

## Women's Studies and Feminist Scholarship: A "Different Voice" in Academe

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Women's studies were the academic outgrowth of the women's movement. Initially there was a push for equality and women were encouraged to move into nontraditional roles; success was equated with success in the male world. As women's studies evolved there was a growing recognition and valuing of feminine qualities, and caring and interpersonal relationships were recognized as playing a meaningful role in the human endeavor. Feminist scholarship and women's studies programs are using feminism as a critique to analyze existing knowledge and in the process are transforming how knowledge is constructed.

Au sein du monde universitaire, les Programmes d'Etudes des Femmes sont l'un des produits du mouvement féministe. Au départ, dans le but d'obtenir l'égalité, on incitait les femmes à assumer des rôles non-traditionnels; réussir signifiait réussir dans un monde masculin. Progressivement, pourtant, les Etudes des Femmes ont contribué à revaloriser les qualités féminines, par exemple l'importance des relations interpersonnelles pour l'ensemble de la vie humaine. La recherche féministe et les Programmes d'Etudes des Femmes voient, dans le féminisme, un instrument capable, non seulement de faire l'analyse critique des connaissances acquises, mais de transformer le processus d'acquisition des connaissances.

Advocates of women's studies have been persistent and innovative in their attempts to establish women's programs in North American colleges and universities. The term *women's studies* is used to encompass research as well as courses which focus on the social, economic, historical, and psychological context of being a woman. In women's studies, feminist scholars have shifted the focus of research from being *on* women to being *for* women — the goal being to help women develop rather than to provide information for researchers (Searing, 1985). How the evolution of women's studies and feminist scholarship have affected the understanding of educational structures and the construction of knowledge will be explored in this paper.

There are difficulties in finding resources and research on women's studies. One useful source is the United States government series of monographs,

*Women's Studies*. This series reviews existing literature on women's studies up to 1980, often drawing upon unpublished works. Another source is Boxer's (1982) chronological account of women's studies in which she notes that women's studies have taken many forms, often shaped by the academic institutions of which they are a part. This variation may account, to some extent, for the difficulties encountered in finding resources on the development of these programs. As Searing (1984) notes, most research about women's studies exists at the campuses where it originated, generally in the files of faculty members of women's studies programs.

Women's studies programs came to be established in North America towards the end of the 1960s and were the academic arm of the women's movement. Women's studies is not a monolithic discipline; it is both a disciplined inquiry and a critique of existing bodies of knowledge and a political movement (Spender, 1981; DuBois, Kelly, Kennedy, Korsmeyer, & Robinson, 1985).

Early feminist academics examined their disciplines from a feminist perspective and found them lacking. As they began examining their disciplines using feminism as a critique, there began to emerge a characteristic picture of women as "either nudged into familiar stereotypes or discarded as aberrations when they could not be made to fit; ... For many faculty and students involved in these early courses, dedicated research on women became the inevitable choice" (Merritt, 1984, p. 254). This focused research served to expose explicit and implicit bias and led pioneering feminist academics to challenge the traditional concepts of epistemology. As Merritt goes on to note, the result of this early women's studies scholarship is reflected in the curriculum of higher education today. Boxer (1989) reports:

Beginning with preparation for the first courses on women in history and women in literature, women's studies scholars undertook a microscopic search for forgotten feminists, literary figures, and women unorthodox enough to have made a mark on a civilization, where a woman's virtue was said to reside in her submission and her treasure to consist of her children ... researchers in women's studies focus their lenses on women's lives in women's own terms: woman as subject, not object, women as producers of goods and reproducers of families, woman as constructor of culture. (pp.185-186)

The feminist perspective present in women's studies courses and in scholarly essays is seeking to correct the explicit and implicit bias in academic disciplines. Feminist researchers use their training in research methods and critical analysis to expose an epistemology based on androcentrism or male bias.

That women's studies is in the process of transforming knowledge is not surprising. Knowledge has been changed as a response to new understandings before. As Degler (1983) notes, "the past does alter as we uncover new evidence from our rummaging through archives or stumbling upon sources not known to exist before" (p. 67). As feminist scholarship gained momentum, the need for a multidimensional analysis for assessing women's position in society became

evident (DuBois et al., 1985). In different ways, psychologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, educators, and literary scholars have provided a basis for the feminist assertion that there needs to be a framework for analyzing the realities of women's existence.

### *Educational Structures*

A feminist perspective in philosophy and education focuses on the sexist nature of ideologies and educational structures. This, DuBois et al. (1985) note, is due to the fact that "education examines what schools teach; philosophy (examines) the abstract system of ideas that refine and reflect the fundamental beliefs of a culture and are passed on through institutions of learning" (p.67). A feminist critique in the field of education has focused on the institutions of learning and how these institutions have shaped women's lives.

Education as a discipline has a history of exploring gender differences and the relationship of these differences to achievement and ability (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). This tradition makes the task of discerning feminist influences in education more complex. Not all research in which gender is a variable can be categorized as feminist scholarship. Though there is a great deal of educational research which suggests that there are no significant neurological factors that would lead to differences with regard to ability and potential for achievement, there are, in fact, significant differences in the level of achievement and attainment of boys and girls; feminist scholars ask how these differences are created and maintained (DuBois et al., 1985).

