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Becoming a feminist methodologist while researching sexual violence support services

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Abstract

This article contends that feminist methodologies offer rich and diverse insights for the production of socio-legal knowledge. Recognizing the pioneering work of early feminist methodologists, it explores three key issues that feminist methodologies bring into sharp relief: a push beyond the scientific method, reflexivity, and reciprocity. Drawing upon a case study relating to the long-elided voices and narratives of English sexual violence support workers, the article goes on to discuss the process of applying feminist methodologies in practice. It frames engaging with feminist methodologies during empirical work as a continuous process of becoming, a rigorous project of critical reflection undergirded by the challenges of translating feminist theory into practice. The process of becoming a feminist methodologist is explored here as an evolving and messy labour of commitments, apprehensions, and realizations, and as a way of doing research that recognizes the impossibility of unstitching ourselves from the claims to knowledge that we make.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There is, Rosalind Edwards states, no singular approach ‘that can be termed *the* feminist methodology’.¹ As this article argues, the multiplicitous and diverse shapes that feminist methodologies take offers insights for the production of socio-legal knowledge. The rich history of feminist methodologies, combined with the variety of approaches that they encompass, enable an exploration of a broad range of issues pertinent to socio-legal scholars. Indeed, past volumes of this journal provide a vivid archive of feminist projects and approaches to socio-legal research. Early volumes include reviews of the work of pioneering feminist thinkers such as Pat Carlen and Mary Maynard, as well as influential contributions from key scholars including post-structuralist feminist Carol Smart.² The journal’s commitment to bringing feminist voices into socio-legal spaces continues apace, with more recent volumes offering a variety of important reflections on, and articles informed by, feminist thought.³

This article contends that feminist methodologies offer a way to translate feminist thought, by no means a singular or ‘unified project’, into empirical practice.⁴ It also argues that while a wealth of feminist contributions have been made by socio-legal scholars, less attention has been given to the fraught process of negotiation between thinking as a feminist and doing as a feminist methodologist.⁵ A relative paucity of reflections on methodological assumptions, and on the often messy translations of feminist thought into the nuanced, minute, and everyday conduct that occurs during fieldwork, persists within socio-legal scholarship.⁶ This tension between theory and practice, between theoretical values and how they are worked out and accomplished in concrete terms, is brought into sharp relief by feminist methodologies.⁷

¹ R. Edwards, ‘An Education in Interviewing: Placing the Researcher and the Research’ in *Researching Sensitive Topics*, eds R. M. Lee and C. M. Renzetti (1993) 181, at 183, emphasis in original.

² C. Smart, ‘Law’s Power, the Sexed Body, and Feminist Discourse’ (1990) 17 *J. of Law and Society* 194; C. Wells, ‘Reviewed Work(s): *Rape on Trial* by Zsuzsanna Adler; *Gender, Crime, and Justice* by Pat Carlen and Anne Worrall; *Justice for Women? Family, Court and Social Control* by Mary Eaton; *Women, Violence and Social Control* by Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard; *Rape, the Ultimate Violation* by Judith Rowland; *Rape* by Sylvana Thomaselli and Roy Porter’ (1988) 15 *J. of Law and Society* 216.

³ See for example H. Baillot et al., ‘Seen but Not Heard: Parallels and Dissonances in the Treatment of Rape Narratives across the Asylum and Criminal Justice Contexts’ (2009) 36 *J. of Law and Society* 195; R. Hunter et al., ‘Feminist Judging in Lower Courts’ (2021) 48 *J. of Law and Society* 595; L. Mulcahy, ‘Watching Women: What Illustrations of Courtroom Scenes Tell Us about Women and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century’ (2015) 42 *J. of Law and Society* 53; V. E. Munro, ‘Legal Feminism and Foucault: A Critique of the Expulsion of Law’ (2001) 28 *J. of Law and Society* 546. See also R. Hunter, ‘Feminist Approaches to Socio-Legal Studies’ in *Routledge Handbook of Socio-Legal Theory and Methods*, eds N. Creutzfeldt et al. (2020) 260.

⁴ G. Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice* (2003) 4; A. Brooks and S. N. Hesse-Biber, ‘An Invitation to Feminist Research’ in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, eds S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. L. Leavy (2007) 2. For an excellent overview of the diversity within feminist thought, see R. Campbell and S. M. Wasco, ‘Feminist Approaches to Social Science: Epistemological and Methodological Tenets’ (2000) 28 *Am. J. of Community Psychology* 773.

⁵ For insightful discussion of the tension between ‘knowing and doing’ within feminist empirical projects, see Letherby, id., p. 160.

⁶ A rich socio-legal account that contradicts this trend is S. Bano, ‘“Standpoint”, “Difference” and Feminist Research’ in *Theory and Method in Socio-Legal Research*, eds R. Banakar and M. Travers (2005) 91.

⁷ For a compelling description of the intimate and often uncomfortable project of becoming a feminist researcher, see N. L. Deutsch, ‘Positionality and the Pen: Reflections on the Process of Becoming a Feminist Researcher and Writer’ (2004) 10 *Qualitative Inquiry* 885.

Against a backcloth of feminist theoretical sensitivities to voice, subjectivity, narratives, and power relations, feminist methodologies recognize that ‘methodological reflection ... is itself an epistemological act’.⁸ Feminist methodologies bring to life and embrace doing research as inherently ideological; they recognize that the research process is enriched by critical reflection on, and accountability towards, all that we bring to our work in terms of how we do it and the claims to knowledge at which we arrive.⁹ Feminist methodologies thus emphasize the intricate relationship between ideological and theoretical outlooks, assumptions, and personal biographies, and the process by which data is collected, selected, and presented to ‘speak’.¹⁰ Foregrounding feminist methodological sensitivities to the relationship between thinking and doing, this article contends that reckoning with the process of translating feminist thought into feminist empirical practice offers valuable insights for the production of socio-legal knowledge.

