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The Science Behind Feminist Research Methods

Jill Morawski*
Wesleyan University

Feminist science often is caricatured in oppositional terms—as a venture antagonistic to the scientific mission. Such portrayals not only misrepresent feminist science but also displace the fact that there are multiple feminist approaches toward science, each advancing particular notions of appropriate methods, objectivity, subjectivity, and the jurisdiction of scientific inquiry. Acquaintance with the variety of feminist approaches toward science will enable feminist scholars to better configure their research and strategies. Comprehending science itself as culture is crucial to these ends. A contextual perspective on science as culture will enhance our abilities to effect cultural change through our research projects. Such comprehension also will prepare us for improving the environment in which we work as well as the nature of that work.

What are feminist methods? What would a list of feminist methods look like? We could begin to answer these questions with a basic definition of feminism: a belief that gender is a primary category of experience (and therefore, of analysis) and an attendant commitment to remedying the disadvantages of women. Applying this elemental definition to psychology, we then could locate a large number of methods that accommodate gender as a central analytic category; for any particular method to be feminist, it would be necessary that the method not just be applicable to observing or measuring gender but also that the method itself be "gender fair" or absent of unacknowledged gender meanings. The list now would be substantial and would conjoin some otherwise highly distinguishable research practices. This inductive approach to defining feminist research methods, however, collapses together some significant efforts on the part of feminist researchers. It also underplays the problems of gender in science itself in order to extend accountability to the practice of science itself.

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jill Morawski, Department of Psychology, Wesleyan University, Middleton, CT 06459-0408. Electronic mail may be sent to jmorawski @wesleyan.edu

In order to capture the exciting and occasionally controversial inquiries that attend feminist work in science, I begin this article by examining the idea of feminist science. Feminism is often cast as inimical to science; in such stereotypic contrasts, science often is taken to be isomorphic with positivism—a reductive, quantitative, and value free or apolitical conception of science. Such analyses ultimately produce a version of feminist methods as antagonist, marginal, or otherwise opposing science (and sometimes each other). A more complete picture, I argue, requires comprehending science as a culture sustained by particular yet changing practices, including feminist work. Not all feminist psychologists subscribe to this cultural understanding of science, and the second part of the article considers feminist research that ensues from a more conventional view of science as an abstract set of rules: this view, often called feminist empiricism, "argues that sexism and androcentrism are social biases correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry" (Harding, 1986, p. 24). Other ventures into feminist science, influenced by feminist scholarship across the disciplines, are wary of the notion that scientific norms are somehow free of gender dynamics. These studies proceed by examining the culture of science itself. In the third section of this article, I draw upon feminist reappraisals of objectivity and subjectivity to illustrate these other feminist revisions of scientific methods. The article concludes by considering the future of feminist methods in psychology.

The Science of Feminism

In textbooks as well as popular accounts, science often is taken as a set of prescriptions or precise rules of procedure; violations of these procedures render a research project invalid or nonscientific. However, studies of science as early as those of Fleck (1935/1979) and Kuhn (1962) upturn such idealist, reified accounts, revealing instead how science is constituted through historically bound, shifting practices. What counts as rules of evidence is not pregiven but the result of debate, often with political implications. The rise of particular kinds of methods, such as statistics, is governed by larger social needs and interests (Porter, 1996). Within psychology, methodological norms such as operationalism (Leahey, 1980), statistical inference (Gigerenzer, 1991), debriefing (Harris, 1988), aggregate sampling (Danziger, 1990), and validity (Cronbach, 1988; Hornstein, 1988) were designed and promoted to resolve not simply technical problems, but political ones as well. In yet other matters of scientific techniques, such as experimental artifacts (Suls & Rosnow, 1988), experimenter characteristics (Morawski, 1997), and language (Lamb, 1991; Lopes, 1991), methodological problems exist for long periods without resolution; correcting such problems risks further revealing the cultural dynamics of psychological inquiry.

Once science is understood not as rule bound but, rather, as constituted through a complex set of sustained, consensual practices, then concepts such as objectivity,

reality, validity, and representation can be seen to be the *results* of scientific work and not as some unproblematic *preconditions* of that work. Science no longer can be taken to be independent of its practitioners, their actions, their aspirations, and their culture; nor is it always separate from the actions of nonscientific actors or institutions. In brief, a contextualized view enables an appreciation of science as a cultural activity and moves us beyond complying with so-called abstract methodological norms to appraise the complex practices of science, including practices that test or contest those presumed norms.