Feminist scholarship investigates how and why schools contribute to the decline in girls' attainments and achievement. Shakeshaft (1986) notes that despite the fact that girls begin school with higher achievement potential than boys, by the time they end school the difference is reversed. The internal social structure of the school and how it impacts on the lives of female teachers and students is explored by Shakeshaft; this type of research reflects the areas of feminist concerns in education. She points out that it is a myth that the culture of schools is female; as she explains, "schools were created to serve the public purposes of men's lives, not the private purposes of women's" (p. 500). Another area of concern is that of curriculum and textbook content. Phillips's (1983a, 1983b) analysis of school texts shows gender bias in terms of language and in the portrayal of women in stereotyped roles. The bias in these books and in the social structures of schools can be related to women's lowered educational and vocational aspirations and achievements throughout their lives (Frazier & Sadker, 1973; Phillips, 1983a, 1983b; Shakeshaft, 1986).

### *Education and Psychology: Theory and Practice*

Most theorists, including those in education, have articulated their epistemological structures in terms of male norms and development. They have

taken the experience of a specific group as paradigmatic of human experience. This violates the concept of universalizability. Gilligan's 1982 work in the area of moral development had an impact not only on the theories about moral development but also on the disciplines of psychology and education. She identified a code of morality that is marked by valuing care and relationships. This code of morality, identified not by gender, but by values of care and relationship, does reflect differences by gender. Her research shows sex-related but not sex-determined differences in moral reasoning. Her work has had a strong influence on feminist scholarship and the women's movement.

In the early stages of the women's movement the path to equality was viewed to be assimilation of male values and behaviors and denial or rejection of traditional female attitudes and values. This led women to move into nontraditional male dominated careers and encouraged women to take more math and science in school (Desjardins, 1989). Miles (1989), in viewing the early phase of the women's movement, notes that much of this period reads like an apology for women and that many of the writers of this period (e.g., Juliet Mitchell, Simone de Beauvoir, and Shulamith Firestone) accepted the view that women's concerns were "essentially less human than men's (and this) require(d) that the way forward be seen in terms of leaving these concerns behind" (Miles, 1989, p.215). Early feminist thinkers rejected the stereotyping of women by insisting that women were capable of being the same as men. They focused on women's lack of participation in important areas of life as defined from an androcentric point of view. This initial acceptance of the androcentric bias led to the rejection of social relationships, personal life, and child rearing as being important areas of life. In this push for equality:

women have been encouraged to become autonomous, separate, and competitive so they will succeed in these endeavors since success is equated with male behavior and because it now has been assumed that it is better to act like a male than a female. (Desjardins, 1989, p. 140)

However, as women continued to explore in the areas of feminist thought, other views began to develop and alternative standards of judging emerged. Through these standards women are now moving beyond acceptance of a male-defined world to one which includes a definition of it by women as well. Gilligan's work, for example, has provided us with a different understanding of femininity and competence. With the recognition that feminine qualities do not necessarily lead to a negation of competence has come a realization that qualities which incorporate caring about relations and connections can play a meaningful role in human endeavor. By excluding the issues of care, orientation theorists have ignored an entire area of human life.

The implication of excluding the issues of care orientation, according to Gilligan (1982), is that the norms which we use to measure human development in the areas of cognitive abilities and psychological health are questionable. She

notes that these norms are developed and interpreted using psychological theories and schemas which are affected by moral beliefs. Therefore, once we are able to question the definitions of morality we are also able to challenge the notion of the invariant stages of cognitive development that find women incapable of reaching the highest stage of cognitive and moral reasoning.

As noted earlier, Shakeshaft (1986) has pointed out that schools are not particularly conducive to fostering the intellectual growth of female students. She believes both the social structures and the curriculum in schools show gender bias. Therefore, before we judge female cognitive development and ability we need to examine the context in which development occurs. As Shakeshaft states, girls fall behind boys in their performance and aspirations as indicated by lowered educational goals. This, she argues, happens in a variety of ways. She believes "the interactions of teachers with students reinforces the societal message that females are inferior" (p. 501). Boys are encouraged to talk and interact more than girls; the competitive learning styles are often not as effective for female students; there is little effort made to integrate the female experience into the curriculum. All these factors, Shakeshaft believes, collude to reinforce the message that females and their concerns are somehow outside the domain of formal theories and structures of education.

### *Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship*

As feminist scholars began to explore the issues concerned with the production of knowledge, there came a realization that knowledge is socially constructed and that most of it is constructed by men (Smith, 1978; Spender, 1981; Daly, 1973). The reality that defines women's understanding of their world is not their own. Smith (1978) explains that men treat as significant what they say and do; what men do is considered important and is written about by men for men. As women's work is not considered important, women are excluded from the process of the production of knowledge which is codified through written and spoken words. A group that controls the production of knowledge controls power and is therefore in a position to provide positive meanings to its experiences and negative meanings to the experiences of the group that does not.