By situating feminist methodologies in the distinct history within which they emerged, this article first discusses three key issues that feminist methodologies bring to the fore – namely, an interrogation of the scientific method and positivist ideals of objectivity and neutrality; reflexivity and a critical awareness of positionality and power relations; and reciprocity, giving back, and an ethics of care. Having explored these insights, the article then considers the process of undertaking feminist methodologies in practice. Drawing upon experiences of completing research with sexual violence support services, the article frames engagement with feminist methodologies as a process of becoming. It does so to highlight the simultaneously fraught and enriching journey of negotiating theoretical values, assumptions, and ideological commitments, and translating these into concrete actions and decisions as a feminist methodologist.¹¹ The path between thought and practice, between holding theoretical values and putting them to work through concrete action, is illustrated as a thorny one. These reflections are offered as part of a wider commitment to the emphasis that feminist methodologies place on revealing and celebrating research as a process as much as an end product, and on achieving rigour through transparency towards the often chaotic, rather than neat and seamless, nature of research.¹²

2 | FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES: THREE KEY THEMES

It is impossible to try to ‘squeeze all feminist methodology into a single way of thinking’;¹³ any attempt to do so risks obscuring the diversity of approaches that feminist methodologies encompass, and the application of feminist methodologies to a broad range of methods, questions, and

⁸ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 5.

⁹ Id. For more general discussion of the relationship between methodology and ideology, see H. S. Becker and I. S. Horowitz, ‘Radical Politics and Sociological Research: Observations on Methodology and Ideology’ (1972) 78 *Am. J. of Sociology* 48.

¹⁰ C. Ramazanoglu and J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (2002) 159–160; C. Kitzinger, ‘Feminist Approaches’ in *Qualitative Research Practice*, eds C. Seale et al. (2007) 113.

¹¹ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

¹² Id.; Campbell and Wasco, op. cit., n. 4; L. Stanley and S. Wise, ‘Feminist Research, Feminist Consciousness, and Experiences of Sexism’ in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, eds M. M. Fonow and J. A. Cook (1991) 265.

¹³ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10, p. 62.

issues.¹⁴ This section of the article explores three key themes, not to paint a picture of feminist methodologies as a unitary whole, but to situate them as foregrounding several important concerns.

2.1 | Beyond the scientific method: a turn from objectivity and neutrality

Feminist methodologies emerged from a pioneering turn against, and destabilization of, positivist emphases on objectivity and neutrality, and an unearthing of these ideals as themselves constructed and partial.¹⁵ This shift was grounded in a commitment to bringing silenced voices and obscured lives to the fore and recognizing researchers' subjectivity, presence, and interactions with participants as fundamental to the production of knowledge.¹⁶ The criticism of 'the unquestioned authority of the scientific method' – a method resting on assumptions that neutrality and objectivity during knowledge production are possible and desirable – was central to early feminist methodologies.¹⁷ While feminist methodologies are a diverse field, a problematization of 'scientific philosophy' underscored many pioneering feminist methodological works.¹⁸ Interrogating the scientific approach meant questioning its claim to an 'authoritative knowledge of social reality'; destabilizing this claim also led some feminist methodologists, especially those working from postmodern and post-structuralist outlooks, to dispute the idea that social science research could, and should aspire to, 'produce one certain truth'.¹⁹

It was the neglected experiences and words of women that early feminist methodological critiques of objectivity and neutrality brought into sight; women, each with their own meanings, understandings, and lives, were envisioned as valuable, agentic subjects rather than passive research objects.²⁰ The ground-breaking work of feminist methodologists such as Anne Oakley was a direct rejection of 'rational, detached, value free research' and the androcentric assumptions on which these ideals were based.²¹ Oakley's work with mothers in the 1980s problematized hierarchical power relations between interviewer and interviewees, which the 'textbook paradigm' of structured interviews encouraged.²² Her interviews with women reimaged research relationships by embracing the value-laden, partial, and involved position of researchers within the communities and social worlds that they studied.²³ In recounting acts such as helping interviewees 'with the demands of house-work and motherhood' where conducting interviews conflicted with

¹⁴ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

¹⁵ Brooks and Hesse-Biber, op. cit., n. 4; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

¹⁶ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

¹⁷ Id., p. 63.

¹⁸ M. Maynard, 'Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research' in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1994]) 465, at 469.

¹⁹ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10, pp. 42–43.

²⁰ K. Anderson et al., 'Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History' (1987) 15 *The Oral History Rev.* 103; Edwards, op. cit., n. 1; A. Oakley (and a subsequent exchange with J. Malseed), 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms' in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1981]) 261.

²¹ Edwards, op. cit., n. 1, p. 183; S. Harding, 'Is There a Feminist Method?' in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1987]) 456, at 457; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4; Maynard, op. cit., n. 18; Oakley, id.

²² Oakley, id., p. 236.

²³ Id.

these, or committing to answer ‘all personal questions’ that interviewees asked, Oakley’s work disrupted the illusory ideal of “‘hygienic” research’ and the mythological conception of objective data production.²⁴ Significantly, it challenged the appropriateness of positivist conceptions of bias when doing research that sought to produce knowledge about previously obscured lives in the terms of the people living those lives.²⁵ Such early feminist methodologies presented a radical reworking of knowledge production and notions of validity and legitimacy.²⁶ Feminist methodological sensitivities to the impossibility of value-free knowledge creation saw a shift from aspirations to the ‘neutral knower’, generalizability, and replication of results towards rigour through transparency about the subjective nature of research.²⁷ Destabilizing positivist ideals of objectivity and neutrality was integral to a wider feminist methodological project of carving a space within which alternative knowledges could emerge. Occupying this space saw feminist methodologies interrogating ‘who can be a “knower”’, what constitutes ‘legitimate knowledge’, and whose voices, lives, and stories matter.²⁸

Indeed, early feminist methodologies had their roots in qualitative work and methods such as unstructured interviews as a means of making room for alternative voices, experiences, and meanings.²⁹ Qualitative projects, in their attention to intersubjectivity, meaning making, and the ways in which people experience and construct the social worlds that they inhabit,³⁰ complemented feminist methodological challenges to objectivity and neutrality. However, feminist methodologies find application beyond a rigid qualitative/quantitative binary.³¹ Gayle Letherby notes the ‘danger of supporting a paradigm divide regarding methods’ and a failure to recognize the worthwhile use of quantitative methods and positivist outlooks within projects informed by feminist methodologies.³² The quantification of the ‘significance of violence in women’s lives’ is a valuable illustration that quantitative or positivist approaches and statistical methods are not antithetical to feminist methodologies.³³ While acknowledging the critique of positivist “‘malestream” methods’ as an integral aspect of pioneering feminist methodologies, it is equally important to recognize that quantitative methods are by no means incompatible with feminist methodological projects.³⁴ Although feminist methodologies remain largely grounded in qualitative sensitivities to meanings, narratives, voices, and subjectivity, an appreciation of feminist methodologies as

²⁴ Id., p. 263; Stanley and Wise, op. cit., n. 12.

²⁵ Oakley, id.

²⁶ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

²⁷ Id., p. 63.

