

*This book is dedicated to all those who seek knowledge and who are passionately committed to inquiry and scholarship that generates new ideas and actions in the social, cultural and political spheres.*

*For Churchill Livingstone*

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# Writing research

## Transforming data into text

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## Feminist approaches

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### INTRODUCTION

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*...this is work that must be done with extreme care because it is so very important to those who would benefit from its results.*

(Kirsch 1999:102)

Feminist perspectives have dramatically influenced the world of English-language writing and publishing, even for those whose work is not explicitly feminist. The demand for gender-neutral language, which has been heeded almost universally in the publishing world, arose from the wave of feminism that began in the early 1960s, and included not only a shift to gender-neutral language in professional publications, but also in every aspect of popular journalism. The eminent nurse, Wilma Scott Heide, who served as the third president of the National Organisation for Women in the United States, played a pivotal role in demanding

that the newspapers in Philadelphia and subsequently nation wide, end their practice of listing job ads separately for men and women (Haney 1985; Heide 1985). As a result, today classified ads for jobs are listed as 'help wanted' (instead of 'help wanted: female' and 'help wanted: male'), an editorial practice that has provided a foundation for fundamental and lasting social change. This change, which on the surface appeared to be merely a minor editorial shift, created a major social change that opened job opportunities to people regardless of gender.

When a researcher's work is founded on feminist perspectives, the demands placed on the writing process become significant beyond the implications of mere choice of word. The written report communicates and creates significant social and political changes that underpin feminist scholarship. This chapter provides an overview of feminist perspectives and presents guidelines to use in scholarly writing that is consistent with feminist principles.

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## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND WRITING RESEARCH

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Feminist perspectives span a world wide range of ideas, explanations, and philosophies. Fundamentally, feminist perspectives are founded on assumptions that value women and women's experience, recognise systematic conditions that oppress women, and reach toward transformations that create a better world for women (Hall and Stevens 1991, Humm 1995). Differences among the various perspectives include different explanations as to how women's oppression has developed and what sustains it, what remedies are best pursued to end oppression and discrimination against women, and how sex and gender interface with other forces of oppression, such as race, class, sexual preference (Humm 1992, Kauffman 1993, Tong 1998, Young 1997). The contrasting differences are not usually mutually exclusive; each offers important dimensions to understanding the complex challenges that feminism addresses.

Research methods that are influenced by feminist perspectives vary depending on the particular feminist perspective that informs the work (Reinharz 1992, Webb 1993). However, there are more common elements in the application of feminist perspectives on method, and on writing, than there are differences.

The descriptions that follow focus on the common elements that inform feminist research and writing.

## VALUING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Writing that fundamentally values women and women's experience is vastly different from the research and writing that dominated professional literature for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shifts in both substance and style came from the growing strength of feminist scholars and activists who recognised and challenged the neglect and devaluing of women in literature and offered a wide array of remedies to address the problem. The earliest recorded feminist writings focused primarily on uncovering evidence demonstrating the pervasive and persistent practices that fundamentally discounted, ignored, or harmed women (Spender 1982), and this focus has continued as new insights have emerged. Along with knowledge of the ways in which women and women's experience have been silenced or distorted, feminist scholars increasingly address ways to shift fundamental philosophies and theories, and in turn, methods, to more accurately represent women and women's experiences.

Among the most far-reaching shifts were changes in language consistent with Heide's call to eliminate sexist language. Male-centric language is based on the assumption of male-as-norm, and it is this assumption that feminist scholars and activists challenged, not simply the choice of words. The end of use of male nouns and pronouns as a 'generic' term for all people represented a shift to acknowledge the autonomous humanity of all people without reference to or derivation from that which is male. The shift took hold primarily because of a general recognition that male terms are editorially inaccurate, a fact uncovered by the persistent shift to female terms when referring to women in a text that otherwise claimed to be using male terms to refer to everyone.

Feminist scholars and activists also insisted that research methods and findings that are exclusively based on men and males cannot be generalised to women and females, and called for research by women, with women, and for women. Subsequently, shifts in method and approach emerged to adequately address women's experiences. Further, the topics around which research focused shifted to those topics that are of major importance for women. For example, research on violence against women was

virtually non-existent before feminist scholars and activists insisted on a shift to work that values women and women's experience (Parker and McFarlane 1991).

While the majority of research and writing that values women and women's experience focuses on women as researchers and as research participants, this commitment does not exclude those who are not women. In fact, there are endless research needs that include children and men, but that arise from a fundamental concern with the worth and well-being of women. For example, Phillips' (2001) research, in which young boys were the participants, focused on the ways in which masculinity is constituted, understood and enacted, with the overall goal of finding new directions for ending practices of male violence.

