GENDERED SOCIAL INDICATORS AND GROUNDED THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a pilot program undertaken to assess the advantages and disadvantages of including significant elements of grounded theory in research measuring women’s progress. This pilot program, carried out in Western Australia, aimed at broadening the range of data collection and analysis methods in the field of gendered social and economic indicators. It featured ten affinity group discussions with sixty-two women and six men on the issue of women’s progress in the region. The results have implications for future research on women’s well-being.

KEYWORDS

Social indicators, women’s status, feminist methodology, focus groups, grounded theory, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, we carried out a pilot program to assess the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating significant elements of grounded theory methodology into attempts to measure women’s social and economic progress. The pilot program consisted of ten affinity groups, made up of sixty-two women and six men, which held discussions on the issue of women’s progress in Western Australia. Our goal in forming these groups was to broaden the range of data collection and analysis methods in the field of gendered social and economic indicators. We believe the results of this pilot program have implications for future research on women’s well-being.

BROADENING METHODOLOGIES

A number of considerations prompted our decision to choose affinity groups as a potential means of broadening research methods. First, we were aware that social and economic indicators, the traditional ways of assessing

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women's status, are surrogate measures for unobservable aspects of social activity. Researchers use these measures to assess changes in a social activity that is, in itself, unobservable. The usefulness of an indicator derives from its relationship to the unmeasurable concept for which it is a proxy. Its main feature is that it is quantifiable, thereby allowing comparisons to be made between jurisdictions, between populations, and over time (Michael Carley 1981).

Gendered indicators—such as life expectancy, average wage rates, access to resources, average working hours, and women's political representation—can be used to assess changes in women's social and economic status. These statistical data collections typically allow comparisons of diverse social and economic outcomes. When changes and comparisons are apparently favorable to women, they may be perceived as indicating "progress," that is, movement toward a desired goal or position. However, as Alaka Malwade Basu (1992), Yasmeen Mohiuddin (1996), and Mona Danner, Lucia Fort, and Gay Young (1999) have pointed out, perceptions of what constitutes improvement in one's economic and social situation are subjective. So too are researchers' assessments of whether changes in an indicator represent positive or negative change for specific persons or in specific contexts (Carley 1981; Julie Aslaksen, Ane Flaatten and Charlotte Koren 1999; and Frederik Barth 1999).

In addition, these statistical data collections can fail to accurately reflect women's interests and problems (Desley Deacon 1985; Nancy Folbre 1991). The relative lack of data on domestic violence, the working conditions of female outworkers, and the distribution of resources within households, for instance (Nancy Folbre 1994; Danner, Fort, and Young 1999; Elizabeth Durbin 1999), illustrates how ostensibly quantitative data are underpinned by significant qualitative assumptions (Diana Strassmann 1997). Therefore, while existing gendered indicators allow many useful insights into women's relative economic and social status, they may also neglect issues of importance to women. Women's perceptions of the relevance and meaning of existing indicators may also vary according to their experiences (Patrice Flynn 1999; Siri Naess 1999).

Another problem with relying strictly on gender breakdowns of existing statistical bases is that these may cause researchers to benchmark women's experiences against those of men. This tendency may contribute to a research framework in which women's experiences are devalued and/or men's experiences are perceived as achievements that women should emulate. Such a framework contains elements of the "add women and stir" approach to economics derided by Sandra Harding (1987). It may also contribute to a relatively uncritical application and validation of existing theoretical constructs to new areas (Susan Himmelweft 1995; Sabine O'Hara 1999). These potential difficulties challenge those who seek to monitor women's social and economic status: we must develop a framework
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capable of both illustrating the value of some of women's differing experiences and of identifying sources of social and economic injustice in others.

Given these considerations, the research team decided to seek out a research framework in which the categories and themes for data collection, as well as the development and evaluation of indicators, were related to women's own perceptions and experiences of economic and social change.

An obvious candidate for this task is grounded theory. This theory provides a research methodology in which data collection and hypothesis formation are conducted concurrently as part of an all-inclusive process of theory development. In an iterative process, researchers using grounded theory collect data on the topic of interest, analyze it for emergent themes and linkages, and then form hypotheses.

