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## **Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity -**

### *Editorial*

This special issue of *GJSS* is devoted to feminist interdisciplinarity, articulating alternatives to common conceptualisations of interdisciplinarity on the one hand and feminist scholarship on the other. It deals with the ways in which interdisciplinarity and feminist scholarship strengthen each other through a series of epistemological and methodological reflections, documented by Sabine Hark, Hanna Ojala and Hanna-Mari Ikonen, Mia Liinason and further exemplary analyses by Björn Pernrud, Sabine Grenz, Kerstin Alnebratt. Meeting the needs of the *GJSS*, the methodological implications of the former and the methodological choices made in the latter articles are concentrated upon so as to further interdisciplinary research methodology on the one hand, and, in the case of this special issue, feminist scholarship on the other. As implied in the title ‘Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity,’ the articles in this issue also reflect upon the political implications of feminist knowledge production, and its relations to action and social change.

As special issue editors, we have found it important to address the issue of *feminist* interdisciplinarity both in itself and within the context of the *GJSS*. As PhD students in institutions (resp. Gender studies at Lund University, Sweden and at Utrecht University, the Netherlands) where interdisciplinary gender studies is fundamental, we are often confronted with different kinds of ‘how’ questions: how to design a research in an interdisciplinary manner, how to relate to disciplinary feminist research methods, how to relate to mainstream interdisciplinarity, how to set up a research project in such a way that the societal impact is maximized. We have wanted to contribute to the answering of these questions both for our colleagues and fellow PhD students in interdisciplinary gender studies and for a broader public of scholars interested in

interdisciplinary research methodology. We believe that an issue on feminist interdisciplinarity can bring these two publics together, and as such our work is an instantiation of practising feminist interdisciplinarity.

In women's and gender studies, interdisciplinarity has been a fundamental key for a long time. It can be said to be the result of the basic idea for feminist scholarship explained by feminist academics in the early 1970s: the idea of feminist work in the academy as a critical project, questioning mainstream knowledge as biased. Women's studies were thus not explained as complementary to mainstream, existing scholarship, but as a *corrective* project, and feminist academics in the 1970s argued for the need to *integrate* women's studies into every other discipline. Starting from the question of women's identity, the integration of women's studies in the academy did not amalgamate around "an abstract body of knowledge ... but around the concrete body of (a) woman, in relation to which bodies of knowledge were explored, constructed, and interrogated", as phrased by Gabriele Griffin (2006: 69). Through initiatives of academic grassroots-movements inspired by the women's liberation movement, women's studies started to develop in the European arena in the early 1970s. At this point in time within women's studies, the different liberation movements, the public debate on scholarship and democracy, governmental policies and the work by academic feminists came to mutually influence each other. Depending on the various historical and political developments in different national contexts, the further development of women's studies came to vary a great deal between the European countries. In the Northern parts of Europe, in countries like the U.K, Sweden, and the Netherlands, women's studies modules and undergraduate courses were developed into programs during the 1980s and 1990s when feminist scholars could gradually establish departments of their own. In the Mediterranean or Eastern parts of Europe, there has been another development, partly due to the intellectual traditions, structures of higher education, and a feminist critical positioning vis-à-vis the institution as such in countries like Italy, for instance (Griffin & Braidotti 2002: 5).

The organization of women's/gender studies in departments of their own was accomplished through a *dual strategy* in the 1980s and 1990s, signified by a simultaneous integration of women's/gender studies into established disciplines and an autonomous organization of women's/gender studies as a subject field of its own. The

dual strategy was inspired by the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, and launched with the explicit concern of avoiding the risk of ghettoization (if autonomously organized) or assimilation (if integrated in the established disciplines). Thus, in several European countries of today, it is possible to pursue women's/gender research following four different levels in academia:

- a) *Gender studies*: autonomously organised as a discipline in its own right.
- b) *Gender research*: research with issues of gender at its core, research that has gender as its primary focus, integrated in other disciplines.
- c) *Gender perspective*: research that analyses and problematises issues of gender, positioning gender as a perspective along side of other equally important perspectives.
- d) *Gender aspects*: research in which gender is not particularly visible in the analyses, although still present as a dimension of the study.<sup>1</sup>

The question debated ever since the development of women's/gender studies into departments in their own right, and even more so during the latest years, is whether the successful integration in academia means that women's/gender studies is to be apprehended as a discipline like any other. In other words querying whether it will be able to keep its interdisciplinary profile throughout the everyday academic work in the department through interdisciplinary syllabi and courses, and the catering of students from different disciplines. In the Anglo-American context, a debate around the im/possibility of women's/gender studies was developed in the end of 1990s and early 2000s as part of this problematic. The often referred to starting shot of the debate is as the special issue of the journal *differences* (1997, 9:3) and especially Wendy Brown's argument *against* women's studies programs and departments in their own right, referring to the intellectual and theoretical limitations of a field based on identity. After the poststructuralist critique of the category "women", Brown argues, women's studies has lost its object, core and aim of investigation while postcolonial theory, queer theory

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<sup>1</sup> This division is developed on the basis of a distinction made by Hillevi Ganetz (2005) *Gender research applications within the field of Humanities-Social Sciences (Genusvetenskapliga projektansökningar inom humaniora-samhällsvetenskap)* Stockholm: The Swedish Research Council (p. 13). In this inquiry, Ganetz distinguishes between three kinds of gender research, i.e. a) gender research, b) gender perspective, c) gender aspect, thus not giving an account of gender studies as a subject field of its own.

and critical race theory have gone somewhere else. She finds “no there there” (82). In 2000, American scholar Robyn Wiegman took this debate further, by diagnosing the reactions to the call from various quarters for the multiplicity of identities and political fragmentation as expressions of a fear over the impact this could dispel on feminism’s healthy condition. While critical about generational models as patriarchal and heterosexist, Wiegman shows how a generational thinking in the academy is performed through a certain culture, creating specific relations of belonging and affect. As an example, she mentions the story of feminism’s move from the streets of activism into academia through which the “now-canonical scene of feminist self-intervention” is told. (811). Instead of a continuation of a historical memory as accumulative and operating through the idea of generational legacies, Wiegman argues for an interruption of this reproductive logic. She writes: “... feminism is not self-identical, which means that her temporal order is not teleological; her subjectivity is irreducible to the political emplotment of either mine or yours. ... I argue not only for the political value of feminism’s inability to remain identical to itself, but for a studied reassessment of the meaning and force of academic institutionalization itself” (808, 809). Thus, Wiegman asks for investigations of the *implications* of this successful academic institutionalization of feminist knowledge, where “women” is produced as object of study and stories of “real women” are being told.

In times where large numbers of students, and PhD-students, take their degrees in women’s/gender studies, investigations of the so-called all-embracing critical potentiality of feminist academic work – described as liberatory, transformative and transgressive – is indeed highly ranked on the agenda. In this issue of *GJSS*, Sabine Hark formulates the probing question whether the critical impulse of feminist interdisciplinarity runs the risk of being assimilated into a “new norm for transnational corporate elites”. In her piece *Magical Sign. On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* she makes an investigation of the politics of ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’. She is refreshingly suspicious of them as marks of a buzzword in present academic discourse. Hark takes as her point of departure the two-fold meaning of inter- and transdisciplinarity and exhibits how inter- and transdisciplinarity on the one hand are expressed as the emblem of critical, transformative and transgressive

knowledge seeking, while the same terms, on the other hand, are presented as the model for the neo-liberal discourse of Higher Education of today. After an investigation of the politics of the terms, as well as the politics of disciplinarity, she turns her attention to an investigation of the politics of interdisciplinarity within women's studies with the question "Why did interdisciplinarity turn out to be such an important feature in defining and distinguishing Women's Studies?" A question she evolves throughout the article, focusing on the intellectual sites and material conditions of knowledge seeking in women's studies. In her response to Hark, Nina Lykke takes departure from Hark's question of whether the ambition for interdisciplinarity was nothing but rhetorics, or if it has resulted in real structural changes. Giving examples from the European gender studies discourse, Lykke emphasises the importance of acknowledging the widely different ways of organizing women's/gender studies in local, national and regional contexts. She argues for the necessity of articulating alternative ways of what it means – structurally, institutionally, epistemologically and politically – to perform women's/gender studies as an inter- or postdiscipline.

During the fights 'with' and 'against' the notion of hegemonic feminism during the 1990s, the interventions from queer and postcolonial scholars were allowed to make their entry into the central debates of the field of women's/gender studies in the 1990s. The dismantling of the so embraced idea of global sisterhood came to result in deep and ongoing debates on the epistemological and methodological implications of diversity and power asymmetries. In her analysis of the ways in which feminist scholars have tried to manage plurality and power, Mia Liinason shows in this issue of *GJSS* how the intention to produce research without simplifying plurality or further expose implicit power hegemonies, have developed a will to produce 'guaranteed ethically approved' research in feminist academic work. Through a series of reflections on the general ambition in feminist academic work to avoid the methodological problems attached to the existence of power, which she investigates through an analysis of epistemological 'ranking-lists' or methodological 'check lists', she finds the ambition to avoid power asymmetries a problematic point of departure in itself. Thus, she encourages us to *shift* the focus of feminist inquiries, suggesting that the "...important task for feminist scholars is ... not to avoid power asymmetries, but to learn to handle them". Through

examples by the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, she develops a methodology based on the idea of knowledge seeking as praxis, from the start imbued with norms, habits, customs and ideas, and as such intrinsically interwoven with cultures, politics and power.

In his piece, Björn Pernrud takes departure in another recent debate in women's/gender studies through his case study of the theoretical foundations of sex therapy in a feminist context. Starting from an analysis of the divergences between the two positions of "mainstream sex therapy" and "feminist sex therapy", Pernrud acknowledges the challenges formulated through the feminist intervention and simultaneously shows how the critical interferences establish a relation between mainstream and feminist sex therapy, through which they both are defined as contending positions. By way of a discussion of the feminist sex therapist's hopes for an unrepressed sexuality, he finds that those feminist hopes are positioned in a framework, none the less equally normative as the mainstream model. Thus, stressing the needs to take explicit responsibility for the politics that are practised, Pernrud devotes the remaining parts of his article to the question of how to establish a methodology capable of acknowledging the political nature of knowledge claims. Through the efforts to visualize the interactions between the "real" world and the claims for knowledge, Pernrud request models of knowing able to accommodate both knowledge and politics.

While Pernrud investigates the epistemological and theoretical foundations of feminist knowledge seeking as it has been developed in the last decade, Hanna-Mari Ikonen and Hanna Ojala work on the interdisciplinary research methodology of the feminist interview in their methodologically focused article *Creating Togetherness and Experiencing Difference in Feminist Interviews. Knowing in a post-standpoint way?* Starting from their own research project and their own specific interviewing strategies (telephone interviewing vs. in-depth and multiple face-to-face interviews) with women in Finland, Ikonen and Ojala develop an account of the interview as a space for interaction and exchange that has to be accounted for rather than a space whose legitimacy can be assumed from on the basis of an identity political framework of 'feminist standpoint epistemology.' Their discussion relates to the discussion reviewed

above about the so-called *lost object* and *lost theoretical foundation* of feminist study today. By conceptualizing a research strategy that is post-identity and post-standpoint yet not non-foundationalist, they stress the continued usefulness of the feminist interview in the (post-)postmodern era. Thus, they suggest “the idea of distinctive locations and permanent as well as temporary assemblies” as a tenable methodological position also in concrete interview research.

Indeed, even though the critical potential of women’s/gender studies is praised in all quarters of feminist academic work, the discussions of how this critical potentiality are understood are conspicuous by its nature. To produce uncomfortable knowledge might be one way to carry this critical potentiality into effect. In the research notes section to this issue of the *GJSS*, Sabine Grenz presents her research project on German women writing about the end of the Second World War as an attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator. Grenz describes her intentions to make the present German cultural memory of national socialism in its gendered structure visible. Through a description of the composite method she uses in the research project – a combination of historical research and sociological and cultural analyses – she evolves in this piece her ideas around methodology, as exemplified by two analyses of excerpts from her source material, German women’s diaries written in 1945. The second research note comes from Kerstin Alnebratt who discusses the use of (interdisciplinary) research methodology by the authors of Master’s essays in women’s/gender studies in Sweden. She claims that the *lack* of words for what they actually do springs from a serious lack of methodological awareness, in a theoretical sense, as well as in practical skills. Through an awareness of the connections between methodologies, epistemologies and methods, she asks for a more practically oriented, ongoing discussion on methods in gender studies. The latter should be grounded on methodological and epistemological theories – a request that is not uncontested in women’s/gender studies, as evidenced by the ongoing debates in the field over the dual organization, the process of disciplinization and the interdisciplinary character of the field, as earlier mentioned.

The issue closes with three book/ journal reviews of state of the art reflections on feminist interdisciplinarity, produced in a U.S context. First of all, Romaine Zuidema



gives an introduction of the topics in the special feminist methodology issue “New Feminist approaches to Social Science Methodologies” of the journal *Signs* (2005, vol. 30, no. 4), asking whether research itself can contribute to producing a liberatory, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group. Secondly, Jennifer Lynn Musto presents the collection *Women’s Studies on Its Own: A next Wave Reader in Institutional Change* as an anthology offering various views on the academic feminist project vis-à-vis institutions in the U.S. Thirdly, Kajsa Widegren discuss Jane Roland Martin’s book *Coming of Age in Academe – Rekindling Women’s Hopes and Reforming the Academy*, in a reflection over the implications of a perspective where women’s lives and social conditions are seen as the point of departure for women’s studies as a discipline. As editors we have opted for a selection of reviews of books on the topic in question so as to make the issue not only an intervention in the debate, but also so as to connect to current-day scholarship on feminist interdisciplinarity.

In conclusion: The wide range of the articles in this issue reflects the theme of the issue in itself, not only as to content, but also as to epistemologies, methodologies and methods used. In an attempt to release feminist knowledge production both from the “traditional” frames of academic knowledge production and from a repetition of past feminist positions in feminist academic work, this issue seeks to address the need of a transfer from dichotomizations such as disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity, empirical/theoretical as well as quantitative/qualitative, to a thematic mode of working (cf Esseveld & Davies 1989). By doing this, we would like to suggest, the theoretical, epistemological and ontological questions are being placed on the forefront, in an understanding of feminist academic knowledge production as an investigation of the intersections between the subjective, the theoretical and the political. In the context of this special issue, ‘the political’ and ‘the scholarly’ refer to the *European* political and scholarly domains. With this issue, we have attempted to develop thoughts on feminist interdisciplinarity from within the realm of European women’s/gender studies so as to complement the debate as it has taken place in the Anglo-American world.



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## Magical Sign. On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity

### Abstract

*For more than a decade ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’ have operated as buzzwords in the abundant debates on the changing nature of knowledge, science, society, and their mutual relations. Both terms call up currently highly invested notions in today’s global knowledge economies such as dynamics, mobility, fluidity, flexibility, excellence, connectivity, and adaptiveness. Contrary to these phenomena, inter- and transdisciplinarity also figure as prominent emblems of knowledge projects that understand themselves as critical, transformative, and transgressive of modern science, knowledge, and the order of academic disciplines. Indeed, one could argue that it is especially Women’s and Gender Studies that most strongly appreciate inter- and transdisciplinarity in the academic universe.*

*Inter- and transdisciplinarity thus seem to be able to both fit into models of neoliberal market- and management-oriented reforms of Higher Education and at the same time figure as foundation of the radical and transformative potential of Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies or Postcolonial Studies. Hence, one could indeed argue that inter- and transdisciplinarity function like magical signs, that is, as empty signifiers meaning whatever their users want them to mean.*

*Taking this rather inconsistent positioning and claiming of inter- and transdisciplinarity in and for both neoliberal reforms of Higher Education and transformative knowledge endeavours as a starting point, this paper discusses some of the theoretical, methodological, and institutional problems that arise from this at least incoherent if not paradoxical situation. The aim is neither to provide definitions of inter- or transdisciplinarity nor an inter- or transdisciplinary methodology. It is rather a plea that we first need to chart the intricate terrain of the politics of interdisciplinarity before we will be able to develop a transformative inter- or transdisciplinary methodology in/for Gender Studies.*

Key words: Interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity; critical knowledge project; neoliberal market; neoliberal reforms; Higher Education; Women’s Studies.

### **Introduction**

For more than a decade ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’ have operated as buzzwords in the abundant debates about the changing nature of knowledge, science, society, and their mutual relations. Both terms currently claim highly invested notions in today’s global knowledge economies such as dynamics, mobility, fluidity, flexibility,

excellence, connectivity, and adaptiveness. Rhetorically they play an integral part in the restructuring of the modern western university as they serve as criteria for excellence in research assessment and teaching evaluation and as a rhetorical resource in the global competition of universities for prestige and funding as well as students and faculty.<sup>1</sup> Interdisciplinarity, Peter Weingart and Nico Stehr (2000: 1) observe, has indeed “become a label almost synonymous with creativity and progress, signalling reform and modernization in science and scientific institutions”. Disciplinarity and academic disciplines, in contrast, are often portrayed as static, rigid, immobile, backward, and resistant against (necessary) reforms. The advocates of transdisciplinarity for example argue, that universities will only be suitable actors in future knowledge production if they overcome their discipline-based structural conservatism and recognize the emergence of a new type of knowledge that is transdisciplinary knowledge. This, scholars like Basarab Nicolescu (1997) suggest, would imply a multi-dimensional opening of the university: towards the civil society, towards other places of knowledge production, towards the cyber-space-time, towards the aim of universality, and towards a redefinition of values governing its own existence.

Nicolescu’s plea for transdisciplinarity is but one example for a rhetoric in which disciplines have indeed become the emblem for the immobility of universities, their supposed inability to change and to adapt to new challenges. In the European Union “Bologna-process” for example, concepts of interdisciplinarity seem to be the perfect match in the process of reorganizing study programs in terms of tradable modules. For it promises the kind of mobility and flexibility needed in a system that organizes Higher Education consistently in terms of a market-oriented consumerist model.

Contrary to these phenomena, however, inter- and transdisciplinarity also figure as prominent emblems of knowledge formations that understand themselves as critical, transformative, and transgressive of modern science, knowledge, and the order of

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<sup>1</sup> To give just one example for this rhetoric, an excerpt from the mission statement of the private “Zeppelin-University” in Friedrichshafen/Germany: “Zeppelin University: a multidisciplinary university for tomorrow’s decision-makers. Zeppelin University is a state-recognised private institution of higher education bridging Business, Culture and Politics. Zeppelin University defines itself as an individualised, international, and interdisciplinary educator of well-rounded decision makers and creative innovators in the fields of business, culture and politics, as well as a multi-disciplinary research institution exploring issues relevant to society.” (07 May 2007 <[http://www.zeppelin-university.de/index\\_eng.php](http://www.zeppelin-university.de/index_eng.php)>)

academic disciplines such as Women's Studies, Queer Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. Indeed, one could argue that it is Women's and Gender Studies that most strongly appreciate inter- and transdisciplinarity in the academic universe (Hark 2005: 335-389).<sup>2</sup> For it is the interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies and its positioning vis-à-vis universities and their supposedly problematic disciplinary order, many believe, that makes Women's Studies distinct within the academy.

