

11 Writing the Voices of the Less Powerful

Research on Lone Mothers

Kay Standing

In this chapter I discuss one of the final stages of the research process over which we, as researchers, have power and control – the process of writing up. In particular I consider the language we use when we write, and how this may play a role in sustaining hierarchies of knowledge. I do this by looking at my research on low income lone mothers in the inner city, and my own experiences as a white working-class woman re-entering the academic world. I explore the differences and power relations between academic writing, including much feminist work, and working-class women's everyday language. The dilemma I want to address in this chapter is of how we write our research in a language which is acceptable to the academic community but does not alienate the people who took part in our research. This issue is central for feminist research which claims to be 'on, by and *for*' women.¹ It is a particular dilemma for feminist researchers researching groups of less powerful people – that by the ways in which we write, and represent their words to an academic audience, we may in fact reinforce and contribute to inequalities of power.

I have tried to write this chapter in a way which is understandable to most people, not just those of us from academic backgrounds, or taking part in feminist research. It does contain some complex language, the 'technical terminology' of sociology, that illustrates that it is not always possible to write about complex issues in everyday language – often the language does not exist outside the discipline – but I have tried to write as simply as possible in order to make this chapter accessible. The dilemma in this of course is that this very chapter may not be taken seriously, it may be seen as simple, untheoretical, not sufficiently academic. So be it. Part of the reason for this chapter is to challenge those assumptions, to make you, the reader, stop and think about how you write up your own research, about who you are writing for, and what the purpose behind the research is.

However, I have a confession to make about my own use of language. I do not always write in this way. I have written other articles in quite different, more 'academic' language. My PhD is written in quite dense, often complex, theoretical language – it is concerned with the discursive construction of lone motherhood and lone mothers' subjectivities – how lone mothers are seen in

society (or specifically, in the education system) and how they see themselves.

It was through writing the thesis that dilemmas discussed in this chapter arose. I am instrumental in my use of language. We need to recognize that research does not take place in isolation – it is always for someone or some purpose – it always has a chosen audience and cannot be separated from this. The audience we choose to address all too often affects our language and accessibility. I want to challenge that this should be so. If a piece of writing or research is not accessible, because of the language it is written in, to those who take part in the research, what is its purpose? Who is the research for?

This chapter then is more of a ‘raising issues’ chapter than a ‘how to do it’ textbook. Its purpose is to challenge and contest, to make you, the reader, think and question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the language of feminist research, and the purpose of the research.

Background: language in the field

This chapter is based on the dilemmas that face me as I write up my research for a doctoral thesis. My research is on lone mothers’ involvement in their children’s schooling. I am interested in exploring their understandings of their lone motherhood, and how these understandings may differ from those of, and affect their relationships with, their children’s school. The research is based on interviews with 28 lone mothers, all on low incomes (all claiming income support, housing benefit, and/or family credit). The women are of various ages (from 20 to 48), of differing ethnic backgrounds, have children of different ages and live in differing household situations (some with their parents, some with live-in partners, all with their children). All of the women live, or work, on a large North London council estate.

I began the research in the summer of 1993, in the midst of the demonization of lone-mother families in Britain in government rhetoric, policies and the popular media. A moral panic over lone motherhood arose, with lone mothers portrayed as a ‘social threat’ or a ‘social problem’. Newspaper headlines screamed, ‘Wedded to Welfare – Do They Want to Marry a Man or the State?’, ‘Once Illegitimacy Was Punished – Now It Is Rewarded’ (*Sunday Times*, 11 July 1993). A BBC television *Panorama* documentary, *Babies on Benefit* (BBC1, 20 September 1993) portrayed lone mothers as irresponsible, young, single, never-married women, having babies in order to obtain social security (welfare) benefits and council housing. The language used in these debates was inflammatory and derogatory, as Michelle, a white working-class mother with one daughter and one son commented:

... we had all this thing about single parents were like the root of all evil you know. It just got ridiculous. I mean all the pressures we was getting like the government saying we’re doing this, that and the other you know, and people believe it.

When I began the research, dilemmas of difference were at the forefront – I was not a lone mother (I was not, at the time, even a mother). I had never

lived in a lone-mother family – the attacks on lone mothers seemed to have little relevance to my life. Yet the social construction of appropriate motherhood, and control of women's sexuality through a dominant discourse of normative mothering (in a heterosexual, married relationship – a white middle-class model of the nuclear family) are issues that concerned me as a feminist. All women are defined in relationship to motherhood (either positively or negatively) (Gordon, 1990). This construction of all women as potential mothers (and some women as potential 'bad' mothers) is one which impacts on women's lives and identities in various ways, organizing them in particular relationships with institutions, such as schools.²

The women were contacted through snowballing methods, starting with my own social network on the estate. During the course of the fieldwork I became pregnant and gave birth to my daughter – the newly acquired identity of 'mother' opened up contacts with many women (through baby clinics, toddler groups and the like).