In comparison with more orthodox forms of hypothesis formation and data collection that economists use, grounded theory gives a relatively low priority to a priori theorizing and reliance upon existing theoretical constructs. This does not mean that researchers approach a question as though they are value-free "blank slates." Proponents of grounded theory both accept and expect that researchers will bring theoretical sensitivity to a research program; they also consider an understanding of standard theoretical constructs and conceptual insights as integral to the research (Wanda J. Orlikowski 1993). However, once researchers have framed a research question, the methodology requires that theoretical constructs be explicitly drawn from data. The most significant issues and the linkages among them must be developed from data. Thus, grounded theorists generate hypotheses, gather and analyze data, refine or reformulate hypotheses, and gather further data.

Grounded theory has drawn criticism for not requiring the investigator to distance herself from what can be investigated; as a result, some scholars see it as overtly subjective and value bound. Other scholars question whether it is possible to generalize from theory that emerges from a grounded theory approach (see, for example, Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Craig J. Thompson 1997; Seán D. Bürca and Damien McLoughlin, 1998). Others contend that grounded theory helps researchers produce analytical generalizations of theoretical concepts and patterns, which, while their significance may vary according to context, can be of universal importance (Dorothy Leonard-Barton 1990; Orlikowski 1993).

Despite the disagreements over its overall validity, grounded theory may prove to be a useful methodological framework for identifying and developing indicators of social and economic progress indicators that are based on women's own perceptions of these issues. According to O'Hara (1999), the appropriate theoretical approach for determining the areas of women's lives relevant to developing meaningful gendered social and economic indicators should involve collecting and analyzing broad-ranging
data on women’s perceptions of social and economic progress, yet without relying upon existing theoretical constructs. Instead, the process should be based on data collection and on discourse-based reflections about the meaning and measurement of social and economic progress.

The grounded theory approach was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) to add legitimacy and rigor to qualitative research. Grounded theory has been especially successful when existing theories have been inadequate for situations with social and cultural specificity. For example, it has gained some prominence among health researchers seeking to incorporate knowledge of problems specific to their patients into their individual treatment plans (Barbara Keddy, Sharon L. Sims, and Phyllis Noerager Stern 1996: 450). As numerous scholars have pointed out, grounded theory has also been useful to management theorists, who have found existing theoretical structures to be inadequate when applied in non-Western countries (Nancy J. Adler, Nigel Campbell, and Andre Laurent 1989). Similarly, grounded theory has helped analyses of rapid technological change such as the introduction of computer-aided software engineering (Orlikowski 1993) and in instances when cooperation rather than (the expected) competition has emerged among firms (Larry Browning, Janice M. Beyer, and Judy C. Shetler 1995; Judy Scott 2000).

That grounded theory is useful in situations that do not conform to perceived norms has importance for feminist research. Women’s experiences do not always fit the established theoretical frameworks of economics, which are based on autonomous individuals and market exchange. Further, as women are themselves a diverse population, research methods need to accommodate the possibility of divergent experiences and views (O’Hara 1999). Grounded theory is also consistent with the view that knowledge is socially constructed and that researchers play an interpretative role when collecting and analyzing data and formulating theory.

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A PILOT RESEARCH PROGRAM

Aims of the project and the research question

Our goal in carrying out this program was to gain familiarity with research methods associated with grounded theory, and to assess the possible advantages of integrating this research method into studies of indicators of women’s social and economic progress.

From the outset, we designed the research program to be limited in scale. While the ultimate aim of grounded theory research is to generate new
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theory, in this case we did not intend to develop new theories from the project. Rather, we anticipated that the project might proceed as far as identifying themes and issues of importance to women's social and economic well-being in Western Australia. At a later stage, we plan to use the data to evaluate the adequacy of existing measures of women's progress and to develop new measures as needed. In keeping with the exploratory nature of the research, we planned a relatively limited program of data collection and analysis. Financial resources, commensurate with the size of the program, were made available by Curtin University's Business School and the Women's Policy Office, a bureau of the Western Australia state government.