²⁸ Harding, op. cit., n. 21, p. 458; Letherby, id., p. 5.

²⁹ Letherby, id.; Edwards, op. cit., n. 1; Maynard, op. cit., n. 18; Oakley, op. cit., n. 20; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

³⁰ D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (2017).

³¹ Campbell and Wasco, op. cit., n. 4; Maynard, op. cit., n. 18.

³² Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 88.

³³ Maynard, op. cit., n. 18, p. 466. For an informative discussion of feminist approaches, such as feminist empiricism, that do not reject but ‘rework’ positivist emphases on objectivity and neutrality, see Brooks and Hesse-Biber, op. cit., n. 4, p. 12. The work of feminist political economist Diane Perrons further illustrates that quantitative approaches can be imbued with feminist sensitivities; see for example R. Dunford and D. Perrons, ‘Power, Privilege and Precarity: The Gendered Dynamics of Contemporary Inequality’ in *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds M. Evans et al. (2014) 465. For a more recent exploration of how ‘quantitative data can be empowering’ for diverse feminist projects, see C. D’Ignazio and L. F. Klein, *Data Feminisms* (2020) 98.

³⁴ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 88.

encompassing a variety of methods and outlooks allows a move beyond a static qualitative/quantitative dichotomy.³⁵

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that early feminist methodological critiques of objectivity and neutrality arose from efforts to ‘write women’ into social science research, to open space for their diverse voices, and to bring into relief their nuanced experiences and narratives.³⁶ The centring of women’s experiences as a means of redressing the systemic exclusion of women’s claims to knowledge, and instead validating and ‘listening to women’s voices’, was a central thread running throughout early feminist methodologies.³⁷ Yet, while feminist methodologies emerged out of this drive to make women’s experiences visible, a conflation of the ‘terms “feminist” and “women’s”’ ignores the diverse and heterogeneous lives and voices that exist to be explored within feminist methodologies.³⁸ There are ‘multiple feminist subjects’, and multiple points from which knowledge about ‘the particular power relations that affect gendered lives’ can be produced.³⁹ Early feminist methodological impetuses to explore, rather than abandon, ‘women’s experiences, absences and silences’ find productive translation into renewed feminist methodological sensitivities to a myriad of marginalized and obscured voices.⁴⁰ Contemporary readings of the striving towards openness, subjectivity, and partiality that undergirded early feminist methodologies can be productively combined with an attentiveness to the experiences, stories, and voices of diversely gendered subjects. When the possibilities of attending to such experiences, stories, and voices through feminist methodologies are recognized, criticisms of early feminist methodologies – that the study of women’s experiences alone offers a partial account of social worlds – are more easily addressed.⁴¹ In troubling notions of neutrality and objectivity, and attending instead to the rich meanings, terms, and experiences of both participants and researchers, early feminist methodologies paved the way to bring into the fold and count as valid the meanings and narratives of diversely situated subjects.

2.2 | Reflexivity: positionality and power relations

Thinking reflexively during research – namely, cultivating a critical self-awareness towards the interactive process by which researchers present, negotiate, and manage their self in

³⁵ A. Oakley, ‘Who’s Afraid of the Randomized Controlled Trial? Some Dilemmas of the Scientific Method and “Good” Research Practice’ in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1989]) 512.

³⁶ M. L. Devault, ‘Talking and Listening from Women’s Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis’ (1990) 37 *Social Problems* 96, at 96.

³⁷ Kitzinger, op. cit., n. 10, p. 113; Harding, op. cit., n. 21; Maynard, op. cit., n. 18; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10. For rich feminist socio-legal attention to women’s voices and narratives, see C. McGlynn et al., ‘“I Just Wanted Him to Hear Me”: Sexual Violence and the Possibilities of Restorative Justice’ (2012) 39 *J. of Law and Society* 213; C. McGlynn and N. Westmarland, ‘Kaleidoscopic Justice: Sexual Violence and Victim-Survivors’ Perceptions of Justice’ (2019) 28 *Social & Legal Studies* 179.

³⁸ Maynard, id., p. 469; Harding, id.; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4; Oakley, op. cit., n. 35; Ramazanoglu and Holland, id.

³⁹ Ramazanoglu and Holland, id., pp. 74–75; Stanley and Wise, op. cit., n. 12.

⁴⁰ Ramazanoglu and Holland, id., p. 45; Devault, op. cit., n. 36. For an informative socio-legal feminist discussion of children as diversely situated and elided subjects, see A. J. Powell et al., ‘Intersectionality and Credibility in Child Sexual Assault Trials’ (2017) 31 *Gender and Society* 457.

⁴¹ M. Hammersley, ‘Hierarchy and Emancipation’ in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1995]) 478.

relation to participants – is another key theme running throughout feminist methodologies.⁴² A spirit of ‘conscious partiality’ – namely, a rejection of the idea pursued within much positivist research that objectivity is both possible and preferable to subjectivity – undergirds feminist methodological understandings of reflexivity.⁴³ Reflexivity involves being conscious of the fact that interactions, and data produced, between participants and researchers are always partial and socially situated.⁴⁴ Feminist methodological concerns with reflexivity are thus intricately interwoven with a commitment to recognizing knowledge as socially constructed and imbued with power relations.⁴⁵

While the notion and practice of reflexivity is not the ‘province of feminist methodologies alone’, feminist methodologies underscore the importance of reflexivity as a way of accounting for the processes by which knowledge is produced, in direct relation to the positions and situations of those involved in research.⁴⁶ Although the precise shape of reflexivity, in terms of ‘[what it] means, and how it can be achieved’, differs across feminist projects, a sensitivity to ‘the identification of power relations’ in the production of knowledge runs throughout feminist methodologies.⁴⁷ Reflexivity here becomes a critical awareness of the authority of researchers to make particular claims to knowledge, a process that is informed by their recognition of the positions that they occupy within the landscape of their research.⁴⁸ Early feminist methodologies stressed the value of researchers entering the ‘same critical plane as the overt subject matter’, of subjecting themselves to analysis, and of locating themselves ‘within the frame of the picture’ that they sought to ‘paint’.⁴⁹ Feminist methodologies thus offer an understanding of reflexivity that emphasizes the importance of interrogating the ways in which representations of participants’ lives, words, and meanings are generated in relation to researchers’ own assumptions, life histories, and positions within social worlds.⁵⁰

Feminist methodological sensitivities to the fact that participants and researchers are ‘real people’ situated within webs of power relations are integral to further elements of feminist commitments to reflexivity.⁵¹ Such commitments to critical reflection are intricately interwoven with emphases on non-exploitative research relationships, a recognition of the co-produced nature of data, and a rejection of treating knowledge as ‘raw material for the data mill’.⁵² Imbuing reflexivity with concerns about exploitation and hierarchy within research, feminist methodologies offer rich awareness of the ways in which researchers’ actions, assumptions, and choices play out in the lives of all of those whom they involve in their projects.⁵³ The feminist notion of ‘strong reflexivity’

⁴² E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

⁴³ R. K. Bergen, ‘Interviewing Survivors of Martial Rape: Doing Feminist Research on Sensitive Topics’ in *Researching Sensitive Topics*, eds R. M. Lee and C. M. Renzetti (1993) 202; Harding, op. cit., n. 21; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁴⁴ Bergen, id.

