Chapter 33
"Asking the Woman Question" in Case Study Research

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ABSTRACT

Case study research provides the researcher with the opportunity to decide the most convincing epistemological orientation. Such versatility is nonetheless embedded in the assumption of objectivity contends G. Griffin in Difference in View: Women and Modernism, which speaks of an "abstract masculinity" intended here as the assumption of universal humanity where men's and women's experiences are melted into one experience. Case study research, this contribution contends, even when about women, hinders the experience of women, an experience that is always situated, relational, and engaged. In other words, ontologically, it is argued here, the reality of women's lives is absent from the domain of case study research because the language adopted when framing case study research is still very much a language that talks about women, but it does not allow women to speak.

INTRODUCTION

In case study research, too often researchers hold the view that there is one single reality, which is independent of the individual and can be apprehended, studied and measured, through a neutral perspective (Woodside and Wilson, 2003). This contribution challenges the notion of epistemic privilege (Pinnick, 2005) which talks of abstract masculinity (Connell, 1983; 1995; see also Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) arguing for the need to "ask the woman question" in case study research. Making knowledge claims across differences (Griffin, 1994) allows for the reproduction and co-production of hidden power relations to be dissected and for such relations to surface. Borrowing from feminist approaches (Oakley, 1981; England, 1994; Ermath, 2000), the question who has the power to know what and how power is implicated in the process of producing knowledge, takes central stage in this chapter when seeking to understand the value of case study research. Regularly facing the challenge of having to defend itself

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from generalisation (Yin, 2014), case study research is well positioned to call into question the power relations in the research encounter. The power to decide what difference is measured against and how the "different" is constructed, in turn leads to the problem of claiming objectivity as epistemological privilege (Guba, 1981).

The key objective of this contribution is therefore to challenge such objectivity by suggesting the adoption of a feminist standpoint (Katila and Meriläinen, 1999) which confronts a privileged social identity by making a claim that it is unfair to generalize from a single case whilst contending that each singularity has its own value and merit (Brooks, 2007). The proposed understanding of standpoint is consistent with some claims Harding (1991) makes about standpoints when she emphasizes that a standpoint is not the same as the social position occupied by an inquirer or a participant in her study. Instead, she claims that taking a standpoint is a matter of moral and political commitment, for this reason suggesting that a standpoint is a collective achievement.

This contribution maintains therefore that feminist standpoint epistemology in all its nuances (Bondi, 1990; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), offers a credible and valuable contribution to support strategies for using case study research which ultimately "asks the woman question" (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991). Evaluating the most current definition of case study research, it is noticeable how Stake (1995) selects a flexible stance and, while concerned with rigor in the processes, he maintains a focus on what is studied (the case) rather than how it is studied (the method), neglecting to ask such an important question. For Stake, case study research is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances: woman, as a category of epistemological enquiry is indeed absent here. Equally, Merriam (2009) includes what is studied and the products of the research when defining case study as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, avoiding to "ask the woman question". Yin's two-part definition (2014) focuses on the scope, process, and methodological characteristics of case study research, emphasizing the nature of inquiry as being empirical, and the importance of context to the case. Again, here, women are invisible (see also Holmgren and Hearn, 2009). From this brief overview, it is already perceptible that what is emphasized here is that the defining feature of case study research often takes central stage over the content of any research endeavour where case study research is employed. In discussing the proliferation of definitions (and subsequent confusion), Flyvbjerg (2011) is particularly valuable here as he contends that using a simple definition, almost borrowed from the dictionary, might be a more useful approach, albeit the omission of the lived reality of women's lives, as the assumption remains of an abstract masculinity (Connell, 1983; 1995). Whatever the definition preferred, these varied definitions stem from the researchers' differing methodological and epistemological approaches and often reflect the elements they emphasize as central to their designs (Forchuk and Roberts, 1993). The diversity of approaches subsequently adds diversity to definition and description but also contributes to supporting researchers (Stake,1995; Merriam, 2009 and Yin, 2014) wishing to neutralise the claim that case study research carries little scientific gravitas, because of its generalization. Researchers (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) often consider the fact that the same accusation has been made against a single scientific experiment. The argument is that scientific facts are rarely based on single experiments; they are usually based on a multiple set of experiments, which have replicated the same phenomenon under different conditions. The same approach can be used with multiple case studies but requires a different concept of the appropriate research designs (Verschuren, 2003). In search of appropriateness, the adoption of a feminist standpoint is not merely an exercise in ideological reassurance, but rather the opportunity to maintain that a feminist standpoint epistemology in all its nuances (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), offers a credible and valuable contribution to