I had initially intended to use more 'sociologically acceptable' methods of contacting women by sending out letters through the local primary schools: I had sent out 30 letters in one school and received no replies at all. Again the use of language is important here; other researchers (for example Glucksmann, 1994) have found that working-class women often do not respond to requests for interviews in written form, especially on 'official' stationery. The reasons for this are complex, partly due to a mistrust of authority, but also partly due to the style and language that letters may be written in.

Unlike Tina Miller (this volume) I had little difficulty in gaining access by using snowballing methods. It was slow and time-consuming, with each network running out after about five women, but it allowed me access to women who may not have responded to more 'conventional' methods. Snowballing also gave me access to women whom I would not have contacted otherwise, because they did not fit my definition of a lone mother (for example, if they had a partner). It allowed the women to define their own situation and identity as lone mothers.

Snowballing also helped to break down some of the power relations between myself as the 'researcher' and the women as the 'researched'. It allowed for a relationship of trust to be established because the women were always approached by someone they knew – at first, myself, but as the snowballing progressed, the women who I had interviewed asked their friends and neighbours to take part. In this way, each new 'interviewee' had some idea of what the interview would be like. In this way, snowballing is a useful method for contacting groups of women, such as low income lone mothers, who are vulnerable and stigmatized in everyday life (Lee, 1993). Because I had begun my research in the midst of the British Conservative Party and popular media demonization of lone-mother families, many of the women were initially suspicious of my agenda and the ends the research would be used for. Lone mothers' lives are constantly under supervision, from school, health, welfare and benefit agencies, and many of the women were simply tired of having to

explain their lives again. Jane, a white working-class lone mother with one daughter summed up the feelings of many lone mothers:

I think lone mothers are tired of having to defend ourselves. It's, 'Oh no, why pick on us again?' especially after Peter Lilley [the secretary of State for Social Security who launched a particularly vicious attack on low income, inner city lone mothers in 1993] when everything can be turned against us.

Snowball techniques meant that my sample was not representative of lone mothers nationally, but they allowed me to 'sample explicitly with reference to the social structure' (Coleman, cited in Lee, 1993: 66) of the locality. My sample, although small, is diverse and reflects the varied age, class, ethnicity and family status of lone mothers in the area.

The interviews were in-depth and tape recorded, lasting between one and four hours, depending on the amount of time the women were able to spare in their busy timetables of childcare, housework and paid work. Occasionally, if we ran out of time, an interview would continue the following day or week. Most of the interviews took place in the women's own home, but some also took place in my home. As other researchers have noted (Ribbens, 1989), the interview situation, especially in-depth interviews, gives the interviewee some power to control the interview – the power over what to tell, and the power to decide what to talk about. For me, the interviews seemed to be both like, and unlike, conversations. Often they involved a dialogue between us, and often the women would ask me questions, especially about my family and relationships. Sometimes I felt that our roles were reversed, and I was the one being interviewed. However, at the end of the day, I held the research agenda; it was my questions that led the way the interview went.

In the interview situation, especially when we are women interviewing women about family and household issues, the language that we use, and the issues we discuss are private and shared (see Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Ribbens, 1994). It is when we take the interview tapes and the women's words away for analysis and writing that the dilemmas, for me, begin to appear. However equal the methods of access and interviewing, we, as researchers, still hold the real power when we take the women's private words into the public world of academia. It is in producing the written text, the thesis, research report, journal article, book, that we have the most power (see Pam Alldred, this volume). Researchers hold the power of which data, which parts of the interviews, to use, how to interpret the women's words, what to use the research for, and how to represent the women's voices – what language to use to write. It is, as Maxine Birch argues (this volume), the dilemma of moving from the research world to the sociological world – of moving from being a participant in the research relationship to being in a position of power to translate and interpret.

Dilemmas of speaking and writing

As I began writing up my thesis I became increasingly aware of the differences and contradictions between how I speak, and how I write. Listening to the

tapes of the interviews as I transcribed them, I was aware that there was very little difference between the spoken language of myself and the women I interviewed. We had different regional and ethnic accents and dialects, and the interviews were full of laughter, slang, pauses, idioms and ungrammatical speech that were impossible to reproduce on the written page. I transcribed the tapes as I heard them, as a constant monologue or dialogue, with pauses, hesitations, both of us speaking at once, but with no formal sentence structure, commas, colons and full stops. We do not speak in grammatically correct sentences. We speak in a flowing, haphazard way. But to put the women's voices in the written text in this way looked 'wrong'. It jarred against the complex sentence structure of my academic writing. The language in which the women, and I myself, spoke (and indeed in which most of us, you the reader included, speak) is very different to the language of academic writing. To put the two side by side seemed to reinforce the unequal power relations between me, the researcher, and the women, the researched. Moreover, as Beverley Skeggs points out, it made their words look '... authentic and simple' (Skeggs, 1994a). The issue is not just one of the gaps between the written and the spoken word, but between the spoken word and the academic presentation of the spoken word. It is the ways in which we represent and interpret the women's voices which reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and power.