⁴⁵ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁴⁶ Id., p. 76.

⁴⁷ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10, p. 118.

⁴⁸ Id.; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁴⁹ Harding, op. cit., n. 21, p. 461.

⁵⁰ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁵¹ Bergen, op. cit., n. 43, p. 202.

⁵² Id.

⁵³ R. Edwards and M. Mauthner, ‘Ethics and Feminist Research: Theory and Practice’ in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, eds T. Miller et al. (2012, 2nd edn) 14.

acknowledges that reflexivity, as an ethical rather than a purely methodological issue, demands 'honesty, transparency and overall accountability in research' instead of mere lip service to an ideal of self-awareness.⁵⁴ This concept of strong reflexivity rests on an understanding that being 'open about the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions that inform our work' and knowledge claims is an ethical duty.⁵⁵ Here, feminist methodologies foreground an understanding of reflexivity as a moral obligation, a commitment to engage with and account for the relationship between researchers' inner worlds and the lives of all of those who participate in their research.

Lastly, a sensitivity to power relations, which entails an often fraught reckoning with differences between researchers and participants, underscores feminist methodological notions of reflexivity.⁵⁶ Feminist methodologies emphasize the need to remain sensitive to 'structurally based divisions between women on the basis of race and/or class', as opposed to romanticized visions of 'some special sort of nonhierarchical woman-to-woman link'.⁵⁷ Beyond a sole focus on the lives of female-identifying subjects alone, feminist methodologies place importance on being honest about and attentive to 'structurally based divisions'.⁵⁸ This awareness of difference, positionality, and power relations within feminist methodological notions of reflexivity is intricately interwoven with wider theoretical feminist debates about knowledge production. Postmodern feminist critiques of standpoint feminism, where the generation of knowledge is grounded in women's experience and claims are made from a female standpoint, rest on a rejection of the existence of a homogeneous, essentialized gendered subject 'woman'.⁵⁹ Standpoint feminism exists in tension with the post-structuralist feminist 'fragmentation' of the subject as well as recognition within both queer theory and Black and intersectional feminisms that multiplicitous experiences, meanings, and standpoints are possible and emerge from diverse, intersecting power relations.⁶⁰ As such, feminist methodological sensitivities to difference as part of reflexivity towards power relations are situated within theoretical feminist debates about the authority and validity of various claims to knowledge and representation.⁶¹

In discussing the 'methodological dilemmas' encountered during 'in-depth qualitative interviews' with British Pakistani Muslim women, Samia Bano introduces the idea of 'standpoint differences', which feminist methodologists can use to negotiate these theoretical debates in practice.⁶² Bano's socio-legal work encourages an appreciation of 'notions of difference and diversity' in bottom-up, empirical feminist research, and the importance of sensitivity to the evolving,

⁵⁴ A. Doucet and N. S. Mauthner, 'Knowing Responsibly: Ethics, Feminist Epistemologies and Methodologies' in Miller et al., id., p. 122, at pp. 124–132; A. W. Gouldner, 'Toward a Reflexive Sociology' in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, ed. C. Seale (2004 [1972]) 381.

⁵⁵ Doucet and Mauthner, id., p. 130.

⁵⁶ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

⁵⁷ Edwards, op. cit., n. 1, p. 184.

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ Maynard, op. cit., n. 18; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

⁶⁰ Maynard, id., p. 467; Bano, op. cit., n. 6; Brooks and Hesse-Biber, op. cit., n. 4; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990); M. M. Fonow and J. A. Cook, 'Feminist Methodology: New Applications in the Academy and Public Policy' (2005) 30 *Signs: J. of Women in Culture and Society* 2211; H. L. McCauley et al., 'Advancing Theory, Methods, and Dissemination in Sexual Violence Research to Build a More Equitable Future: An Intersectional, Community-Engaged Approach' (2019) 25 *Violence Against Women* 1906; G. Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (2011).

⁶¹ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

⁶² Bano, op. cit., n. 6, p. 92, p. 95, p. 111.

multifaceted, and contingent standpoints of participants and researchers.⁶³ This intersectional rereading of standpoint feminism highlights an awareness of researchers' standpoints and how these interact, come into tension with, and influence those of their participants in an ongoing and dynamic process.⁶⁴ Bano's work is a rich example of feminist methodological sensitivities to the diverse situations of researchers and participants within power relations, and the importance of recognizing these positionalities for the production of knowledge claims and their validity. In highlighting the importance of reflexivity to the multifarious situations of researchers and participants, feminist methodologies underline that research relationships are a process of negotiation, a labour that requires sustained critical reflection unique to each interaction. While there is no one way of 'doing reflexivity' within feminist methodologies, the sensitivity to power relations and their impact on the production of knowledge informs related feminist methodological ideals, including reciprocity.

2.3 | Giving back: reciprocity, an ethics of care, and the co-production of knowledge

Feminist methodologies are also concerned with mutuality, reciprocity, and non-hierarchy – exchanges of listening and talking, giving and taking, between researcher and participants.⁶⁵ Feminist methodologies encourage a giving and 'sharing of yourself' as a form of reciprocity, an exchange owed to participants upon whose voices, stories, and lives projects are built.⁶⁶ Of course, the very notion of research – parasitic in its demand for the sharing of personal meanings, narratives, and lives in order to make claims to knowledge – rests on inequality.⁶⁷ Despite feminist methodological emphases on reciprocity, attempts to dissolve hierarchy, and reflexivity towards power dynamics, research relationships are inevitably imbued with differential power relations.⁶⁸ Yet feminist methodologies seek to counter this by actively building research relationships in which exchanges of labour are reciprocal, rapport is 'genuine' rather than 'instrumental', researchers give back to the communities with whom they produce knowledge, and the 'coauthorship' of data is duly recognized.⁶⁹

In their commitments to reciprocity, feminist methodologies highlight a need for researchers to 'place' themselves within their research and remain aware that they will be 'placed' by participants via reference to social characteristics and power relations.⁷⁰ Feminist visions of the research process as a 'dialectical relationship' recognize that empowerment and negotiation of non-hierarchical relationships is not a rigid, static, or linear process.⁷¹ Feminist methodologies emphasize that attempting reciprocity entails recognizing that positions of empowerment exist in flux throughout researchers' interactions with participants and the life course of a project.