Data collection

A grounded theory methodological framework does not, in itself, necessitate a specific form of data collection. Various forms of data are consistent with a grounded theory approach to research, including field research, secondary data, and literature. Part of our program was constructing definitions of women's social and economic status, which required us to investigate questions of meaning, to ask participants to describe values, and to have them relate experiences of change over time. Thus, interviews and recording conversations were the most appropriate methods of data collection (Janice M. Morse 1994).

Interviews and conversations can be conducted in a variety of ways. We decided that focus group discussions would offer several advantages for examining perceptions and experiences of changes in women's social and economic status. This form of data collection facilitates the natural emergence of themes from discussion among the participants. In contrast, interview questions developed by the researcher tend to produce narrow or otherwise unsatisfactory answers. (Irene van Staveren 1997; Frances Montell 1999). Feminist research from the other social sciences, and increasingly from within economics, provides considerable theoretical and practical guidance in conducting this form of data collection (Harding 1987; Mary L. Hirschfield 1997).

We decided to collect data by means of a type of focus group known as a natural affinity group. Forming such groups entailed recruiting participants with similar backgrounds, who knew one another or had something in common, and who could meet in a place that was convenient and familiar to them. The use of natural affinity groups enables a researcher to listen in on conversations in which participants are comfortable speaking with one another about what could otherwise be sensitive or controversial (Eileen Van Aken, Dominie Monetta, and Scott Sink 1994). A program of ten affinity groups was planned.
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Participant selection

Affinity group participants were selected with the goal of maximum variety sampling. This means that rather than selecting a statistically representative sample of the population, researchers select participants who represent, as closely as possible, a heterogeneous sample. This process of selection facilitates the collection of two types of data: high quality case descriptions, which document uniqueness; and common experiences across participants (Morse 1994). Selecting this form of sampling was consistent with the researchers' interest in studying areas of commonality and diversity within a varied population.

Western Australia is a large state, culturally and geographically diverse. We identified five broad, interrelated characteristics of women who live there. These “areas of diversity” were socio-economic background; cultural background; age or stage in the life cycle; geographic location; and attachment to the labor market. These identified areas of diversity were not intended to be exhaustive and did not include, for example, sexuality. While each affinity group consisted of a relatively homogeneous group of participants, the total range of participants was purposefully but randomly recruited to encompass a diverse range of women and men. To assist with monitoring and ensuring diversity, each participant was asked to complete a short survey summarizing demographic, social, and economic variables.

We recruited participants through a variety of methods, including making requests to a retirement village, a primary school, and tertiary institutions, as well as to a personal contact in a regional town. The Women’s Policy Office helped us recruit participants in regional areas, and we engaged a consultant to assist with recruitment of indigenous participants. In each case, the initial contact person was informed of the broad nature of the research project and then asked to gather a group of six to eight people who would be willing to discuss women’s social and economic progress. The venues for these discussions, chosen to be familiar and convenient for participants, included, for example, a classroom at their children’s school, a local community activity center, a small reception room at a local hotel, and private homes. The resulting ten groups were characterized as:

1. Women in professional or managerial occupations.
2. Mothers of school children aged between 5 and 12 years.
3. Women residing in Kalgoorlie (a major regional center with an economy based on mining).
4. Women residing in Bunbury (a major regional center with a diverse industrial base).
5. Women residing in Manjimup (a small rural town).
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(6) Women residing in a Perth retirement village.
(7) Women aged 17 to 20 (of varying educational attainments).
(8) Urban Aboriginal women.
(9) Urban immigrant women.
(10) A group of fathers of school children aged between 5 and 12 years.

Information from a short initial survey confirmed that the participants represented diversity in terms of income, place of birth, age, employment status, occupation, and household structure and responsibilities.

Affinity group questions and discussions

The aim was to keep each discussion as broad as possible, but within the following parameters: What were the participant’s goals and aspirations? What constituted “progress” for them as individuals? How would participants describe progress for women in general? We achieved this aim by having the affinity group facilitator provide the following brief introduction to participants.

We have been undertaking some research into how women’s progress is measured. This is important because many policy decisions affecting women use statistics, sometimes called indicators, to measure whether women are becoming worse off or better off in our society.

