

Feminist nursing research without gender

This theoretic article examines the potential for different types of nursing research to reinforce or undermine gender categories that historically have served to limit some women and marginalize others. Feminist research that gathers or analyzes information in the form of a male/female or man/woman dichotomy risks reproducing social relations damaging to women. Other approaches to dispersing or deconstructing gender dichotomies are discussed, and a series of questions about feminist nursing research is raised.

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FEMINISTS IN NURSING have long realized that language is both enslaving and liberating. The language of textbooks, education, and science have been closely examined for their emancipatory or sexist potential.¹⁻⁹ It is both impossible to escape our linguistic history (for without it we are silenced) and dangerous to use a language that has enslaved women. We have struggled to both reclaim and create new meanings of "woman." Simultaneously, women of color have emphasized that there is no single definition of "woman."¹¹⁻¹³

One consequence of this re-visioning has been the distinction between "sex" and "gender," "female" and "woman." Feminists have tended to use "gender" and "woman" to emphasize that a woman is not defined by her biology, her sex.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ This distinction has been important in nursing research, partly because we conduct both physiologic (sex) and social (gender) research. All these terms appear in feminist research and, of course, all have a long misogynist history.

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Nursing is developing a rich history of feminist research. The volume of nursing research on women grows steadily. However, are feminist research and nursing research on women synonymous? What are the implications for feminist visions of the expanding nursing research that focuses on women?

Working in a school of nursing with a powerful representation of feminists, we began to reexamine our own work on women. What, we wondered, are the rationale and consequences of this concentrated attention on women? Are we rigorous enough, for example, in maintaining the sex/gender distinction? Is it possible to do so? When does the employment of these terms advance the cause of social and economic justice for women? When does their use reinforce old or create new stereotypes that limit women?

Our purpose, therefore, is to initiate some consideration of whether feminist nursing research should use more sparingly and more precisely the concepts of man/woman, male/female, sex/gender. Many forms of feminist research tend to recreate the problematic, binary categories of man/woman, male/female, and simply adding to or changing the content of these binary categories is insufficient. They need to be dismantled.

Any research that sorts its subjects into either a unitary category of "women" or dichotomous categories of "men" and "women" supports a conceptual scheme that reinforces the material subjugation of women. Ironically, feminists, who are concerned with countering that subjugation, should be extremely careful when using these categories of "woman" and "man."

Some distinctions between *generative* and *analytic* forms of inquiry and between two

approaches to generative inquiry will be introduced. These distinctions will be used to explain why much of feminist nursing research about women perpetuates problematic social categories. On the other hand, an argument will be made for maintaining the category of "woman" in analytic research, and the article will conclude with some speculative questions.

GENERATIVE RESEARCH

The term "generative" is used to emphasize activities leading to the creation of new information about women, research that highlights previously unnoticed aspects of women's lives and contributes to the closer inspection of women. Of particular interest is the generation of information about subjects, individuals, women. A familiar product of such inquiry is the identification of new syndromes, such as premenopausal syndrome or postmenopausal syndrome or fear-of-failure syndrome.¹⁷ This concern is not method-specific; physiologic experiments, surveys, and interpretive strategies (eg, grounded theory) can all create "generative" research.

Generative research, then, may be described in terms of what Foucault calls "technologies of the self."^{17-16,18-20} Research, as a technology, influences the creation of modern identities. Our self-concepts, the categories we use to create and evaluate our lives, are influenced by the technology of research. Think, for example, of how much energy is spent evaluating our sexual selves or whether our "needs" are being met through our work.

These are not "neutral" activities divorced from politics and power. Foucault has writ-

ten that power and knowledge are mutually generative and correlative.¹⁹ Research as “biopower” involves power/knowledge relations through investigations of sex, truth, the body, and the individual. This biopower rests on the historical precedents of treating humans as species and populations (scientific categories) and treating the body as an object to be manipulated and dissected.²¹ Science, in this model, involves a sophisticated sort of surveillance through which knowledge is both extracted and constituted. This creates questions about power and knowledge relations embedded in nursing research on women.

Researchers in the human sciences have traditionally looked within their subjects for their truths, often using manipulation and control.