Inter- and transdisciplinarity thus seem to be able to both fit into models of neoliberal market- and management-oriented reforms of Higher Education and at the same time figure as foundations of the radical and transformative potential of Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies or Postcolonial Studies. Hence, one could indeed argue that inter- and transdisciplinarity function like magical signs (Katie King 1994), that is, as empty signifiers meaning whatever their users want them to mean. Maybe more than any other feature to describe knowledge formations they are enormously flexible and elastic concepts that have the capacity to emblematised even contradictory ideas.

Taking this rather inconsistent positioning and claiming of inter- and transdisciplinarity in and for both neoliberal reforms of Higher Education and transformative knowledge endeavours as my starting point, I will, in what follows, discuss some of the theoretical, methodological, and institutional problems that arise from this at least incoherent if not paradoxical situation. The aim is neither to provide definitions of inter- or transdisciplinarity nor an inter- or transdisciplinary methodology. It is rather a plea that we first need to chart the intricate terrain of the politics of interdisciplinarity before we will be able to develop a transformative inter- or transdisciplinary methodology in/for Gender Studies.

### **The Politics of Inter/Disciplinarity**

A cursory review of the debates on inter- and transdisciplinarity suggests that these are as much about (academic) politics and what one could call the phantasmatic dimensions of knowledge production as they are about the actual production and organization of

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<sup>2</sup> Exemplary for German Gender Studies debates on inter- and transdisciplinarity and especially for the appreciation of interdisciplinarity in Women's and Gender Studies see Kahlert, Thiessen and Weller (2005).

knowledge. We therefore cannot discuss concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity without examining both the political issues such as the 'nature' of knowledge formations, politically induced transformations of Higher Education, and the function of inter- or transdisciplinarity as a magical sign. We also cannot leave out the phantasmatic dimensions such as ideas about the transgressive potential of knowledge or the role of feminist knowledge producers as change-agents. This is even more true at a time when a similar logic of interdisciplinary boundary crossing as engaged by feminist scholars informs Higher Education policies and the economic logic of academic capitalism more generally.

And it is even truer in light of the fact that, as German sociologist of science Peter Weingart (1997) observes, concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity seem to be the most seriously underthought critical, pedagogical, and institutional concepts in the modern academy. Most scholars, he claims, seem to avoid enquiry into the history of discourses and debates about interdisciplinarity. For this would make clear that although since the late 1960s interdisciplinarity is proclaimed, demanded and hailed as the panacea of reforms of Higher Education this has not lead to substantial institutionalization of interdisciplinary research and teaching structures let alone sophisticated transdisciplinary research methodologies (Weingart 1997: 521-529). Quite the contrary, Weingart insists, while interdisciplinary rhetoric proliferates differentiation and specialization in science goes on unhampered. Science historian Julie Thompson Klein (1990) shares Weingarts view. Discussion of interdisciplinarity, she observes, is becoming both broader and deeper. Institutional obstacles to interdisciplinary programs, however, remain formidable.

Though Klein diagnosed this almost two decades ago it still holds true today. While the rhetoric of both scholars and science policy makers towards interdisciplinary or more recently transdisciplinary work is enormously open and supportive, it is de facto difficult to submit work that covers a range of disciplines. It is also difficult to transcend disciplinary-bound perspectives. Borrowing a term from German feminist sociologist Angelika Wetterer (2003: 286-319), one could describe the present situation as a paradoxical juxtaposition of rhetorical modernization and structural perseverance. The discourse is widening and there is a heightened sense of urgency about the need for interdisciplinarity. Whereas at the same time interdisciplinary programs struggle for

legitimacy, resources, and recognition and disciplines become in effect ever more specialised and sealed off.

Insights of sociologists of knowledge Robert Merton (1973) and Uwe Schimank (1994) might be helpful towards understanding this paradox. The prevailing strategy in knowledge production, Merton argues, is to look for niches in uncharted territory, not yet occupied by disciplines – one could call this uncharted territory the domain of interdisciplinarity. In the following, however, it is necessary to avoid contradicting knowledge by insisting on disciplinary competence and its boundaries, to denounce knowledge that does not fall into this realm as ‘undisciplined’. Thus, in the process of research, new and ever finer structures are constantly created as a result of these activities. This is the very essence of the innovation process, but this process follows the logic of disciplinarity that is the logic of differentiation. The role of inter- or transdisciplinarity in that process is that of an intermediate buffer zone, that is a zone providing space for knowledge that has not yet been accommodated by a discipline. Uwe Schimank (1994: 409-432) speaks of a “functional antagonism” in this regard. Following the social differentiation theory, he argues that the successful logic of the scientific system is disciplinary differentiation. Interdisciplinarity then is the functional counterpart to ease the tensions that arise from specialisation. The inter- or transdisciplinary crossing and deconstructing of boundaries could in this regard be seen as part of the reconstruction and maintenance of disciplines rather than their deconstruction. Metaphorically speaking, interdisciplinarity is the lubricant that keeps the disciplinary machinery running. In Deleuzian terms one could argue that interdisciplinarity is part and parcel of the post-disciplinary formation. This, however, does not mean the end of disciplinary power but its release throughout the social field.

Against this backdrop it comes as no wonder that it is often left unclear as to what the ‘inter’ or ‘trans’ in inter- or transdisciplinarity actually stand for. The original OECD definition of interdisciplinarity, at the Paris-conference on this issue in 1970, for example, was rather broad, ranging from “simple communication of ideas” to the “mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field” (Thompson Klein 2003). Julie Thompson Klein (1990) has thus described interdisciplinarity as an ‘archipelago’, a number of scattered or regrouped islands



broken away from a system that both provokes and rejects them. Interdisciplinarity has indeed appeared so widely that definitions vary from country to country, institution to institution, from one part of a campus to another, and even among members of the same team. Regarding the boundaries to cross, blur or traverse – e.g. between disciplines, between scientific knowledge and lay knowledge, between the known and the yet unknown, between academy and agora – transdisciplinarity in particular is used in many different, even opposing ways.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the relationship between interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity is often not well thought through. It may be the case, as science historian Steve Fuller (2003) argues, that only the persistently articulated need for interdisciplinary solutions to disciplinary problems brings out the inherently conventional character of disciplines. We could thus understand the latter's stasis and supposed inability to change and innovate as a discursive effect of the politics of interdisciplinarity instead of as an inherent feature of disciplinarity (Fuller 2003).

In fact, if we look at the history of disciplines it soon becomes clear that no discipline has ever been static – simply because they do not exist in isolation – nor have their boundaries been obvious and evident. “If there is an undisputed truth about disciplinarity”, Julie Klein (1993: 185-214) comments, “it is that disciplines change”. Though “discipline” can be regarded as the “first principle” (Clark 1983: 35) in the production and organization of knowledge it was never an undisputed principle. The critique of academic disciplines as limited and confining is as long-standing as the disciplines themselves. We therefore should not misunderstand a discipline as always already “finished”, that is trying to understand the “nature” of disciplines from the end, their disciplinary ‘gestalt’. For, as Steve Fuller (2003) points out, disciplines often started out “as social movements that aspired to address all manner of phenomena and registers of life, not simply the domain of reality over which they came to exercise custodianship”. These movements campaigned against each other to acquire professorships, funding, and influence. Disputes over methodology, for example, operated as symbolic events in this ongoing struggle. Over time, these clashes were institutionally resolved, especially through the creation of academic departments that were entitled to self-reproduction. In historical perspective, Fuller concludes, disciplines

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<sup>3</sup> For different concepts of transdisciplinarity, see Hark (2005: 380-383).

often “function as little more than the legitimating ideology of the makeshift solutions that define the department structure of particular universities”.

Fuller’s view corresponds with science historian Timothy Lenoir’s approach on how to study disciplines:

*“At the heart of the approach to discipline I am proposing is the claim that disciplines are political institutions that demarcate areas of academic territory, allocate privileges and responsibilities of expertise, and structure claims on resources. Disciplines are embedded in market relationships regulating the production and consumption of knowledge; they are creatures of history reflecting human habits and preferences rather than a fixed order of nature.”* (Lenoir 1997: 3)

If we look at disciplines from such a perspective, that is if we understand them as both products of social struggle and as political institutions it follows that any discipline is constantly influenced by points of view and methods of related disciplines. Connectivity is thus not a genuine feature of interdisciplinarity. For disciplinary boundaries are never seamless boundaries. Often, they are poorly demarcated, making them, as sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn (1983: 781-795) suggests, “ambiguous, flexible, historically changing, contextually variable, internally inconsistent, and sometimes disputed” (Gieryn 1983: 785). This, however, does not mean that it is easy to cross disciplinary boundaries or that eventually they would disappear and disciplines merge. As in “real life” one needs visas and the right passport in order to cross borders.

### **Changing Concepts**

Concepts of interdisciplinarity also change over time. And I will give just a few examples of this. Steve Fuller (2003) pointed out, “interdisciplinarians of an earlier era” promoted “critical reflexivity” as the core idea of interdisciplinarity. The “goal of interdisciplinary collaboration today tends to be less the fundamental transformation of intellectual orientation – a realignment of disciplinary boundaries – than the fostering of good communication skills so that no vital information is lost in the pursuit of a

common research project.” Thus, “obstacles in interdisciplinarity”, Fuller continues, “that in the past would have been interpreted as based in disciplinary considerations are now demoted to local problems of project management that need to be overcome as expediently as possible, for purposes of grant renewal and securing the employability of the project members”.

Another time-related change in concepts of interdisciplinarity is the fairly recent transition from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity. Although, as both Helga Nowotny (2003) and Julie Klein (2003) point out, “transdisciplinarity is a theme which resurfaces time and again”, recently it has taken some striking turns. Klein dates the term to the international OECD-conference on interdisciplinarity, held in Paris in 1970. The conference organizers defined transdisciplinarity as “framework that transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary frameworks through a comprehensive and overarching synthesis” (Thompson Klein 2003). Other definitions emerged in the ensuing decades, including a new structure of unity informed by the worldview of complexity in science. Such as a new mode of knowledge production that fosters synthetic reconfiguration and recontextualization around problems of application, and collaborative partnerships involving public and private sectors in research on problems of sustainability. The most prominent definition to date is certainly the one proposed by Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons first in their book *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (1994) and again in *Rethinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (2001). They define transdisciplinarity as

*“the mobilisation of a range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies to solve problems. But, unlike inter- or multi-disciplinarity, it is not necessarily derived from pre-existing disciplines nor does it always contribute to the formation of new disciplines. The creative act lies just as much in the capacity to mobilise and manage these perspectives and methodologies, their ‘external’ orchestration so-to-speak, as in the development of new theories or conceptualisations or the refinement of research methods, the ‘internal’ dynamics of scientific creativity. The configuration of researchers and other participants keeps on changing and gives rise to the often-temporary nature of a ‘Mode 2’ working style. Teams*

*are brought together and dissolve upon having finished their work, only to be re-configured in a different constellation for another task. In other words 'Mode 2' knowledge, in this trans-disciplinary form, is embodied in the expertise of individual researchers and research teams as much as, or possibly more than, it is encoded in conventional research products such as journal articles or even patents." (Nowotny, Gibbon and Scott 2003: 181)*

Nowotny, Gibbons, and Scott situate transdisciplinarity clearly outside the framework of traditional academic disciplines and focuses on the border between academic science and non academic-science. An alternative approach, proposed by German science philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß (1998) and also widely discussed in German Gender Studies contexts, conceptualizes transdisciplinarity in a quasi post-colonial critical mode as discipline-oriented. In discipline-oriented approaches of transdisciplinarity 'trans' refers to a kind of border traffic between disciplines that is characterized by critical reflexivity. Unlike concepts of interdisciplinarity that leave disciplines intact reflexive transdisciplinarity transcends disciplinary divisions within the historical context of the constitution of disciplines. It reminds disciplines of their historicity and the epistemological contingency of their respective perspectives. It is in this sense that one could speak of transdisciplinarity as operating in a post-colonial mode of critique. And it is this definition of transdisciplinarity that recently appears increasingly as a label for new knowledge formations rooted in cultural critique such as Women's Studies and Gender Studies.

What I hope has become clear thus far is, *first*, interdisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary practices are as little as disciplinary practices neutral. They have histories, and they take place in particular places and in specific times. They can support either hegemonic projects or critical ones. The emergence of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary programs and methods as well as the programs and methods themselves have thus to be understood as much in relation to the history of knowledge production and institutional politics as in relation to the emergence of disciplines and their programs and methods.

*Secondly*, disciplines have created dominant consensus through the creation of boundaries between different kinds of subjects and bodies of knowledge. The boundaries themselves therefore become reified and legitimated, and they have

produced their own subjects and reproduced their own practices. Yet, to simply charge disciplines with inadequacy elides questions of the relationship between knowledge production and institutional histories. Because almost as soon as disciplines establish credibility through discourses of coherence and rigor, they tend to fall into crisis. Against the assertion of distinctive purity, it is thus possible to conceive disciplines as always already hybrid and constantly changing. Moreover, interdisciplinary projects have also often sought disciplinary-like status in the process of institutionalization and thus have fallen into similar dynamics.

### **Inter- and Transdisciplinarity in Women's Studies**

Against the background of this more general discussion on the nature of disciplinarity, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and their related politics, I will now turn to debates on interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies. Why did interdisciplinarity turn out to be such an important feature in defining and distinguishing Women's Studies? Again, my primary concern is not methodological questions of inter- or transdisciplinarity but the politics of interdisciplinarity.

At first sight the variety of inter- or transdisciplinary programs in Women's Studies and Gender Studies both in North America and in Europe seem to prove Weingart's and Klein's diagnosis. That there is a lot of talking about interdisciplinarity yet little substantial infrastructure. Quite the contrary, interdisciplinarity is not only one of the founding and key defining elements of feminist knowledge projects and can almost certainly be found in virtually every mission statement or program description of any Women's Studies program anywhere in the world. Women's Studies programs would very likely claim that they did in fact create interdisciplinary research and teaching structures. And I will give just one albeit rather prominent example: On the 25<sup>th</sup> birthday of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) feminist literary scholar Bonnie Zimmerman (2002: viii-xviii) comments on the beginnings of Women's Studies in the U.S.:

*“Women’s Studies, as we understood it at its outset in the late 1960s, included critique and reform of traditional disciplines, combining and recombining disciplinary perspectives into new formations, and inventing entirely new ways of analyzing and understanding the category woman. Through interdisciplinary invention and disciplinary reform, we would radically transform the discursive structures of society.” (Zimmerman 2002: ix-x)*

There are several characteristics attributed to interdisciplinarity that made it of significant interest to Women’s Studies in the first place. *Foremost*, interdisciplinarity offered a framework to conceptualize a “space” between the disciplines – Merton’s uncharted territory –, a space necessary for the intervention in knowledge production. Feminist scholars figured this space as a gap between the perspectives of women on the one hand and the assumptions, models, theories, canons, and questions the so-called traditional disciplines had developed on women on the other hand. Feminist scholarship has in fact more than adequately demonstrated the existence of this gap during the past 30 years of research and teaching. As a consequence, some disciplines opened their borders to include previously excluded research questions, while others revised their methodology to make room for the recognition of gender as a research variable, if not a category of analysis.

Interdisciplinarity, *secondly*, offered feminist scholars a language that enabled them to combine the insights of two or more fields of study. This knowledge, many feminist scholars argued, would be unassimilable by the disciplines. For both in content and in form, and by virtue of its very production, they believed, such knowledge stands already as an implicit critique of the disciplinary organization of knowledge.

*Third*, while interdisciplinarity incorporates disciplinary approaches to knowledge when they are useful, while it borrows and incorporates, it does not feel constrained by disciplinary methods and rules for the uses of such approaches. Interdisciplinarity, thus, holds the promise of disobedience, unruliness, and rebelliousness (not only) against disciplinary regimes: features with high currency in Women’s Studies contexts. Often, for example, Women's Studies is thus described as ‘crossing (out) the disciplines’. This phrase captures the revolutionary promise that is inherent in interdisciplinarity, namely, that in crossing, it will cross out the disciplines.

Additionally, it holds the promise of a fundamental epistemic challenge that, in producing new knowledge that does not “fit” the disciplinary structure, feminist interdisciplinarity will somehow undermine the very legitimacy of the disciplines themselves. It is these kind of promises that make up the phantasmatic dimension of knowledge production. They enable feminists to imagine themselves as change agents and feminist theory as a transformative power.

The language of interdisciplinarity, I would thus argue, provided feminist scholars foremost with a means to draw a distinction, to paraphrase Niklas Luhmann, to differentiate and distinguish their project from already established disciplines. Interdisciplinarity provided the space necessary to articulate feminist ideas and accommodate these ideas within academe, it was and maybe still is a vehicle to articulate and establish feminist knowledge and not the goal.

This becomes even more evident when we consider that different Women’s Studies programs conceptualise and practice inter- and transdisciplinarity in many different ways. What is called interdisciplinarity in one institution might not be recognized as such or could be called multi- or transdisciplinarity in another. Interdisciplinarity, Bonnie Zimmerman (2002) for example observes, “typically refers to a course team-taught by more than one professor, or in which a scattering of ideas gleaned from the more accessible texts in several fields is strung together or introduced to the students as possibilities for further research. Only rarely does it refer to entirely new ways of organizing and exploring the knowledge-base of Women’s Studies.” (Zimmerman 2002: x) Accordingly, for most Women’s and Gender Studies programs it would be more accurate to speak of multidisciplinary instead of a genuinely inter- or transdisciplinary research and teaching approach. Canadian feminist scholar Susanne Luhmann (2001) shares Zimmerman’s observations. Luhmann argues that most “degree-granting Women’s Studies programs created over the last three decades in North America offer only a few courses specifically designed as Women’s Studies courses for Women’s Studies programs while the majority of course offerings continue to draw on existing resources in various disciplines”. Also most teaching positions as well as research projects are still tied closely to specific disciplines. “This points”, Luhmann concludes, “to the overall additive quality of interdisciplinary Women’s



Studies and seems to confirm rather than question the disciplinary organization of the university.” (Luhmann 2001)

In addition, it may also be the case that government agencies, university presidents or reformers of Higher Education who endorse inter- or transdisciplinarity understand interdisciplinarity quite differently from what feminist scholars have in mind when they try to set up inter- or transdisciplinary programs and structures. As a consequence, feminist academics may possibly find themselves in a situation in which they are forced to frame their projects in terms not of their own making. And might not have the institutional and intellectual resources to work through the effects this will have on their ideas, concepts, and projects.