⁶³ Id., p. 111.

⁶⁴ Id.

⁶⁵ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁶⁶ Edwards, op. cit., n. 1, p. 186.

⁶⁷ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4.

⁶⁸ Bano, op. cit., n. 6.

⁶⁹ Maynard, op. cit., n. 18, p. 467; Bergen, op. cit., n. 43, p. 202; Edwards, op. cit., n. 1; Oakley, op. cit., n. 20.

⁷⁰ Edwards, id., pp. 187–188; Deutsch, op. cit., n. 7.

⁷¹ Bergen, op. cit., n. 43, p. 202.

Thus, feminist methodological emphases on reflexivity towards researchers' positionalities and presentation of self in relation to their participants are interwoven with efforts to avoid the 'paternalistic' assumption that participants are automatically less powerful than researchers.⁷² While a 'researcher usually ... has control over the tape-recorder' and 'a pen', feminist methodological understandings of reciprocity turn on striking a balance.⁷³ This balance is between being 'critically reflexive' towards power relations and being alert to the risk that researchers can 'over-passify respondents' when they assume that they are always already less powerful by virtue of their role as participants.⁷⁴ Furthermore, while 'post-positivist feminist methodologies generally endorse a non-hierarchical standard emphasizing care, compassion, connectedness, and collaboration', contemporary feminist methodologies illustrate that the assumption that researchers are always already more powerful than participants might paradoxically facilitate participants' disempowerment.⁷⁵

The emphasis on reciprocity cutting across feminist methodologies is also bound to an 'ethic of care', and a conception of the research process as involving ongoing relationships and accountability to participants long after a project's official end.⁷⁶ The treatment of participants with 'sensitivity and respect', and sustained commitments by researchers to care for those with whom they produce knowledge in meaningful ways, undergirds feminist methodologies.⁷⁷ Concrete examples of this ethics of care include researchers making themselves available to participants after their involvement in a project or signposting participants towards care when they experience the research process as distressing.⁷⁸ An ethics of care, 'centered around an orientation of support and respect for the people researchers recruit', is integral to feminist methodological conceptions of giving back.⁷⁹ Significantly, this ethics of care is interwoven with an attentiveness to context and sensitivity to the specific dynamics between participants and researchers.⁸⁰ This in turn is directly informed by feminist methodological commitments to embrace the deeply personal aspects of doing research, value partiality over neutrality, and remain alive to the unique relationship between each participant and researcher.⁸¹ Indeed, imaginations of the feminist researcher as 'an empathetic listener' who does not 'exploit nor manipulate the researched' assume that the opportunity to speak, share 'their stories with others', and contribute to social change are automatically empowering for participants.⁸² When a more nuanced, situational, and reflexive concept of reciprocity is adopted,

⁷² A. Burgess-Proctor, 'Methodological and Ethical Issues in Feminist Research with Abused Women: Reflections on Participants' Vulnerability and Empowerment' (2015) 48 *Women's Studies International Forum* 124, at 126; Goffman, op. cit., n. 42; Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

⁷³ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 114.

⁷⁴ Id., p. 116.

⁷⁵ Burgess-Proctor, op. cit., n. 72, p. 125.

⁷⁶ Id., pp. 126–132; Edwards and Mauthner, op. cit., n. 53, pp. 21–25.

⁷⁷ Oakley, op. cit., n. 35, p. 517.

⁷⁸ Bergen, op. cit., n. 43; Burgess-Proctor, op. cit., n. 72; R. Campbell et al., "'What Has It Been Like for You to Talk with Me Today?'" The Impact of Participating in Interview Research on Rape Survivors' (2010) 16 *Violence Against Women* 60.

⁷⁹ Burgess-Proctor, id., pp. 126–127.

⁸⁰ Edwards and Mauthner, op. cit., n. 53.

⁸¹ Oakley, op. cit., n. 20. For a rich account of the personal and emotional labours involved in becoming a feminist researcher, see S. Alkhaled, "'Are You One of Us, or One of Them?'" An Autoethnography of a "Hybrid" Feminist Researcher Bridging Two Worlds' in *Being an Early Career Feminist Academic: Global Perspectives, Experiences, and Challenges*, eds R. Thwaites and A. Pressland (2017) 109.

⁸² Bergen, op. cit., n. 43, p. 202.

‘the potential complexity of social categories, relationships and meanings’ is addressed.⁸³ These feminist methodological conceptions of reciprocity avoid making blanket assumptions about what might be empowering or disempowering for participants as though they are a homogeneous class, motivated by the same feminist outlooks as researchers.⁸⁴ They also recognize that the meanings of reciprocity, non-hierarchy, mutuality, and care are negotiated between each participant and researcher, not an automatic, universal result of undertaking feminist methodologies.

Lastly, in emphasizing the importance of giving back to the people and communities with whom knowledge is produced, many feminist methodologies are concerned with recognizing the ‘co-produced’ nature of such knowledge.⁸⁵ There are divergences in opinion as to whether realizing a feminist methodological ‘goal of more egalitarian relationships’ through ‘shared or co-produced knowledge’ is achievable.⁸⁶ However, the importance of recognizing the place of both researchers and participants in the construction of knowledge is an undercurrent running throughout feminist methodologies, which acknowledge that research is underlined by the interaction and meaning making between researchers and those who participate in research.⁸⁷ In accounting for the ‘interactive’ nature of research, a central theme running throughout many feminist methodologies is the recognition of the ‘active’ role that both participants and researchers play in generating claims to knowledge.⁸⁸ This process of production may not always be equal or achieve the ideal of ‘a mutual interaction in which the researcher is open and gives something of themselves.’⁸⁹ However, in recognizing the place of both researcher and participant in shaping the knowledge created, feminist methodologies valorize attempts towards more reciprocal exchanges in knowledge production. In their efforts to bring participants’ voices and stories into the fold (such as by being led by the words of participants during interviews), feminist methodologies recognize the joint, interactional labour of knowledge production that occurs between researchers and participants.⁹⁰ The recognition of the ‘coauthorship’ of data within feminist methodologies is an awareness driven by the conception of the research process as intersubjective, and part of wider feminist methodological objectives to dissolve hierarchy in favour of reciprocity.⁹¹

3 | BECOMING A FEMINIST METHODOLOGIST: BUILDING A BRIDGE FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

As Letherby states, ‘[f]or many feminists, feminist research *is* feminist theory in action’.⁹² However, the landscape of this action, of negotiating the shape of theory in practice, is one fraught with challenges. Reckoning with how to translate the insights that feminist methodologies

⁸³ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10, p. 112.