Researchers in the human sciences have traditionally looked within their subjects for their truths, often using manipulation and control.³ It was perceived that in order to achieve the desired goals, subject docility and complicity were needed. How is it that the answering of surveys and the biologic scrutiny of bodies is now seen as routine and acceptable? In part this is accomplished through a “disciplinary technology” that involves the infinite division of the world into parts, with relatively little attention to the act and process of dividing.²²

Separation of “human” from “earth,” individual from community, organ from system and further subdivision of these by splitting human into genders and races, earth into land and water, individual into body and mind, community into ethnicity and culture, organ

into cells and fluids, and systems into subsystems—all these are acts of power and of knowledge. By continually abstracting and focusing, all attention is on the object of study, not on the act of abstracting, focusing, and studying. Consequently, the human processes remain invisible and neutral, and the only thing seen is the “unit” of analysis. Thus we encounter gender but not gendering.²³

Modern research technologies, when applied to people, have an insidious effect; people begin to think of themselves and to construct their experience in terms codified by research (eg, “normal” sexuality). When surveys indicate a “normative” rate of sexual activity between heterosexual couples, people immediately begin to analyze their own activity in comparison to these “norms.”

By continually abstracting and focusing on pieces of the “subject,” who is the “object” of study, attention is diverted from questioning the conditions of the act of abstracting, focusing, and studying.²⁴ We offer up our experiences and our bodies to participate in the acts of separation, examination, and distribution, without thinking about the conditions for and consequences of these acts. The result is a myriad of books on self-diagnosis, self-hypnosis, self-management, self-improvement, and self-care for countless maladies of the body, mind, or both.²⁵ Thus we learn that wife battering is, according to Dalton,²⁶ a symptom of the battered wife’s premenstrual syndrome and that frequent heterosexual relations and childbearing are essential stages of “normal” adult development.²⁷

Foucault and others^{3,14,22} have stated that research technologies are not “neutral.” They have consequences, and some of these

consequences are to help reproduce gendered individuals.²³ When we "generate" more knowledge about women, even if we do it as feminists, we must attend to these consequences. Such consequences will be discussed following the section on analytic inquiry.

ANALYTIC INQUIRY

Analytic inquiry, in contrast to generative inquiry, refers to research activity that focuses not on subjects but on discourse (ie, on how people, including nurse researchers, talk about their subjects). Rather than breaking subjects, persons, and women into parts, it breaks talk about women into parts. Some forms of analytic inquiry are called "deconstruction," "critique," or "analysis."²⁸

The sex/gender distinction arose in precisely this context. It developed to divide discourse about women into two types: that which attributed women's competencies and performances to biology (ie, sex or nature) and that which attributed them to socialization (ie, gender or nurturing). At the heart of the distinction is the issue of change; as long as inequality is attributable to biology, it is politically easier to maintain that inequality. However, if inequality results from social arrangements, then there is more pressure to alter those arrangements. Trying to change biologic discourse on women has been like battling a sexist hydra: cut off the head of the "wandering uterus," and "raging hormones" replace it.

Considerable feminist research has operated in the analytic mode. Rich's "revisioning" of language²⁹; Daly's recapturing of lost, supportive meanings of "woman"³⁰; and Harding's analyses of the meanings of "sci-

ence"³¹ are all examples. The goal has been to criticize and contain discourse (meanings) that have limited the autonomy and responsibility of women. This article continues that tradition by analyzing the discourse of generative research on women.

TWO APPROACHES TO GENERATIVE RESEARCH

These distinctions between generative and analytic inquiry are imperfect and are offered here only as an heuristic. Using these distinctions, we will examine two different approaches to generative research and how the sex/gender distinction functions in each.

The first approach separates research subjects into two categories based on the initial question: Are males/females or men/women different with respect to some criteria? Examples commonly identified as sexist are those comparing males with females on some valued social performance: Are men better at math than women? Are women more intuitive than men? Are men stronger or faster than women? Do women reason differently from men?³²

Using this approach, each participant is assigned to one of two categories: male or female, man or woman. The subjects may assign themselves (by checking a demographic box) or be assigned by the researchers (through observation). This taxonomy is an *interpretive* process, an activity, not merely the passive, neutral recording of a pregiven reality.³³ The researcher decides how to classify the subjects, or the subjects decide which box to check. By contrast, notice how conscious and active the taxonomic process currently is with respect to ethnicity: one has to read carefully a list of 4

to 12 ethnic identifiers and select the *most appropriate* one.

Another common approach to generative research is to examine a range of behaviors or characteristics and then sort the subjects into groups. Here the questions might be: What is the *range* of variability in some area of human performance? Physical endurance, mental skills, and emotional variability are studied to see what people are able to do or what goals they are pursuing when they engage in some activity. How do people vary with respect to their physical endurance and their patterns of emotional highs and lows?