Against this backdrop one could argue that in Women’s Studies interdisciplinarity is as much a seriously underthought critical, pedagogical and institutional concept as everywhere else in the academic universe. As Marjorie Pryse (2000) argues for the U.S. context: “For 30 years Women’s Studies has lived with casual and unexamined understandings of interdisciplinarity” (Pryse 2000: 106).

Pryse is extremely critical of Women’s Studies failure to develop a critical interdisciplinary methodology. “Gender, race, class, and sexuality as vectors of analysis”, she argues, “have served as place-holders for some methodology that we have yet to design” (ibid.). We have failed to understand, she continues, that these vectors “do not in themselves constitute methodology even though they do define both our political and intellectual commitments” (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Bonnie Zimmerman (2002) urges one to consider the question whether Women’s Studies did indeed move beyond disciplines to new ways of thinking about women and gender. 30 years after the beginning of Women’s Studies, she argues, “the way in which we frame our research and teaching continues to be grounded in traditional disciplines” (Zimmerman 2002: x). Although, Zimmerman continues, “feminist theory is the key to the interdisciplinary practices of Women’s Studies”, it has not pushed far enough beyond the disciplinary divisions, because “theories and methodologies draw so tenaciously upon their disciplinary families of origin” (ibid.). Critical theorists, for example, would not speak to, or understand, social scientists. Also, Women’s Studies has barely addressed the assumptions and methodologies of the

natural sciences or intellectually incorporated the arts sufficiently, let alone begun to think about theory and methodology outside Western structures and traditions.

Whereas Pryse and Zimmerman point to the failure of Women's Studies to develop an interdisciplinary methodology, on a more optimistic note feminist literary scholar Sneja Gunew (2002: 47-65) describes Women's Studies as "a continuing experiment in interdisciplinarity". Women's Studies, she argues, is "able to offer a tradition of experimentation in interdisciplinarity in areas ranging from curriculum design to pedagogical principles, team-teaching, and, at least, course articulation" (Ibid.). This, however, Gunew warns, "does not always mean that Women's Studies has been able to pursue these experiments systematically or to theorize them clearly" (Ibid.). We thus "need to learn more about integrated interdisciplinarity", Gunew concludes, because, due to its common focus on women, Women's Studies has too often taken interdisciplinarity for granted (Gunew 2002: 51). "Much of what I've experienced", she comments, "has been a putting of disciplines side by side in a multidisciplinary way rather than working for an integrated model" (Ibid.).

This is for the most part due to the fact that despite their efforts to the contrary Women's Studies is still deeply implicated in the conventional structure of disciplines. Moreover, the skills that faculty bring to the programs are thoroughly informed by their own disciplinary training. The actual study programs are thus often structured along the disciplinary lines familiar to the faculty teaching in the program instead of along interdisciplinary-framed research questions or problems. Given that most Women Studies scholars come from the humanities and the social sciences this can – among other challenges – in practice lead to a further distancing from the sciences, medicine, and technical fields. In addition, because of the institutional history of Women's Studies as primarily occurring in faculties of humanities and the social sciences, as well as its being subjected to a legacy of underfunding and marginalization, Women's Studies often lacked time and resources to fully articulate its ideas on interdisciplinarity. And last but not least, practices and traditions of professionalisation within fields will have a great deal to do with the possibility of interdisciplinarity.

Consequently, the departmental and curricular structures within most Women's Studies programs combine core courses and faculty with cross-listed courses (and faculty). From the disciplines appears a promise of an opportunity for developing

interdisciplinarity. In actuality it often produces a tension between core and cross-listed. In which feminist knowledge remains dialogically connected to traditional disciplines even though the perspective students bring back into the disciplines from their core courses involves critique of those disciplines. Women's Studies thus appear to occupy the space of critique simply by virtue of its organizational position “outside” the traditional disciplines.

### **Disputed Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity as a Site of the Making of Women's Studies**

This leads me to my last argument. As I discussed in the beginning, when interdisciplinarity is discussed often more is at stake than the production and organization of knowledge. Discussions of interdisciplinarity articulate issues concerning the distinctness, integrity, coherence, and claims to authority of academic fields. They are part of the making of disciplines as conflicts are crucial to creating and defining disciplines. This is true for debates in Women's Studies on interdisciplinarity. They are part of the history of conflict in a field struggling to become a discipline.

I will try to demonstrate this via an exemplary discussion of three texts published in the late 1990s in two U.S.-feminist journals, *Feminist Studies*, and *differences*. These texts speak of the tensions surrounding Women's Studies at a particular moment of its history that is a moment in time when debates on the premise, aims, and legitimation of Women's Studies as a discrete area of study proliferated. All three texts consider the question how interdisciplinarity functions in the process of constituting the field.

The first text I am looking at is Judith A. Allen and Sally Kitch's contribution to the *Feminist Studies'* special issue on Women's Studies, “Disciplined by Disciplines? The Need for an Interdisciplinary Research Mission in Women's Studies” (1998). Allen and Kitch maintain that Women's Studies is under threat from the disciplines, or, more precisely, is “disciplined by disciplines” (Allen and Kitch 1998: 275-299). They promote the institutionalization of Women's Studies as an *interdiscipline* with autonomous interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs, its own research mission, and separate

departmental form of organization. Without such change in institutional structures, without constituting it as a separate interdisciplinary discipline, and without a renewed intellectual commitment to doing scholarship under the banner of Women's Studies, without, thus, becoming an *interdiscipline* in its own right, Allen and Kitch consider Women's Studies continued presence in the university at risk. According to Allen and Kitch, Women's Studies is threatened by a divergence between its wide-spread interdisciplinary teaching mission on the one hand, and its predominantly discipline-based research practice on the other. This shores up the disciplines but weakens Women's Studies. Not moving beyond "discipline-focused research," they conclude, "may ultimately call into question the very need for a field called Women's Studies" (Allen and Kitch: 281). Although the very success of Women's Studies in many disciplines made gender an indispensable category of discipline-based scholarship this very success proves dangerous to Women's Studies. It questions the distinct role and, ultimately, the existence of the field itself. Hence, the authors argue that renewed commitment to interdisciplinarity is required, not only at the level of instruction, but more importantly in scholarship and institutional structures. Such commitment to instructional, scholarly, and institutional interdisciplinarity would offer a chance to rescue Women's Studies from the threat of becoming redundant.

Allen and Kitch point to interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies as a solution to an emergent crisis of the field. In the same issue of *Feminist Studies*, Susan Stanford Friedman reflects in her piece "(Inter)Disciplinarity and the Question of the Women's Studies Ph.D." (1998) on her ambivalence toward the very structure that Allan and Kitch favor (Stanford Friedman 1998: 301-325). Friedman thinks through her reluctance to endorse freestanding interdisciplinary Women's Studies programs, especially at the Ph.D. level. Whereas, for Allan and Kitch Women's Studies suffers from the tension of scholarly being too much in the disciplines while Women's Studies programs favor an interdisciplinary teaching profile, for Friedman, Women's Studies as a discipline is not enough. Friedman questions specifically the viability of interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs in Women's Studies since the vastness of Women's Studies knowledge makes it unlikely that one could ever achieve mastery in such field: "The feminist knowledge revolution is so broad ranging in scope and so deep in its complexity of debate and discovery that even an introductory acquaintance across the divisions [of the

humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and performing arts and its respective sub fields] is a major challenge ... [and] the attempt to design a Ph.D. program that draws on knowledge for all four divisions would result in insufficiently rigorous teaching and learning.“ (Stanford Friedman 1998: 314)

Friedman concludes the vastness of such knowledge would produce only insufficiently trained candidates. This problem of coverage becomes even more complicated if one considers the fact that knowledge about gender or women is no longer sufficient knowledge. Instead, analysis that focus on gendering processes needs to interact with analyses that focus on the processes of racialisation, on class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. Such complicated analysis is difficult enough to achieve within one discipline, Friedman insists, to do this across all areas of Women’s Studies is impossible.

In summary: Both accounts of interdisciplinarity in Women’s Studies suggest that Women’s Studies is successful. Successful in integrating itself into disciplinary canons, as Allan and Kitch point out, and successful in producing abundant knowledges, as Friedman informs us. However, these very successes pose threats to the field of Women’s Studies, contradictory threats point to the field becoming superfluous and unmanageable. Interestingly, in the analyses offered by Allan and Kitch and Friedman respectively, the threat to Women’s Studies is understood as coming from outside rather than from within the field. In the account of Allan and Kitch, Women’s Studies is under threat of becoming obsolete because the disciplines take over due to their intellectual, and institutional dominance. To counter this risk, the authors suggest that Women’s Studies must become an interdiscipline, which sounds much like a discipline. In Friedman’s account, to the contrary, interdisciplinarity and high academic standards seem to be contrasting projects. She thus argues at least against autonomous Ph.D. programs in Women’s Studies.

Interestingly enough, neither Allen and Kitch nor Friedman question the “nature” of disciplinarity and its function in the production of knowledge. It seems indeed the “first principle” (Clark 1983: 35) of the organisation of knowledge.

Against this backdrop I will now turn to Biddy Martin’s contribution to the special *differences* issue on Women’s Studies, “Success and its Failures” (1997). Martin thinks about the role of interdisciplinarity in the reorganisation of knowledge in the

university and the role Women's Studies might or might not play in this. In her essay, Martin is sceptical about the future of Women's Studies and, particularly, about its potential to continue as a leader in the re-organisation of knowledge. In her account, Women's Studies has become too similar to other disciplines. It immersed itself in disciplinary and political turf wars and became preoccupied with accepted truth and methodology regimes. Thus, Martin worries that Women's Studies has lost the ability to be the site for true intellectual curiosity, to be still interested in what is *not known* and to treat this creatively.

To move beyond habitual exchanges of accepted truths and the repetition of familiar arguments and positions, and in order to regain the intellectual charge that it once held, Martin holds against normalised knowledge production, Women's Studies would need to assume a leadership role in transforming university curricula into interdisciplinary scholarship and learning. Martin, however, doubts that Women's Studies has the capacity to do so.

Hence, where Friedman and Kitch and Allan see an unfinished project of feminist enlightenment, hindered by an unresponsive and inhospitable institution and its academic practices, Martin finds Women's Studies too finished. Thus unable or perhaps even unwilling to take a leading role in the much needed further transformation and the re-thinking and re-defining of knowledge itself. Where Friedman finds Women's Studies not being enough *of* a discipline and Allan and Kitch find it embroiled too much *in* the disciplines, Martin declares Women's Studies as too much *like* a discipline and thus no longer interested in what lies outside of its boundaries or in what is not yet known.

For Friedman and Allan as well as for Kitch, Women's Studies' knowledge production is ultimately limited by institutional demands, demands that are brought to bear onto its knowledges from the *outside*. For Martin on the other hand, Women's Studies are limited from the *inside*. She suggests that we need to trace how Women's Studies is restricted by some of its own practices, theoretical assumptions, pedagogical habits, and epistemological persuasions. Yet, rather than merely putting blame on the field Martin alerts our attention to limitations posed by the *inside* of knowledge itself. She suggests a model of knowledge that does not rely on such distinctions as

inside/outside, margin/centre dichotomies and looks to an epistemology with a different methodology.

This re-imagining of knowledge that Martin seems to suggest expands beyond a mere widening to the field of Women's Studies to other objects/subject of study such as the study of gender and sexuality, a model that some institutions are considering and that is also endorsed by Allan and Kitch. This widening of its subjects of study is an important first step, which, however, has its own limitations if it does not simultaneously consider the epistemological disavowals of such a move. Martin speaks to such disavowals when she outlines how intellectual curiosity is foreclosed through and within established parameters of feminist knowledge. Such foreclosures in turn lead to unrealized interdisciplinarity. Her example of choice is social constructivism and the lack of critique of constructivism, which fosters a deep split between the social sciences and humanities on the one side and the hard sciences on the other. With the exception of a critique of sciences, Women's Studies – like the social sciences and humanities – tends to have little engagement with the sciences. Responses that consist only of resistant and defensive reactions, however, foreclose any kind of genuine curiosity. Martin concludes that the feminist refusal to consider “that ‘biology’ might play any role at all in the construction of subjectivity is indicative of a defensive rather than genuinely curious and interrogative procedure”.

Martin urges a move towards an interdisciplinarity that, besides the social sciences, the humanities and fine arts, also includes the sciences, and, allows us to become “curious again. Curious, about what [d]ifferent disciplinary formations and knowledge can contribute to problems or questions that we share” (Martin 1997: 109). This kind of curiosity needs to include the domains that traditionally have been excluded from the study of women, gender, and sexuality. Further more, to engage that which has been “disavowed, refused, or ignored [so] we might unsettle what have become routine and impoverished practices” (Ibid.). Her appeal for a renewed curiosity urges us to consider and engage knowledge that is not immediately obvious in its relationship to gender, women, and/or sexuality.



### **Material Conditions**

What is thus left out when inter- or transdisciplinarity becomes the norm? How can we guarantee that all disciplinary perspectives are heard in contexts that organise knowledge along hierarchically ordered disciplinary lines? What kind of disciplinary hierarchies already exist in the field of Women's Studies? How can we account for the contingent and uneven development of feminist knowledge in various disciplines without assuming or even claiming an avant-garde role for some disciplines? Functions Women's Studies interdisciplinarity primarily as a mark of distinction in order to differentiate itself from the so-called "traditional" disciplines? In what regards functions interdisciplinarity as an internal disciplinary technology in the Foucaultian sense? How do Women's Studies govern its own intellectual development in contexts in which government policies sometimes favor the humanities, sometimes the social science, and most often the sciences? What if it is precisely the logic of interdisciplinary boundary crossing that universities now find in their own interest to support? And last but not least, given the extensive praise of features such as connectivity, applicability, and boundary crossing attributed to interdisciplinarity, is the critical impulse feminist scholars associate with interdisciplinarity in danger of being assimilated to what Masao Miyoshi (2000) has defined as the new norm for transnational corporate elites: the ability to translate across the boundaries of cultural differences? Is interdisciplinarity thus becoming a stage in the production of the new transnational professional-managerial class thus ceasing to be an emblem of critique?

These are but a few of the material conditions that configure the possibility for critical interdisciplinary work in Women's Studies. In light of these conditions I agree with Kitch and Allen that Women's Studies does indeed need to become a discipline in its own right. In order to be able to develop the kind of interdisciplinary methodology that Pryse, Zimmerman and others call for we need robust institutional infrastructures that not only guarantee participation but also more institutional autonomy for example with regards to curriculum-development. Only then will Women's Studies be truly enabled not only to intervene in sedimented disciplinary regimes and routines but also to develop robust concepts of inter- or transdisciplinarity. As Diane Elam (2002) argues,

the “important move that Women’s Studies can make is that it indeed become a department without simultaneously taking on the rigidity of a discipline. In doing this it can begin to challenge the terms and conditions under which the university is accustomed to operating. Part of the negotiation that Women’s Studies as a department will have to make is preserving, even intensifying, all of its various interdisciplinary connections while arguing for its fiscal, administrative, and disciplinary autonomy” (Elam 2002: 220).

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### Reponse to Sabine Hark

Having spent my academic career as a feminist researcher and teacher working for inter- and transdisciplinary spaces for Women's/Gender/Feminist Studies (WGFS)<sup>1</sup>, I welcome Sabine Hark's plea for disciplinary autonomy and interdisciplinary connectedness wholeheartedly. I agree very much with the quote from Diane Elam with which she concludes her article:

*In order to survive and grow, Women's Studies needs to be viewed by the institution as a financially and intellectually autonomous discipline that continues to explore its interdisciplinary commitments.*(Elam 2002 quoted in Hark p. 23)

What I would like to do in this comment to Sabine Hark's article, is to suggest ways to push further the discussion of WGFS as a field of studies which should act as a discipline in institutional contexts, but which at the same time should keep up a total interdisciplinary openness. As I once wrote, such a position is currently "a monstrous oxymoron, but perhaps the mainstream of tomorrow..." (Lykke 2004: 100).

#### 1. A positioning.

In the interdisciplinary WGFS milieu, where I am employed as professor of Gender Studies (Linköping University, Sweden) we define the oxymoronic position, referred to above, as one which makes WGFS into a postdisciplinary discipline. Institutionally, we define what we do as thematic WGFS, where the term "thematic" has a very precise institutional meaning. Thematic research is at my university officially defined as an alternative to disciplinary research, and it is organized accordingly. To be defined as a "theme" means to have status as a department with its own interdisciplinary team of professors, post-doctoral researchers and

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<sup>1</sup> As an acknowledgement of the diversity of naming practices, which have been part of the institutionalisation processes of feminist research, I shall refer to the area as Women's/Gender/Feminist Studies (WGFS). The space does not allow me to go into a debate about the distinctions.

PhD students, its own PhD-awarding interdisciplinary doctoral programme, its own budget and administration etc. Besides a thematic department for Gender Studies, my university also runs parallel units for “themes” such as ethnicity, children, water, technology and social change etc. It is very enriching for WGFS to be organized as this type of unit for thematic, inter- and transdisciplinary research and at the same time form part of an environment, where there are many units of this kind, each with its own thematic focus. This opens a lot of possibilities for cross-cutting collaboration.

To do WGFS in such an environment makes it possible to act and elaborate the field as a postdisciplinary discipline or what Hark (quoting Allen and Kitch 1998) calls an “interdiscipline” (Hark p. 17), i.e. a discipline in the sense that we have our own unit with its own staff, the right to award PhD degrees in thematic Gender Studies etc., and a post- or interdiscipline in the sense that we make it a point to keep up a total transdisciplinary openness.

## **2. The “future” has already begun!**

Besides a positioning, this brief introduction to my university and my postdisciplinary working environment should serve as an example which is meant to point beyond Hark’s statement that the hailing of interdisciplinarity since the 1960s have been more of a lip service game than a real change of structures. I would like to strike a more optimistic tone as regards the current state of the art than Sabine Hark does. But, in so doing, I want to give my warm support to Sabine Hark’s vision of WGFS, reconfigured as interdiscipline or postdiscipline in the above defined sense.

When Sabine Hark talks about “a paradoxical juxtaposition of rhetorical modernization and structural perseverance” (p.4), I do, on the one hand, agree, when looking at the overall picture. Traditional, border policing ways of doing disciplinarity is still going strong in many universities and national as well as international funding agencies, and, I agree very much that this has repercussions for the unfolding of inter- and transdisciplinary dimensions of WGFS.