Contemporary feminism has entered the culture of science with an agenda that includes more than the routine study of gender experience. Feminist science, in all its variants, entails multiple strategies to revise or transform the dominant practices of science that have been found to be androcentric or sexist. Primed with evidence of systematic bias in scientific representations of reality and of women's experiences as marginal participants in science, feminist scholars have excavated sexism in science. Sandra Harding (1986) has categorized these efforts into five distinguishable programs: studies of inequities surrounding women's participation in science; studies of sexist misuse of scientific knowledge; analyses of sexist bias in research; interrogations of linguistic and/or textual biases in science; and explorations of alternative, gender-fair or feminist, epistemologies. However distinct these programs, and however varied the methodologies or theories employed in them, they share a belief captured in Virginia Woolf's observation that "science, it would seem, is not sexless; she is a man, a father, and infected too" (1938, p. 139). Beginning with this shared belief, one that acknowledges the connections between science and social relations, feminist scientists elect different strategies to change what Donna Haraway (1986) calls the "narrative field" of science. They collectively, if sometimes tacitly, hold that the boundaries between the scientific analyst and the rest of the world are permeable, and that the links between scientific practice and other political actions are substantive and foundational.

Feminist psychologists, then, including many who would count themselves as otherwise conventional researchers, are generating alternative forms of social practice, effecting changes in the science's narrative field. That is, even the simple claims that the scientist's gender influences scientific conduct challenge basic ideas about science as a set of abstract norms. Thus, despite significant differences in their conceptions of science (epistemology), feminist psychologists are collectively engaged in "liminal science," one at the threshold of or betwixt and between fixed conceptions (Morawski, 1994). To occupy a liminal zone is not necessarily to be stuck in or stuck by something; rather, it is to be not so encumbered or detained: The liminal actor has the potential to subvert, transmute, transform, or reaffirm the reigning worldview. The collective effect of feminist work in psychology notwithstanding, there exist varied epistemological stances among researchers. As described in subsequent sections, these stances translate into two different

methodological styles: what can be called limited revisions or remedial methods and more inclusive revisions or transformative methods.

Remedial Methods

Many feminist psychologists have opted for interventions that adhere to the conventional canons of inquiry but revise techniques that are visibly gender biased. Their projects sometimes are called feminist empiricism, although this is a misnomer because empirical techniques are employed in scholarship as diverse as feminist materialism and psychoanalysis. What unifies these remedial projects is the belief that science is the search for objective knowledge, a search that has been tainted by sexist attitudes but that can be restored to its democratic and good science ideals by the infusion of feminist awareness. These projects are not new: They are observable in feminist psychologists' detection of bias in sex difference research throughout this century. They appear as early as the 1890s, when Mary Whiton Calkins (1896), Cordelia Nevers (1895), and Amy Tanner (1896) contested Joseph Jastrow's study of sex differences in cognition. Strategies of feminist remediation are present in Helen Woolley Thompson's (1903) landmark empirical study of sex differences. They are visible too in Ruth Hershberger's (1948) fictional female chimpanzee who castigated psychologists for their sexist research methods. Similar ideals guided Georgene Seward's (1946) attempt to create sex-fair interpretations of post–World War II sex difference research: She showed how empirical evidence suggested "a democratic reformation of sex roles" in society (p. 249).

Most recently, this remedial tradition has been highlighted through the work of Alice Eagly. Her research demonstrates the power of empiricism—the persuasive force of using the "master's" techniques as well as empiricism's attribute of analytic precision—but it also reveals the limitations of these strategies. Eagly's (1987b) studies of sex differences use conventional research techniques to uncover systematic research biases. Her insistence (Eagly, 1987a, 1990) that researchers routinely should check for sex differences in all empirical analyses is persuasive, yet it intimates the limitations and ambiguities of the dominant rules of inquiry. For instance, while arguing for such systematic data checking, Eagly found herself up against other researchers who used the same methodological norms to claim that such systematic analysis violated procedures for theory testing (that such systematic testing was unwarranted unless there were theory grounds to suspect sex difference); that routine sex difference testing could function as self-fulfilling prophecy (an empirically derived construct), thus creating sex differences where none previously existed; and that such testing may not, in fact, yield valid evidence of real sex differences but merely measures of epiphenomena (Baumeister, 1988). In another case, Eagly's (1995) earnest plea for researchers of sex differences to apprehend their own sex biases, even feminist sex biases, led her to appeal to some abstract vision of "scientific" work as a corrective to these biases. Because she could offer no specific

or fail-safe conception of that work, her position depends on an abstract belief in some value-free method.