### RECOGNISING SYSTEMATIC CONDITIONS THAT OPPRESS WOMEN

Feminist scholarship is characterised by an explicit concern with the forces that are assumed to oppress women, and with an explicit objective to better understand and reveal these forces. Because the dynamics that sustain systematic oppressions are deeply embedded in cultures and societies, they are extremely difficult to discern. The methods and insights uncovering hidden oppressive forces is one of the major contributions of feminism.

Early in the second wave of feminism (considered to emerge during the 1960s in the United States), women activists and scholars formed consciousness-raising groups where women came together to discuss their experiences and the conditions of their lives. Consciousness-raising became the fundamental method of feminism, and continues to be a process that is inherent in feminist projects of all types (academic scholarship, community activism, and so forth). The fundamental insight coined in the phrase 'the personal is political' came from early consciousness-raising efforts, when women began to recognise ways in which their personal concerns had been culturally relegated to 'women's sphere', a sphere arising from, and sustained by, systematic social and political forces. Further, the disadvantages and struggles that women assumed were merely isolated circumstances of their individual lives began to be recognised as common experiences among many different women with vastly different individual circumstances (Humm 1995, Lennon and Whitford 1994, Tong 1998, Young 1997).

For example, when women began to recognise that their 'choices' for life work were limited to service-oriented, underpaid vocations (clerical service, janitorial service, childcare, factory labour, marriage, teaching, nursing) it was possible to begin to examine how this limited scope of choice was constructed socially and politically. Further, the fact that the options all required self-sacrifice in the interest of serving predominantly male-centred interests revealed systematic cultural and political injustice based on gender.

Explanations of women's oppression provide far-reaching insights and account for a wide range of diversity among feminist theories (Humm 1992, Tong 1998). Some theories locate the explanations in political dynamics. Some explanations focus on psychological development and the many factors that shape psychological development. Others locate explanations in economic circumstances, or in legally sanctioned arrangements that limit women's social and economic capacities. There are many more variations on these and other kinds of explanations, some conflicting with others, but generally, each explanation provides a dimension of insight that adds deeper understandings of women's oppressions.

While it is not always necessary for a researcher or writer to lay claim to one particular theory or explanation of women's oppression, feminist approaches to scholarship bring personal perspectives to the surface, making explicit the ideological lens that is brought to bear upon the work. The perspectives of the researcher fundamentally influence the choice of research purpose, questions, methods, procedures and the selection of relationships with participants. The perspectives also influence the choice of language used in the methodology and in the reporting of the research.

For example, typically feminist research is based on a recognition of women's objectification in society. Some researchers focus on an explanation that focuses on economic and political forces that sustain women's role in society as unpaid or underpaid service workers, rendering women as not fully human, but rather as 'tools' serving the needs of others to the economic advantage of those who are served. In this view, women have been seen as not capable of making independent, fully human choices about their lives, but rather perform an objectified function that serves the needs of others. Other researchers focus on recognition of the various forces that silence women and that make it difficult or impossible for women's perspectives to be

considered as viable human experiences. This approach also recognises the many ways in which women's reality has been misrepresented by male scholars who have interpreted women's experience without concern for what women themselves actually think, feel or experience.

Explanations such as those focusing on objectification of women arising from social function or silencing of women are not incompatible. The primary lens through which the researcher constructs all aspects of the work shapes the language used in the work. Instead of the word 'subject' to refer to research participants, for example, a researcher who is primarily concerned with social norms that limit women's choice might use the words 'worker' or 'volunteer'. A researcher who focuses primarily on the silencing of women and bringing women's voices to the surface might use the terms 'narrator' or 'informant'.

## TRANSFORMING THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

Explanations of women's oppression by definition imply ways in which to change the world to benefit women. Logically, for example, if women have been disadvantaged by limited social roles, then the world would be better for women if they are freely able to choose whatever social roles they wish to pursue. In fact, over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many parts of the world, this transformation has gradually emerged for some women, but not all. Further, there are vast areas of the world where little or no changes have occurred. Nevertheless, explanations that focus on a dynamic such as social roles, while not adequate in themselves, point toward possible transformations. There are many dynamics that function to sustain limited social roles for women that are not yet clearly understood, but the vision of a world where women can fully realise their potential remains a central inspiration for feminist scholars and activists.

Postmodern feminist scholars have influenced feminist thought particularly in the realm of transforming the world (Tong 1998). Generally, postmodern feminist scholars have rejected the idea of oppression, of dominance and submission that many of the early feminist theories held as central. Instead, postmodern feminist views tend to focus on the advantages of being the 'other' in the world, and have examined ways in which the construction of 'other' has sustained generalised assumptions about women and women's experience.