But to leave the argument here, is, on the other hand, to make a too sweeping and homogenizing statement. Hence, I do not agree, when Sabine Hark right away concludes that

“it seems indeed the case that in Women’s Studies interdisciplinarity is as much a seriously underthought critical, pedagogical and institutional concept as everywhere else in the academic universe” (Hark p. 13). From this kind of overall characteristic of the state of the art, it becomes difficult to grasp local, national and regional differences as regards the transnational unfolding of the field of WGFS. Moreover, such a generalizing conclusion distracts the attention from the ways in which Academia today, including the spaces where WGFS has been able to gain institutional ground, performs as a very messy environment, where clear-cut dichotomies such as disciplinary/interdisciplinary do not apply neither structurally nor rhetorically. Moreover, I miss the point that, in some settings, the postdisciplinary “future” has already begun, which Hark and several of the Anglo-American feminist researchers, on which she primarily builds her argument, hope for. In Sweden, for example, a growing number of established interdisciplinary Gender Studies PhD programmes have had the institutional-material and discursive possibility to transcend the stalemate, in which a lot of Anglo-American Women’s Studies programmes seem to have ended up, according to the introduction to one of Sabine Hark’s sources, the volume Women’s Studies on its own (Wiegman 2002) - ie. a stalemate, where

*interdisciplinarity becomes an effect of disciplinary accumulation, not a strategy of instruction at either the undergraduate or doctoral level. (Wiegman 2002: 5)*

### **3. To go beyond US-outlooks**

Sabine Hark’s way of pointing out dilemmas and contradictions as far as the history of interdisciplinarity in general and within the field of WGFS in particular is concerned, is important and well argued. But her strong focus on US examples (Pryse 2000; Zimmermann 2002, Allen & Kitch 1998, Stanford Friedman 1998, Wiegman 2002 etc.) gives her analysis a problematic twist. It means that the specific organisational and structural foundations of US Women’s Studies and the ways in which they, perhaps primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, have furthered, but also restrained transversal and discipline-transgressive feminist knowledge production tend to become universalized. The strong focus on US examples means that Sabine Hark’s analysis cannot transcend their dilemmas.



A lot can, definitely, be learnt from the US-specific dilemmas, but I think that Sabine Hark discusses them in a too generalizing way. She gets “captured” by them in a sense, which Susan Stanford Friedman (one of Hark’s sources), in fact, articulates very well. In an article, debating whether or not to establish PhD degrees in WGFS at the University of Wisconsin Madison (Stanford Friedman 1998), whose first part is quoted extensively by Sabine Hark, Stanford Friedman undertakes a very interesting move in the last part of the article. In an attempt to push herself into innovative epistemological grounds, she argues against the first part of her own article and its scepticism vis-à-vis PhD degrees in WGFS, and in so doing, she articulates the worry that her way of thinking about the whole issue, as presented in the first part of her article, is too “captured” in the US situation:

*I worry about being captured in the discourse of the present in the United States through a failure of imagination, an inability to think more broadly about future possibilities.* (Stanford Friedman 1998: 319)

I agree with Allen & Kitch (also quoted extensively by Hark) that what is much needed, is “a fieldwide analysis of the structural, institutional, epistemological, and political factors” that play a role in generation of “a full interdisciplinary women’s studies research mission” (Allen and Kitch 1998: 275), and I think Sabine Hark’s article is an important contribution to such an analysis. But I shall add that transnational perspectives has to be systematically included and thought through. National and institutional differences and diversities, issues of travelling theories, methodologies and models, translations from one context to another etc. have to be taken thoroughly into account. This is one of the lessons, I have learnt from my yearlong commitment to the unfolding European WGFS.

#### **4. How to reach alternative accounts?**

As Sabine Hark’s article has brought me to reflect on transatlantic differences, I shall end my comment by suggesting that the diversity of strategies, which European WGFS have developed in order to overcome sometimes seemingly insurmountable barriers vis-à-vis going interdisciplinary, together with European level initiatives to compare notes on this diversity in the 1990s and 2000s, have created a basis for perhaps more diverse and boundary

transgressing reflections on interdisciplinarity than the ones, currently emerging out of US Women's Studies.

To exemplify, let me mention a couple of current large scale European WGFS organisations such as the EU-funded thematic network Athena, comprising over 100 European WGFS programmes/groups/units, or the Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, a PhD training consortium of over 40 WGFS programmes/groups/units from the Northern regions of Europe. What is being performed within these major institutionalized WGFS frameworks is, I think, more well-developed discursive-material deconstructions of the disciplinary/interdisciplinary dichotomy than the ones, which have been allowed for in the US examples, discussed by Hark. This is not to say that the mentioned European contexts are without problems. Far from it. My point is that the diversity in terms of building and reflecting on new transgressive and boundary-crossing WGFS curricula, performed within these organisational frameworks, seems to shift the perspectives of the fieldwide analyses away from the dichotomous either/or of being/not being disciplined by the disciplines or having/not having an identity as a (successor)discipline to a more diverse stance.

Since we all - Sabine Hark, her main US sources, myself and a lot of my feminist colleagues, engaged in Athena and other European projects - seem to agree on the necessity of alternative accounts of what it means for WGFS to perform as an inter- or postdiscipline, I think much more space to compare notes is needed. So I welcome the initiative taken by the editors of this journal to give space for such debates.

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## Who's the expert?

### On knowledge seeking as praxis: a methodological approach

#### Abstract

*To establish a knowledge seeking that sheds light upon manifoldness without simplifying plurality or further exposing implicit power hegemonies, feminist scholars need to distinguish between forms of rationalist knowledge and knowledge as praxis, calling attention to the fact that scholars need to address how issues of habits, norms, customs and ideas are related to the production of knowledge. Through analyses of an epistemological ranking-list and a methodological check list, I investigate ways of managing plurality and power in contemporary feminist scholarly work and argue that the ambition to avoid power asymmetries in feminist scholarship is a problematic point of departure. By drawing on the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, I propose a methodology based on the idea of knowledge as praxis, treating knowledge production as action, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world, intrinsically interwoven with culture, politics and power.*

Key words: praxis; methodology; intersectionality; plurality; power; Sara Ahmed; Chantal Mouffe

#### **Introduction**

In June 2006, I attended a lecture by the American philosopher and feminist scholar Naomi Scheman, who was travelling through Europe making inquiries on why people trust, or do not trust, research. "In epistemology", she said, "there is too much focus on truth. But truth, in the way it gets talked about, is on the other side of the horizon. It doesn't tell us how we are going to get it. We are talking too little of how we are going to practice".

After all those years of feminist theorization on the negative consequences of mainstream epistemology, I found it odd to discover that the ideologies of rationality are still prevailing in feminist intellectual work. It made me think of the introduction of intersectionality in Sweden, which exposed a fear of pluralism in feminist research that shared commonalities with the ideologies of rationality in mainstream epistemology. Later, I found Scheman's statement confirmed while reading a handbook in feminist methodology. Here, I

noticed how the feminist wish to produce “ethically approved” research engendered instrumental guidelines for feminist scholars, treating power as something controllable and distinguishable from the relation to the scholar and the investigation itself. It became clear to me that it is indeed time to change the focus of our inquiries. In this article, I wish to propose a methodology based on the idea of knowledge as praxis, treating knowledge production as doing, as an activity, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

I pursue the following three areas of investigation in this article: firstly, I investigate feminist scholars’ difficulties on handling plurality in research, through the example of one feminist debate around the introduction of intersectionality in the early 2000s in Sweden. Secondly, through the analysis of a sequence from a feminist methodological handbook I investigate how feminist scholars manage power in research. Thirdly, by drawing on the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, I investigate the implications for feminist research of knowledge production as praxis. Here, I present knowledge as performed within a specific and historically defined context, with an emphasis on the connectedness between knowledge production and our constant inclusion in the world. Prior to this, I give a short note on terminology.

### **Cultures, politics and power**

In this article, I make use of the two concepts culture and politics. Seeing that both are changeable and richly varied, I need to explain my usage of them. Anthropologist William H Sewell has made a distinction between ‘culture’ as an abstract analytical category and ‘culture’ as a “concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices” (1999: 39). It seems to me, however, that the distinction would be made more clear if ‘culture’ in the first respect was denominated ‘the cultural’. With this understanding, I will hence describe ‘the cultural’, drawing on Sewell’s distinction, as an analytical concept/category, raising from our complex practical lives. Furthermore I understand ‘culture’, in a concrete sense, where expressions of opinion take place, from which it follows that ‘culture’ is pluralizable and contradictory (cf. Sewell 1999: 52). I thus understand the notion of ‘culture’ as the inscription in stories, rituals, customs, objects and practices of the meanings, located at a specific time and place. Practices

of cultures are moreover concentrated around powerful institutions, constituted by organizations, states, religions, business corporations and so on.

Recently, French philosopher Chantal Mouffe published a book in which she problematizes the epoch of the “post-political *Zeitgeist*”. Here, she produces a critical framework in which she distinguishes between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ that will further inform my discussion on politics:

By ‘the political’, I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe 2005: 9)

Hence, the practical dimensions of ‘politics’ take place at an ontic level, i.e. at the level of current practices and beliefs. I understand ‘politics’ in this dimension as ideological differences, expressed through social practices, actions. ‘The political’, in turn, is a theoretically defined category at an ontological level.

The relations between culture and politics are always intersected by power. Hence my need to also explain my use of ‘power’. Drawing on the writings of Dorothy E Smith, I define power as developed in interactions between ourselves and others, although often originated more or less far away from us, in governments and organisations – institutions that we both produce and are produced by (Smith 2005: 13). As a consequence the scholar can be seen to produce knowledge to a world she herself is a part of. Power, therefore, is relational and situational. A scholarly inquiry must be situated in the context of the social, the cultural and the historical. The expressions of power are polyphonic, and may be found in universal and/or more provincial hegemonies. I conceptualize the distinction between power in general and hegemonic power as a difference between power and domination. A hegemonic individual or structure dominates over people in an oppressive, discriminatory or violent kind of way.

### **Feminist conceptualisations of knowledge**

Several years have passed – as well as a great amount of theoretical schools – since the idea of an objective research was exchanged into a scholarly work where subjective capacities

were taken into account. Within feminist research, one of the most significant alterations took place during the mid-seventies, in the accentuation of research where the scholar's everyday experiences were considered as central (Smith 2004: 28).

Feminist scholars have since then in various ways raised objections against claims on universality in research. Feminist empiricists inquired forms of knowledge in a problematising of experiences. Feminist standpoint theoreticians investigated the knowing subject, while postmodernist feminist scholars questioned subjectivity, to quote the terminology introduced by Sandra Harding in the early 90s (Harding 1991: 106). Furthermore, there has been extensive focus on the importance of taking diversity into account, not least illustrated by the row of conceptual tools that have been delivered in the field during the last decades: 'inappropriate/d otherness' (Minh-ha 1986/87), "'world"-travelling' (Lugones 1987), 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1987), 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1994, Hill Collins 1998) and 'trans-versal feminism' (Yuval-Davis 1997). Presently, the feminist awareness of conducting research with ethical responsibility has led to heavy claims on the very research process.

However, it is now clear that an all too far driven respect for differences may widen the gaps between different groups of people. In terms of a dissociation from the term 'reciprocity', this fact was also addressed by Rosi Braidotti as well as by Judith Butler in their respective key-note papers, at the 6th European Gender Research Conference Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context, University of Łódź, Poland, in August 2006. Although in different ways, they both emphasized the risk that an all too far driven respect may end up in a deepening of divisions, and sharpened boundaries between groups of people.

The background to this dissociation from reciprocity in recent feminist work is, to put it briefly, found in the feminist critique of mainstream epistemology, which in the 70s brought forth such notions as experiences and feelings to the agenda (cf. Smith 1987). Awakened by the feminist theoretical development during the 70s and 80s, the feminist scholar started paying attention to the limited possibilities of grasping and representing experiences and narratives. This pointed towards the location of marginalized lives as the position from where the feminist scholar ought to start the inquiry. Hilary Rose explains:

Working from the experience of the specific oppression of women fuses the personal, the social and the biological. It is not surprising that, within the natural sciences, it has been in biology and medicine that feminists have sought to defend women's

interests and advance feminist interpretations. To take an example: menstruation ( - - - ). Cartesian dualism, biological determinism, and social constructionism fade when faced with the necessity of integrating and interpreting the personal experience of bleeding, pain, and tension. (Rose 2004: 77)

The image of feminist scholars as occupied with researching the situation of women with similar experiences as themselves, was however criticized almost directly from the start as being all too universalistic. As the reflections of Uma Narayan elucidate:

Although feminist groups ... do try to extend the scope of feminist concerns to other groups (for example, by fighting for childcare, women's health issues, and equal wages issues through trade union structures), some major preoccupations of western feminism (its critique of marriage, the family, compulsory heterosexuality) presently engage the attention of mainly small groups of middle-class feminists. (Narayan 2004: 215)

I would say that the development of the feminist standpoint epistemology of the 70s until postmodernism in the 90s, generated a significant debate on a variety of relevant differences. Although feminists during the 60s and 70s had taken different social categories under consideration, such as 'class' and 'ethnicity' along side with 'gender', for instance (cf. Hemmings 2005), by the 90s the gender category was definitely dethroned and by no means automatically perceived as the most relevant category. Issues of sexuality, class and ethnicity had been brought to the centre of the discussion and Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a key concept in the book *Mapping the margins. Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color* 1994. Here, Crenshaw emphasized the experiences of discrimination against women of colour, but commented also on the importance of taking into account also other social categories, such as class and sexuality:

Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. (Crenshaw 1994)



Some scholars developed ideas of dialogues and narration, conceptualized as able to allow plurality and reciprocal respect between groups of people (cf. Young 1997, Benbabib 2004). Nevertheless, by means of the deep hegemonic power structures that intersect relations of ethnicity, class and gender, those “reciprocity models” for communication, met criticism for resulting in either sharpened boundaries between different groups of people, or ignorance towards oppressive structures. This is thus the point of discussion where Braidotti and Butler present reciprocity as a method that further develops power asymmetries between groups of people and a problematic ideal in feminist research.

### **Intersectionality – a debate**

In the recent feminist debate in Sweden, few feminist concepts have met as much attention – and fewer still have been so widely used – as intersectionality. When introduced in Sweden in 2002, the concept was presented by postcolonial scholars Diana Mulinari, Irene Molina and Paulina de los Reyes (cf. *Maktens (o)lika förklådnader:kön, klass och etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige*). They stressed the importance of considering every possible axis of domination, within the frames of contextualized investigations, deeply rooted in specific historical and spatially situated social processes (cf. Molina, Mulinari, de los Reyes 2002). The fact that intersectionality was introduced in Sweden by postcolonial scholars was, however, not a coincidence. Crenshaw underlined the intersections between race and gender when she introduced the concept in 1994. This made the concept particularly tuned towards postcolonial scholars. More remarkably, however, was the late awakening of Swedish Women’s Studies scholars to theorise and investigate issues on discrimination of ethnic groups, i.e racism.<sup>1</sup> The debates in the Swedish Women’s Studies discourse on discrimination during the 70s and 80s, had focused on the intersections between sex/gender and class, as the interplay between two oppressive strategies/systems: patriarchy with sex/gender, versus capitalism focusing on class (cf. Ganetz, Gunnarsson and Göransson 1986). Thus, the intersections of sex/gender and ethnicity had not been seriously taken into account by Swedish Women’s/Gender Studies scholars during the 70s and 80s.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘racism’, however, is seldom used in the Swedish gender studies discourse, because it is apprehended as all too essentialistic. The scholar using the term is suspected of supporting the ideology behind ‘racism’. The common expression used instead is ‘ethnicity’, or ‘practices of racialization’.

When introduced in Sweden, intersectionality quickly became a popular concept among feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines. Even though Crenshaw had focused strongly on applicability in her introductory writings of the key concept, and had not paid attention to the epistemological and methodological implications of the concept, her aim – political applicability – was in Sweden combined with concerns of the epistemological and methodological implications of the concept. The concern of an indefinite row of power asymmetries came thus to be the starting point of debate in the Swedish Journal for Women's Studies (*Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* no. 1/2003 and 3/2004). In the first contribution to the debate, it was argued that we ought to arrange the categories internally in order for researchers to avoid the establishment of an infinite row of power asymmetries. Here, the category of gender was apprehended as a strategically important category, and as such in the right of a privileged status in the setting as a whole (2003/1: 53). In a responding article, reactions to this presentation understood the suggestion of a hierarchical division as an example of a hidden assumption of power, giving the gender category a hegemonic status (2004/3: 113).

Crenshaw's metaphoric use of cross roads was a dissociation from the principle of additive discrimination, towards the conjoining of multiple systems of subordination. The concern for an endless row of power asymmetries might thus be interpreted as a search for a "final" solution, apprehended as a backslide to the ideologies of pure rationalism. In short: a fear of pluralism in research. The concern for an endless row of power asymmetries also displays a lack of analysis of how cultures, politics and power interact. The hidden assumption of power, finally, may result in a lack of serious and deep-going reflexivity and an un-awareness of power relations in research.

### **Power and feminist knowledge production**

Power has been acknowledged as an important issue by feminist scholars. By way of references to locally constituted knowledges, or that knowledge is produced by groups in consensus, feminist researchers made efforts to avoid the connection between the scholar and the power dimension (cf Longino 1993, Code 1993). Under the label of cognitive manifoldness, Longino presents knowledge production as a process, where no one has an

epistemic privilege (Longino: 101). This view on knowledge production, nevertheless, is the result of a feminist ambition to avoid power relations in research. It ends with a disregard of the fact that power always permeates relations between, as well as within, groups. Secondly, it will never be able to find anyone responsible for knowledge produced in Longino's sense. Consequently in the effort of avoiding power in research, an implicit norm might be taken for granted, opening up for exercises of superiority of different kinds. Difficulties like this might paradoxically arise, when feminist scholars try out models with the explicit wish of avoiding discriminatory practises in research. In the following, I will give an example of this, introducing one sequence in the book *Feminist Methodology*, by Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Jane Holland.

The book *Feminist Methodology*, by Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Jane Holland (Sage 2005) is quite popular in gender studies courses with its focus on methodological issues. This book serves as an example of how the knowing subject in feminist research nowadays attains the authority of an expert through the usage of "ethically approved" methods and techniques in feminist knowledge production. This may, nevertheless, result in an instrumental usage of the methods displayed and a lack of awareness of why a certain method is used. In the following, I give an example of this, investigating a "feminist check-list".

The feminist check-list is an enumerated list of things a feminist scholar should have in mind during research. After the conclusion, the scholar should be able to give account of the following, according to Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2005: 138):

1. what forms of reasoning this knowledge claim depends on;
2. whether this knowledge claim is confined to a local truth game or is more general;
3. how the knowing feminist who makes this knowledge claim is constituted;
4. whom this knowing feminist speaks for, why and with what authority;
5. what evidence or other grounds exist for the claims made;
6. how this evidence/grounding is constituted and assessed;
7. how counter-evidence/grounding is acknowledged and assessed;
8. what normative framework structures this process of knowledge production;
9. what connections/disconnections are claimed between ideas, experiences and realities;
10. whether and how these connections are conceived, denied or left unclear.