Remedial feminist projects have had notable success in altering the narrative field of psychology; among their achievements is the profound one of making gender a legitimate category of analysis. Yet in retaining an unquestioned commitment to abstract conversations of inquiry, these projects can neither certify exact methods nor investigate gender in all scientific places, notably in the very epistemic roots of science. Psychology's canon of empirical experimentation ultimately, and in its very conception, exonerates the observer and observations from scrutiny, thus blocking any deep interrogation of the scientific actor and the politics of science. Its logic is protective: If methods are held to be without politics or sexism, then it is only their improper use that politicizes them. Further, that worldview incorporates a naive view of language, reducing linguistic problems to representations requiring observational confirmation. For instance, feminist reformists are caught within a circle of defining the terms "sex" or "gender," but ultimately are unable to question the meanings of these observation terms. The deeper or more nuanced (and gendered) features of scientific visions, practices, and language cannot be ameliorated through remedial tools alone.

Transformative Strategies

The tendency to distinguish empiricist from postempiricist (interpretive, materialist, constructionist, postmodern, etc.) feminist work not only repeats the above-noted misnomer but also implies fixed boundaries between such epistemological traditions where, in fact, no simple lines of demarcation exist (Keller, 1995). The exemplars cited above illustrate the transgressions and fluid quality of even studiously remedial work. Thus, Thompson (1903) prefaced her experimental study of sex differences with the claim that science required a utopia if the aim was a fully "trustworthy investigation of sex alone"; she acknowledged that "the complete fulfillment of these conditions, even in the most democratize community, is impossible" (p. 2). Similarly, Tanner (1896) became exasperated over the assumptions about the two sexes and about women's natural predispositions; she realized that language and cultural assumptions about sex could not be eliminated from empirical work. And Eagly's (1995) analysis of psychologists' presuppositions, sexist and feminist alike, perhaps ironically demonstrates the necessity of attending to the psychology of the observer as well as that of the observed.

In such remedial work lay plentiful moves beyond rule adherence: The studies tell of the limits of a single method, the need to attend to language, the inadequacy of common practices of objectivity and validity, the gender politics of scientific institutions, the significance of the observer to an estimation of the knowledge produced, and a desire to connect science honestly with social change. In the last 2 decades, substantial feminist research has taken these conclusions as starting points

for designing new modes of inquiry. Some of this work adds two presuppositions largely absent from the earlier feminist efforts: acknowledgment of the diversity, complexity, and historical variability of human experience and actions, and a preference for understanding and interpreting, rather than simply predicting and controlling, experience and behavior.

Here feminist psychologists enter a place between orthodox science and somewhere else, a place affording freedom to explore new methods and theories, generate new language, and reappraise the objects of study. However, theirs is not and has not been an unbridled freedom; in fact, the emergence of a new feminist psychology in the 1960s and 1970s relied on existing psychological knowledge and expertise, particularly concepts of psychological identity, consciousness raising, and psychotherapeutic techniques (Herman, 1995). Nevertheless, this space has provided opportunities for experimenting with theory, language, method, and social action—experimentation that also was enabled by the increased numbers of women scientists, the maturation of feminist theories, and a cultural atmosphere more sensitive to matters of gender. And the opportunities have been seized, yielding, in just 2 decades, a diverse array of methodological innovations. No single literature review could adequately survey these new methods; nor could a reviewer at the present time accurately predict their viability. These projects do have coherence, however, for they collectively venture to transform several key scientific assumptions: objectivity, subjectivity, validity, and the idea of science.

Objectivity

Objectivity is a signature characteristic of psychology, constituting such a pervasive, almost moral, feature of our science that it is difficult to generate a concise definition. It has become a primary epistemic aspiration of our studies, a technical criterion for what counts as valid knowledge, and an attribute of the investigator.