Generalised assumptions about women, they claim, are as damaging as the patriarchal forces that have been assumed to be solely responsible for any disadvantage that women have experienced. From a postmodern view, the construction of oppression has been an artefact of a language and a way of thinking that divides the world into 'this or that', 'good or bad', 'oppressed or oppressor'. The transformation that is required involves a refusal to categorise or name the world in terms that have been constructed in a binary and oppositional language/thought system, and instead to address each individual experience and reality in its own right, without imposing categories or values.

Many of the insights of postmodern perspectives are academic and philosophic and are difficult, perhaps impossible, to implement in research and in writing. However, the important challenges of postmodern perspectives have brought new awareness to all feminist research and writing. Postmodern perspectives have extended in substantial ways the early feminist commitment to changing language as a way to transform the world. Rather than viewing women as 'victims' of circumstances beyond their control and seeking transformations that seek to change limiting circumstances, feminist scholars are increasingly turning to work that views women as 'survivors', with unique talents and strengths that have developed to a remarkable extent and that can serve well the transformational projects of making a better world for women. Even further, postmodern scholars challenge the use of gender-specific constructs and categories in research, noting that this persistent practice actually sustains the prejudices and stereotypes that are inherent in the categories themselves (Allen, Allman and Powers 1991).

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## FEMINIST GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

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Feminist perspectives guide all aspects of scholarly work, but feminist principles are particularly important in the writing process. Writing is a form of thought that informs the work itself, because the active process of putting the work into descriptive and interpretive language shapes the work and gives it substance. The written account of research is more than a simple report. It is an active process that shapes social and political relations, and shapes the relationship of the research to the

culture, the people, and the society (DeVault 1999, Ehrlich 1995, Young 1997).

Writing from a feminist perspective for a traditional academic audience imposes certain challenges that are not easily resolved or overcome. Many publishers and editors unequivocally require the standard formats for reporting research, although since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been growing awareness and flexibility in response to credible challenges from feminist scholars. Nevertheless, in order for one's work to be accepted within any particular discipline, the text must meet certain stylistic expectations that have developed within traditions that were shaped primarily by patriarchal perceptions and concerns (DeVault 1999). Like all serious scholars, feminist scholars must have their work accepted within their academic discipline in order to have their work successfully influence the evolution of the discipline. The challenge is to meet traditional academic standards sufficiently without compromising one's own feminist sensibilities, and to continue to work for change in the traditional stylistic expectations.

Traditional academic writing styles tend to obscure powerful personal meanings, objectify research participants (including the researcher), drain emotional content that can be significant to the work, and sustain socially and culturally embedded 'isms' that are not consistent with the effort to overcome stereotypes and prejudices – all of which are vitally important from a feminist standpoint. In addition, traditional reporting tends to direct the reader toward the author's interpretation of the evidence, prescribes the theoretical significance of the work, and suggests the author's implications for action and further research. The reader, given this kind of text, has the choice to either accept the work as presented, or approach the work with scepticism in order to identify flaws in the work and find a reasonable basis to differ from the author. The writing conveys a message that assumes that the author is in a competitive stance with the reader, expecting the reader to assume an adversarial position with the text (DeVault 1999).

In contrast, feminist writers assume the reader's role to be that of an active participant in the intellectual development of the work, considering both sceptical and accepting stances simultaneously. Reporting that is informed by feminist perspectives focuses on complex aspects of the work without prescribing

a set formula for interpretation. The focus is on possible patterns and alternative explanations, and the reader is called upon to enter into a discourse with the work. Regrettably, this kind of writing can be judged as lacking by a reviewer/reader who expects a text that calls for the traditional reader response based on competing ideas and interpretations (DeVault 1999, Kirsch 1999).

To some extent, the conflict between the world of feminist writing and traditional publishing standards resides in stylistic conventions that are gradually fading, but the traditional standards remain sufficiently embedded to create considerable confusion and concern. The stilted, passive-voice, third-person presentation that has been traditionally associated with scholarly and scientific writing came to be viewed as evidence of the researcher's objectivity and therefore adequacy as a scientist or scholar. In fact, the stylistic conventions of such writing have nothing to do with the scientific integrity of the work. Yet, writing that does not conform to the standard can be judged as unscientific, unscholarly and overly subjective. To address a reader who would render such a judgement, when writing outside of the standard conventions the text needs to be explicit and clear concerning the scientific and philosophic standards that have given the work its shape and integrity.