We would really like to get your ideas on what you think progress means. Perhaps if we start by thinking about your ideal or perfect society. What would you be doing? What would other women be doing? Would things be very different from the way they are now?

This introduction proved suitable for initiating enthusiastic and lengthy responses from participants with minimal direction from the facilitator. Discussions proceeded for at least ninety minutes and in some cases were wound up by the facilitator after two hours. When necessary, the facilitator prompted further conversation by seeking clarification or further exploration of issues previously raised by groups rather than referring to a list of structured questions.

Taping and transcription of conversations

Taping was carried out using a high quality transcription tape-recorder, which could capture the voices of people sitting around a table or room. Two researchers attended each group discussion with one researcher acting as a discussion facilitator and the other taking notes. The notes were taken to ensure that some data collection could proceed in the case of equipment or power failure.
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Data analysis and use of software

Following the meeting of each affinity group, the tapes were transcribed for analysis. We carried out analysis by reading through the transcript and noting the different themes and issues that emerged during the group discussions. Relevant sections of each transcript, focusing on different themes, were assigned a code, which was applied to subsequent transcripts when the same theme arose. For example, sections of transcript discussing the relationship between paid and unpaid work were given one code, sections dealing with physical safety and well-being another code, and so on. The researchers then grouped together sections of different transcripts with the same code to facilitate analysis of themes by different groups.

We facilitated the coding and analysis process by using software known as NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data*Indexing Searching and Theorizing). This program allows each part of a transcript to be electronically categorized, labeled according to group, and collated according to theme. New codes (NUD*IST calls these nodes) can be created when new themes emerge and existing codes can be merged, moved, or renamed as data collection proceeds. With appropriate formatting of the original transcript, a coded section can be as small as a sentence, or, if the conversation focuses upon one issue for a lengthy period, several pages. The software enables researchers to readily group together, for further analysis, conversations on related themes from different transcripts. Thus, they can examine whether there was consensus or diversity of views on a specific issue, whether the issue was raised by only one group or by a range of groups, and the linkages between this issue and other themes discussed by participants.

Following analysis of transcriptions from the first two groups, it appeared that the diversity of issues was so great that each affinity group would generate a different set of themes and categories. However, as further discussions proceeded, a number of central themes emerged.

To the surprise of researchers, a number of seemingly important issues relating to women's social and economic status did not arise during the early discussions. These issues included the availability of health and educational services and environmental issues. It was decided that toward the end of the next two meetings of affinity groups, the facilitator would introduce these issues to determine whether they generated significant debate or were, in fact, of little interest to the participants in these groups. While these more specific questions initiated some conversation among participants, the identified issues did not emerge as central concerns and we decided not to proceed with further specific questioning of other groups. The issue of these apparently neglected topics is discussed in further detail in the outcomes section of this paper.
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OUTCOMES: FINDINGS ON THE PROGRESS, STATUS, AND GOALS OF WOMEN IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The small-scale nature of the project meant that the resulting analysis could not generate conclusions necessarily applicable to the population of Western Australian women. The data obtained were rich and diverse but did not have statistical validity; nor did they allow the confident formation of firm hypotheses. In the language of grounded theory, "saturation" had not been achieved. However, analysis of the qualitative data was necessary for two reasons. First, as this was a pilot program, it was essential that the researchers gained familiarity with this form of analysis. Second, we hoped to achieve an appreciation of the insights that could be gained through this process rather than relying on statistical data alone. Within this context, we briefly summarize the outcomes (Siobhan Austen, Therese Jefferson, and Vicki Thein 2001).

Initial themes from the first two focus groups were diverse, and the first themes and categories identified proved difficult to apply as further data were collected. However, as the coding and categorization of data proceeded, four main themes emerged. These are listed in Table 1, along with the various sub-categories of data that were identified. The first theme related to how people identified change and social progress over time. By referring to specific social and economic changes over the preceding four to five decades, participants identified developments they felt had facilitated women’s ability to reach their goals. Discussion of different groups revealed some consensus on the idea that changes related to women’s greater participation in paid employment and its benefits, such as greater career choices and improved access to finance, constituted progress for women. Employment conditions that facilitated women’s participation in the labor force were also seen as progress, particularly the introduction of maternity leave. Participants also identified significant advances unrelated to paid work, including greater control over fertility and improved labor-saving technologies.

