of power.

It would have been impossible for us, however, to mobilize and organise the scattered women through the research project *alone*. Even if they are action-oriented, women's studies cannot *on their own* do such work. Perhaps this should not even be attempted: the researchers usually will leave the area after a certain period of time and the women who are left behind will have to face the political consequences of their mobilisation. If a research project is carefully linked to an ongoing movement, however, the separation between research and action, theory and practice can be overcome - at least tendentially. The degree to which the resources and services of a research project can be used to further the aims of the movement will depend on the movement itself.

Similar autonomous organisations did not exist in the other two areas, and we thus found ourselves in the typical research situation of outsiders who had come to snoop around. In one area the situation was complicated further by the fact that for approximately the last hundred years the local women had become accustomed to being the objects of charity for the Christian church and Western business interests. It was difficult to explain to them that we had no such charity to offer, and at first they did not see any point in talking to us. They were completely atomized as workers and housewives, and although we were able to organise group discussions in which they talked about their problems, the initiative was clearly in our hands. These women belonged to a better class and caste than the women in the first area, but their consciousness and self-confidence were much lower.

We realised that a research project that does not link up with some local group which will constitute a permanent base for conscientisation, mobilisation and action, will remain at best a pleasant episode in the lives of the women, and will be unable to develop its emancipatory potential. In any case, women's research projects as such should not be expected to *start* a conscientisation movement. This would presuppose greater commitment and involvement of the research team in a particular area than is possible for most urban-based women in Third World countries.

Even in areas where no movement was yet in progress, however, we realised that it was impossible *not* to become involved. Given the general sex-segregation and oppression of women in India, the women very soon came to tell us about their private problems with their husbands, their mothers-in-law, the quarrels in the village, etc. This 'women's gossip' was obviously encouraged by the fact that we were women, belonging to the same social category, and were also outsiders and researchers who were ready to listen to their stories. This general feeling of 'being on the same side' helped to overcome the usual barrier

between people from different classes and cultures. The establishment of an open and friendly rapport between us and the women was mainly due to the commitment and enthusiasm of the Indian women on the research team, who were not only capable of partial identification with the problems of the rural women, but who also enjoyed being with them and temporarily sharing their lives.

NOTES

1. In analogy to ethnocentrism, i.e. centred around the male.
2. The paper is published in German in: *Heksenkollege: de feeks viool* (Nijmegen, Holland, 1978, out of print); and in *Beiträge zur Feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Verlag Frauenoffensive, München, 1978).
3. M. Mamdani's study of the 'Myth of Population Control' describes the functioning of this kind of research (Mamdani: 1973).
4. The present world-wide interest in Women's Studies, though a direct outcome of the women's movement, must also be understood as an effort to neutralize and co-opt the protest potential of the movement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hartwig Berger (1974) *Untersuchungsmethode und soziale Wirklichkeit* (Frankfurt).
- Paulo Freire (1971) *Pädagogik der Unterdrückten* (Stuttgart, Kreuz Verlag).
- Gerrit Huizer (1973) 'The a-social role of social scientists in underdeveloped countries: some ethical considerations', in: *Sociologus*, 23/2, 165-177.
- (1975) 'Applied Social Science and Political Action' (paper 34, Annual meeting of the Society of Applied Anthropology, Amsterdam).
- Helgard Kramert (1977) 'Wann wird die Selbstverständlichkeit der geschlechtlichen Arbeitsteilung in Frage gestellt?' (Paper, Frankfurt).
- R. Leavitt, U. Sykes, E. Weatherford (1975) 'Aboriginal Woman: Male and Female Perspectives' in: R. Reiter (ed.): *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, Monthly Review Press).
- Kurt Lewin (1953) *Die Lösung Sozialer Konflikte* (Bad Nauheim).
- (1963) *Feldtheorie in den Sozialwissenschaften* (Bern).
- I.L. Horowitz (1976) *The Rise and Fall of the Project Camelot: Studies in the Relationship between Science and Practical Politics* (Cambridge Mass. MIT Press).
- Mahmood Mamdani (1973) *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Caste and Class in an Indian Village* (New York/London, Monthly Review Press).
- A.H. Maslow (1966) *The Psychology of Science* (New York)
- Mao Tse Tung (1968) *Über die Praxis, Über den Widerspruch* (Ausgewählte Werke, Bd. I, Peking).

M.K. Martin and
B. Voorhies (1975)

Female of the Species (Columbia
University Press).

June Nash (1974)

Report on the Conference on
Feminine Perspectives in Social
Science Research (Buenos Aires,
March 1974)

Martin Osterland (1973)

'Lebensgeschichtliche Erfahrung
und gesellschaftliches Bewusstsein,
Anmerkungen zur sozio-biographischen
Methode', in: *Soziale Welt*.

Eric Wolf and J.G.
Jorgenson (1970)

'Anthropology on the Warpath in
Thailand', in: *Review of Books*
(New York, Nov. 1970).

1944
The following information was received from the Bureau of the Census, Washington, D. C., on August 1, 1944:

The Bureau of the Census has advised that the total population of the United States on July 1, 1944, was 136,622,000.

The Bureau of the Census has also advised that the total population of the United States on July 1, 1943, was 135,422,000.

U. S. Census Bureau
Washington, D. C.

August 1, 1944

Very truly yours,
Director

Enclosure