⁸⁴ Id.; Kitzinger, op. cit., n. 10; J. McCorkel and K. Myers, ‘What Difference Does Difference Make? Position and Privilege in the Field’ (2003) 26 *Qualitative Sociology* 199.

⁸⁵ Burgess-Proctor, op. cit., n. 72, p. 126.

⁸⁶ Id.

⁸⁷ Edwards, op. cit., n. 1.

⁸⁸ Id., p. 185; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, pp. 83–84.

⁸⁹ Letherby, id., p. 83.

⁹⁰ Id.; Anderson et al., op. cit., n. 20.

⁹¹ Bergen, op. cit., n. 43, p. 202.

⁹² Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 62, emphasis in original.

offer, such as rejection of the scientific method, reflexivity, and reciprocity, is a difficult and continuous labour, heavy with ‘tensions and contradictions’.⁹³ The interface between theory and practice – between thinking as a feminist and doing as a feminist methodologist – is a liminal space where ambivalences, contradictions, and anxieties are far from absent. This section of the article traces the building, and crossing, of the bridge between feminist thought and feminist action in empirical work as a hard path, an imperfect journey not to be romanticized but recounted in the spirit of honesty, openness, and partiality that feminist methodologies foreground.

The translation of feminist values, theories, and commitments into concrete actions and decisions is explored here as a process of becoming, a continuous project of critical reflection towards the fact that we cannot unstitch ourselves from the research that we do. Despite embarking on fieldwork firmly believing that I was a feminist methodologist, I am not always accomplished at *being* a feminist methodologist in practice. Part of reckoning with the fact that I cannot neatly disentangle myself from the research that I do has meant grappling with actions and decisions that have contradicted the feminist theoretical values that I hold. In reflecting on this process, I am conscious of critiques regarding ‘self-indulgence’, the misuse of ‘reflexivity as a “get out” clause’, and the fact that presentations of the messy intricacies of research are nonetheless carefully crafted representations made possible by the position of authority that researchers hold.⁹⁴ Yet, in drawing upon my experiences of undertaking research with sexual violence support services, I seek to highlight that the process of becoming a feminist methodologist is one replete with mistakes, and demanding of honesty where mistakes are made. Indeed, pioneering feminist methodologists paved the way to publicly account for and rigorously lay bare ‘research as experienced’, as a deeply personal and often disorderly process thick with dissonance and challenges.⁹⁵

The aim of drawing upon my experiences below is to be accountable to the fact that the tension between feminist theory and practice came as something of a shock to me, causing feelings of alienation, uncertainty, newness, disorientation, and loss. While I had immersed myself in the rich feminist methodological literature, I was unprepared for the thorny path of putting my theoretical feminist commitments into action, of taking ownership for the meaning of feminist methodologies within my own interactions and decisions during fieldwork. It was not that feminist methodological texts, so alive to the messiness of doing research, failed to alert me to the difficulties of crossing the bridge between feminist thought and practice; it was that my understanding of these challenges took fuller shape with my personal experience of daily, sometimes minute, tensions and dilemmas presented by translating theory into actions. Thus, despite realizing that many of the observations below will hardly be surprising to experienced feminist methodologists, I make them to show that choosing to undertake work informed by feminist methodologies is not a singular moment in research design, from which actions easily follow. It is an intricate, ongoing, fraught, and intimate process of becoming, where the insights of feminist methodologists who have gone before take on a new tone and weight. As such, I explore a number of experiences while doing research with sexual violence support services to demonstrate that becoming a feminist methodologist is a continuous, often difficult, yet deeply enriching project.

⁹³ B. Ahmed, ‘Not Telling It How It Is: Secrets and Silences of a Critical Feminist Researcher’ in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, eds R. Ryan-Flood and R. Gill (2010) 96, at 96.

⁹⁴ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 143; Ahmed, id., p. 102.

⁹⁵ Stanley and Wise, op. cit., n. 12, p. 266.

3.1 | Against the scientific method: reckoning with rules and structure

In turning from the scientific method, pioneering feminist methodologies often stressed the value of making room for, being open and sensitive to, and allowing interactions to be informed if not led by, the words and stories of participants in order to bring elided voices into the fold.⁹⁶ As part of this shift from objectivity and neutrality, feminist methodologies underline the importance of bringing oneself into the research process and recognizing that what participants say, or do not say, is directly shaped by the specific interactional dynamics that occur during research.⁹⁷ Before I began carrying out interviews with workers within sexual violence support services, I was well attuned to feminist methodological emphases on centring participants' words and meanings within research interactions, analyses, and representations. This awareness seemed particularly important given the fact that there is a dearth of socio-legal research on, and a relative neglect of the voices and stories of, sexual violence support workers within the literature.⁹⁸ As Jean Rath notes, there is a paucity of research 'on the experiences of workers in Rape Crisis centres' within England and Wales; while my research explores sexual violence support services as a whole, this paucity of literature persists.⁹⁹

Yet, in beginning to carry out interviews, I became acutely aware of my uncertainty, and even discomfort, at navigating the interactional labour of the interview process.¹⁰⁰ I felt at loss as to when it was appropriate to laugh, nod, break eye contact, or sit in silence and give participants the room to speak about the issues that they felt important to raise. Interrogating my perception of appropriateness, I realized that many of my concerns turned on positivistic notions grounded in aspirations towards objectivity and neutrality. During initial interviews, I forgot basic principles, such as probing into the words and language that participants used as authors of knowledge in their own right, which the feminist methodologies that informed my work brought into sharp relief. I found myself clinging to the safety of rules, structure, formality, and a guise of detached neutrality valorized by the scientific method, despite the fact that I knew that these had been exposed within pioneering feminist methodologies as often wholly inappropriate for sensitive research.¹⁰¹

When I listened back to, transcribed, and attended to the ways in which I interacted with my participants during these interviews, I began to see the missed opportunities to explore

⁹⁶ Anderson et al., op cit., n. 20; Letherby, op. cit., n. 4; Oakley, op. cit., n. 20.