However, most groups believed that not all social and economic change was positive. Participants felt that they, or their children, were under increased pressure to achieve success in formal education and careers. They had the impression that few real prospects existed for those who did not pursue goals in these areas. Some participants felt that there were difficulties with defining appropriate roles for those who had relied on traditional models in family and household relationships, and that old stereotypes were being replaced with new expectations. Others expressed concern about "new" social problems such as the greater availability of illicit drugs, declining physical safety, and the breakdown of informal care structures within the community.
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Table 1 Categories developed for data analysis

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<tr>
<th>1. Identifying change and progress</th>
<th>1.1 Changes</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1.2 Careers and work, new sources of identity</td>
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<td>1.3 The invisible role of unpaid work at home</td>
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<td>1.4 Change and lack of change in society</td>
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<td>1.5 Changing relationships with men</td>
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<td>1.6 &quot;New&quot; choices</td>
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<td>1.7 &quot;New&quot; problems</td>
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<td>2. Home and work</td>
<td>2.1 Entering and maintaining careers</td>
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<td>2.2 Different rewards</td>
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<td>2.3 &quot;Boys' clubs&quot; and men's attitudes in the workplace</td>
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<td>2.4 Gender balance and bias</td>
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<td>2.5 Other workplaces</td>
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<td>2.8 Support from the family</td>
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<td>3. Social context</td>
<td>3.1 Expectations of women</td>
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<td>3.2 Relationships between women and men</td>
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<td>3.3 Regional and social variations</td>
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<td>3.4 Cultural differences</td>
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<td>4. Goals and aspirations</td>
<td>4.1 A balanced life</td>
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<td>4.2 Self-employment</td>
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<td>4.3 Contributing to the community</td>
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<td>4.4 Financial security and independence</td>
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<td>4.5 Lack of money—an obstacle to reaching goals</td>
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<td>4.6 Physical safety</td>
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<td>4.7 Self-realization</td>
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A second major theme related to women's increasing participation in the workforce and their simultaneous retention of substantial responsibility for unpaid household work. Discussions on this theme were broad ranging. Participants felt that while women had greater opportunities in the workforce, it was difficult for them to achieve all they would like in their careers. The reasons cited ranged from exclusionary work practices and workplace cultures, labeled by some participants as "boys' clubs," to workplace policies governing issues such as working hours and salary packaging, to formal institutional arrangements for childcare and the changing availability of informal care through families and friends.

Third, participants had considerable discussion on the impact of social context on women's ability to achieve their goals. Changing expectations (from men and women) of women's roles, lack of access to educational and employment opportunities in their local area, and the significance of cultural background were included in this category of data.

Finally, participants identified a diverse range of social and economic goals, with most participants wanting to achieve or maintain at least one of
the following: a balanced life; self-employment; financial independence and security; a contribution to the community; pursuit of further education and interests; good health; and a spiritual basis to their life. The extent to which social change contributed to these goals frequently determined whether participants viewed such change as a positive or negative force for women.

Participants from all groups felt that women had some distance to travel before they could hope to achieve their goals without facing substantial impediments. Overwhelmingly, we gained the impression that women feel that they continue to face stark choices and substantial costs when they bear children. These were attributed to the direct economic penalties associated with absences from the paid workforce, the lack of recognition and status afforded to those who undertake household work, and a loss of financial independence. Some younger women felt that it was embarrassing and a risky career move to even mention that they would like to have children.

Some issues appeared to be important to specific groups of people. For example, many goals discussed by indigenous participants related to their wishes to contribute to the further development of their local communities. They viewed the pursuit of skills and education that would facilitate such contributions as important. Within this context, policies assisting reconciliation and attempts to include indigenous history and culture within mainstream education were seen as social changes that could assist with these goals. Similarly, physical safety seemed to be of particular concern for older women. The identification of specific concerns for different groups of women provides an example of the possible advantages of developing additional indicators relevant to women's diverse circumstances.