Several problems have emerged from feminist analyses of objectivity. Objectivity represents impersonal, value free, and hence, universal understandings about the world (the binary of subjectivity that represents personal, volitional, and hence, idiographic understandings about that world). Thus, scientific objectivity involves discernment and denigration of subjectivity (Daston & Galison, 1992). Second, although objectivity is based on the premise that one can observe from no specific position—that there is some Archimedian point of observation free from the conditions of perception or the characteristics of the observer—no such position can be located. In fact, numerous studies have revealed how objectivity is gendered, reflecting masculine ideals in its privileging of detachment, control, manipulation of nature, and emotions of disinterestedness (Bordo, 1987; Keller, 1985; Merchant, 1980). Lamb's (1991) analysis of the language used in conventional research on spousal battering and Lopes's (1991) study of the language of rationality in cognitive research demonstrate that objectivity is situated somewhere and conveys a

stereotypic voice of authority. Third, objectivity as conventionally defined produces a tension between truth and social action. Modern science's project of human betterment stands as inimical to an objectivity defined as devoid of values and morality. Feminist research, grounded in a commitment to women's rights and well-being, reveals the tensions between attaining such a disinterested ethos and realizing justice.

Such problematics have motivated feminist efforts to reconfigure objectivity as a scientific goal and practice that is not dichotomous and gendered (or otherwise imbued with dominance), makes a place for the observer, and admits both the complexity and greater ambitions of science (Haraway, 1988, 1994; Harding, 1991; Keller, 1985). These theories of objectivity reject Cartesian bifurcations of mind and body, self and other, fact and value. They relinquish the ideal of generic knowers laboring in freedom from historical circumstances. Knowing is instead situated and worldly: It involves intricate webs of social interactions and transpires in temporal planes. Knowing is relational in multiple senses: the knower's position in a social order, the relations within a community of knowers, and the connections between knowers and the world to be known. In this last sense, knowing is reflexive in that it can be realized only with various gazes back and forth, acts comprising what is commonly known as observing. Objectivity is an accomplishment of multiple practices, one that has moral and material as well as methodological substance.

The steps from these new conceptions to research domains are tenuous; above all, these ventures are complicated by the press of the dominant modes of inquiry. Yet such steps are being taken daily by feminist researchers who strategically revision knowers as well as the knowing process. Reconsiderations of the observer are of three sorts: locating the self of the observer, furnishing different identities or situations as integral to objectivity, and relinquishing classic procedures of control and mastery. Lykes (1989) discovered and then integrated into her analysis the disparity between feminist aspirations for collaborative researcher and participant relations and the contractual relations structured in standardized procedures, notably techniques of informed consent. The Guatemalan women participating in her study saw the consent form as shifting the relationship between themselves and the interviewers. Lykes reflected on the subtle message of power contained in the form and ultimately used the form to initiate fuller clarification of her role and relationship to the participants. Analyzing a dialogue between herself and a client at a rape crisis center, Fine (1989) explored the multiple selves of the researcher, including their contradictions, and offered insights into the transformation of the observer. These studies frame objectivity in terms of the social relations of the investigative context.

Feminist psychologists thus are at the forefront of rethinking their status as knowers in relation to participant "others," especially those differing in race, class, and gender, but these formative practices sometimes reveal the enormity of the undertaking. Hurtado and Stewart (1997) examined how Whiteness is naturalized

and made ephemeral in psychological research; its invisible yet hegemonic presence, particularly in researchers, requires multiple methodological innovations and extensive critical analysis. Better, more objective research methods entail finding "ways to retain a critical, counterhegemonic presence in the research" (pp. 309–310): addressing the limitations of one's position, seeking different standpoints, and employing complex collaborative methods that better enable representation of multiple perspectives. In a study of gay scientists' work on homosexuality, Terry (1996) has described the perils and seductive traps that attend research centered on one's own identity. In a review of homosexuals' approaches to social scientific study of homosexuality, Terry has identified the different historical conditions that predispose researchers to select and promote one theory over another: In a contemporary climate where genetics supplies a popular world view, "scientists may feel that 'nature' really is more liberating than 'nurture,' if only because the former is more manipulable than before and the latter is imagined as hostile, hopeless, and homophobic" (p. 288).