The guidelines that follow are offered to assist in composing research reports and other kinds of scholarly work with a solid allegiance to fundamental feminist principles, and to do so in ways that attempt to address concerns of a reader who comes to the work with traditional patriarchal expectations.

## FUNDAMENTAL RULES OF GRAMMAR AND NAMING

The fundamental rules of grammar and naming remain a major concern of feminist authors, since it is through these conventions that infinite numbers of power relationships, prejudices, biases and stereotypes are sustained in the culture. Because the shifts that are required actually yield a more accurate, sound and readable text, most publishers and editors now expect authors to conform to the shifts in grammar and naming that have been identified by feminist scholars. Nevertheless, patriarchal conventions remain embedded in most English grammars, and recognising instances

when bias and prejudice occurs in language is not an easy task. Often it takes the blunt challenge of bias by a member of a group that is victimised by the bias to jolt authors to recognise their own, often unintended, prejudice. The guidelines that follow can be used to 'test' a text for sound grammatical construction and naming language.

### People first

Labels are disabling, and are generally considered inappropriate in good writing. Therefore, a fundamental rule is to always acknowledge the person first, followed by any descriptive terms that reflect their circumstances, as in 'people who have/are living with/AIDS...'.

Labels that convey a derivative identity are so common when referring to women, that often English language speakers do not recognise the loss of personhood that accompanies the use of such labels. Words such as 'wife', 'mother', or 'widow' used in phrases such as 'the mothers in this study' are not inaccurate, but in this phrase the women are assumed to be mothers first, not people first. Use instead wording that puts the women first, as in 'the women in this study, all of whom were mothers...'.

'People first' implies that something comes after the idea of 'person'. That which comes next are the descriptors that locate people within a context, or that describe something about their unique circumstances, or the common ground that they share with others. People have the right to define themselves, and to select the descriptors that best identify who they are. In feminist research, the process of self-definition begins in the early phases of the research project and participants enter the project with some avenue to choose the descriptive terms that they prefer or agree to use. For example, if a researcher is working with women who are lesbians, women who participate in the project may prefer to use the word 'gay' to self-identify. The researcher working from a feminist perspective would respect each woman's preference, and change the general language of the study documents to a phrase like 'women who self-identify as gay or lesbian'. The preferred language requires more words, but reflects a more accurate descriptive language that acknowledges the personhood of the women first, and their right to self-definition.

### Insider/outsider

This principle holds that people may describe themselves in ways that outsiders may not. The word 'girl' to refer to adult women is generally unacceptable, demeaning and infantilising. However, adult women in a close friendship network may fondly refer to their group of friends as 'the girls' or 'my girlfriends' to indicate the special and intimate nature of their relationship. If women who participate in a study use a phrase such as 'us girls' the researcher uses their words when the text is clearly citing their own words to describe their experience, but not in text where the researcher is referring to the women who participated in the study.

### Inclusion/exclusion

The inclusion/exclusion principle refers to language that is accurate in terms of who is included and who is not included. Feminist perspectives have generally tended toward inclusion in order to overcome and challenge the exclusions of patriarchal systems that granted privilege to some at the expense of others. However, in reaching toward inclusion, feminist writers have sometimes assumed that their own perspectives and ideas applied to 'all women' when in fact the experience or description can only apply accurately to a certain group of women (Hooks 1984).

The principle of inclusion/exclusion appears deceptively simple, while in reality, it requires deep reflection and usually several revisions of text in order to achieve precisely accurate language, and to locate alternatives to generally acceptable language. Consider the following examples:

### Abortion rights or reproductive rights

'Abortion rights' usually implies the experience of women who wish to have the right to obtain an abortion, and excludes women who are concerned about the use of abortion as an involuntary means of genocide, or about involuntary sterilisation. Even if your intention is to limit your concern only to abortion, if you are sensitive to issues of involuntary abortion, your preferred term would be 'reproductive rights'.

## Parenting

The term 'parent' is assumed to be an inclusive term referring to mothers and fathers. However, it is often used to obscure the reality of women who are mothers. When all the parents in a situation are mothers, or, when the author is assuming the parents to be the mothers, then the exclusive term 'mother' is more accurate. If most of the parents are mothers and a few are fathers, then this proportion should be acknowledged in the text, rather than continuing to use the general term 'parent' as if there were equal participation.

## False inclusion

A phrase like 'participants can complete the instrument in less than 10 minutes' assumes that all participants can read at a certain grade level and are literate in the language in which the instrument is presented. The text may have specified limitations of the instrument, and it may be clear that the instrument is constructed in a given language. But without being specific about just which people can actually complete the instrument in a specified time frame, the phrase is inaccurately inclusive.