I had made a conscious decision to 'tidy up' the transcribed words of both the women and myself, for example to edit out some of the 'ums, ahs, errs, you knows', the swearing, and my own constant 'yeahs', and make 'gonna' and 'innit' into 'going to' and 'isn't it'. The before and after example below from Maria, a white working-class lone mother with three daughters, illustrates the dilemmas I faced in transcribing the taped interviews as I heard them, and then translating them into a form more suitable and acceptable for an academic piece of research. Maria's style of speech is distinctive. She speaks quickly and passionately, at '90 miles an hour', barely pausing for breath (and certainly with no respect for grammatical conventions!). During the course of the interview she became upset and emotional, angry and heated. In the passage below she talks of her anger at her ex-husband not paying Child Support:³

I got that letter and I think ... it just don't ... oh I was fuming this morning you know how if one person had just said one thing to me I'd've jumped down their throats you know but that's it ... I think oh sod the lot of them you know I mean they've done no investigation at all I told 'em when they phoned me it's a lie he's living with someone I even spoke to me mother-in-law, I said why is he telling me this 'oh well erm she's not working' and I said 'so fucking what?' that's not my problem and what is the big deal [shouted] 'cos he's expected to pay something for his kids [yeah] it's pathetic you know [yeah]. so erm. I can't say to the kids 'oh this is what you're gonna get [oh no] it's an insult it's like oh yeah this is what you're worth, you ain't even worth a pound each to him you know [yeah] yeah yeah, and it's hurtful you know ...

The lack of punctuation marks makes the passage difficult to read, and sits uneasily in conventionally written text. Yet at the same time, unedited, it

captures Maria's style of speech, it captures her passion and anger, the emotions which became lost in the tidied up, neutralized, 'safe' version of the same passage. The words remain the same, but much of the meaning is lost:

I got that letter and I think . . . It just don't . . . Oh I was fuming this morning. You know how if one person had just said one thing to me, I'd've jumped down their throats. But that's it. I think, oh sod the lot of them you know. I mean they've done no investigation at all. I told them when they phoned me, it's a lie, he's living with someone. I even spoke to my mother-in-law. I said, 'Why is he telling me this?' She said] 'Oh well, erm, she's not working.' And I said, 'So fucking what?' That's not my problem, and what is the big deal 'cos he's expected to pay something for his kids? It's pathetic you know. So, I can't say to the kids, 'Oh this is what you're going to get.' It's an insult. It's like, oh yeah, this is what you're worth, you're not even worth a pound each to him. And it's hurtful you know.

The editing out of many of my interventions, the 'yeahs', also negates the experience of the interview, when often both of us would be talking at once, and has implications for where we place ourselves in the research text.

By tidying up the transcripts in this way, I homogenized the women's voices, making them all sound (or read) the same. I took away their own (and my own) distinctive way of speaking, which reflects their background and culture, and made standard English the 'normal' means of communication. This raises a further dilemma: by doing this, am I further negating the worthiness of the women's language, and indeed of my own? Am I just playing into the hands of the 'establishment' by saying black and white working-class women's ways of speaking are wrong, are inadequate, are not as valid as the academic discourse? However, the women themselves often did not feel that their words were valid as academic discourse, and wanted to tidy up their speech to sound 'more English'. This compromises the character of both their speech and the data and has implications for the production and validation of knowledges.

I tidied up the women's language partly in response to feedback from some of the women after giving them their interview transcripts to read. Initially I asked everyone who took part in the interviews whether they wanted copies of the transcripts. About half of the women did, with others asking for copies of articles or papers written as a result of the research because 'I'd like to see what other single mothers are saying' (Sian, white, one son). Although most did not read them (nor did those who asked for copies of articles or papers I had written), mainly through lack of time,⁴ the comments I did get were not on the contents of the interviews, but on the style and language used – such as, 'Do I really say "you know" all the time?', 'Don't I um and err a lot?' This in itself has important repercussions for the meaning of the interviews. Statements such as, 'You know', and bodily gestures may point to implicit shared understandings between research participants.⁵ Although none of the women actually asked me to alter their style of speech, there was an implicit feeling that it was not good enough for the public world. As Marlene Packwood argues:

. . . [working class-women] at times experience the English language as alien, full of subtleties and nuances which are available to the middle classes. Certain words are

totally out of our area of experience [. . .] It is another aspect of the middle-class lifestyles which reiterate the different world we were brought up in [. . .] Lack of confidence with language mirrors our nervousness inside [. . .] Sometimes the words come out coarse, harsh, clumsily expressing what we need to say. The basic need, language itself, almost as basic as breathing, is still not ours for the asking. (Packwood, 1983: 12)

Many of the women wanted to challenge, and speak (or write) about, the representations of lone mothers, but did not know how to. Maria again:

Maria: I hear and read all this crap about single mothers and I want to go on telly, or write an article and tell them what it's really like, how hard it is . . .

Kay: Why don't you?

Maria: Who'd listen to me? I mean I could talk for hours about my woes, but what difference would it make, they wouldn't take me seriously now would they? Come on, a working-class cockney like me – yeah, they're really gonna have me on Newsnight or something [. . .] I don't know how you're supposed to write things for papers and that [. . .] Maybe they'll listen to you.

