

# Chapter 5. My Research Ethics, Myself: Reflecting on Feminist Research Regrets

Jamie White-Farnham  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, SUPERIOR

While studying women's health advocacy, my co-editors and I invited three public activists to contribute chapters to our collection. One of the women with a dire cancer prognosis wrote a short, well-written chapter. When the book was published, she felt disappointed that our scholarly book was not the type sold at Barnes & Noble and did not reach an audience as widely as imagined. As her health worsened over time, I regretted asking for her time and doubted that the occasion to write her story provided a benefit to her.

During a study of women of retirement age about their post-professional literacy practices, I stumbled into tensions with my participants. I was championing home-making and other non-verbal literacies as progressive and feminist actions that reclaim "rhetorical heirlooms" and "heritage literacy," but the women challenged these notions as setting women back. Although kind to me, the participants scoffed at what current scholarship in feminism was teaching younger women. This sat with me for a long time, and I felt I had let them down.

After a personal experience in my family, I began to study bank robbery as a cultural script, as the scholar Wendy Hesford has studied rape. After completing secondary research in the Criminal Justice literature, I received IRB approval and began recruitment efforts. I only ever interviewed two women, and while cooperative, they disregarded and poo-pooed the research purpose, which chastened me. In an effort to respect the women's lived experience, I stopped recruiting participants and never took up the project again.

I spent many years revisiting and wrestling with the shame these experiences left in me. Finding excuses for why these projects fell—or felt—flat did not help me move forward or learn from them. Over time, I pushed myself to undertake reflection.

I considered whether I had breached ethical frameworks put in place for researchers, such as the Belmont Report, the Nuremberg code, or the Helsinki Declaration. I reviewed and reflected on feminist research principles as the field of Writing & Rhetoric describe them by re-reading them, spending time thinking, and bringing my nascent thoughts to the Feminisms and Rhetorics conference in 2019 for feedback from my peers. I felt pretty confident I had honored women's lived experiences, complicated dominant narratives, and made explicit my own biases and positionality. I believed I understood these well.

I considered my job at a small rural public university that does not value research highly nor offer a teaching load or an infrastructure to support it, such as funding, release time, space, personnel, marketing, etc. The breadth, scale, and reach of my research would be limited, but this was not a surprise.

Most difficult of all was considering my feelings, a block which I came to realize stemmed from avoiding an uncomfortable truth. Earlier, as a student and a striving assistant professor, I put a vision of the perfect research project ahead of true curiosity. My perfect projects cleaved perfectly to research ethics, but did I undertake them responsibly? I had responded to trends, to suggestions, to pressure. But had I asked: what did I want to learn and feel through research? The answer was: no, not yet.

Sheepishly, I began to follow lines of inquiry based on authentic wonderings, even when my research questions seemed small, weird, or only of interest to me. I felt curious, sucked into my reading, and enjoyed the handful of “a-ha!” moments that occurred. I gained confidence slowly in areas I never envisioned writing about or sharing with students: memes, public rhetoric, anti-racism.

I also formed an opinion on feminist research ethics when I mistakenly de-centered and downright ignored my own hopes, desires, and values. My opinion and assertion has since become expressed this way: the ethical schema of our feminist research methodologies must be undergirded by a personal layer of curiosity and feelings that not only matter, but are foundational.