Claims on self-reflexivity, reflexivity and critical awareness in the research process are highly ranked in feminist research, now further illustrated by the very existence of a check-list like this. After my second reading of the check-list, however, I found myself calling its existence into question, realizing that a check-list like this could turn a process of reflexivity into a routine decision, supposedly reflexive and critical, but in practice nothing less than a mechanical matter of routine. Moreover, the check-list does not tell anything about the researcher's ideological views. If we are dealing with a theory, that in itself does not construct any critical points of view on the notion of the expert, on the construction of the 'rational individual', for instance, the check-list won't be able to guide me in any direction, because of its lack of understanding of power relations embedded in the production of knowledge. It would, in fact, be possible to pursue a scientific investigation within the range of a positivist paradigm and still be able to tick off the 10 points in this feminist check-list – an example that clearly illustrates the fact that the check-list is not in itself attached to any specific understanding of power. Hence, in order to produce research with a feminist responsibility, the scholar needs to explicitly formulate her ideology and values. But this is not an easy task, particularly not as the mainstream scientific norm still rejects explicit recognition of ideological or political commitments in research.

One of the reasons why feminist scholars in the early years of feminist epistemology strove to formulate questions of a responsible knowledge-seeking process, of the scholar as a co-actor in the research-process, of interpretation of research results, or of the researchers responsibility towards the objects of research, was the striving for recognition for the female researcher's authority. As Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter express, in their introductory chapter of *Feminist Epistemologies*:

The history of feminist epistemology itself is the history of the clash between the feminist commitment to the struggles of women to have their understandings of the world legitimated and the commitment of traditional philosophy to various accounts of knowledge – positivist, postpositivist, and others – that have consistently undermined women's claims to know. (Alcoff and Potter 1993: 2)

However, as displayed through the example of the feminist check-list, relativistic as well as universalistic claims on 'objectivity' and 'truth' run the risk of being re-introduced in the feminist ambitions of being acknowledged as experts. The check-list stresses the importance

of giving an account of, among other things, forms of reasoning, truth, authority. But, without problematising what “evidence”, “truth” or “authority” is and can be, implicit notions originating from a hegemonic paradigm may be further developed in the feminist check-list.

Knowledge production is an interactive and complex process, deeply embedded in the structures of power of the social world. Hence, neither a reflexive process, nor a check-list, can compensate for mistakes made in an investigation executed in the paradigm of, let’s say, positivism. The check-list will guide me in the same direction as the implicit norm in the positivist paradigm.

The mere shaping of the check-list, finally, causes some problems as well. The ten numbered points direct my thoughts towards the positivist paradigm’s hopeful lull into security. Any scholar who proudly ticks off the ten points on the list may have silenced her conscience, without being asked to give an account for the kind of consequences that the research practice and research outcome result in. The check-list does not encourage the scholar to be critical against the way relations of power affect the knowledge-seeking process.

The ambition to avoid the methodological problems attached to the existence of power asymmetries in knowledge production is problematic, indeed. If the scholar does not make the relation between her/himself and the object of investigation explicit, an unexpressed norm will be taken for granted, opening up for exercises of superiority of different kinds, as earlier mentioned. The important task for feminist scholars is thus not to avoid power asymmetries, but to learn to handle them.

It is at this point that the heritage from mainstream epistemology causes deep problems for feminist scholars. Seeing that our relations to the world are complex, constituted by feelings, thoughts and emotions in a mixture, performed through narratives, speech and acts, it is difficult to maintain notions of rationalism while handling diversity in research. Instead of focusing on finding a “final solution”, or making a “universal claim”, the knower ought to be occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

The importance of investigating the relations we have to the world involves a reflection over, not only the relation between the subject and object of research, but also of the situatedness and contextuality of the investigation in question. This is also the reason why I in the following develop a framework of knowledge as a praxis, from the start imbued with norms, habits, customs and ideas. In this framework, I conceptualize the knowledge seeking

process as a two-way relation, in which the subject and object of research constantly influence each other.

### **Experiences, discourse and the “real” world**

Many feminist investigations of intersectionality describe, interpret and analyse the experiences of the discriminated (cf Essed 2005). The concept of experiences is, however, not uncontested. For the purposes of this article, I give in the following only a short account of some lines of argument in the feminist debate of experiences.

In the 90s, Joan W Scott presented a fundamental critique of the discourse on experiences, questioning the trustworthiness of knowledge claims drawn out of experiences:

It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originally point of explanation - as a foundation on which analysis is based – as a critical thrust of histories of difference. /- - - / When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence in which explanation is built. (Scott 1999: 81)

To Scott, the mere idea of experience in knowledge production causes problems. To her, the description of experience only proves what we already knew: that differences exist. Descriptions of experiences do not raise any questions or explanations of how these differences are established, how they operate or how the subject’s actions are to be interpreted as a consequence of her experiences. It is, as Scott argues, in fact impossible to speak about experiences as something people “have”. Rather, we ought to speak about individuals as constituted by experiences (cf. Scott 1999).

There are, indeed, lots of difficulties with inquiries based upon experiences, as for instance on the common apprehension of the empirical material as a ‘natural result’ of a collaboration between the subject and object of an interview. This idea, nevertheless, does only once more express the unsettled and unsettling relation to positivism in feminist inquiries of today. Thus, I agree, when Scott together with Judith Butler comprehend experience as a product created through the collaboration between the subject and object of the inquiry. From

this follows the impossibility of a direct translation of experiences into knowledges. As Scott and Butler argue, experience cannot be translated to knowledge in any immediate sense, because it is established within the frames of the discourse, and by the discourse (cf. Butler 1992, cf. Isaksson 2006). This is an important point, which I also accept. Simultaneously, however, I would like to point the focus on another dimension of the issue, which is about experience as lived experience. A bodily existence is filled with histories from the present as well as from the past, and one's body is filled with cultural possibilities, both received and reinterpreted.<sup>2</sup> This is the process of how we become our bodies – we are not ready-made (by the discourse), never completely finished (in the discourse). Constantly, my body receives and reinterprets cultural norms. In that way, I am in the process of becoming (cf. Butler 1987). I conceptualize our bodily becoming as a potentiality for change. Although this is modelled within and by the discourse, investigations in a strict rhetorical sense are not sufficient. As I develop in the following, we need also to take the “real” world into account, in an understanding of the “real” world as the common world we live in, where our hopes, negotiations and fights for a different future are performed.

### **Praxis and feminist knowledge production: a methodological approach**

In the following, I will make a presentation of the concept praxis, give a brief oversight of its conceptual history and investigate the implications of praxis as a contextualized and situated activity for feminist work, exemplified by the work of the feminist philosophers Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe. I focus on knowledge production as doing and as such intrinsically interwoven with cultures and politics.

The history of the concept praxis begins with Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> Praxis is action. By action, I refer to practises of situated thinking, of articulation, narratives, speech and acts in

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<sup>2</sup> Partly, this idea resembles the Marxian critique of idealism, in which he writes about the historicity of the object, apprehending objects as things that take shape through labour (Ahmed 2006: 41).

<sup>3</sup> For those not familiar with Ancient philosophy, it might be interesting to know that Aristotle didn't try to establish a universal, normative system of ethics. He was rather interested in how we may practice the art of living (cf Holm 1993).



conjunction. Action, as I shall display in the following, is a result from experiences of life in a common and public world.<sup>4</sup>

To Aristotle, *theoria* is the highest form of *praxis*, and as such occupied with finding ‘*episteme*’ – some form of solid knowledge: “what we know through *episteme* cannot be otherwise than it is” (Aristotle 1139b20; Book IV, Ch.3). *Episteme* involves showing that your claims are possible to believe in, and developed from starting points apprehended as trustworthy. The apprehension of theoretical knowledge as a practical ability is important, particularly because it clearly differentiates *theoria* from forms of rationalist knowledge.

Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical; for this rules the productive intellect, as well, since every one who makes makes for an end, and that which is made is not an end in the unqualified sense (but only an end in a particular relation, and the end of a particular operation)- only that which is done is that; for good action is an end, and desire aims at this. (Aristotle, Book VI: 2 1139 b 5)

All my actions and in particular the way I handle incidents that are unpredictable or uncontrollable influence my life deeply. I myself take shape through my cognitive, bodily and affective responses to incidents and passions, owing to the two-way relation between cognition, bodies and objects. When I act, I will affect the object I am acting towards. Then the object will affect me, through its response in the shape of a transformed activity, that is returned back to me and so on. This two-way relation between the subject’s and object’s actions, thoughts, words and passions have furthermore been developed in contemporary feminist phenomenology. In feminist phenomenology of today, the rejection of the rationalist epistemic opposition between subject and object, has been exchanged for the emphasis on a two-way relation, in feminist phenomenology often denominated as a ‘lived relationship’. Thus, when the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed presents her ideas about orientation, and the two-way relation between subject and object in the book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) she is developing these threads of thought:

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt has written about *praxis* as action. See for instance: Arendt, Hannah (1998) *The Human Condition*, Chicago, III, University of Chicago Press.

Orientations involve directions towards objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them. (28)

Praxis could very well be used within a phenomenological framework. They share several elements, of which the most important are a) an attentiveness to the concrete, social world b) an acknowledgement of the corporeality of the knowing subject, and c) a rejection of the opposition between subject and object.

One implication of the mutual dependence of the subject and the object is that the scholarly investigation is not occupied with a reconstruction of the world, but with an inquiry of the relations we have to the world. This is where Ahmed puts an emphasis on the fact that our relation to the world, and thus our knowledge of the world, is derived from our position in the world.<sup>5</sup>

To be able to perceive and react on anything, we need to have some basic experience of it, or to have heard about it from someone we trust. Already the perception is impregnated by the agent's character. This is why it is always already too late to focus on the purpose of the activity when we ascribe someone as responsible for her actions. This is also why the agent is responsible for how the situation appears to her, for the omission of ethically important details, and for misrepresentations (Holm 1993: 187). My perception is key to my understanding of the world. Sara Ahmed writes:

We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things. /---/ For example, say I perceive something before me. In perceiving the object as an object, I perceive the object in a certain way, as being some kind of thing. Perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object. (27)

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that Sara Ahmed returns to phenomenology is not that surprising. It is interesting though, that Ahmed take Husserl as one important inspiration for her theoretical departure. Both feminists and other scholars have criticised Husserl for being all too essential. Ahmed, however, emphasizes a bodily awareness in his ideas about intentionality.

There is an interrelatedness between subjects, objects, space, action and orientation. When Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the body as a situation, she paid attention to the fact that the biology of the body always should be reflected through the context of the social, the cultural and the historical (cf. Beauvoir 2002, Gothlin 1991: 140, 287, 1992: 19). The apprehension of the body as a situation is central here, but the notion of the body as a situation is not enough. As also pointed out by Ahmed in the quote above: when I perceive things, objects, I perceive them “in a certain way”. Indeed, my perception involves an apprehension of that object. This is what Ahmed means by orientation. My perception (of things, objects) is informed by the position I occupy, which, in turn, is related to the thing or object in question. My location towards things, though, can never again be apprehended as plane “location”. My location towards an object is continuously involved in an apprehension of that object, an apprehension that depends upon the position from where I stand: “Bodies inhabit space by how they reach for objects, just as objects in turn extend what we can reach.” (Ahmed 2006: 110).<sup>6</sup> The bodily situation is thus possible to grasp as situational orientation. Epistemologically, this means that the knowing subject her/himself is deeply interwoven in the process of knowledge production.

As earlier outlined, knowledge production is always performed within a specific and historically defined context. This implies that particular aims and certain sets of habits, norms, customs and ideas are intrinsic in the very knowledge seeking practice. Praxis is thus both a contextualized activity, and situational orientation (through the emphasis on the acknowledgment of the scholar’s relation to the world). I receive and reinterpret cultural norms, which means that I am shaped by the discourse, but also by my lived experience – I am continuously shaped and reshaped by my perceptions, thoughts, passions and acts in a public and common world.

### **Diversity, understanding and power**

Understanding is conceptualized in a similar way. It is never finished, or fixed, but constantly shaped and created through inquiries and argumentations. Aristotle writes: “For understanding

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<sup>6</sup> “By objects”, writes Ahmed, “we could include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, even worlds” (2006: 126).

is neither about things that exist forever and are unchangeable, nor about any and every one of the things that come into being, but about things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation” (Aristotle, Book VI: 10).

In the hope of a transformation, and in the hope of a democratic and progressive sexual and gender politics, Judith Butler addressed the necessity of heterogeneity among feminists at her key-note speech at the 6th European Gender Research Conference Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context, University of Łódź, Poland, August 2006. In the form of a criticism of the wide spread tendency in our various local and translocal communities to reach consensus, this is furthermore an issue elaborated by Chantal Mouffe. With a deep rejection of pure rationalism, Chantal Mouffe criticizes all kinds of consensus as forms of exclusion and presents her ideas about diversity as crucial and the existence of power as inevitable. At stake here, is a distancing from various kinds of compromising models:

We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The idea that power could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality are illusions, which can endanger democratic institutions. (Mouffe 2000: 27)

Mouffe’s ‘agonistic pluralism’ is introduced as a way of constructing “them” not as an enemy, but as somebody whose right to express herself we defend. It is possible to construct a legitimate enemy as an adversary. Hence, while antagonism is the struggle between enemies, agonism is described as the struggle between adversaries (Mouffe 2000: 15, 17). That is to say, we need to multiply the institutions, discourses and forms of life that create the democratic values in order to constitute democratic individuals, and hence, research. We need to interfere more, not less:

This question, pace the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion, since this would imply the eradication of the political. Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an “us” by the determination of a “them”. The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established. (Mouffe 2000: 25)

In dissociation from pure rationality, Mouffe puts a focus on practices instead of argumentation. Her disapproval of all forms of consensus is based on the belief that consensus is excluding every other opinion than the hegemonic. The promises that ajar in this critique of a rational consensus, are the promises of a critical engagement, of new encounters and of the possibility of change.

Praxis, finally, is the exercise of certain habits, namely the “good” ones (‘hexeis’). A “good” hexis is a habit involving contextually sensitive and adequate judgements (hexis is furthermore developed by Bourdieu in the particular understanding of ‘bodily habitus’). The training in “good” hexeis”, then, is an exercise of the capacities that characterize a person in possession of practical wisdom (i.e. ‘fronesis’). That is to say, a person that is able to perceive, interpret, judge, choose action and act “morally good” in every concrete “ethical” situation, which furthermore presents a dimension of accountability in knowledge production (cf. Holm 1993).

The concern of an infinite row of power asymmetries was one of the difficulties observed in the discussion on intersectionality earlier in this article. One suggestion proposed to the problem with this infinite row, however, was to give the category ‘gender’ a privileged status in the concept as a whole. I described this as a relapse into pure rationality’s search for a final rational solution, as a fear of pluralism in research. When Mouffe put a focus on the deep disadvantages with an aspiration for consensus, this is one of the problems she bears in mind: “... taking pluralism seriously requires that we give up the dream of a rational consensus, which entails the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life.” (Mouffe 2000: 12). The fact that the category of gender was suggested as the first category in the hierarchy was not any unfortunate coincidence. It was only an explicit expression of the fact that the gender category already was in possession of a hegemonic status in the Swedish gender studies discourse, in the beginning of 2000s.

As familiar, mainstream epistemology has been criticized by feminist scholars for being eurocentric, androcentric and partial. Feminist epistemologies have investigated the process of knowing, and brought to its core bodily as well as experience-modelled dimensions of the ‘knowing subject’ (cf. Code 1993, Hankinson Nelson 1993). Simultaneously, and as I had Naomi Scheman point out in the beginning of this article, there has been an all too strong

focus on the possibilities/impossibilities of truth and a will to control the dimension of power in research.

As constitutive of the social, power could never be eliminated (Mouffe 2000:14). This is why practises of feminist knowledge production should not be occupied with efforts to avoid power in research – although the hopes for a better world may easily displace the aims of the inquiry. By means of the deep hegemonic structures of power that intersect relations of ethnicity, class and gender, there is a wide-spread ambition to identify a model for communication which takes experiences and diversity into account. Here is where knowledge as praxis may provide another angle for feminist research, conceptualized as a situated, critical practise of activity and articulation, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

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Björn Pernrud

## **Diffraction Feminist Sex Therapy**

### Abstract

*The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to examine how feminist sex therapists have challenged, and articulated feminist alternatives to, conventional approaches to treatment of sexual difficulties. Secondly, it seeks to make a methodological claim and example regarding ways to analytically approach academic literature and claims to knowledge. Drawing on feminist responses to epistemological issues raised in relation to natural as well as social sciences, I seek to develop an analytical approach based on diffraction as an optical metaphor. To that effect, part of my purpose it to exemplify a methodology based on feminist interdisciplinarity by putting it to work in the context of therapeutic inquiry and knowledges. Regarding the case of sex therapies, I claim that feminists have developed convincing critiques of conventional models as well as a promising stance for feminist approaches in sex therapy. Nevertheless, I argue that there are issues concerning the notion of sexual well-being specifically that remain to be addressed by feminist sex therapists in order to properly undo particularly problematic dimensions of the conventional legacy.*

Keywords: feminist epistemology; feminist sex therapy; diffraction; situated knowledges

### **1. Adding Interest to Objectivity**

Feminist critiques of scientific practices and knowledges have repeatedly pointed to how political, and in particular androcentric and sexist values influence that which is promoted as scientific knowledge (Keller 1982, Longino 1990). In 1986, feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding identified the principal question which scientific enterprises raise for feminists: how is it possible, despite the androcentric implications of traditional scientific endeavours, to turn scientific knowledge seeking into a project faithful to feminist interests (Harding 1986)?

Almost simultaneously with Harding's articulation of the science question in feminism, the field of *sex therapy* became a location for feminist intervention and reconstruction. Sex therapy came to being in the United States in the late 60s and early 70s, roughly simultaneously with the radicalization of the U.S. women's movement. As one embodiment of the alleged sexual liberation feminists considered a reorientation and

consolidation of men's control and exploitation of women (cf. Densmore 1973, Coveney, Kay, and Mahony 1984). Following the research and clinical work of gynaecologist William Master and researcher Virginia Johnson (1980), sex therapy developed as an approach to treatment of sexual problems such as difficulties in achieving orgasms, pain associated with (hetero)sexual intercourse, vaginismus, premature ejaculation and erectile difficulties.