The women not only did not have access to the resources to get their voices heard, but they also did not know the correct conventions in which to speak and write. In this way, language acts as a barrier, a way to reinforce inequalities of gender, class and race – the denial of access to the 'correct way' to speak creates hierarchies of knowledge. This again raises issues for us as feminist researchers of what the expectations for the research are.

Often I felt that the women expressed ideas and concepts in plain language much more effectively (and powerfully) than complex theoretical explanations would have done. Yet the process of producing an academic piece of work demanded that I took the women's words and theorized from them, juxtaposing their language with that of the academy. In this way, the women's knowledge becomes invalidated – their ways of saying things and expressing ideas are judged to be not as valid as those of the 'experts', the researchers in the academy. As Maxine Birch (this volume) found, to be reflexive over the use of language, to try to represent the women's words in their own voices brought the dilemma of ' . . . not being sociological, but just being descriptive'. In this way, language becomes one of the ways in which hierarchies of knowledge are reproduced.

The dilemma, however, of the difference between the spoken and the written word is a more general one, and one which goes beyond the difference between the spoken and written word *per se*. Very few of us write in the way that we speak, yet, when we, as academics, write articles and research reports using empirical research, we *do* transcribe our participants' words as they were spoken – their spoken language enters the text to make our work 'authentic' and real – *our* spoken language does not. As researchers we too feel discomfort at the disjunction between our spoken voices and written words. However, as researchers, our voices are hidden behind the academic conventions, contrasting the words of the interviewed with the technical and often abstract language of the social sciences. We need to ask, what does this do to the women (and men) we research? The worlds we investigate are often

those of the less powerful, for feminists, often those of women. What representation, what image of these women are we constructing? We claim we are being 'true' to our respondents by recording their voices accurately, but if their words and language are different from the other written text – the analysis – does this make them seem less valid? For black and white working-class women we need to consider the implications of our use of language – does using their words as they are next to academic language simply reinforce stereotypes of strong and angry women fighting against the system, or of depressed and downtrodden mothers? As feminist researchers one of our roles is to translate between the private world of women and the public world of academia, politics and policy. The dilemma remains of how we do this without reinforcing the stereotypes and cultural constructions we are challenging.

For me, in researching lone mothers the issue of language was crucial. My research practice was (is) informed by feminist theory and an interest in post-structuralism. Above all, I tried to follow Kum-Kum Bhavnani's definition of a feminist project, that

... any study whose main agent is a woman/women and which claims a feminist framework should not reproduce the researched in ways in which they are represented within dominant society – that is, the analysis cannot be complicit with dominant representations which reinscribe inequality. (Bhavnani, 1994: 29)

In this context the use of language and the ways in which I represented lone mothers through the use of their own words was important in challenging the ways in which lone mothers are represented.

It was important to me that I did not use language in a way that would reflect, or reinforce, the negative stereotypes of lone mothers. However, my very use of the term 'lone mother' is in itself an academic construct⁶ – it is a use of language that I, as an academic, have imposed on the women's understandings. All of the women in my research referred to themselves as 'single parents' – regardless of their previous marital status (whether they were divorced, separated, never-married, or had new partners). They rejected the term 'lone' because of the connotations of 'being alone', as Jackie, a white working-class mother with one son stated: 'I'm not on my own am I? I have a family, we are a family.'

Most of the women also used the ungendered term single *parent*, rather than single mother, perhaps as a way of distancing themselves from the negative discourses which focus on single mothers. Here I faced a dilemma with my own use of language: do I use the preferred term of the women I interviewed – single parent – and stay true to their language, or do I use my preferred term – lone mother – a term seldom used outside of academic writings? I decided to sacrifice staying true to the women's words for two instrumental reasons. Firstly, the term lone *mother* emphasizes that it is overwhelmingly *mothers*, women, who are single (lone) parents; to refer to ungendered parents prioritizes fathers and makes invisible the gendered dimensions of lone motherhood. Secondly, the term *lone* mother, is inclusive –

it includes all mothers who define themselves as single (or lone, or self-supporting, or solo or autonomous, all terms used in academic writings), it includes women who are divorced, separated, widowed as well as those conventionally called single – never-married mothers. This example illustrates one of the dilemmas of language – that in gaining a wider definition (or academic credibility) you must often lose part of the ‘authentic’ voices of the women in research.

The issue of language then is especially important for feminist researchers trying to do research ‘on and for’ marginalized and less powerful groups of women, such as lone mothers (see also Pam Alldred, this volume). In the next section I want to explore how the mystification of academic language serves to alienate and disempower these groups of women.