With this set of questions, it is only near the very end that there is a need to create a social *typology*, to group people in categories to facilitate identification and intervention.

Simple correlation hunting has been banned by international treaty. Now there must be a *theoretic* rationale for loading these categories into a regression analysis. Should the typology include man/woman, male/female, skin color, or physical size? Because all sorting is an interpretive act, researchers must be self-conscious of their interpretive categories. Bleier warns against the strong tendency to sort by preexisting ideologic categories, thereby using poor science to support more poor science: "Standing alone, few of [sociobiology's] hypotheses and assumptions have any independent scientific support, but together, supported by each other, they create the illusion of a structure of weight, consistency, conviction and reason."³⁴(p.58)

Just as the first question asked about an infant is its gender, so it is automatically assumed that surveys should include a variable on gender (or sex), and the gender of research participants is expected to be identified in all research efforts. The questions to

be raised are: (1) What is the *rationale* for that identification? and (2) What are the *consequences* of it?

RATIONALE FOR USING SEX/ GENDER TYPOLOGIES

The first question is why we want to sort our subjects into dichotomous categories. Obviously there is a phenomenology of gender: People sort themselves by gender. (By questioning the role of gender categories in generative research, we are by no means suggesting that one can "escape" gender or stand outside it. We both inherit [ie, are created by] gender and shape its meaning.^{23,33} Furthermore, we want to emphasize the unfortunate material consequences of gender. However, that is precisely why Giddens,^{35,36} Habermas,^{37,38} Haraway,^{39,40} and others argue that science must include not only phenomenological but also critical inquiry, for these subjects have sorted themselves *into gender by sex*. They have used biologic (sex) markers, assumed incorrectly to be dichotomous, to create genders. People sort themselves using inherited criteria—what Giddens calls "unacknowledged conditions"³⁵—and by so doing perpetuate both the categories and any resulting inequality.

Several assumptions coexist within this sorting process, whether it is done by the researcher or by the subjects themselves. The most important one is that maleness and femaleness are stable historically, across cultures and within cultures. Davis¹³ and hooks¹¹ remind us that in the fight for women's suffrage, the primary argument that women had to counter was a biologic one: that by nature, women were simply too

frail and weak in body, and consequently, in mind to withstand the trials and responsibilities of full citizenship. However, Sojourner Truth did not have the "woman's" privilege of biologic weakness. She stood up to ask "Ain't I a woman?"

I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne 13 children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?^{12(p61)}

How different from the antisuffrage claims of women's "nature" is current research? Do we still seek to establish "women's nature" usually by studying only Euro-American women?

Men and women do not just have different experiences; they have unequal experiences, and biology is used to perpetuate that inequality.

If the underlying theory for sorting subjects by gender is causal (ie, maleness or femaleness "causes" differences in performance), then there are two common justifications: biology and differential experience. Common discourse supports the two categorical possibilities of nature and nurture. Yet we have decades of evidence that the "nature" (biologic) hypotheses have played a post hoc ideologic role serving to perpetuate structured inequity.^{13,32} Men and women do not just have *different* experiences; they have *unequal* experiences, and biology is used—most recently in pregnancy leaves and mommy-track policies—to perpetuate

that inequality by inhibiting women's career progression and reinforcing the practice of women being primarily responsible for child rearing.

Differential experience (eg, Chodorow⁴¹) is the contemporary rationale underlying many decisions to begin with an initial dichotomy. Such theory is based on De Beauvoir's³³ observation that gender is a continuous *achievement*, the result of considerable labor, not a given. Thus men and women *become* different through a long, arduous process involving distinct social experiences. However, society is structured to provide differential experiences along a variety of criteria: race, ethnicity, economics, region, sexual preference, religion, and gender.^{12,27,42,43} Why the a priori choice of gender?

Sorting subjects into dichotomous categories involves one or more of three rationales:

1. a belief in a "fixed" identity—an essential nature of women;
2. an assertion of biology (sex) as the cause of discovered differences; and
3. a belief that men and women have unique social experiences that account for observed differences.

Foucault^{3,14,22} has emphasized that this sorting is inseparable from power and leads people to think of themselves in terms of the categories used in research. Now some of the consequences of employing these categories will be examined.

CONSEQUENCES OF USING AN A PRIORI SEX/GENDER TYPOLOGY

Problems arise when researchers use sorting criteria that the society itself uses to *differentially* allocate resources and oppor-

tunities.^{44,45} For example, many people see it as problematic that our culture emphasizes gender as both dichotomous and dimorphic. Social arrangements often emphasize the masculine/feminine dichotomy and expand that dichotomy across many frontiers, such as child rearing and fire fighting. Consequently, any research that automatically creates a dichotomous demographic category of male/female risks contributing to this situation.