Whereas the main concern of sex therapy is treatment of *sexual dysfunctions*, as an interest in medical and scientific inquiry it promotes and develops knowledge about how human sexual functioning is constituted. Moreover, sex therapeutic research seeks to chart the etiology and conceptualize the pathology of the conditions in focus of therapeutic efforts. From feminist perspectives, available articulations of sex therapy, sexual functioning and dysfunctions have been analysed as deeply androcentric and heterosexist. Accordingly, as feminist sex therapist in the mid-80ies began efforts to rework an endeavour apparently at the service of patriarchy into a sex therapy faithful to feminist hopes and interests, sex therapy became the site of efforts to resolve a sex therapy question in feminism (Pernrud 2007).

To that effect feminist sex therapy, as well as feminist epistemology, challenges the androcentric and patriarchal politics of establishment sex therapy and science respectively, and seeks to demonstrate how feminist politics paves way for a better sex therapy. In both cases, concerns are evoked regarding the possibility of claiming a politically saturated 'better' that is not reducible to merely politics. Also both feminist sex therapists and epistemologists seek to retain epistemic privilege for their claims to knowledge, without denying the political nature of these claims. According to feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway (1991), hopes to remain political and objective at the same time have often been treated as carrying contradiction. Faith in objectivity and epistemic privilege has appeared to call for the detached, disembodied and disinterested approach to knowing that feminists have criticized establishment science for promoting, putting emphasis on the political and historically contingent nature of knowledge construing this as an invitation to relativism.

Haraway insists, however, that knowing is possible neither from the detached nowhere-in-particular nor from the relativist everywhere-at-once, but that it is possible only from somewhere specifically. The fact that knowers are embodied, localized and interested is for Haraway the very condition under which knowledge is at all possible. It should not, accordingly, be considered as something that epistemologists need to work around, or as a reason to claim that hopes for reliable and objective knowledges are misguided (Haraway

1991). Accordingly, political interests can be construed as pertaining to *the somewhere* and belong in this sense to the conditions by which knowledge is possible. With feminist sex therapy literature as my empirical case I will, in one facet of this article, explore and seek to specify more concretely how political interests and positions are consequential for claims to knowledge. At the same time I also propose to undertake an exploration into methodology. That is, in the process of exploring how political notions are consequential for claims to knowledge, I will also address issues regarding what it takes from an analytical approach to remain faithful to the notion of a non-contradictory relation between objectivity, political interests and assumptions.

## **2. A Diffractive Methodology**

Conventionally, epistemology raises questions about how well knowledge represents its subject matter, implying that knowledge is somehow separated from the world it speaks about. In such theories of knowing, political values lead to biased representations (Longino 1990), and political ideologies is at risk of covering the world in a proverbial mist (Hartsock 1997). But once it is acknowledged that knowing takes place *in* the world, as a way to partake with it, it appears problematic to consider politics as something that curtail the access the knowing subject has to the object of knowledge (Haraway 1991, Barad 2003). Furthermore, and even more basically, it appears problematic to consider knowledge, literature and language in terms of representations (Barad 2003).

Instead of a representational analysis of claims to knowledge, I propose, clearly inspired by Haraway, that knowledge should be engaged in a *diffractive* analysis (Haraway 1997). The notion of diffraction is here taken to be a metaphor contesting the equally metaphoric notion of reflection, informing representationalist ways of construing knowledge and language. When light is diffracted it is made to interact with itself; light waves reinforce and cancel each other out into interference patterns, sometimes as spectacularly as rainbows. Clearly, a rainbow cannot be reduced either to the sun or to the rain, but it is a realization of the joint agencies of the sun and the rain. As a metaphor, diffraction speaks to me about how the agencies of different parts of the world are joined together into new parts of the world (cf. Haraway 2003, Haraway 2004).

Knowledge as an interference pattern is not a replication of its subject matter mediated through a knower, but it is a relation, an articulation of things, enacting new things, such as explanations, conceptualizations and theories. In particular I will, throughout the following analysis, consider and seek to demonstrate how a diffractive methodology can contribute to a non-relativist understanding of ways in which political notions are consequential for claims to knowledge. Here, a diffractive analysis of claims to knowledge does not ask how well knowledges describe and explain things, but it seeks to interrogate how words and accounts are made to interact to become descriptions, explanations and theories. Accordingly, claims to knowledge will be analysed as consequential of meaning making agencies; claims to knowledge will be analysed in that they are made of the *work* concepts, pieces of empirical information and political interests and standpoints perform in relation to each other. In order to make these rather general methodological remarks more substantial, I will now turn my attention more closely to the empirical case of this article.

### **3. Critical Interference**

Feminist sex therapy began in discontent with available and established sex therapeutic approaches to sexual problems and well-being. Sexologist Leonore Tiefer, who has published on feminist approaches in and to sex therapy since the early 80s, has repeatedly contended that the basic problem with mainstream sex therapy, and the reason it is in dire need of feminist alternatives, is that it promotes a *medical model* to sexual problems and well-being. Basically, the notion of the medical model, as Tiefer posits it, points to two crucial concepts and their interrelatedness in mainstream sex therapy. The concept of the Human Sexual Response Cycle (HSRC) on the one hand, dating back to 1966, works in mainstream sex therapy as a conceptualization of healthy sexual functioning. The HSRC resulted from laboratory studies conducted by Masters and Johnson, in which they observed many forms of sexual interaction in order to discern what it is that happens to the human body when it is involved in sexual activity. Essentially, Masters and Johnson claimed that the human body responds to sexual stimulation by displaying a pattern of distinct physiological changes, where for instance clitoral engorgement, vaginal lubrication, penile erection and eventually orgasm and ejaculation are manifested in a certain order (Masters and Johnson 1966).

For some people however, this process has a tendency to be interrupted or disturbed. People who do not experience orgasm as a result of sexual stimulation, or who do not display vaginal lubrication or penile erection, in mainstream sex therapy are regarded as physiological manifestations of arousal. They have to contend with *sexual dysfunctions*; conditions that constitute the main target of mainstream sex therapy intervention (Kaplan 1978, Masters and Johnson 1980, American Psychiatric Association 2000). To that effect, mainstream sex therapy relies on a physiological notion of sexual functioning, paired with a portrayal of sexual problems in terms of dysfunctions. Taken together, mainstream notions of sexual functioning and dysfunctions lead mainstream sex therapy to promote an approach to sex and sexuality in which matters of sexual dis/satisfaction are distributed along an axis of health and pathology. In the medical model, according to Tiefer, '[s]ex is no longer a human arena for negotiation, but an arena where there is an objective standard against which performance can be measured' (Tiefer 1988: 17).

As Tiefer along with other feminist sex therapists, such as Doreen Seidler-Feller (1985), Wendy Stock (1988) and Stock and Charles Moser (2001), analyse the mainstream approach in sex therapy, there are largely two issues that render the medical model specifically problematic. Tiefer, in a 1988 article illustrates an initial point when she contends that mainstream preoccupation with physiology and its individualized approach to sexual difficulties forecloses the possibility of a more full appreciation of the wide range of causes behind sexual problems:

*The social origins of sexuality problems – rigid sex roles, unrelenting standards of performance, relationships of unequal power, absence of sexuality training or education, sexuality having to fulfil displaced needs for self-esteem and worth in a bureaucratic world, increasing awareness of sex brought about by the commercial exploitation of sexual images, histories of sexual violence – are never treated..*  
(Tiefer 1988: 17-8)

Whereas mainstream models discuss for example performance anxieties, fear of intimacy and anger as etiological of sexual problems, (Masters and Johnson 1980, Kaplan 1979, Kaplan 1995) feminist sex therapists maintain sexual problems cannot be properly understood without also taking the social and cultural context of sex into account.



A second point of contention in feminist approaches to mainstream sex therapy emerge in accounts of what it means and entails to have sex. The medical model, according to feminist criticism, has reduced sex to a matter of properly and heterosexually behaving genitals. Having pleasurable sex hinges on the ability to engage in (heterosexual) coitus. Such a reductionist way of construing sex has several problematic consequences. It limits that which is viable to consider as sexual difficulties to include only problems with the behavior of genitals, thereby foreclosing the possibilities for clients of sex therapy to raise other issues they might have. However, possibilities are not foreclosed equally, but women in particular are ill served by the medical model's definition of sex, whereas men's experience of sex and sexual problems is well represented (Stock 1988, Tiefer 1988).

In the first instance this critique instantiates a feminist perspective on mainstream sex therapy. Feminism, in feminist sex therapy, is, in Tiefer's words, enunciated as concentrating on 'women's positions, women's voices, women's perspectives and women's problems' (Tiefer 1988: 30). When assuming women's perspectives on sex and sexual problems, different notions than those given room in the mainstream model emerge; women, according to Tiefer, tend to value emotional and communicative dimensions over the genital emphasis apparent in mainstream sex therapy (Tiefer 1988). Moreover, to limit conceptualizations of sex and sexual problems to the physiology of the genitals does, according to Stock, tend to favour men's experiences of sex and sexual problems, as they are prone to view sex as a matter of genital performance much in the same sense as the medical model does (Stock 1988). When women's voices are taken seriously to ground a feminist approach in and to sex therapy, it becomes apparent that the mainstream model constitutes sex therapy from men's perspectives.

Importantly though, feminist critiques of the mainstream approach are not merely declarations of discontent, or critical accounts of a faulty theorization of sex and sexual problems. The criticized version of mainstream sex therapy is in a sense partially productive of feminist alternatives. Firstly, when it is contended that the physiological emphasis in the mainstream model is insufficient and misplaced because it excludes the social and institutional surroundings of sex and sexual problems, more than saying something about the mainstream approach, this claim also points to what is required of a feminist sex therapy; in order to find sex therapy that takes women's voices, perspectives and problems seriously, feminist sex therapists need to replace the physiological focus with an account of how sex and

sexual problems are socially shaped and impinged upon by a patriarchal society. Secondly, as the medical model appears to posit coitus as a measure for sexual functioning, thereby operating from a pre-given norm regarding what sex should be, not only does it exclude other forms of finding sexual satisfaction, but it also denies people the ability to define sexual well-being for themselves. For a feminist sex therapy to overcome this problem, it would accordingly need an account of sexual well-being that does not reduce it to an intractable, and particularly a heterosexist norm, instead allowing people's own experiences agency in determining notions of sexual well-being.

In this vein, feminist sex therapists' critiques of mainstream sex therapy are not simply ways to critically represent mainstream sex therapy. At the same time as mainstream sex therapy is read from a feminist perspective, the criticism this reading yields works to define and ground the position in sex therapy from which the mainstream approach appears problematic. Criticism defines what is needed of a feminist sex therapy at the same time as feminist needs and interests define the sense in which mainstream sex therapy is critically understood. What this suggests is that critical knowledges regarding mainstream sex therapy, more than statements about the mainstream approach, establish a relation in which mainstream and feminist sex therapy are defined and emerge as contending positions. In the establishment of this relation feminist sex therapists' assumption of women's perspectives perform work in demonstrating where the mainstream model falls short. Whereas the mainstream sex therapy perform work by laying claims to feminist alternatives in sex therapy as to how they need to be alternative.

#### **4. Constructive Interference**

As suggested above, because of what it excludes from the purview of sex therapy, and because of its portrayal of sex in coital terms, it is the physiological reductionism of the mainstream model that feminist sex therapists have indicated as the principal problem of mainstream sex therapy. To that effect, to overcome the androcentric, heterosexist and expert approach to sex embodied in the mainstream model feminist alternatives have been framed as depending on the possibility of producing a social constructionist theory of sex, sexual satisfaction and sexual problems. A social constructionist theory of sex, appropriate for

feminist sex therapy, has to be able to take into account the consequences of a social and patriarchal context for sex and sexuality, and it has to accommodate a conceptualization of sexual well-being that does not subscribe to preconceived notions of normality and pathology.

In an article originally published in 1987 Tiefer draws on social constructionist research on sexuality to suggest a direction for a more promising approach in sex therapy than previously available (Tiefer 1995). A constructionist approach to sexuality would, it could be suggested from Tiefer's arguments, put the most basic notions of sex research and sex therapy into question as it considers sex to be a locally constructed and historically specific category. Rather than departing from ready made definitions of sex, sexual satisfaction and sexual problems it would depart from an interrogation of what sex means in concrete and local settings, and it would seek to demonstrate how such meanings are contingent upon social and cultural conditions.

Although a social constructionist approach to sex and sexual problems is clearly different from the mainstream theorization, it does not direct attention away from physiology entirely. Rather than abandoning mainstream notions of the physiology of sex and sexual problems entirely, feminist sex therapy incorporates attention to physiology within a social constructionist model. Stock contends in this vein that there is no need to completely relinquish 'efforts to understand sexual function and dysfunction, but that we *must* be fully aware of how the social construction of sexuality shapes our methodology and determines our emphasis' (Stock 1988: 31). Similarly, Seidler-Feller maintains that

*[e]xisting professional ways of viewing "sexual dysfunctions" are not inherently inconsistent with a feminist approach but seem naively to ignore the history of Western conflict and compromise alive in each of us. (Seidler-Feller 1985, 126)*

At a first glance it would seem from Seidler-Feller's claim that the conventional understanding needs to be supplemented with a feminist perspective. However, feminist sex therapy is not simply an addition to existing models. Feminist sex therapy does not reject that conventional sexual dysfunctions could be considered sexually problematic, or that the notion of human sexual response describes processes that sometimes are set in motion when people have sex. What contestation of the medical model amounts to is the notion that its constituents need to be pried apart from each other and incorporated into a different framework. Feminist

contestation of the medical model calls for different ways of relating concepts of physiology, sex, sexual problems and sexual satisfaction to each other.

In this vein, feminist sex therapeutic theorizations of sexual matters deny the mainstream notion that physiology is the bedrock of sexuality, and begin instead by asking, in Tiefer's words, '[h]ow, from the vast range of physical and mental possibilities, do people come to call certain ones sexual?' (Tiefer 1995: 28). This approach allows for an understanding where physiology still can be made relevant, without committing to the 'assumption that the body dictates action, experience and meaning' (Tiefer 1995: 24). Against this background, social constructionism works as a general theoretical framework allowing for the employment of more specific social scientific notions. That is, within the social constructionist approach to sex it becomes viable to have social scientific concepts performing work to theorize processes in which sex and sexuality are socially constructed, and bodies and experiences become sexualized. In feminist sex therapy then, sex, sexual problems and sexualized physiology are theorized within a framework where concepts, such as 'socialization', 'sex role', and 'patriarchy', drawn from gender and social sciences theory, perform important and explanatory work.

Within this framework, Seidler-Feller, in her 1985 article, enunciates the most prominent feature of feminist sex therapy's distinctive theoretical commitment: 'Female sexual dysfunction may be viewed as a general status protest /.../ and a woman's best defence against a sexual ritual of subordination may be "sexual dysfunction"' (Seidler-Feller 1985: 124). A sexual problem, rather than a pathological condition, is seen as an embodiment of resistance, and as an 'expression of self-ownership and right to privacy' (Seidler-Feller 1985: 125). Supported by theoretical notions of an unjust society, and concepts describing mechanisms by which society and social structure have individual impact, feminist sex therapy commits to an understanding of sexual problems as responses and resistances to injustice. Sexual problems embody one way in which the personal is political (cf. Seidler-Feller 1985, Tiefer 1988). In an article from 1994 feminist sex therapist Marianne Keystone draws on Seidler-Feller's argument and contends:

*I really question whether vaginismus is at all abnormal... Some feminists see ... vaginismus as... positive... in that it is better for a woman's vagina to say 'No' when she has not yet felt able to clearly verbalize her feelings, than for the woman to place herself in an unsafe or unequal position. (Keystone 1994: 324)*

Later, Keystone in a 1998 article co-authored with Marsha Carolan, settles the slight hint of doubt whether it is reasonable to de-pathologize vaginismus entirely, in favour of viewing sexual difficulties as a healthy way to learn that relational or social conditions are inappropriate for sexual exchange:

*feminist sex therapy conceptualizes sexual difficulties as arising from individual or dyadic responses to: feelings of powerlessness or lack of equity in relationships, past or present sexual trauma, compulsory heterosexuality, intransigent gendered beliefs, societal emphasis on genitally based sexuality, and dominant culture biases about sexual behaviour.* (Keystone and Carolan 1998: 291)

In contrast to mainstream sex therapy, where sexual dysfunctions are understood as mental disorders and evidence of psychopathology, feminist sex therapy, by de-emphasizing the notion of sexual functioning and framing sexuality and the relational and social context as a system, lends towards emphasizing that sexual problems are social, institutional or relational rather than individual entities. In effect, relational and social issues *are* the primary problems, and individual sexual dissatisfaction is a response to relational and social conditions. This displacement, in comparison to mainstream models, is succinctly summarized by Keystone as she claims that ‘the pathology is within society, not the woman’ (Keystone 1994: 324).

More than a conceptualization of sex and sexual problems feminist sex therapeutic claims to knowledge regarding the social construction of sexual matters could be understood as an account of a knowing relation established through the work performed by social scientific and gender theory notions. It is a relation in which sex and sexual problems and the position of feminist sex therapists as feminist social scientists are delineated in relation to each other. What I propose here is the notion that more than making statements about sex and sexual problems, as objects of knowledge, claims to knowledge is also about what it entails to be a knowing subject. Knowledge is a relation in which objects of knowledge and knowing subjects are determined relationally (cf. Barad 2003, Pernrud 2007).

## 5. Political Interference

Conceptualizing particularly women's experiences of sexual problems as resulting from social and institutional problems has consequences for how therapeutic intervention is construed in feminist sex therapy. As feminist sex therapists view sexual problems as expressions of patriarchal sexual politics (Seidler-Feller 1985) this is grounds for contending that feminism and feminist activism provide a mode for therapeutic intervention (Tiefer 1996, Tiefer 2001). Contesting the conventional notion that sexual dysfunctions are pathological conditions interfering with a congenital capacity for sexual functioning that sex therapy seeks to restore, feminist sex therapy considers sexual problems as expressions of political resistance and invitations to further feminist activism in the form of therapeutic intervention.