How academic discourse negates everyday language

The language conventions of academic discourse (the language used in academic books and articles, in spoken discussion by some members of the academic world) is different from, and more complex than, the everyday private language of most people. There is no reason why academic language should be different – it is just a convention (Madoc-Jones and Coates, 1996), but it is a convention that excludes others from taking part in academic discourse. It is also a convention that serves a particular purpose – to uphold notions of knowledge as abstract, rational and detached from women’s everyday lives (see Smith, 1988, 1989). Language is not simply a means of communication. It is also an expression of shared understandings and assumptions, and as such it transmits certain (hidden and implicit) values to those who use it. Language is ‘... at once the expression of culture and part of it’ (Mills, 1989: xi). In the academic world, the language used often expresses values and understandings held by white, male, ‘scientific’ culture. It seems to me that, as bell hooks argues, one of the many uses of academic language is to reproduce an intellectual, white, male, middle-class hierarchy where the only work seen to be theoretical is work that is ‘... highly abstract, difficult to read, and containing obscure references’ (hooks, 1994). This ensures that certain knowledges are heard, while others are obscured and hidden. These knowledges may be different from, and in opposition to, those of our own as feminist researchers, and the differing knowledges of the women we interview. This is a point that I will return to later, but first I want to explore some of the implications of the use of this abstract language for feminist research.

Feminist research is concerned with challenging dominant assumptions and representations. I assume if you are reading this book you have some interest in, or familiarity with, feminist research. You may have read the main texts, entered the theoretical debates. You may be engaged in political action inside or outside the academy. If, like me, you came to your research believing you could challenge and contest taken-for-granted assumptions and

question dominant knowledges by using feminist research, you may have been surprised by the ways in which different feminisms seem to reproduce and create hierarchies of knowledge through using complicated 'male-stream' academic language. My experiences of feminist research are mixed. I left academia after completing my MA in women's studies because, much as I loved the subject and found the theory stimulating, I could not relate it to what I was doing, socially, economically and politically, outside the university setting. I felt I had two lives – my academic one, and my personal one where my friends, social network and family were not academic. The feminisms I was learning seemed to be from the standpoints of white middle-class women. They were experiences different from my own, as a white working-class woman. Dorothy Smith (1988, 1989) writes of how, as feminist academics and women, we operate in two worlds – our everyday life, and the sociological world in texts, whose conventions are embedded in the relations of ruling (. . . 'that internally co-ordinated complex of administrative, managerial, professional and discursive organisation that regulates, organizes, governs and otherwise controls our societies', Smith, 1989: 38). The texts that we write – ' . . . the moment after talk has been inscribed as texts and become data when it must be worked up as sociology' (Smith, 1989: 35) – are written in a style and language that conform to sociological discourse – removed from the realities of women's everyday lives.

I returned to academic life seven years later to begin a PhD. I believed feminist theories had 'moved on', begun to deal with differences, and not just the acknowledgement of difference, but the unequal power relations in differences between women (Olson and Shopes, 1991). Yet many of the dilemmas remain unresolved, not least the question of how we write, how we use the words of women who are different from us in a way that represents the realities of their lives, and does not serve to marginalize and oppress further.

Despite the growth of 'difference' feminism, discussions of difference and diversity downplay or ignore questions of language (hooks, 1994). The feminist demands for the primacy of diverse voices that are often silenced, marginalized and/or censored all too often do not question the language used in these demands. Diverse participation does not necessarily mean diverse language. As the audience for feminist writing and speaking grows, and becomes increasingly diverse, it is still assumed that 'standard English' will be the main way of communicating feminist thought.

For feminist researchers in higher education a further dilemma arises – not only must the research be written up in 'standard English', but, with the growth of an academic theoretical 'meta-language', also written in a style that is acceptable to male-stream academia, even if the style and language is inaccessible to the people who take part in research. Despite the increasing number of feminist journals and publications, the growth of women's studies as a discipline, and increasing numbers of black and white working-class women entering social science disciplines, the language of feminism grows increasingly complex and convoluted. This concern is not new – socialist feminists in the 1970s took issue with the complex language of Marxism

(Segal, 1987) – but it seems to have escalated as feminism becomes increasingly interested in debates around postmodernism and post-structuralism.

Feminist theory has recently embraced post-structuralism, or ‘... turned to culture’, (Barrett and Phillips, 1992; Nicholson, 1990), a move from a concern with ‘things’ to a concern with ‘words’ (Barrett, 1992). As a materialist feminist I was initially hostile to the concepts of post-structuralism. It seemed to form a vacuous theory, with no grounding in the material realities of everyday life. Power seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The emphasis on deconstruction seemed to me to alienate theory from practice, to individualize and leave me, as a feminist, with nothing to organize around politically. Postmodernism seemed to represent ‘... the politics of privilege’ (Skeggs, 1994a). Its basis in language meant you needed to understand the language in order to participate. However, as I read more, I found some post-structural feminism (for example, Weedon, 1987) useful in providing a way to deal with competing and often contradictory accounts of life in my data, of theorizing the women’s (and my own) constantly changing identities and accounts of reality. Post-structuralism seemed to present a change from portraying women as ‘passive victims’ of oppression to a recognition of the ‘... possibility of resistance, struggle and active defiance’ (Maynard, 1994: 274). A recognition of the diffuse nature of power is useful, as long as we remember that not all power relations are equally balanced; some of us are more oppressed than oppressors, and vice versa.