'Immigrants to this country' often refers in actuality to European or Asian people who arrived in the country within a relatively recent time frame, without specifying who is included and who is excluded. Be specific as to which people you are including, where they arrived from, and within which time frame. What else do you assume about the group? Are they all English-speaking, first generation, in the country legally?

The commonly used phrase 'people of colour' emerged in the English language in an effort to put people first, to avoid the obviously biased 'non-white' term that casts 'white' experience as the norm. However, the phrase still homogenises all people who do not claim a European ancestry and sustains a false inclusion based on ethnic or ancestral heritage.

## Sex and gender

There is persistent confusion in the English language concerning sex and gender. 'Sex' refers to a person's biological characteristics of male or female. 'Gender' refers to socially and culturally

acquired roles that are dominantly feminine or masculine (Maggio 1991). The fundamental grammatical rule in using these two terms is one of accuracy. If you are asking about or reporting biological characteristics, then ask about or report sex as male or female. If you are asking about or reporting acquired social and cultural roles, you can accurately use the term 'gender'. The terms 'man' and 'woman' are generally considered to be related to gender roles but are usually also assumed to reflect sex.

Non-sexist language, or language that does not carry a bias or stereotype based on sex or gender, requires the use of gender and sex-neutral terms when possible, and accurate use of specific terms referring to men and women, girls and boys, females and males. There are a number of issues to be aware of in order to achieve accurate non-sexist use of language.

## POINT OF REFERENCE

The most common sexist error is the assumption that 'male' and 'men' (usually white, middle or upper class) are the norm, or the point of reference. The phrase 'equal opportunity' is a quintessential example from early feminist literature, and persists in many venues today. The question 'equal to whom?' reveals the bias inherent in the phrase. For example, the phrase 'equal access to education' most often would imply that women (or other disenfranchised groups) are being granted access to educational opportunities that previously were reserved for (white) men. The access that men have enjoyed is considered to be the norm toward which the disenfranchised group would aspire. Generally, this is considered to be a 'good thing'. However, upon closer examination, feminist scholars for decades have raised questions concerning the nature of traditional education, the sexist bias that persists in these very institutions, and the desirability of conforming to the patriarchal norms inherent in these institutions (Nightingale 1979, Woolf 1966).

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## GENDER AND SEX-FREE LANGUAGE

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Gender and sex-free terms are those that can be used for either men or women, males or females (Maggio 1991). Some such



terms, however, also carry general assumptions about gender or sex, such as secretary, teacher, or nurse (assumed to be women), and doctor, lawyer, or merchant (assumed to be men). Generally, these terms are now preferred as generic gender-free terms without any sex-qualifiers, except when sex or gender is important to the meaning of the text. Such terms as 'male nurse' or 'woman doctor' are unacceptable. The test of such terms is to consider the symmetrical phrase 'female nurse' or 'man doctor'. If the symmetrical term is ridiculous, then both are ridiculous.

### GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE

When sex or gender is pertinent and appropriate, gender-fair language is used. Gender-fair language involves the accurate, symmetrical use of gender-specific language for both men and women (Maggio 1991). For example, consider the symmetrical structure of both the survey and the sentence reporting the survey as follows: 'The survey showed that men are comfortable with a nurse who is female, while women are less accepting of a nurse who is male'. Notice the use of the 'people first' principle, instead of the unacceptable sexist term 'male nurse'.

### GENDER-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

Gender-specific terms are neither good nor bad in themselves, but they need to be used accurately (Maggio 1991). Use 'businessman' if all the people you refer to are men. 'Businesspeople' is a preferred gender-neutral term if indeed the gender of the people include both men and women in approximately equal numbers. However, since 'business' people still typically arouse images of male persons, and since it remains true in most contexts that the majority of those to whom the term refers are still men, it is likely to be more accurate to use the more wordy phrase 'business men and women' which also emphasises the fact that women are indeed business people.

### PSEUDO-GENERIC LANGUAGE

Pseudo-generic terms are those that are used as if they refer to both men and women, but in fact they do not. The context of the writing typically reveals the error and the true intention of the

author. For example, the phrase 'clergy who are permitted to have wives' reveals that the author actually uses the generic term 'clergy' to refer to men, assuming that the author also views clergy as heterosexual. A more acceptable phrase would be 'clergy who are permitted to have spouses or domestic partners'.

A more subtle context that reveals the author's bias occurs when the generic term is used for several passages, and then a gender-specific passage occurs that reveals the fact that the generic term really only referred to men or women all along. This has been common with the supposedly generic use of the term 'man'. If the author indeed were to mean both men and women, then when women enter the picture, they would not need to switch to the gender-specific use of the term 'women', but inevitably, they do.