As noted above, while these findings were of local interest, the pilot scale of the research program limits their significance. The diversity of views presented throughout the project illustrates the importance of canvassing the views of participants from a wide range of backgrounds. While several issues were raised by all or most groups, some issues were raised by only one or two groups. It is quite likely that some important issues remain unidentified because of the limited number of groups included in the study. Substantially larger numbers of participants need to be included in a comprehensive study in order to ensure the capture of as many views as possible. For this reason, no attempt was made to prioritize issues based on the frequency with which they were raised or their distribution across groups.

LESSONS FROM THIS RESEARCH

This project was a pilot program. As such, its main outcomes are the lessons it provides for future research using these research methods. One of these outcomes was a richness and understanding of data that could
not be gathered from our previous focus on existing statistics and indicators (Siobhan Austen, Alison Preston, and Therese Jefferson 2000a, 2000b). The process of listening to participants' experiences and the complexity of the linkages between different areas of social and economic activity will provide a subject for future analysis that we expect will assist researchers in developing the types of indicators that may prove useful in the future. The use of a grounded research approach therefore offers advantages that have not been available through more narrowly defined research questions.

A few examples serve to illustrate the dimensions added by collecting data directly based on people's experiences within a grounded theory approach. The first example is the prominence many women give to the impact that social and institutional contexts have played in decisions they have made throughout their lives:

... I've made a journey but that journey hasn't taken me as far as I would have liked to have gone ... perhaps because of the choices I made earlier in my life that were to do with the way I was brought up and things that I was led to believe that women were supposed to do.

That again is pressure on women like us. They expect you to have a good job and also raise children and be a good mother too. There is a different pressure in that way. When you were growing up you had one kind of pressure to have family and children, but these days we have two pressures from two sides. When asked what you do - it's just not complete if you just say I am a mother.

... I find that hard. I've got ten years, I've got to get this done, I've got to get myself established as a person before I can have that family or have that pressure of having to have a family. You've got that biological clock thing and society pressure that you’ve got to have a child before you’re 35 or 40 because otherwise you’re a nutter or something.

Another example was the complex relationship between women undertaking different roles within society and the importance of recognizing diversity among women. It was clear that women do not see themselves as a homogeneous group and that policies suited to some women may not be welcomed by others.

There is also tension between women. Some women have to cope with an extra workload when they [other women] are off with children.

Discussions of changing social structures illustrated the complex linkages between family, community, and social support, which allow women to pursue goals outside their home, particularly when they have primary responsibility for the care of children or other family members.
Here we have the nannas of the world working as well. My children, if they need me to look after their children I am working, I've got my own job, so I can't baby sit my grandkids so readily. So childcare is necessary for them.

... we don't have the support to help—the grandmothers are not there to help to look after the kids or help with the housework. Or you don't have your sister two blocks away to mind the kids so you can do what you want. It's like gone. We are by ourselves; we are isolated now, we have to create our own community.

A final example is provided by women's evaluations of the adequacy of their wages or their ownership of assets. They frequently assessed these factors by referring to the degree of financial independence they had gained (or not gained), rather than by comparing their achievements with men's rates of remuneration and control of assets.

If my husband walked out on me tomorrow, I wouldn't be financially independent. I've always depended on him to support me. I've had part-time work but I've never had a career where I could feel that I could walk away if I chose to and still support myself.

I have my own property—it's my safety net. It's mine ... I have basically created my own empire. I don't know why—I just wanted my independence ... Even now I wouldn't have children unless I knew I could bring them up myself—just in case.

It's independence. If you're young and you're a woman and you've got no money then you can't be independent of your parents or your husband or your boyfriend.

Insights into the role of social expectations, institutions, complex social and economic linkages, diverse needs, and the motivations for seeking financial independence and asset accumulation may have implications for the development of theory relevant to women's experiences. While the study was too small to contribute to the development of any specific aspect of theory, the methodology appears to demonstrate some difficulties associated with traditional theoretical frameworks and data collection methods, which treat social and economic institutions and individual preferences as exogenous to women's roles as economic decision-makers.