It is interesting then that the language of difference, post-structuralism, that offers the most possibility for change and difference, is written in the most inaccessible, exclusionary and complex language (hooks, 1991). It speaks to a very specialized audience, namely those who share the knowledge of the language in which it is based.

This presents a dilemma for feminist researchers, who, like myself, believe post-structuralism offers possibilities for challenging and contesting dominant ideas and the way less powerful groups are represented. This dilemma is perhaps best illustrated by the example of a well-known feminist methodology text, *Breaking Out* (1983), by Liz Stanley and Sue Wise. The first edition was written in simple, easy to understand language. However, the second edition, *Breaking Out Again* (1993) used the complex academic language. Defending their rewrite of *Breaking Out* in the ‘specialist language’ of post-modern and post-structural social science, Stanley and Wise write that as academic feminism has become professionalized, that is, accepted by male-stream sociology ‘... it has become necessary to participate in its language-games in order to be taken seriously as a member of its epistemic community’ (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 231).

They themselves acknowledge that this approach will alienate many readers from their ideas because of the complex and mystificatory way in which the book is written. This again raises the crucial issue of who feminist research is for, especially if, as Stanley and Wise acknowledge, one of the aims of feminist research is to challenge male-stream academic conventions:

... feminist praxis should be the goal – as enhanced political engagement, rather than a preoccupation with textuality and intertextuality for its own sake. We also need to keep in mind that a part (but not the whole) of such a praxis is a feminist political engagement within academic life itself; we are here to change it. (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 231)

If part of our role as feminist academics is to challenge academic conventions which exclude and marginalize less powerful groups, how can we hope to do this if we continue to ‘play by the rules’? This is a dilemma for feminist researchers questioning and challenging dominant representations of less powerful women’s lives if part of the aim of the research is to use knowledge in a way that challenges oppressions and inequalities. These are the dilemmas which Rosalind Edwards and Jane Ribbens discuss in Chapter 1 of this volume, of how the researcher is inevitably placed in the position of ‘translator’, and the difficulty/impossibility of escaping the dominant discourses.

The dilemmas of class and differing knowledges

The dilemma of language is particularly acute for feminist researchers who, like myself, are from working-class backgrounds. In order to succeed in higher education, working-class students have to surrender part of their working-class identity (hooks, 1994; Lynch and O’Neill, 1994). Working-class knowledge, language and culture do not ‘fit’ into traditional academic conventions. For people moving outside poor working-class backgrounds, language is important. To fit into the mainstream, working-class and black students have to adopt, in public, a different style of speaking and writing to their private voice at home and in the community. In this way, language becomes a ‘source of estrangement’ from your background, culture and ways of knowing (Childers and hooks, 1990; hooks, 1989). Although I identify myself as being from a working-class background, through education I am no longer ‘working-class’; my ways of knowing are different from those of my neighbours and the women I interviewed.

For black and white working-class women, lone mothers and others, their ways of knowing are different from, and do not translate easily into, conventional academic forms. For black and white working women, knowledge is based in the family, community and ‘common sense’ (Luttrell, 1992), not in academia and ‘rational science’. For the lone mothers in my study, knowledge of the schools, educational system and welfare agencies was gained through people they knew and trusted, family, friends and neighbours whose common sense came from experience, and the sharing of common problems, not from ‘professional experts’. Their knowledge was partly acquired through their individual, personal and private experiences of mothering, but again this knowledge was shared with other mothers in the form of practical or emotional help.

Knowledge is differentiated by race and ethnicity, as well as by class. Black women have to negotiate racism in their everyday lives, and their knowledge can be seen as part of a collective identity as black women, learnt through kin

relations and everyday interaction with a white racist society (Collins, 1990).

For lone mothers, their knowledges are localized knowledges shared by mothers, rather than part of the academic or professional 'scientific' discourse. Because women's knowledge is seen to come from their mothering and domestic responsibilities, it is seen to be private and individual, and therefore it becomes structurally excluded from academic thought (Luttrell, 1992; Smith, 1988). Through using a language which is different from that used by working-class women to describe their experiences and knowledge, and often inaccessible to them, a hierarchy of knowledge is set up. The researcher is seen to have more knowledge, to be able to interpret the words and worlds of the women in a way that, by its complexity and difficulty, implies that the researcher has greater, or better, knowledge, better understandings, than the women who form the research.

Women's use of language, both written (letters, diaries) and oral (gossip, chat) are private forms, confined to the space of the home, family and community. In the public world, especially in the cultural domain (the ways in which society represents itself through institutions, rituals and 'official' knowledge), women's language forms have '... little or no currency, let alone value' (Cameron, 1990: 4). In society's most important and prestigious spoken traditions – religion, ceremonial, political rhetoric, legal discourse – women's voices are silenced, both by social taboos and restrictions and by custom and practice (see, for example, the historical exclusion of women from public debates and the ongoing debate over women priests).