Whereas the social scientific framework employed in feminist sex therapy provides an account of the connections between social and institutional conditions and embodied or individually manifested sexual problems, the notion that therapeutic intervention ultimately seeks to accomplish social and institutional change expresses a more specific contention. In addition to a social scientific account of connections between individuals and their social surroundings, feminist sex therapy also commits to an *evaluation* of these connections regarding where and in what sense they involve problems in need of change. Seidler-Feller, in her 1985 article claims, in connection to the notion that sexual dysfunctions are functional responses to untenable conditions, 'that women have an inalienable right to control over their bodies' (Seidler-Feller 1985: 125), thereby beginning to indicate why it is the social and institutional framework that ultimately is in need of intervention and change rather than individual women. Keystone, in 1994, makes remarks that further suggest the notions paving way for an understanding of sex therapy in terms of political activism:

*The term mental disorder for some sexual dysfunctions is worrisome in general and certainly for women in particular. Indeed I suspect that our use of the term sexual dysfunction may sometimes disempower women even further, albeit in the guise of helping them, by labelling their behaviour as dysfunctional. (Keystone 1994: 322)*

In both Seidler-Feller's and Keystone's contentions it is suggested that for a sex therapist to locate problems within women, and accordingly seek to change them, this would as such be disempowering for women and counter-productive from a feminist stance. A feminist sex therapy needs instead to affirm women's experiences and perspectives as evidence of healthy expressions of women's relation to social and institutional conditions. Consequential of politically investing women's perspectives into the social scientific framework employed in feminist sex therapy is a commitment to a social, institutional and political ontology of sexual problems, and it furthermore defines what it takes and entail to intervene therapeutically. The politics of women's perspectives establishes claims to knowledge regarding sexual matters and therapy as a relation in which problem and therapists are defined relationally, as matters of sexual politics and political activists.

Here, the notion that therapy consists of an expert seeking to help a patient is de-emphasized. Rather, feminist sex therapy is construed as an endeavour where therapist and client work together in the face of a common enemy. In this vein, Keystone comments to the effect that it is important to work side by side with her clients:

*From my own perspective as a therapist... feminism involves, at all times, the notion of safety. It means acting on behalf of women in whatever professional and humanitarian way I can, to ensure that they feel safe within themselves and within their environment to the degree that this is possible for women in today's society.*

(Keystone 1994: 321)

Stock, in her 1988 article, argues that being a feminist sex therapist 'requires... energy to maintain an awareness of an egalitarian model of sexuality while existing and working within a culture and social reality antithetical to gender equality' (Stock 1988: 39), thus calling more strongly to mind that client and therapist are involved in a shared struggle.

As the notion that 'sexual dysfunctions reflect sexual politics' (Seidler-Feller 1985: 124) calls for political activism, the objectives of therapeutic intervention in feminist sex therapy too can be considered in political terms. Keystone and Carolan explicate their vision of the promises of a feminist sex therapy:

*Feminist sex therapy research would expand our vision of sex beyond genital functioning, number of orgasms achieved, and frequency of intercourse to the ways*



*in which an individual can become comfortable and empowered in her or his own sexuality and expand this into mutually satisfying equitable sexual relationships.*

(Keystone and Carolan 1998: 294)

Lee Handy et al, in an article from 1985, argue in a similar manner when they claim that ‘[a] feminist position would involve promotion of a woman’s right to determine her own style of sexual expression and affirmation of a range or life-styles for meeting her social, emotional and sexual needs’ (Handy et al. 1985: 74). Further Tiefer states, rather succinctly, that ‘the only magic pill for women’s sexuality is broad-spectrum freedom’ (Tiefer 2001: 92). What these remarks begin to suggest is the notion that patriarchy is construed as curtailing especially women’s sexual well-being, and that feminist sex therapy seeks to accomplish change to the effect that women’s opportunities to define and experience sexual satisfaction are liberated. As a conclusion of my analysis of feminist sex therapy I will interrogate this liberationist approach to the objective of therapy further and I will argue that it contains a problematic ambiguity. In order to substantiate and elaborate on this point I will begin by taking the mainstream approach in sex therapy further into account.

Mainstream sex therapy strongly promotes the notion that sexual dysfunctions signal the need to liberate sexual functioning. That is, sexual functioning is understood as a natural process (cf. especially Masters and Johnson 1980) that will unfold by its own power and logic as long as it is not interfered with, inhibited or restrained by external forces. Performance anxieties, being angry with a partner or having been raised with the notion that sex is dirty are examples of what could manifest as sexual dysfunctions and block sexual functioning (Kaplan 1995, Pridal and LoPiccolo 2000, Wincze and Carey 2001). Clearly, the emphasis on the social construction of sex and sexuality in feminist models appears to directly contradict a conception of human sexuality that grants explanatory powers to a process allegedly unfolding naturally. Nevertheless, like mainstream sex therapy, feminist models invoke liberationist notions when construing the purpose and objectives of therapeutic intervention. In an article from 1996 Tiefer remarks on this alleged analogy between conventional sex therapy and the feminist movement:

*Sex therapists often think of themselves as social liberators, helping people move beyond restrictions and inhibitions created by the Judeo-Christian [views on sexuality] ... Feminists also view themselves as social liberators, helping people*



*move beyond restrictions and inhibitions embedded in gender roles and stereotypes and institutionalized in all parts of society.* (Tiefer 1996: 53-4)

The recurring use of notions of ‘restrictions’ and ‘inhibitions’ is, I think, significant; although in relation to different kinds of phenomena – gender roles and social institutions – from what conventional sex therapy considers, Tiefer’s claim indicate that feminist sex therapy still approaches sexuality as a dimension of human existence characterized in terms of repression (cf. Foucault 1998). Similar notions occur in Stock and Moser’s chapter from 2001: for feminist sex therapy, an important part of the objective of treatment is to ‘help the client gain freedom from assigned gender roles and recognize roles that are confining, restrictive or oppressive’ (Stock and Moser 2001: 155).

Moreover, it is emphasized that feminist sex therapists strive to ‘actively encourage individuals to express their unique sense of self and self-sexuality’ (Keystone and Carolan 1998: 292). That feminist sex therapy involves the ‘promotion of a woman’s right to determine her own style of sexual expression and affirmation of a range or life-styles for meeting her social, emotional and sexual needs’ (Handy et al. 1985: 74). That is, it could be suggested that the freedom from gender roles feminist sex therapy seeks is a freedom that allows women and men to determine for themselves what they desire sexually, how often, with whom, and what sex and sexuality means to them.

If gender roles and institutionalized patriarchal power relations are construed primarily as inhibiting and repressive, it would seem that feminist sex therapy subscribes to a notion of a (female) sexuality that somehow exists prior to the incursion of patriarchy. Simultaneously though, as both Tiefer and Stock suggest in their 1988 articles, a person’s sexuality is a result of socialization; that women allegedly value emotions and communication over genital contact, while men are more concerned with the latter. This is seen as having an effect on the way women and men are socialized differently in contemporary societies (Stock 1988, Tiefer 1988). The question then, is whether feminist sex therapy seeks to liberate a sexuality that exists prior to or independent from socialization. Or if the result of socialization after all is accepted; even though sexuality is largely a product of patriarchal socialization. The objective of therapeutic intervention is to ensure that women and men are entitled to express and enjoy it to the same extent. Both alternatives appear, I think, problematic. Accepting the effects of socialization would leave feminist sex therapy with a feminism that largely went along with patriarchal definitions of sex and sexuality, merely striving to change how such definitions are

valued and given opportunity to be realized. The notion that people somehow carry with them an authentic sexuality, on the other hand, appears at risk of lending itself to essentialist frameworks.

To me it seems viable to argue that this problem is a result of a liberationist framework inherited from mainstream sex therapy (Pernrud 2007). That is, both feminist and mainstream sex therapy appear premised partially as liberal projects in which power, society and convention are repressive, and the hope for freedom is the hope for an unrepressed sexuality and existence. Here, the notion of sexual functioning provides mainstream sex therapy not only with a resource to conceptualize what it is therapeutic intervention seeks to liberate, but also with an excuse to relinquish responsibility for the objectives of therapeutic intervention. For feminist sex therapy on the other hand, it is uncertain if there is anything that could serve as an analogous resource – neither patriarchy nor notions of sexual essence appear particularly appropriate.

Perhaps, the contention that ‘feminists are typically suspicious of norms because of their historic function in social control’ (Tiefer 1988: 11) has lead feminist sex therapy to a place where it is too eager to refrain from being normative. Everybody’s right to define sexuality in their own terms surely sounds appealing. But once it is acknowledged that one’s ‘own terms’ never are one’s own, things appear in a troublesome light. If feminists refrain from being normative, whose norms will in the end prevail? Should feminist sex therapy instead relinquish liberationist notions, to embark on a constructive effort, within a constructive and responsibly normative framework, what was true all along would become clear: therapeutic intervention is not an innocent endeavour, and there are no excuses for renouncing responsibility. Therapeutic intervention, like any form of political activism, requires taking stand for what is promoted, and assuming responsibility for the politics one practices.

## **6. Methodological Diffractions**

More than an effort to analyse issues raised in feminist sex therapy, this article has been an attempt to suggestively demonstrate a diffractive methodology for interrogating ultimately epistemological questions. I have posed questions about how political assumptions and

notions are consequential for claims to knowledge, and I have sought answers for these questions within a methodological framework in which the presence of politics does not automatically deny knowledges the possibility of claiming epistemic privilege. In this final section I will point more explicitly to what it is that makes a diffractive methodology appropriate for a non-relativist analysis and acknowledgement of the political nature of claims to knowledge.

As a metaphor for knowing, the notion of diffraction suggests that knowledge should be construed as an interference pattern; it is not just an image of an object of knowledge, but it is a testament to the interaction between both 'object' of knowledge and the knowing 'subject'. In this vein I have analysed claims to knowledge in feminist sex therapy not just as accounts of sex and sexual problems, but as accounts of the relations between sexual matters and sex therapists. Moreover, this construal of knowledge suggests, I think, that it takes work, both literally and metaphorically speaking, in order for knowing relations to be possible. Accordingly, claims to knowledge are consequential of the instruments employed in research or the questions interviewees are asked, but also of the work performed by the conceptual, theoretical and politically interested means and techniques employed in the establishment of knowing relations between different parts of the world.

If claims to knowledge are understood as being about the relation between knower and known, partially related to each other through political views, assumptions and materialities, it is of utmost epistemological importance that this relation is taken fully into account (cf. Haraway 1991). Knowledges that do not explain or acknowledge their political content offer only incomplete accounts of their place in the world. Clearly, claims to knowledge in feminist sex therapy are for the most part accountable for the politics they involve. Notions about women's perspectives as a preferable point of departure for understanding sex and sexual problem are explicated and held forth as an important feature of a feminist approach in sex therapy. Also a commitment to women's right to control over their bodies is developed into a mode for delineating sexual problems. Concerning sexual well-being however, I have traced a tendency in feminist sex therapy to displace political commitments unto the clients of therapy. The liberationist framework invoked to that effect creates a point of problematic ambiguity in feminist sex therapy, and leaves notions of sexual well-being incompletely accounted for. The no-norms politics (Tiefer 1988) is political in its own right, and needs to be acknowledged

and accounted for as such. Currently, left unexplored, it is an invitation to essentialism, or to an acceptance of the sexual ramifications of patriarchy, into feminist sex therapy.

In Haraway's reconsiderations of the science question in feminism, she maintained that feminist epistemology needed to find a way 'to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingencies for all knowledge claims ... *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world' (Haraway 1991: 187). Within a diffractive understanding of knowledge, I think it is viable to claim that knowledges are political in the sense that they account for a world where politics really exists, and political views and assumptions are among the things that relate parts of the world to each other. Accordingly, knowing relations are established in a historically contingent world through historically contingent means, and claims to knowledge accounting for knowing relations are indeed historically contingent and about a real world.

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## **Creating Togetherness and Experiencing Difference in Feminist Interviews – Knowing in a post-standpoint way?**

### Abstract

*In this article we start from feminist interdisciplinarity and focus on the interview method as a site of interaction and production of knowledge. Interviews have traditionally been and continue to be one of the basic data collecting methods in social sciences, and this is especially true for Women's Studies. Our aspect is in our own PhD research on rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students. Both use feminist theories and methodologies and, in addition, one takes place in the discipline of Regional Studies and the other in Adult Education. The material has been collected through two different ways of interviewing: by telephone and face-to-face.*

*We discuss what consequences our "dual position" as producers and analysers of research material brings to knowing and how we produce knowledge in this setting. We agree with the idea that knowledge is social. Thus, striving for knowledge means finding shared communities and making use of and accepting differences. We take as our point of departure both standpoint feminism and postmodern ways of practising feminist research when we stress the influence of location, differences and respect. We conclude that our research method is best described as post-standpoint as it relays both standpoint and postmodernist theory to produce knowledge about women's lives.*

**Key words:** feminist interdisciplinarity; interviews; standpoint theory; postmodernism; post-standpoint.

### **Introduction**

Interviews have traditionally been one of and continue to be the basic data collecting methods in social sciences, and this is especially true for Women's Studies. In recent years it has become popular to use so called natural materials, and methodological and epistemological attention has moved mostly to the questions of analysis. It is still contemporary to discuss



interview as a method and, particularly, the viewpoint of material collecting. In this article<sup>1</sup> we focus on the interview method as a site of interaction and production of knowledge. We engage in the discussions of the interview method in Women's Studies especially from the viewpoint of changing methodological and epistemological emphasis, and discuss situatedness, reflexivity, feminist standpoint with its recent added contents, and postmodern feminism.

Our starting point is in our own studies on rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students. We will discuss what situatedness means in our cases in which the material has been collected through two different ways of interviewing: by telephone and face-to-face. In contrast to using material that exists despite of the researcher, we take into account our "dual position" as producers of research material on the one hand and as analysers of the same material on the other. We discuss questions this fact brings to knowing. With interview research the context of the interaction affects the analysis. Bringing together the contexts in which the studied people talk and the contexts in which we listen to them is a challenging task. How we find solutions to this task has an effect on the analysis of the interaction and, thus, the results we present. When thinking through on how we should conceive the research relationship, interaction and our dual position, we find ourselves at the same time in the middle of discussions on standpoint feminism and postmodern ways of practising feminist research. We stress the influence of location, differences and respect and conclude that our research method is best described as post-standpoint as it relays both standpoint and postmodernist theory to produce knowledge about women's lives.

We commence with describing different characteristics and emphasises of feminist interviews. We look at how the so called second wave feminism and the influence of feminist standpoint epistemology have had a transforming effect from the viewpoint of interview research. These approaches are affected by the cultural turn, and the changes it has brought on are overlapping with the shifts in social sciences in general. Next we turn to a description of our own PhD research and their methodological frames. The fact that we have collected our research material through interviewing and are sharing some similarities with standpoint epistemology but nevertheless position our studies "in the era of the cultural turn" has occupied our thoughts. It is for this reason that we want to consider the epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was published in Finnish in the journal for Women's Studies 'Naistutkimus-Kvinnoforskning' (Ikonen and Ojala 2005) and presented at the 6th European Gender Research Conference, University of Łódź, Poland, September 2006.



questions of collecting and analysing interviews in the social scientific frame in which we are currently operating. We discuss our different ways of collecting material (telephone and face-to-face interviewing) and what consequences this brings or does not bring to our analysis. We demonstrate how we have been handling differences and creating togetherness in interview situations and thus try to gain knowledge. As a conclusion we will examine the potential of a post-standpoint methodology in feminist interview research.

### **Interview in a feminist context**

Interviewing has been one of the most frequently used data collecting methods in Women's Studies. Discussions of feminist methodology and, above all, the interview method increased during the second wave of feminism around the 1970s, even though some feminists had been using it (Reinharz and Chase 2002: 223-224). Pivotal in these discussions was the concern that no such theoretical or methodological practices existed in mainstream social sciences in which women's realities and the ways of knowing could be analysed and understood (e.g. Roberts 1981, Keller 1985, Harding 1986). Feminists were searching for new ways of researching with the aim of giving audience to previously unheard voices, to make visible what had been previously unseen and to move away from the biologically informed concept of sex towards the more cultural concept of gender. Epistemologically, it meant looking from the standpoint of women or a particular group of women – taking women's experiences, instead of men's, as a point of departure. In early standpoint feminism it was argued that women are better equipped to understand certain aspects of the world because they see the world from margins, and from the margin one can also see the center (e.g. Harding 1986, Hartsock 1987). When seeing from particular and identified standpoints, important truths about the lives of more affluent, powerful groups can be revealed and critical questions raised about the social order and gender systems (Hill Collins 1990, Harding 2004b: 130).

In early standpoint feminism the overriding concern was to take into account the perspective of women and their everyday life, which had been ignored before (e.g. Smith 1987). Purportedly on account of this interviews appealed to feminists, because it was thought to offer the researcher better access to women's ideas, thoughts and experiences than the other, more masculine methods. Even though the interview method was applied in

mainstream social sciences, feminists saw its usefulness in cases based on unstructured, free woman-to-woman discussions. This way of interviewing was called a feminist interview. (E.g. Oakley 1981, Oinas 2001, Reinharz 1992, Riessman 1991, Ronkainen 1989; 1990.) The feminist interview was based on the idea of open, free, considerate and equal interaction between two women. In this kind of interview situation, the interviewee would not only answer questions passively but, would additionally; produce knowledge together with the interviewer. The idea was that it was better for a woman to be interviewed by a woman because men do not share the same experiences of being in the world as women do (Reinharz 1992: 23).

With this comprehension of an ideal interview feminists were criticising mainstream social sciences on the “hygienic” attitude in which the political and emotional contexts of the research had been largely ignored (e.g. Oakley 1981, Reinharz 1992). In feminist interview research the aim was not only to collect research material but also to offer an opportunity to emancipate the interviewed women by helping them find their own voices and use it to change their oppressed situation and status (e.g. Opie 1992). Thus, a feminist form of interview was thought to offer knowledge about and of women differently than the mainstream social sciences which had ignored women’s ideas altogether or let men speak for women (Reinharz 1992: 19).

The aim of using interviews was to get women to be more involved in the study which was seen to happen during semi-structured face-to-face interviews (i. e. a given topic but free discussion) (Graham 1984). Because the face-to-face encounter existed in the core of interviewing – engagement, empathy, understanding and the interchange of experiences of being a woman – this meant the use of in-depth interviews (Maynard 1994). This implied that large-scale, structured and quantitatively analysed material could not enable the ideal of a feminist interview. For example telephonic interviews as a traditional survey research tool became a questionable and problematic form of material collecting. Telephonic interviews were carried through with a technical tool (understood as masculine) without the face-to-face encounter of the researcher and the researched, which probably did not yield the desired results for feminists.

The image of incompatibility is caused by the fact that there exist very few studies on which telephone interviewing is used with an open-ended question frame and a small amount of interviewees. Karin Filander (2000) is an exception to this as she has conducted qualitative

interviews by phone in Finland. Veli Matti Autio (1994) points out that irrespective of the mode (telephone or in person), one can expect structured answers to structured questions. However, in a widely used methodological textbook telephone interviewing is introduced followed by a few lines which give the idea that those interviews could be semi-structured (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2004: 64-65). Also internationally comparisons are few between qualitative telephone and face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004: 107). Typically telephonic interviews are seen as suitable for very specific situations or for short and structured interviews (op. cit., 108). In their study Judith E. Sturges and Kathleen J. Hanrahan (op. cit.: 112-113), using both interview modes in the same study, discovered that the “depth” of responses did not differ by the type of interview and none of their interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the research method. Roger W. Shuy (2002) states that one can mobilise different interactive means also in the telephone interviews and that female interviewers seems to be better at this.