⁹⁷ Oakley, id.

⁹⁸ For a valuable exploration of conducting interviews with British Rape Crisis workers, see J. Rath, 'Training to Be a Volunteer Rape Crisis Counsellor: A Qualitative Study of Women's Experiences' (2008) 36 *British J. of Guidance & Counselling* 19. For an informative discussion of possible future directions for British sexual violence support services, see M. Ackhurst, 'Everyday Moments of Disruption: Navigating Towards Utopia' (2019) 5 *Studies in Arts and Humanities* 115. Within an American context, see P. Y. Martin, *Rape Work: Victims, Gender, and Emotions in Organization and Community Context* (2005); S. E. Ullman, 'Interviewing Clinicians and Advocates Who Work with Sexual Assault Survivors: A Personal Perspective on Moving from Quantitative to Qualitative Research Methods' (2005) 11 *Violence Against Women* 1113; S. E. Ullman and S. M. Townsend, 'Barriers to Working with Sexual Assault Survivors: A Qualitative Study of Rape Crisis Center Workers' (2007) 13 *Violence Against Women* 412.

⁹⁹ Rath, id., p. 19.

¹⁰⁰ Two interviewees did not consent to appear in publications at the time that this article went to press. The discussion of conducting interviews is general and relates to no one interview in particular.

¹⁰¹ Oakley, op. cit., n. 20. Deutsch recounts a similar feeling of 'discomfort' and alienation when subtracting 'emotionality from the research process', and instead deferring to aspirations of objectivity that appeared to her, when first undertaking fieldwork, to be the "correct" action as a researcher'. Deutsch, op. cit., n. 7, p. 888.

participants' language, meanings, and stories.¹⁰² In interrogating why I took a particular shape within research interactions in clinging to the idea of structures and rules in these early interviews, I started to recognize that I held unchecked fears about emotional involvement, which aligned with deeply positivistic conceptions of 'dangerous bias'.¹⁰³ In unpacking my fears about my presence in interviews, I began to attend to and appreciate the co-produced nature of knowledge – that participants inevitably saw, observed, and interpreted me back, in an iterative process of crafting knowledge. Feminist methodological emphases on listening gained particular weight here; in undertaking research within a sector whose workers are rigorously trained in the 'art of listening', I began to see that the very act of listening to participants was imbued with negotiations of power, reciprocity, and trust.¹⁰⁴ I realized that the act of speaking may be an acute inversion for those who are trained to listen and that how I listened inevitably shaped the stories that I was told.

My recognition of the privilege of being given the space to listen to my participants was undergirded by a realization that the non-verbal act of listening was itself intensely interactional – that when to nod, how to arrange my face, when to laugh, when to break eye contact, or when to make a note of a phrase were moments in a constant, iterative, and 'bidirectional' process of mutual observation, sensitivity, and 'impression management'.¹⁰⁵ Attention to the unsaid – the micro-level and seemingly mundane aspects of interaction – became, for me, underscored by the idea that there were particular ways of listening (a labour that I may or may not accomplish) that did justice to the stories being told. Importantly, negotiating and achieving an appropriate way of listening was specific to each interaction with unique and diversely situated participants, where adherence to rigid structure was unsuitable. It was only when I interrogated my initial reliance on the safety of rules and structure in terms of the set of questions that I asked, for instance, that I was able to arrive at these realizations. Turning away from the scientific method – shifting from the idea that neutrality, objectivity, and replicability should be attempted, and could be achieved, within unique interactions – was a personal process. Considering how I acted out feminist methodological commitments to partiality, which I had valued but struggled to put into practice, was fundamental to this process. It was only when I properly confronted the appropriateness of structure and rules, and recognized the limits of aspirations to objectivity and neutrality in terms of my own conversations with participants, that I fully appreciated pioneering feminist methodological rejections of the scientific method.

3.2 | Reflexivity: positionality and emotional labour

Feminist methodologies also illustrate that we cannot 'separate who we are as persons from the research and analysis that we do'.¹⁰⁶ However, they stress that we can be reflexive about how our personal biographies and situation within wider power relations affect the interactions that we have and the knowledge that we generate.¹⁰⁷ In the wider qualitative emphasis on reflexivity,

¹⁰² Anderson et. al., n. 20.

¹⁰³ Oakley, op. cit., n. 20, p. 266.

¹⁰⁴ L. Back, *The Art of Listening* (2007) 166. For a rich discussion of the importance of listening within feminist discourses and movements surrounding sexual violence, see T. Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (2018).

¹⁰⁵ Deutsch, op. cit., n. 7, p. 889; Goffman, op. cit., n. 42, pp. 208–238.

¹⁰⁶ J. M. Corbin and A. L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2008) 11.

¹⁰⁷ Ramazanoglu and Holland, op. cit., n. 10.

Robert Faulkner and Howard Becker acknowledge that becoming ‘an active participant’ in the ‘world you want to study both helps and hinders your work’.¹⁰⁸ Feminist methodologies highlight that the process of becoming who we are – insider, outsider, or betwixt-and-between – in our research starts well before we have a research proposal. Becoming is a process of recognizing the places from which we listen and speak as we interact with participants and construct the stories that we do.

Feminist methodological commitments to reflexivity entail recognizing that our research is both haunted and enriched by the many ‘ghosts’ of our personal histories and situation within social worlds.¹⁰⁹ Reckoning with these ghosts and being able to face ourselves in our work is often painful, especially regarding sensitive topics such as sexual violence. As Sara Ahmed notes, the process of becoming a feminist is a ‘bumpy’ and often painful labour, ‘a form of self-assembly’ that entails ‘being prepared to be undone’, being willing to unravel our experiences and look towards our own lives and selves, in order to cross the bridge between theory and practice and recognize the production of knowledge as an inherently personal process.¹¹⁰ In my fieldwork, listening to the stories that my participants shared in the moment, and listening back again during activities such as transcription, required listening to myself. It demanded that I notice my own hesitations, pauses, resistances, and responses. Beyond listening to my participants, it also required listening to those around me in everyday life. Given the pervasiveness of sexual violence, any attempt to treat research into sexual abuse in silo – as neatly isolated from our personal relationships and situation in social worlds – is deeply problematic. Being accountable to those around me and recognizing that anyone can be affected by sexual violence meant being attentive and sensitive during daily interactions and the presentation of myself and my work. Critically looking for, and finding, myself within my research with sexual violence support services was often a painful, uncertain, and fraught process. It involved reckoning with how to package my research to both strangers and those close to me and how to position myself in relation to participants – how to speak, how to listen, and how to sit with the fact that the processes of speaking and listening and framing research were imbued with my position in relation to others. Grappling with my presence and position, both inside and outside research interactions, was part of the process of translating feminist commitments to reflexivity into practice. Translating my theoretical commitment to reflexivity as a valuable, enriching, and ethically necessary process meant putting many aspects of myself under the microscope, forcing myself to listen back to parts of interviews where I had failed to listen attentively, for instance, even when it was deeply personal and painful.

