

Is counting gender possible? A reflection on methodological contradiction

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Feminist book history scholars often count gender to analyse systemic gender inequality (Cooter and Women in Publishing 1987; 'VIDA Count –VIDA: Women in Literary Arts', n.d.; 'The Prize Count –The Stella Prize', n.d.; Lamond 2011; Harvey and Lamond 2016; 2019; Marsden 2019; Dane 2020). Following this work during my PhD, I collected and analysed quantitative gender data on literary production and consecration in Scotland in the late 2010s (publications, reviews, book festivals, prizes). I encountered several practical and theoretical issues which troubled my choice of mixed methods. The positivist method of quantitative data analysis which requires counting in categories felt oppositional to my feminist understanding of knowledge as situated, and gender as experienced. This paper reflects on the responsibility of researchers who are interested in being part of social change, in particular on how and why we count gender.

In this paper, I examine the epistemological bases for feminist statistical research, drawing on research on researching gender (Crenshaw 1989; Butler 2006; Cram and Mertens 2015; Serano 2016; Leavy and Harris 2018; McHugh 2020; Spencer, Pryce, and Walsh 2020) and queering quantitative data (Browne 2010; Browne and Nash 2010; Simmons and White 2014; Guyan 2022). I conclude that this epistemological contradiction ought to play a bigger part in feminist methodology, and that counting of gender in categories is possible through what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms "strategic or operational essentialism" (quoted in Leavy and Harris 2018, 69).

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