The researchers also gained insights into the importance of how the facilitator introduced the topic to participants. On reflection, our research question, which asked group members to define their vision of a perfect society, may have contributed to the very limited discussion of issues we thought would naturally arise. These issues included reductions (or improvements) in government services, the increasingly casual or temporary nature of work contracts, and long working hours or
environmental issues, to name a few. Similarly, relatively few groups raised issues related to the accessibility of educational and health services, except when the facilitator specifically introduced this topic, as discussed above.

While these issues may have been of little concern to the participants, it is also possible that the research question itself encouraged particular responses. The term “women’s progress” denotes an implicit comparison with men’s achievements, and participants appear to have focused on those areas of social and economic activity where women may be perceived as being at a disadvantage compared with men. As for those areas of social or economic activity perceived as equally advantageous or disadvantageous for both men and women, it is possible that participants may not have viewed them as relevant to the introductory question.

Further, the term “progress” appears to have caused participants to focus on the economic aspects of well-being. If they equated “progress” with economic gain, they may well have focused on certain aspects of their experiences rather than others. Despite this tendency, however, some participants did raise issues relating to spirituality and the non-economic aspects of their lives.

These issues do not mean that the research findings are not valid. There is little doubt that participants considered the issues they brought up during discussions to be significant. It may mean, however, that the list of issues covered in this study is unlikely to be exhaustive.

Thus, in future projects, researchers may need to reconsider or rewrite the introductory questions of the facilitators. For example, in order to overcome the implicit comparison with men’s achievements invoked by the words “women’s progress,” it may be prudent to open the discussion with a general question relating to social and economic progress for all and to introduce later the question of whether progress means something different for women than for men. Also, substituting “well-being” for “progress” in the facilitator’s introduction may provide some insights into the likelihood that “progress” was prompting particular themes to arise during discussions.

The researchers learned various practical lessons, which could facilitate the efficiency of future projects. In one case, a tight traveling schedule for the researchers’ visit to a regional center meant that a planned discussion with indigenous women could not take place because a funeral was held on the same day. A more generous timetable for this aspect of the project may have facilitated holding the discussion on the following day.

On a more positive note, the facilitators’ attention to relatively simple technical issues, such as acquiring high-quality transcription tape-recorders, using extension cords to allow the best placement of the recording equipment, and taking notes in addition to recording conversations, proved well worthwhile in enabling the widest possible capture of data.
CONCLUSIONS

The findings of our pilot program will do little to dispel the view that grounded theory methodology can yield results that are difficult to generalize. However, this project also illustrates several advantages of using a grounded theory approach to conduct research on issues relevant to feminist economics. First, despite concerns about the introductory questions raised at each affinity group, the process allowed issues to emerge which more narrowly defined questions would not have elicited from participants. For example, the relatively unstructured nature of the discussions allowed indigenous women to focus on the importance of reconciliation between indigenous and colonial cultures, facilitated discussion between young women on the perceived risks of wanting to have children, and allowed women from various groups to reflect on the spiritual side of their lives.

Second, our project illustrates the influence that researchers can have—for good and ill—on deciding which indicators are appropriate for monitoring women’s social and economic status. The research method facilitated this discovery by allowing new issues to be raised by participants and by showing that issues of importance to individual researchers will not necessarily be raised in discussions. By lessening the emphasis given to a priori theorizing and by encouraging the identification of key variables and themes from data, the pilot program illustrates that new insights may be gained from a more iterative approach to hypothesis formation and data collection.

An assessment of the data gained through this pilot program also shows that data gathered in a grounded research project can provide a valuable comparison with existing quantitative indicators. For example, many participants focused on employment issues, particularly gender wage gaps and the availability of employment conditions such as maternity leave and flexible working hours. These outcomes provide an endorsement of the use of many of the more readily available indicators that compare earnings and employment conditions between genders and across jurisdictions.

However, while economic and financial aspects of women’s lives were major subjects of the discussions, participants also raised a wide range of issues that are less readily measured. Achieving a balanced life, making a contribution to the local community, and attaining a spiritual basis to life, all of which participants cited as goals, pose obvious difficulties for researchers seeking to develop suitable indicators of whether women have achieved them. However, once we accept that women consider these goals significant for their social and economic well-being, we will rise to the challenge of fulfilling this task.
ARTICLES

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REFERENCES


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ARTICLES