Part of becoming a feminist methodologist also meant interrogating how the process of doing research into sexual violence affected me. It meant being reflexive about the ‘emotional load’ that sensitive research can ‘place on the researcher as well [as participants]’.¹¹¹ As Rebecca Campbell notes, as researchers we are often ‘ghostwriters for our own work’, in that the emotional labour that we do as part of knowledge production is frequently effaced, subtracted, or silenced in the presentation of that knowledge.¹¹² Remaining alive to the very real threat of ‘emotional exhaustion’

¹⁰⁸ R. R. Faulkner and H. S. Becker, ‘Studying Something You Are Part Of: The View from the Bandstand’ (2008) 38 *Ethnologie française* 15, at 15.

¹⁰⁹ McCorkel and Myers, op. cit., n. 84, p. 212.

¹¹⁰ S. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) 27.

¹¹¹ Edwards, op. cit., n. 1, p. 192.

¹¹² R. Campbell, *Emotionally Involved: The Impact of Researching Rape* (2002) 15.

and vicarious trauma, and planning enough space, time, and resources to process the narratives that we listen to and help to construct, is a duty emphasized within feminist methodologies.¹¹³ The risk of this emotional exhaustion starts well before negotiating access or beginning data collection.¹¹⁴ For example, compiling my sampling frame required systematically looking through the websites of umbrella agencies and services. Apart from being an overwhelming task in terms of the mass of material to tabulate, much of the information that I read was sensitive: it included definitions of sexual violence, survivors' poetry and prose, and survivors' art. I spent moments feeling alienated, lost, and voyeuristic visiting websites that I knew service users would be accessing at the same time; feeling the weight of minute fragments of information, such as guidance on trying not to wash, or change clothes, in the immediate aftermath of sexual violence, to preserve forensic evidence where survivors wished for it to be collected; and grappling with the fact that both the offline landscape, such as service closures, and online information about services rapidly evolve. Remembering feminist methodological commitments to reflexivity was critical here in remaining alive to my reactions, and capacity to process narratives about sexual violence. This was not an easy process. It took time, and sustained reflection, to know when to take breaks or how to process and carry pieces of information that stuck with me. In a sense, the journey towards becoming a feminist methodologist, of putting commitments to reflexivity into practice even when painful and difficult, was not a process that started at the point of data collection; it started well before I began speaking to participants. It was a process that began when I started reckoning with what it meant to enact feminist commitments to locate everything that I brought to my research.

3.3 | Giving back: recognizing possibilities for exploitation

Building a bridge between feminist emphases on making meaningful contributions to the communities studied and achieving this in practice was also an iterative and fraught process of becoming during my fieldwork. Prior to data collection and any negotiation of access, my application for a voluntary position at a frontline service was rejected due to my limited availability. This experience forced me to consider my commitment to core feminist methodological values, such as giving back and knowledge exchange, and the expectations that I placed on those within a sector with which I would later seek to produce knowledge.¹¹⁵

While I assumed that I was following feminist commitments to reciprocity and exchange, I failed to critically question what my involvement, and as an extension my research, could actually give sexual violence support services.¹¹⁶ I was ashamed that the organization had used its precious time and staff resources to read my application when I had only been willing to give a very limited amount of my own time. This moment forced me to interrogate why I had restricted the amount of time that I offered when I had hoped to achieve trust, understanding, rapport, and even insider status through this position. My naivety here, in not anticipating that a service would reject an application that failed to meaningfully contribute time, compelled me to reckon with and confront fears of emotional involvement; it also compelled me to recognize my attempt to place distance

¹¹³ Edwards, *op. cit.*, n. 1, p. 192.

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ Burgess-Proctor, *op. cit.*, n. 72, p. 127.

¹¹⁶ Silverman, *op. cit.*, n. 30.

or space between the world that I wished to research and my daily life, as if neat separation was possible. Reflecting on the meaning of reciprocity at this stage proved invaluable later during data collection, when I was able to more fully confront the hesitancies, fears, and misconceptions towards personal involvement that I initially brought to my research. It also encouraged me to sit with the uncomfortable and liminal status of outsider, relinquish my desire to present as a 'knower', and remain alive to the ways in which I approached and listened to those with whom I spoke and the stories that I was told.¹¹⁷

Part of becoming a feminist methodologist was cultivating this awareness of how to give back, and of being accountable and honest about where giving back was not achieved; the messiness of making mistakes and addressing the moments where I was not a good feminist methodologist, where I did not successfully enact the feminist values that I held in theory, was integral to the process of becoming one. Treading the path between feminist methodological commitments to giving back, reciprocal knowledge production, and dissolution of hierarchy that I held dear required attending to how I negotiated and enacted these commitments in practice. Ultimately, grappling with all of the imperfect ways in which I crossed the bridge between feminist theory and my own practice during research enriched my understanding of the concrete meaning of feminist methodological commitments to reciprocity, care, and knowledge production.

4 | CONCLUSION

There are many challenges involved in translating the rich and diverse insights that feminist methodologies offer into practice. In drawing upon some of my experiences of undertaking socio-legal research with sexual violence support services, this article has framed engaging with feminist methodologies as a continuous and rigorous process of becoming. Crossing the bridge between thinking as a feminist and doing as a feminist methodologist – between theoretical and ideological commitments and concrete actions and decisions – is a fraught, often painful, and sometimes chaotic path to tread. However, as this article has argued, being honest about the difficulty of navigating this landscape is integral to becoming a feminist methodologist.

Critically reflecting upon the tension and incongruence between my theoretical feminist commitments and my actions during research ultimately sharpened my appreciation of the rigour, introspection, and integrity involved in what it means to become a feminist methodologist. Turning feminist theoretical values into feminist practice is a constant, often challenging, but deeply enriching project – one that recognizes and celebrates looking for and finding ourselves in the research that we do.

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¹¹⁷ Letherby, op. cit., n. 4, p. 5.

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