Many people find it easier to change their biology than to change their gender or in fact find that it is necessary to change their biology in order to change their gender. Because the notions of masculine and feminine are often delineated and controlled, some individuals must undergo a massive biologic transformation to create a comfortable social space. These people are known as “transsexuals.” If multiple genders were a part of society, then variability of preferences would not require such hormonal and surgical intervention, and the homophobia that often affects the lives of gays and lesbians would be radically reduced. The idea here is one of dispersal, of dispersing rather than coalescing gender differences, of creating a field of genders rather than a pair of them.³⁹

As an example, a new form of demographic table can be envisioned that sorts people by the fabrics they wear, the size engine in their car, whether and what they shave, who they draw intimacy from and who they sexually couple with, whether they prefer an ethics of intimacy or of justice, whether they remember birthdays and anniversaries or batting averages and gas mileage. Only in rare instances would it be relevant to ask if they had ovaries or testicles or both or neither (conversation with D Ward and J Cornman, 1990).

Gilligan’s research⁴⁶ in ethics provides an example of the dilemmas produced by generative research that begins with an initial dichotomous sorting. Noticing that Kohlberg⁴⁷ had used an a priori selection criteria of “men,” Gilligan responded by selecting “women.” Belenky et al⁴⁸ did the same thing with respect to women’s ways of knowing, in contrast to Perry’s implicit “men’s” ways of knowing. Consequently, when Gilligan noticed a different pattern of ethical reasoning, she attributed it to gender.

Shannon’s⁴⁹ review shows that most research has not confirmed the attribution of an ethics of care to women as much as it has to culture and social class. However, Gilligan’s discourse has perpetuated the division of social experience into gender dichotomies and contributed to new subjects who examine their own gendered ethical reasoning. Some may even wonder about the meaning of men who reason based on care and connections and women who are oriented to rules and laws. Are these “really” men and women?

Similarly, nurse researchers who uncritically use precisely these same categories are participating in precisely the same process.

What, then, should be done? Some issues central to pursuing this question are

- Gender, when used in generative rather than analytic research, cannot be considered a variable, because it necessarily constitutes the very activity being studied; even if one were to somehow “factor it out,” one would be left studying a *different* phenomena. Medical anthropologist Rhodes uses the analogy of gender to water poured over soil (personal communication, 1989). The water becomes incorporated into the very nature of the ground. A certain

amount can be "wrung out," but only baking will remove it all. When soil is baked, the result is dust, not dirt. Very sterile ground, indeed.

- Perhaps the only role sex/gender distinctions can play—vis-à-vis the distinction between analytic and generative research technologies—is a critical one that analyzes not individuals or their experience, but their discourse in terms of the relationship of that discourse to inherited categories such as sex/gender or nature/nurture.
- The role for "remapping" ideologic categories—for example, research that deconstructs the dichotomous nature of the categories and argues that social experience does not always sort itself primarily by gender—must be determined.
- Finally, what about research that documents the structured inequality itself, such as Ward's work on the differential costs of caregiving?⁵⁰ Does this generative research make claims on women's "experience" or create a phenomenology that leads to further subdivisions and self-reflection? Or is it also subject to these same criticisms as reflected in the analysis of feminist discourse by women of color?^{10,51,52} These analyses show that neither the meaning of

women nor the costs of care are constant across racial boundaries. Certainly no feminist research program can afford to minimize the material effects of gender on women. Additionally, some sex-typing research, such as that of Gilligan⁴⁶ and Belenky et al.,⁴⁸ has had an emancipatory effect.

One concern with reexamining the role of generative research in re-creating damaging sexual dichotomies is that it might be interpreted as a perverse support for undermining affirmative action. The serious material consequences often found as a result of sexual subjugation must be emphasized, and the emancipatory potential of much research that uses the gender dichotomy must be recognized. However, employment of the dichotomy ultimately reinforces social arrangements that have worked against all types of women in virtually all western cultures. A better strategy is to deconstruct the dichotomy itself and to expand awareness of the diverse contemporary and historical forms of gendered existence.

Feminist research without gender is not as self-contradictory as it may sound. A world no longer structured by gender, even on a phenomenological basis, can be envisioned. Certainly nursing research can play a healing role in the issues of equality and justice for women.

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