Feminist scholars are attempting to change the control men have over the construction of knowledge. Gilligan, in articulating a need for a woman's voice, is providing women with a language that will enable them to express their experiences as valid interpretations of reality. Her notion of listening to and giving validation to women's experiences has been used by Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, and Tarule (1985) to explore the experiences of women students. To an extent, Gilligan's and therefore Clinchy et al.'s approach is radical in that it validates women's personal experiences as legitimate material for theory building and knowledge construction. As Clinchy et al. note, "In order to design

an education appropriate for women we must learn about the academic experiences of ordinary women, women who are, in most cases, neither teachers, nor scholars, nor even feminists, but simply students" (p. 28).

The fundamental concern of feminist scholarship is to identify and end women's oppression. Feminist scholars do not offer a single unified theory for women's oppression, but rather argue from a variety of theoretical positions. These positions are often grouped in the broad categories of liberal feminists, radical feminists, and socialist feminists. According to Jaggar and Struhl (1978), each theoretical position offers a different perspective on women's oppression and thereby makes a contribution to its analysis. Liberal feminism has its basis in liberal philosophy which, in turn, is based on the social contract theories of the 16th and 17th centuries. The liberal position states that individuals should rise in society on the basis of their merit and talent rather than on the basis of family, race, or gender. Based on this ideology liberal feminists explain women's oppression as resulting from unequal civil rights and educational opportunities. When this inequality has been eradicated, they believe, women will no longer be oppressed. The liberal feminist position does not offer an explanation as to why such inequality exists. The radical feminist position holds that women's oppression is fundamental, historical, and widespread and is therefore very difficult to eradicate. Even social change such as the elimination of class society will not bring an end to women's oppression. The socialist feminist takes the historical materialist approach of Marx and Engels and develops it further. Within this theoretical framework the problem of women's oppression is analyzed in terms of both class oppression and women's oppression by men. Socialist feminists believe the two forms of oppression are inseparably linked and therefore there is a need to struggle against both simultaneously.

Feminist research offers new explanations about women's experiences and in the process poses a challenge to existing theoretical frameworks. According to feminist scholars, attempts to understand women's oppression within the existing theoretical structures or paradigms lead to inadequate explanations of the problem. These inadequate explanations are what Kuhn (1962) refers to as anomalies. As anomalies continue to emerge, there develops within a scientific community a state of crisis. During this period new paradigms emerge. Eventually a paradigm wins the support of the scientific community and the crisis is resolved. This shift in allegiance, according to Kuhn, is not based on logic or "proof" but on "conversion." This conversion leads to the resolution of the "scientific revolution." Feminist scholars believe that existing theories are not able to account for and accommodate the anomalies that arise when used to explain women's oppression. Therefore to accommodate these anomalies a reorganization of knowledge is needed.

### *Implications of Feminist Scholarship*

Gilligan's efforts to articulate and legitimize women's experience has led, if not to a paradigmatic shift in the domain of morality and ethics, then to the broadening of this domain. A similar expansion could occur within the domain of educational ideology. As women "learn to link personal experience to theory ... women are less likely ... to passively accept theories that contradict their own experience" (Pearson, Shavlik, & Touchton, 1989, p.266). Redefining knowledge by making women's experience a valid component of knowledge is an essential part of feminist scholarship.

Women's studies scholars are seeking changes in the creation of knowledge. In education, this restructuring of knowledge has involved making changes in the curriculum in the belief that by changing what is studied — that is, by changing the curriculum — there will be a change in the lives of both men and women (Boxer, 1982). Anderson (1987) believes that for men and women involved in making these changes, this often means political, intellectual, and personal changes as well:

Women's studies scholarship challenges the authority of traditional scholarship and, as a consequence, also challenges the egos of those who have invested their careers in this work. Revising the curriculum is therefore also a process of revising our personalities since our work and our psyches have been strongly intertwined with our education. (Anderson, 1987, p.232)

Feminist scholars, by expanding the normative standards on which the existing structures of knowledge are constructed, have expanded boundaries of human experience. Through this endeavor they have challenged not only male hegemony, but also the status quo of educational structures and knowledge. For women "seek to widen not only their own orbit but also expand the circumference of truth" (Boxer, 1989, p.190).

### *Conclusion*

To state that feminist thinking has brought about a restructuring of knowledge within a discipline would not, at this point, be a defensible position. However, what feminist thinkers and scholars have done is challenge the existing assumptions and social structures which support current theories. As feminist scholars continue to question the existing basis of universal norms and as more and more anomalies come to light, their weight will eventually lead to a paradigmatic shift and a structuring of knowledge will take place. By acknowledging women's values feminism articulates a broader definition of the world. In doing so it poses a challenge to single-sex definitions of truth. Therefore, the ideas explored by feminist scholars have implications for both men and women. While these ideas are important for women, they can no longer be ignored by men. Any scholarship whose knowledge is constructed on the basis of one half of the human experience cannot offer a valid interpretation of

it. Feminist scholarship challenges us to redefine and reconceptualize existing structures of knowledge and, in doing this, offers us a chance to reclaim the other half of our heritage.

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