The same shift is common in lay texts that use the term 'parent'. Initially, it may seem that the author means mothers and fathers. However, along the way a passage will single out fathers, revealing the underlying pseudo-generic use of the term 'parent' when in fact the author meant 'mother'. Usually an extended reading of the text reveals the bias, or, if you substitute the term 'woman' for the term 'man' or 'father' for the terms 'parent' throughout the text, the bias becomes quite clear.

### FEMININE ENDINGS

Endings added to words to indicate female sex or gender are particularly damaging, in that they perpetuate the assumption that the male is the norm, specify a person's sex when it is irrelevant, and imply a diminutive, 'cute' sense of the term. The inappropriateness of the feminine ending is often revealed when one considers the term that is considered male, or generic. Often, the parallel term carries a vastly different meaning, such as 'governess', compared to 'governor'. Other parallel terms are not as dramatic in their vastly different meanings, but convey a gender-specific role that is less than favourable for women, such as 'seducer' compared to 'seductress'.

### THE PRONOUN PROBLEM

Pronouns are a challenge for non-sexist writers. The most common solution is to edit the text to the plural, since in the English

language plural pronouns are gender-neutral. Other strategies include:

- Use the second person, as in 'you can use the second person to avoid sexist pronouns'.
- Omit the pronoun entirely, replace it with an article, or with a noun. Instead of 'the researcher can design her study using a table of random numbers', use 'the researcher can design the study using (random numbers) or (a table of random numbers) or (computerised table of random numbers)'.
- Use 'she and he' and 'her and his' sparingly, if at all. Reserve this usage for instances when nothing else works. Never use the annoying 's/he'. A related strategy that is often favoured is the alternate use of the female and male pronouns in alternate paragraphs or chapters. However, this tends to be distracting and draws attention to a stilted grammatical style.
- Use the singular 'they'. Until the mid-1700s when prescriptive grammarians of the English language began to enforce its exclusive use as a plural pronoun, the pronoun 'they' was considered to be appropriate as a singular referent (Maggio 1991). There is still resistance to this convention, but it is now widely accepted for both written and spoken English. For example, 'No one in the study was asked to share their private journal'.

## HIDDEN BIAS

Hidden bias occurs when the terms used are neutral and free of bias, but the passage still carries a biased message. For example, the sentence 'More women today are living with men without being married' carries a bias against women who are not married (Maggio 1991). The fact is that the number of men who are living with women in an unmarried arrangement equals the number of women in such arrangements. A more accurate statement would be 'More heterosexual couples are living together today without being married'.

Another common example is the non-parallel treatment of ethnicity. The 'white and non-white' dichotomy conveys the importance of being white, since everyone else is lumped together in one 'non-white' category. Since ancestry and ethnicity are complex dimensions that are becoming increasingly individualised, a

preferred approach is to identify ancestral heritage by general geographic origin (for example Asian, African, Pacific-Islander, South American). If a specific cultural, national, ethnic or ancestral heritage is more accurate to the people that you are referring to, use the more specific terminology as closely allied with the preference of the people involved as possible.

## VOICE AND AGENCY

Voice and agency are central to feminist scholarship. Voice and agency also present the most perplexing dilemmas in writing. Traditional scholarship assumed a voice of authority, leaving unquestioned the ground from which the authority rose. The 'voice', presumed to be that of the author, was hidden in mystifying 'objectivity', confusing the author's own perspectives with the perspectives of others who the author claimed to represent.

Feminist perspectives call for explicit accountability and responsibility, demystification of who is speaking, and of the frame of reference from which the voice arises (Kirsch 1999). If the author presumes to speak on behalf of others, the basis upon which the author speaks, and for whom, must be stated explicitly. More often, the author writing from a feminist perspective cites the precise sentiments, thoughts and feelings of others and provides an explicit context from which the right to report the perspectives of others derives.

## SITUATING THE SELF WITHIN THE TEXT

Feminist scholarship situates the author within the work, providing explanations and descriptions that convey the context and the background that the author brings to the work. From a feminist standpoint, this is an ethical responsibility; authors are morally accountable for their own views, actions and decisions. They are also accountable to be clear when they are speaking on behalf of others (Kirsch 1999). If the author is a person of African ancestry who grew up and was educated in a Euro-centric culture, this brief description provides for readers some important information about the author's context and background. However, since such descriptions also have the potential to sustain stereotypes and biases that the reader might bring to the

work, the author also includes explicit statements that describe the particular lens that has been derived from unique personal, social and political experience.