Writing is also something that women are seen to do in private, in the domestic setting within the structural and emotional constraints of women's family and domestic roles. For women living on a low income, the sheer day-to-day effect of living in poverty leaves little time or energy for anything else (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Smith and Noble, 1995), and writing becomes the preserve of the more powerful. For less powerful groups of women, access to academic work is then restricted both by lack of time and the inaccessibility of the language in which it is written – differences that much feminist research has failed to address.

In conclusion: different audiences, different languages?

As this book has shown, the research process does not end with the field work, but power relations continue into our analysis and writing. This chapter has begun to raise some of the ways in which how we write, and the language we use, may contribute to these power relations, and exclude less powerful groups. It has questioned if it is enough simply to state our own personal position and social location, where we, as researchers, are 'coming from', and to use this to explain any limitations of our speech and writing. This is what working-class and black women, and other less powerful groups outside academia, have always had to do. We need rather to challenge and contest the use of academic language, to forge new ways of writing and new

methodologies that do not exclude and alienate. (Quite how we do this in the current academic climate of individualism, competition and the educational marketplace I am not sure.)

Research, however, does not take place in isolation. The use of language and the issues of power involved are situated within specific cultural, historical and ideological circumstances which influence our writing and use of language. As Beverley Skeggs states:

... all writing occurs within particular histories and within an academic mode of production. This presupposes that we are writing for a particular audience. (Skeggs, 1994a: 85)

As a doctoral student, I write in a particular style, for a particular audience, and for a specific end product. The doctoral style of writing in particular is not accountable to those outside the academic establishment, especially those who have taken part in the research. This raises a dilemma for feminists – for whom is the research carried out? We need to be honest when doing research about the outcomes of that research. The writing of a doctoral thesis will gain for me a PhD. It will not alter the material realities of the lives of the women I interviewed. It will not provide adequate housing, childcare, employment. Anne Opie (1992) argues that we empower the ‘socially marginalized’ in our research by taking their experiences of marginality and making it central. We also need to make it public, and accessible. One of my concerns in doing my research is to give space and validity to working-class lone mothers whose voices are not heard elsewhere. In order to do this, and to write a thesis that will be seen as an acceptable piece of academic work, I have tried to use some of ‘the master’s tools’ of language for my own purposes. However, in other situations I may write, and speak, quite differently, in a style and manner closer to my everyday language. This decision is again instrumental. We need to ‘translate’ ideas to different audiences, to formulate different styles of writing and presentation for different settings and make connections between academia and the everyday world. As bell hooks argues below, the separation of the public world of higher education from the private, everyday lives of mothers, through the use of exclusionary language, is one of our own making:

... the use of a language and style of presentation that alienates most folks who are not also academically trained reinforces the notion that the academic world is separate from real life, the everyday world where we constantly adjust our language and behavior to meet diverse needs. The academic setting is separate only when we work to make it so. It is a false dichotomy which suggests that academics and/or intellectuals can only speak to one another, that we cannot hope to speak with the masses. What is true is that we make choices, that we choose our audiences, that we choose voices to hear and voices to silence. (hooks, 1989: 78)

In everyday life we write and speak in different styles; our use of language is not fixed, but varies according to our audience. We write for an audience, academic or otherwise, using different styles with different groups. By the very use of language we can serve to reinforce inequalities of knowledge, by presenting our findings in our academic voice, in the specialized language of

sociological discourse, positioning this next to the women's words in a way that makes them look 'authentic and simple'. By doing this, we reinforce divisions and hierarchies of knowledge across the lines of gender, class and race (see also Pam Alldred, this volume).

There are, however, other ways in which we can use language, to challenge and contest these divisions and hierarchies, to reshape the dominant language as a site of resistance. Language is powerful (see, for example, the historical and cultural exclusion of the less powerful, women, the working classes, black people from literacy). As many black writers have observed, the language to describe oppression has, until very recently, been in the hands of the oppressors, but this language can be reshaped and used to challenge the oppressors. bell hooks writes how black people under slavery took standard English and transformed it into their own language, which was both subversive and threatening to white authority:⁷

By transforming the oppressor's language, making a culture of resistance, black people created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English. The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies – different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview. (hooks, 1994: 171)

It is not language itself, but access to knowledge of that language, that is exclusionary. It is not simply an issue of differing knowledges, but how those differing knowledges are translated into the research. We need a language that incorporates black and working-class women's idioms of speech, but does not subsume them.

I hope this chapter has made you think about your use of language when you write up your research and the implications of it for the production of knowledge.

As I said at the beginning, I do not have any answers; the one that I use, writing differently for different audiences, is in itself a compromise. There are no easy answers. I do not believe that we can, or should, research only those who are like us (see also Edwards, 1996) – that would result in the silencing of the voices of many less powerful groups who do not have access to the academic world and the publishing opportunities it brings. It would mean the knowledge that we promote is that of the privileged. Our choice is how we use the privileges that access to academic knowledge brings us, whether we use it mainly to further our own careers, and to reaffirm hierarchies of knowledge, or whether, through thinking about how we write, how we represent the voices of those who are less powerful, we challenge and contest the dominant knowledges – including the growth of an academic 'meta-language', and write in ways that are accessible to those outside the university setting.