Another approach to analysis of the practices of knowing is critical scrutiny of the sociohistorical context of research programs. In this spirit, Parlee's (1994) study of the emergence of premenstrual syndrome research informs us how investigative procedures are determined by many interests and agents that extend far beyond laboratory walls to include physicians, pharmaceutical companies, activist feminists, therapists, and ordinary people. Her study shows too how invested agents, including feminist psychologists, may discover retrospectively that their scientific engagements have inadvertent results—outcomes that sometimes are contrary to what was intended. In a series of studies on laboratory procedures, Bayer (1992, 1998) has reported how seemingly basic experimental designs and mundane technologies reproduce certain social relations. Thus, small group research rehearses stereotyped family structures, and technical innovations that stand in for the experimenter actually reinforce dominance while they purport to minimize experimenter bias. Whereas Parlee's study suggests that knowers attend more carefully to the dynamic context of their decision making about methods, Bayer's investigations indicate a need to assess the social meanings conveyed through techniques and apparatus.

Subjectivity

A definition of objectivity as that which controls or eradicates subjectivity (Daston & Galison, 1992) yields an impoverished appreciation of subjectivity. Historical analyses have revealed how psychology's notions of subjectivity reflect dominant cultural understandings of the individual while also often inadvertently contributing to the emergence of new understandings (Cushman, 1990; Hacking, 1995; MacIntyre, 1985; Pfister & Schnog, 1997; Richards, 1987; Rose, 1985; Sampson, 1981). Acknowledging the historicity of subjectivity is not to condemn

the scientific project. On the contrary, such awareness bequeaths a fresh opportunity to comprehend subjectivity. Feminist studies have seized the opportunity; they have been especially productive in analyzing that feature of subjectivity known as gender. The introduction of the term "gender" as a central category of inquiry corresponds to the rise of feminist research: It was deployed to distinguish between biological and social theories about male and female differences—to weed the empirical garden of unwarranted nativist assumptions (Unger, 1979). Yet it has become apparent that "sex," too, is a cultural category that has been forged from shared beliefs about the nature of the world (Bleier, 1984; Butler, 1990; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Lacqueur, 1990). Investigation must proceed cautiously, then, to avoid the fabrication of another unwarranted bifurcation. Feminist psychologists have argued that gender is context dependent; that gender differences are not polar but multiple; and that gender requires analysis of its historical, structural, and performative dimensions (Deaux & Major, 1987; Fine & Gordon, 1989; Lott, 1985; Unger, 1989; Wallston, 1981). Related work has demanded that matters of agency and power be integrated into models of gender (Kitzinger, 1991; Morawski & Bayer, 1995; Parlee, 1979; Sherif, 1982; Unger, 1989). Reappraisals of the gendered subject indicate the need to reconsider the "ontogenesis of the subject," including the development of sexuality and bodily experiences (Malone, 1998), race, and class (Reid, 1993).

Overall, these revisions of our understanding of gender intimate the larger project to develop richer, more accurate theories of subjectivity. These theories will replace the conventions of associating subjectivity with either some abyss of internal mental processes or the stereotypic image of an autonomous, independent, and rational subject. Without falling back on older notions of intentionality, new enterprises will articulate the dynamics of agency while attending to how power relations and social structure contribute to subjectivity. Also needing address is the reflexivity of this work: an ongoing scrutiny of how our scientific projects reappropriate, mirror, or change human behavior and thought (Morawski, 1994).

These mandates for understanding subjectivity pose heavy challenges for creating appropriate research methods. Qualitative methods, grounded in extensive contextual analyses, currently constitute the most available techniques for investigating agency and context, and these methods provide the best means for eliminating unwarranted assumptions about individual actors. An example of such work can be found in the study of narratives. Narratives are a "cognitive instrument" (Mink, 1978) that organize human experiences and make them meaningful. Narratives serve as mediations between individual actions and material and social-structural conditions; they reflect the dynamics of ongoing negotiations, interpretations, and construals just as they indicate the constraints operating in these dynamics. Narrative inquiry offers a means of tracing the evolution of gendered self-identity (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). In the case of women's experiences, these studies have located the culturally gendered templates for making sense of one's life

(Quinn, 1987; Wiersma, 1988) and the complex influence of social norms (Ginsburg, 1989; Helson, 1989). Contained in narrative studies is the opportunity to explore experiences of agency and their relation to psychological well-being (Stewart & Malley, 1989).