It is impossible to situate oneself within the work without referring to oneself in some way. Traditional standards of writing that resist or reject the use of personal pronouns would call for the author to refer to one's self in the third person (as in 'the present author grew up in a multi-cultural environment...' or 'the researcher invited the participants to share their stories...'). Use of the third person to refer to one's self has come to be recognised as stilted and annoying, leading to an ever-increasing acceptance of the use of personal pronouns. However, the use of personal pronouns can yield an overly self-absorbed and egocentric text that not only offends the traditional reader, but interferes with meaningful communication with feminist readers who seek a broader foundation and connection with the work at hand than that afforded by the author's views alone (Kirsch 1999).

Many of the alternatives to using the first person pronouns are similar to the alternatives to second and third person pronouns discussed earlier. The pronoun can often be omitted or edited out of the text. In editing, a useful solution is to use a different active noun for the sentence, which avoids moving to the passive voice. For example, instead of 'My analysis revealed that women experienced ambivalence...' use 'Women who participated the study experienced ambivalence...'. Because you are reporting your research, the phrase 'my analysis' is a given and does not need to be stated. The revision makes women active in the sentence and brings them to the foreground, leaving the author/researcher in the background of the text.

Sometimes you need to use personal pronouns, but you can reduce the frequency to avoid a self-indulgent and egocentric text. The following passages show two paragraphs that could be included to situate the author within this chapter. The first illustrates an exaggerated use of personal pronouns, and the second shows a revision to reduce personal pronouns while retaining the author's voice.

Exaggerated use:

I am an Anglo female educated in a Euro-centric tradition. I grew up on the Big Island of Hawaii in a multi-cultural environment as one of two blond children in a predominantly

Asian community. This childhood experience gave me a keen sense of what it is like to be different. Nevertheless, my childhood friendships instilled in me an appreciation of the common ground that I shared with my Asian and Pacific-Islander classmates and neighbours. At the same time, my religion, family traditions and schooling taught me that to be "haole" (Hawaiian for Caucasian) was the ideal, and the privilege that my white skin and blond hair implied was never far from my awareness. (10 instances of personal pronouns in a 114 word passage)

Edited, this passage would read:

I grew up in the Asian community of Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii as one of two blond Anglo children. While feeling a keen sense of being different, I also experienced common ground with Asian and Pacific-Islander classmates and neighbours. Schooling in this multi-cultural environment reinforced a Euro-centric tradition, conveying to all that to be 'haole' (Hawaiian for Caucasian) was the ideal. The privilege that white skin and blond hair implied was never far from childhood awareness. (2 instances of personal pronouns in an 80 word passage)

In the second example, the text is not only edited to reduce the frequency of the use of personal pronouns, but to also acknowledge shared influences that were more pervasive than simply a personal circumstance. The fact is that if I was in a Euro-centric school, then so were my classmates, we all experienced the effect of such schooling. All of us learned that to be *haole* was to be privileged, including the children whose ancestry was Japanese, Chinese, Filipino or other.

## MULTI-VOCAL TEXTS

Experimental forms of multi-vocal texts have emerged to more accurately convey the various voices that 'speak' through the text and to move away from the errors inherent in speaking for others, regardless of good intention. A multi-vocal text is one that is written in the 'voice' of each author independently, or in passages that represent the differing voices of research participants

(Kirsch 1999). The aim of multi-vocal texts is to present each voice in its unique fullness, with explicit reference as to whose voice is being represented.

One approach is to present the text as a dialogue or as a conversation. Electronic communication provides an avenue to develop drafts of a conversation between two or more authors. The drafts can be edited for flow, coherence and logic, but the intent is to retain the individuality and unique expressive qualities of each author so that the text does not become reduced to a homogenised style. Letters, journal entries and transcribed discussions can be used in similar ways to retain individual voice.

The research method of corroborating with all participants to assure interpretive reliability and validity can be extended to the writing process as well, with each participant contributing their own written account. This assures that each participant's voice is included in the written report, but multi-vocal texts in the end are orchestrated by the author/researcher, who is responsible for drawing the material together into a cohesive whole. Contributions from various authors are of necessity edited and selected to meet the aims of the research endeavour and the requirements of the publisher. The researcher remains in a powerful position with respect to other participants, a power dynamic that can give shape to the voices that are represented in the text, even those quoted precisely. Ethically, the researcher bears responsibility for what is researched, the representations that emerge from the fact of conceiving the research to begin with, and the subtle selective procedures that result in various 'voices'. The burden remains, as Kirsch (1999) explains, for the researcher to examine how power dynamics shape interactions with those who participate in various aspects of scholarly production.