The dilemmas we face as feminists writing the voices of the less powerful are those of translation and compromise. How much of the women's voices and experiences do we lose by translating them into more academic language? Yet, if we do not translate, mediate and alter their words, how do we

stop reproducing dominant cultural constructions of poor and working-class women (see also Armstead, 1995)? It is the dilemma of trying to challenge, not reproduce, hierarchies of power and knowledge; the dilemma of not losing the 'authenticity', emotion and vibrancy of women's voices, whilst not positioning them as 'Other', and distancing ourselves from the political challenge of feminist research in the so-called 'objective' language of academia.

Notes

- 1 Not all feminist research claims this.
- 2 Dorothy Smith (1989) argues this relationship is a negative, deficit one.
- 3 The Child Support Act was introduced in Britain in 1993 to enforce maintenance payments from absent fathers.
- 4 This raises a further dilemma for feminist researchers: how far do we go in the spirit of 'reflexivity'? When does empowering the women who take part in research by letting them have a say in the data analysis and writing process become exploitation, taking advantage of women's (limited) time and energy by getting them to do our work for us?
- 5 Thanks to Jane Ribbens for this point.
- 6 Thanks to Rosalind Edwards for this point.
- 7 A contemporary example of this resistance is Beverley Skeggs' (1994b) work on black female rappers.

References

- Armstead, Cathleen (1995) 'Writing contradiction: feminist research and feminist writing', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18 (5/6): 627–36.
- Barrett, Michelle (1992) 'Words and things', in Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips (eds), *Destabilising Theory*. London: Polity Press.
- Barrett, Michelle and Phillips, Anne (eds) (1992) *Destabilising Theory*. London: Polity Press.
- Bhavnani, Kum-Kum (1994) 'Tracing the contours: feminist research and feminist objectivity', in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (eds), *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Cameron, Deborah (ed.) (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Childers, Mary and hooks, bell (1990) 'A conversation about race and class', in M. Hirsch and L. Fox Keller (eds), *Conflicts in Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia H. (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston and London: Unwin Hyman.
- Edwards, Rosalind (1996) 'White woman researcher – Black women subjects', *Feminism and Psychology*, 6 (2): 169–175.
- Finch, Janet (1984) "'It's great to have someone to talk to": the ethics and politics of interviewing women', in C. Bell and H. Roberts (eds), *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Glucksmann, Miriam (1994) 'The work of knowledge and the knowledge of women's work', in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds), *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London, Taylor and Francis.
- Gordon, Tuula (1990) *Feminist Mothers*. London: Macmillan.
- hooks, bell (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, bell (1991) *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround.
- hooks, bell (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Lee, Raymond (1993) *Researching Sensitive Issues*. London: Sage.

- Luttrell, Wendy (1992) 'Working-class women's ways of knowing: effects of gender, race and class', in J. Wrigley (ed.), *Education and Gender Equality*. London: Falmer.
- Lynch, Kathleen and O'Neill, Cathleen (1994) 'The colonisation of social class in education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19 (3): 307–24.
- Madoc-Jones, Beryl and Coates, Jennifer (1996) *An Introduction to Women's Studies*. London: Blackwell.
- Maynard, Mary (1994) "'Race", gender and the concept of "difference" in feminist thought', in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (eds), *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Mills, Jane (1989) *Woman Words*. London: Virago.
- Nicholson, Linda (ed.) (1990) *Feminism/Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Oakley, Ann (1981) 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms?', in Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Olson, Karen and Shopes, Linda (1991) 'Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history among working class women and men', in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. London: Routledge.
- Opie, Anne (1992) 'Qualitative research, appropriation of the "other; and empowerment"', *Feminist Review*, 40: 52–69.
- Packwood, Marlene (1983) 'The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady – sisters under the skin?', *Trouble and Strife*, 1: 7–12.
- Ribbens, Jane (1989) 'Interviewing – an "unnatural situation"?', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 12 (6): 579–92.
- Ribbens, Jane (1994) *Mothers and Their Children: A Feminist Sociology of Childrearing*. London: Sage.
- Segal, Lynne (1987) *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*. London: Virago.
- Skeggs, Beverley (1994a) 'Situating the production of feminist ethnography', in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds), *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Skeggs, Beverley (1994b) 'Refusing to be civilised: "race", sexuality and power', in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (eds), *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Smith, Dorothy E. (1988) *The Everyday World as Problematic: Towards a Feminist Sociology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Smith, Dorothy E. (1989) 'Sociological theory: methods of writing patriarchy', in Ruth A. Wallace (ed.), *Feminism and Sociological Theory*. London: Sage.
- Smith, T. and Noble, M. (1995) *Education Divides: Poverty and Schooling in the 1990s*. London: Child Poverty Action Group.
- Stanley, Liz and Wise, Sue (1983) *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stanley, Liz and Wise, Sue (1993) *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Epistemology and Ontology*. London: Routledge.
- Weedon, Chris (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.