Other explorations of subjectivity begin at a very different place: They focus on transforming the research relationship into a more "collaborative" or "participatory" one. Establishing such research arrangements enables ongoing appraisal not only of our presuppositions about subjectivity but also of the multiple power relations undergirding scientific research. Such new arrangements are further justified on methodological grounds: They ensue from an honest scientific recognition that social context, including the investigative context, is an integral feature of cognitions and actions. One concrete means to realize a collaborative arrangement is to engage participants in the collection, analysis, interpretation, and eventual evaluation of research (Doell, 1991; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Hoff, 1988; Imber & Tuana, 1988; Mies, 1983; Stephenson, Kippax, & Crawford, 1996; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1996).

Challenges

Once made familiar with the significant if sometimes nuanced attempts to transform objectivity and subjectivity, a reader can find, in the pages of psychology journals, myriad instances of such strategies. Small, diverse methodological innovations are altering the narrative field of psychological science. Their impact, of course, sometimes incites criticism: Some backlashes are in evidence in recent writings that assert the perils of self-report methods (and not their ability to enrich data), and in evolutionary psychology theories that explain rape and heterosexual mating as natural acts (and not as complicated social practices). Critical reaction notwithstanding, feminist investigations have changed the landscape of psychology.

Working at this threshold, the gains are not always easy to perceive, nor are the future challenges. Feminist psychologists have engaged the problems of objectivity —knowers and knowing—and construals of subjectivity. And although these engagements are realized through an appreciation of science as culture, as consisting of complex practices and politics, that culture cannot be altered easily. Some of the more pressing troubles circulate around the evaluation, acceptance, and dissemination of knowledge. It can no longer be assumed that facts are simply those things that correspond to some external reality; nor can feminist scholars hold that valid knowledge contains no value premises. In these understandings, feminist inquiry concurs with Cronbach's (1988) redefinition of validity as a pervasive practice within a community, a practice that must explicitly incorporate assessment of the consequences of research findings. Plural methods require plural modes of assessment; so-called applied research need no longer be held suspect; no study, however honorable its politics, should be exempted from critical analysis; and

evaluating knowledge must proceed more democratically by encompassing the appraisal of participants and other interested parties. Proposed techniques for revising how knowledge claims are assessed and utilized include evaluating findings in terms of their effects in the larger culture (Fine, 1985; Lather, 1991; Striegel-Moore, 1993; Worell, 1990) and extending accountability to the larger community (Yllö, 1988). Above all, the commitment to producing knowledge that alters the world means that the procedures for assessing truth claims must include evaluation of how those claims provide enhancement, new awareness, or positive change (Lather, 1991). As Rouse (1996) has noted, these changes are not simply about politics or beliefs, because feminist science scholars value reliable scientific knowledge. Feminist aims assume that "knowledge is neither external to nor merely instrumental for justice, but is itself a valued end for which justice is integral" (p. 208).

A far greater challenge, and one inevitably faced when thinking deeply about the adjudication of knowledge, resides not in furnishing creative research designs, but in modifying the near environment in which researchers conduct their science, learn, teach, and judge the efforts of other scientists. Reid (1993) has cogently enumerated the hazards that are part of the very structure of this environment. In describing barriers to feminist psychologists' knowing women of color, Reid named three notable ones: "personal affiliation," or researchers' personal connection to an area of investigation; "effort maximization," or the economy of getting maximum benefits for work exerted; and "investigator training," or the practice of training new researchers mainly in traditional methods. To this list can be added what can be called "evaluative conservatism," or the tendency to apply canonical standards (sometimes in conjunction with feminist ones) when assessing feminist research projects, students, publications, colleagues, job searches, and candidates for awards.

These barriers, located in the near environment, sometimes unknowingly accepted by us and often tacitly deployed through routine decisions and judgments, persist as a vestige of our liminality. The dangers of such "institutional capture" (Smith, 1987) are nothing less than damaging the viability, longevity, and future development of feminist methods of inquiry. The challenge to feminist scientists, then, lies just as much in everyday actions as in meticulous and innovative research designs. Whenever these actions are within the scope of our influence or control, as is frequently the case, our greatest contribution to feminist methods is changing the environment in which science is generated.

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JILL MORAWSKI teaches at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she is a Professor in the Psychology Department, Women's Studies Program, and Science in Society Program. Her recent research on the routes to more adequate conceptions of gender in psychology is presented in her book *Practicing Feminisms, Reconstructing Psychology: Notes on a Liminal Science* (Michigan University Press, 1994), for which she received the Distinguished Publication Award of the Association of Women in Psychology and the William James Book Award. She is currently engaged in examining the scientific discourses of gender and a historical study of men and reproduction in the 20th century.