## LOCATING THE WORK IN THE COMMUNITY

The project of scholarly writing from a feminist standpoint requires that the work be located in the various communities that might benefit from the work. Feminist research is inherently political, in that it aims to ultimately create a better world for women. This requires that the researcher goes beyond the usual expectations of publishing an account of the research in such a manner that conveys potential benefits, not only for the

community of scholars, but for readers who include, among others, the community that participated in the research process.

## LOCATING AND ADDRESSING THE READERS

In order to locate and address all readers of your work, it will probably be necessary to compose alternative texts. Consider all who might benefit from the work, including your professional colleagues, people from the larger communities that the research participants share, and the various reviewers and publishers of texts that address each potential reader. In addition, consider readers who may not have a direct connection with the work, but who will read your work with different lenses, including people of different ancestral and national heritages, different abilities, different disciplinary orientations. Ask questions such as the following to identify ways in which you may be neglecting certain readers, or hidden assumptions that you have concerning your readers.

### Who do I assume the reader to be?

Scholarly writing commonly addresses professional colleagues and students. When you picture these readers in your mind, what sex, ancestral heritage, class, age, and physical abilities do you imagine? Since in almost every instance you will have professional colleagues who represent a wide diversity on each of these (and many other) dimensions, it is instructive to notice how your mental image reveals certain pre-conceived notions that might leave some readers out.

Given the lens of a particular reader, does the report alienate, or does it draw the reader closer to the work? Focus on the omissions in your mental image, and examine your text carefully to imagine how the neglected reader might perceive your report. If you ask a person who might better understand this perspective to also critique your text, be aware of the burden imposed on this individual when asked to speak on behalf of others who might share their background or experience (Banks-Wallace 1998).

Does the text assume a social and political context that is alien to the assumed readers? If so, are there interpretations of context that respect our differences?

Most authors, particularly citizens of the United States, assume that their readers will reside within their home country. Increasingly, this is not the case. If your research is situated within national boundaries, clearly identify this context. In the writing, however, consider what contextual interpretations, descriptions, or language can be included to address readers in other countries, to bring them closer to your work rather than alienating them.

### Who benefits from this work?

This critical question is central to feminist scholarship, and is a key to determining what audiences you wish to reach with your work. If women who share certain life experiences related to your work are going to benefit, you will need to write for them. This calls for a number of different texts intended to reach different audiences (Ehrlich 1995, Mukherjee 1995, Young 1997).

## INTERPRETING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Feminist research imposes many ethical complications on the research process. For example, one approach to feminist research is to fully engage participants as co-researchers in order to overcome the power imbalances inherent in traditional research methods (Hall and Stevens 1991). However, this creates the ethical dilemma inherent in asking volunteers (usually women) to dedicate time and energy for little or no reimbursement to a project that is not of their own making. Even when participants are fully engaged in the research process, issues still remain concerning the nature of authority and power dynamics that shape descriptions and interpretations. The person who conceives and initiates the research assumes a position of relative power simply by conceiving the project, inviting others to participate, and setting forth the parameters from which the project emerges. Nevertheless, feminist struggles to deal with the challenges of power relationships in the research process have yielded significant changes in research methods that respect human rights and dignity, and extend the understanding of women and women's experiences (Kirsch 1999).

There are as yet no straightforward guidelines for addressing these deeply significant ethical dilemmas, and no one researcher will resolve the issues in a fully satisfactory manner. The burden of the researcher, in the end, is to reflectively examine the ethical issues of research method and methodology, and provide for the various communities who read the report a thoughtful account of the ethical issues that surfaced in the conduct of the study, how they were addressed (or not addressed), and what different approaches might be explored in future similar situations.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, writing and publishing from a feminist standpoint presents a major challenge that reaches far beyond simple editorial rules and conventions. It is a process that is grounded in the author's personal commitment to end discrimination and bias based on sex and gender, as well as certain principles that are derived from a consciously-chosen feminist perspective. The process includes careful and deliberate selection of words, phrases, and embedded meanings that convey the intended messages, and that reach the author's intended audience.

Feminist writing and publishing calls for the very best of scholarship – scholarship that is meticulously accurate, responsible, and accountable to the academic community, the practising community, and the community of people who participate in the work. It begins with a community of scholars who join together to challenge the prevailing traditions of the discipline and who demand the very best of scholarship presented within emerging feminist guidelines for writing. Scholars in turn pay close attention to the needs and responses of the various communities of readers. Out of the processes of interactions with feminist texts, real and substantial social and political change can emerge.

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