A few feminist contributors, especially those influenced by postmodern thoughts, emphasise that the goal of the feminist interview method has been romanticised.<sup>2</sup> The argument goes that the feminist interview does not necessarily result in a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched. It is neither possible to guarantee that an interviewee will be understood correctly during the feminist interview (Oinas 2001, Reinharz and Chase 2002: 228-229). Inescapable power relations are always present in interview situations (e.g. Ribbens 1989). What is more, there is not necessarily any shared female experience on which research relationship can be built and which can be used when gendered social processes are analysed. In reformulated standpoint theory womanhood itself is not, or has never been, an adequate stance for a feminist standpoint. “Feminist knowledge has started off from women’s lives, but it has started of from many different women’s lives; there is no typical or essential women’s life from which feminisms start their thought” (Harding 2004b: 134). However, the process of developing a standpoint is similar and therefore it offers a method for developing standpoints to different kinds of women and women groups (Hirschmann 2004: 320-321). Gender is always made up in a relation to and entwined with other analytical and political aspects (see DiPalma and Ferguson 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> By framing the inquiry around the past and present of the feminist interview method, it inevitably becomes constituted as opposite categories and juxtapositions. This story about interviewing can be read as a developmental narrative, as Clare Hemmings (2005) has argued is the case of Western feminist theory in general. Even though we have learnt this logic of development, it should not be underlined excessively.

Methodologically this has meant emphasizing multiple differences beyond and between the genders, the intersectionality of gender and other categories (like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, age, location) and the performance of gender (e.g. DiPalma and Ferguson 2006, Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Rather than having the attention in a dialogical sharing between women, the focus lies on interviews as places of interaction and performance (Reinharz and Chase 2002). What have become essential questions are how the social locations of researchers and the ones who are being researched affect the interview interaction and the research relationship, and how our knowing is socially situated. Taking situatedness seriously calls for reflexivity. It can mean, as Sue Wilkinson (1988) has written, the consideration of researcher's own identity (personal reflexivity), research itself (functional reflexivity) and research's relation to different disciplinary traditions (disciplinary reflexivity). For Reinhartz and Chase (2002: 234) reflexivity refers to the need to recognise how our knowing - interpretation of women's lives - is socially located and variable over time. This means identification of our complex social positions and subjectivities as well as personal, political, and intellectual agendas.

The interview as a method constitutes knowing in a particular way. The certain knowledge brings consequences that are differently valid or adequate for different subjects. An interview has to be perceived as a structure in itself. The call for reflexivity has also raised questions on the analysis and different textual practices, such as the politics of representing "others" and the power of interpretations in interviews. Always present, multiple contexts and the intersectionality of different categories create a lot of challenge for the analysis processes and for the methods in use and, more generally, for feminist knowing. In Finland Anna Rastas (2005), who has studied racism in the everyday life of children and young people, has considered how to become sensitive to differences and, at same time, question the essentiality of differences. Slightly similar questions have exercised our minds when we have been thinking about differences and similarities and how to overcome and utilise them in our studies.

These processes of the feminist interview research as well as the methodological and epistemological aspects of Women's Studies in general have prompted us to reflect on the methodological choices of our PhD studies. We have perceived many epistemological and methodological discussions as debates between standpoint and postmodern (e.g. Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2004, Harding 2004a and

b, Hekman 2004, Hirschmann 2004). We have thought over how to locate ourselves in the standpoint-postmodern continuum. On the one hand, we have used the interview method in gathering the research material and have conducted the interviews ourselves. We analyse the interaction in the interview situation, research the concrete gendered practises among rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students, and produce a cultural understanding of these practices. On the other hand, we have been and are very aware of the boundaries of the interview method. We are also aware of the twofold power positions which we have as researchers: first we use power in interview situations and then during analysis process. We understand that we produce different representations in research. Even if we study women exclusively, we rather speak about women in plural than a woman: womanhood is diverse.

### **Two cases and their methodological choices: rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students**

Both of our studies take place in social scientific Women's Studies which is combined with regional studies (Hanna-Mari Ikonen) and adult education (Hanna Ojala). Hanna-Mari's PhD study deals with women entrepreneurs in the rural areas in Finland<sup>3</sup>. Her interest on this arose when she recognised that rural areas were repeatedly discussed in connection to entrepreneurship (also in other European contexts, see Labrianidis et al 2004). She discovered that even more generally entrepreneurship was a shared discourse in the Finnish society (also Heiskala and Luhtakallio 2006, Kesitalo-Foley et al 2007, Komulainen 2004; 2006). The talk about enterprising was supposed to make people not only to start their own enterprises (and thus to help reduce unemployment by becoming employers) but also gain enterprising attitudes as employees and students. In the context of the accelerated economic, social and cultural interconnectedness, often called globalisation, the Finnish nation state had to find ways of keeping up with the other EU countries and the wider global competition (e.g. Alasuutari and Ruuska 1999). There was, and still is, a widely shared hope that people would

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<sup>3</sup> Finland is the most rural-like country among the European Union Member States which means that a bigger share of the population than in any of the other EU countries is living in the countryside (Rural Policy Committee 2006). However, there are big differences between the rural areas in Finland. The most problematic remote areas are to be found in Northern and Eastern Finland, while areas near the big towns in Southern Finland are quite affluent (Malinen et al. 2004). Nevertheless, in the whole country the population density is lower than in any other European Union countries (Eurostat Yearbook 2006-07: 50).

learn an innovative, risk-taking, growth-oriented and individualistic that is an enterprising attitude.

In the context of Finland's peripheral rural areas, structural problems such as ageing and people's migration from the countryside, decreasing services and the shortage of jobs are facts that have led people to think about new ways of developing the countryside. The share of agriculture as an employer has diminished for many decades and this situation has taken a turn for the worse after the country joined the European Union in 1995 which caused severe profitability problems for agriculture. To alleviate these problems the rural development authorities introduced enterprising as a means for preserving the necessary economic and living conditions in the rural areas (see Finnish Journal of Rural Research and Policy 2004, Rural Policy Committee 2004). In some versions of the enterprising discourse it is thought that women have to work for the nation and rural areas as well. The enterprising discourse channeled towards women stresses that women are also capable of starting enterprises and both the rural societies and the women themselves would benefit from this. "The liberation" or "emancipation" of women by allowing them to enter into businesses of their own is a central issue in this discursive version of enterprising. (See Keskitalo-Foley et al 2007, Komulainen 2005, Koski 2006, Koski and Tedre 2004.)

In her study, Hanna-Mari was interested in knowing what it is like to live in the current situation in the Finnish countryside if one is a woman and has started an enterprise. Her main questions were what kind of practices do life as an entrepreneur includes and what sort of meanings are attached to it. She wanted to situate rural women entrepreneurs in the context of the enterprising discourse but in a manner that does not suppose that the women themselves are feeling that they are affected by that discourse.

In Hanna's study the focus is on age, gender and agency in attaining education later life. The context of the research is the University of the Third Age and the aged women students of the University.<sup>4</sup> The research is tied to the fact that Western societies are "greying". In a few years the third agers (i.e. people between 65 and 75 years) will constitute

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<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the University of the Third Age (U3A) as an institution is to disseminate up-to-date research findings among aged people and offer them opportunities for independent university studies without, however, aiming at formal examinations and the like (e.g. Swindell and Thompson 1995, Williamson 2000). The idea of offering university education to people who have left the working life was borne in France at the University of Toulouse in 1973. Nowadays U3A activities are organised all around the world (Midwinter 1984). The first U3A in Finland was founded in 1985 and today nine universities have these programmes (University of the Third Age, Yeneral 2003). The U3A programmes have been extremely popular in Finland, especially among women. In 2005 approximately 80 percent of the students of U3As were women (KOTA database).

a significant proportion of the population of the Western societies. For example in the area of the European Union (EU-25) the proportion of population aged 65 and over stood at around 17 % in 2005. Eurostat forecasts that this ratio will rise up to 30 % by 2050. This trend is also seen in the old-age dependency ratio, which is expected to rise above 50 % for the EU-25 by 2045. This means that for every pensioner there will be less than two persons of working. (See Eurostat Yearbook 2006-07: 59-64.) Above and beyond the growing number of aged people, they live longer and are healthier. Aged people will be wealthier than the earlier generations in many ways, for example they are better educated, more active and, therefore, better resourced to create and participate in post-retirement opportunities, such as studying.

Two simultaneous cultural trends can be found in the later life perspective. On the one hand, Western societies have strong positive discourses on third age, lifelong learning, the learning society and active ageing (e.g. Laslett 1989, Jarvis 2001, Gilleard and Higgs 2000; 2005). From the aged people's point of view, these discourses are meant to emphasize active participation and especially a chance to stay as or become again a competent agent, consumer, learner, citizen etc. On the individual level the discourses seek to generate a feeling of keeping track of the society, being independent and living a meaningful life. On the other hand, many negative old age discourses exist, such as "grannyfying" (e.g. Arber and Ginn 1995) and such beliefs as "old dogs can't learn new tricks" (e.g. Jarvis 2001). There are several kinds of ageism and discrimination of aged people, which have often arisen from the thought that aged people are an economic burden to society because they are not productive (e.g. Ginn and Arber 1995, Gullette 2004). Even if ageing is primarily thought to be a biological process, the increasing numbers of aged people have caused social changes, and thus ageing is above all a social question. The framework of Hanna's research builds upon and against these two simultaneous cultural trends. She contextualises the aged women students in this ambiguous situation and asks how studying in the later life constructs and constitutes the women's agency and experiences of ageing.

In both our studies, the research material was collected through interviewing. Hanna-Mari conducted her interviews by telephone and Hanna face-to-face. In addition to collecting a rather small survey which was mainly analysed with qualitative content analysis, Hanna-Mari decided to conduct her interviews with rural woman entrepreneurs by telephone. A couple of issues influenced this choice which she thought would be of interest in the context of Women's Studies. First, it would have been difficult for the researcher to travel to rural



areas over long distances and the poor public transportation. Secondly, and more importantly, it would have been difficult for the entrepreneurs to host a researcher coming from afar and thus then given an impression of something more than an hour's interview. The entrepreneurs are constantly busy and it would have been demanding for some of them to organise a day or half a day with respect to the needs of a visiting researcher. If we think in terms of twenty interviews, putting together travelling, distances and timetables of both the researcher and the entrepreneurs the research process would have been especially challenging. Third, Hanna-Mari's interest in telephonic interviews was her observation of very few disciplines performing qualitative, semi-structured telephone interviews (see Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). She did not see the method as complicated or unthinkable as feminist idealism or qualitative textbooks seem to imply. Telephone interviewing should not necessarily be structured, uncommunicative, exploitative and superficial.

Hanna chose face-to-face interviews in her study mainly for two reasons. Firstly, she had extensive theoretical knowledge based on previous research on the University of the Third Age students' motives and the meanings of studying in their lives. Secondly, she had practical knowledge about the students' thoughts and working manners based on her previous work at the University of the Third Age as a planner and teacher. Therefore she had the aim of challenging the students towards thinking profoundly about their reasons for studying in later life. Interviewing and especially using multiple deep-interviews was conceived to be the gentlest way to face this challenge. Each woman was interviewed three times which also enabled the women the opportunity to air their thoughts thoroughly.

### **Does different ways of interviewing mean different ways of knowing?**

After all the methodological knowledge we had learnt we thought that different interviewing forms had given us different kinds of research materials. Or more likely, we had not considered the possibility that different interview conventions would be able to produce quite similar material. As colleagues we discussed our interview processes, transcription work and the trials of analysis. Gradually we came to notice that we had much in common in our thoughts on the transcribed interviews. Hanna-Mari reflected that the telephone interviews had gone pretty well. She was unsure whether she had asked relevant questions or whether

she knew what to do with the material, but the method as such impressed her as successful. Hanna experienced a phase of confusion: she had had dialogical interview situations, for sure, but where was the big difference these were supposed to produce?

We each chose an actual extract of our interview material and put them together to compare typical interaction processes.

#### Extract A: Marja

- *Right. So, can you tell me a little bit more about why you set up the business?*

> *Well it has in a way to do with this, my husband's background that I was [in a restaurant in the small town] I was the restaurant manager; I had come there [to the small town] from [a bigger town] because the restaurant manager's job was open and I applied and got it and then, well, then came this that in my case all of this has got to do with all the other things in a way, like starting a family and buying a house and all this, like in a way, a total life change happened then.*

- *Yes.*

> *And my husband has an entrepreneurial background and it was him that really urged me that why couldn't I start a catering business. And then [the small town] did not really have such a business, there was only the matron at the parish who was old and apparently about to retire. That was in a way the fact that, a sort of an incentive that from the parish, that from there I would be getting jobs from time to time.*

- *Yes.*

> *So that it was this start-up grant. And that helped that I got the start-up grant and knew that I, like, would get started.*

- *Yes. What about the start-up grant, did you have to be unemployed to apply?*

> *Yes, and I left, like*

- *Yes*

> *the job, like it was six mon..., no was it six weeks*

- *Yes.*

> *The time that. But it happened that [laughs] that at the same time when we like, that we had, we bought a house here in the countryside so in a way it was meant to be that I wouldn't be working nights anymore [laughs]. However, it was I worked*

*shifts as maitre d' so that I was almost always working on the weekends, this was what I meant to do the year before, before we came up with something else.*

*- Yes.*

*> And then it happened that I became pregnant with our first child at about that time when I was making plans for my own business [laughs]*

*- [the interviewer laughs]*

*> that almost on my maternity leave it started but I did have time to run the business and the start-up grant discontinued while I was on maternity leave and then it started up again.*

### Extract B: Elisa

*- Okay. Well, when you participate in the literature seminar*

*> Yees*

*- there is always something to do outside the seminar. I mean, basically, you can just sit in the lecture and it does not bring any homework or anything. So, how much do you work at home?*

*> At the time that I didn't have a computer it was hard work. I sometimes just thought, I'm a very poor typist. I always made misspellings especially at the end of the page. So I had to type it all over again.*

*- Yeah*

*> At the time writing felt particularly more troublesome. But nowadays when I got the computer it has been easier.*

*- Okay*

*> Of course I remember, wasn't it one of Helvi Hämäläinen's books how I took on by accident that awful, that autobiography, that kind of an awfully thick book.*

*- Mm*

*> I remember that time there was always those papers scattered all over the big table the whole week [laughs] which I took for Sunday...*

*- Okay yes*

*> away. And it has been interesting, so I have been doing it willingly.*

*- Mm*

*> But it doesn't feel like work, because it's pleasant.*

Despite our somehow different starting points (if one considers the physical differences between telephone and face-to-face interviews), the transcriptions look very alike. These short extracts do not tell much about our research themes, contents of discussions, tensions and clumsy situations but our point here is just to depict the structuring of interaction. In the quotations, both of us while asking questions show active listening by agreeing, accompanying, asking for complements, laughing and using acknowledgement tokens and other small filling words. However, the interview situations did differ from method to method and between each interview. The transcript does not show all the interaction that took place during the interview process. At the same time, it appears as if the basic interactive structure of the research interview is the same on all occasions.

When describing research, commonly well-known terms should be used. If interviews have been conducted by telephone, this must be mentioned, as just what it was; telephonic interviews. Deep interview is also a commonly shared name for an interviewing style<sup>5</sup>; if one plans to interview people face to face with open questions, deep interviewing becomes the name for the method. Naming the method brings firm associations to mind. However, we argue that the name of the method does not directly describe the way in which the method is used. (Ikonen and Ojala 2005.) Telephone interviewing could be reevaluated by feminist scholars as a usable tool for conducting unstructured interviews.

### **Striving for knowledge and handling differences in interview situations**

Even if interview forms do not directly lead to any certain kind of knowledge, material gained by interviewing has to be dealt with in a somewhat different manner than “natural material” that exists despite the researcher. In recent years it has become popular to study texts and use natural material such as doctor-patient or expert-customer discussions, political documents, newspaper articles, TV-series and other media representations (e.g. Alasuutari 2001: 156, Jokinen 1999: 42-43). Our material was different in relation to these because we used interviews we had conducted personally and thus had had a remarkable influence on

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<sup>5</sup> Reinharz (1992: 281) notes that feminist interview researchers interchange the terms unstructured, intensive, in-depth, and open-ended interview.

what they included. Therefore we did not want to close off the communicative aspect involved in conducting the interviews. Still, a romantic story of getting into the interviewee's deepest thoughts was not anything we believed in. Things are culturally affected but seeing knowledge as such does not necessarily assume material that exists without the researcher. The communication between the researcher and the researched has just to be taken into consideration.

Another aspect we noticed as enlightening was the comprehension that producing knowledge is social (see Code 1995, Harding 2004a, Hartsock 1987, Ribbens 1989). We all act in various social and cultural communities and all have slightly different ways of knowing. As researchers, it was crucial to find means of entering those communities as much as it was necessary in order to be able to understand their ways of knowing, and reflect upon how we could find these ways. Because no-one can get to totally know other people's thoughts, it is important to grasp what it is possible to know for us who have a background of our own (academic, disciplinary, personal) communities to carry within the research process. In the same way, we have to consider the positions the interviewees talk from. How can we find shared communities of knowing and how to bring together these aspects that both the researcher and the researched are familiar with? This became a key question that unified us both even though we had started from different methodological apparatuses, who came close to each other during our mutual discussions and who, originating from this question, began to differ again and follow the lines of our own research materials.

In Hanna-Mari's case, what was shared with the interviewed women was the knowledge about a problematic situation in the countryside and entrepreneurship as a commonly offered solution to it. Hanna-Mari called it a discourse in her mind but the interviewees were able to identify it as well. This was the common thing that served as a starting point of communication even though the big difference between them was that one had experience on rural enterprising or enterprising altogether, and the other did not. So the positions in the interviews were based on this theme and their roles around it.

In the interview plan, Hanna-Mari's aim involved inquiring about the people's relation to their place of residence as this was definitely important to their whole way of living. On occasion during the interview Hanna-Mari and the interviewee noticed they had affinities in their living conditions: an older house they had renovated and enlarged or were planning. The episode in which houses were discussed opened up a natural way of

communicating about an abstract issue, the meaning of place. In addition to that, the house episode revealed interesting aspects that were relevant to the research questions but that the researcher had not thought of beforehand. Thus, the material became a part of the analysis as well.

In Hanna's study, the shared starting point was the practical experience obtained from the University of the Third Age, one as a teacher and the others as students. This simplified the starting point of the interview discussions as there were many familiar issues to talk about. The challenge rose from trying to encourage the students of the University of the Third Age in finding new perspectives to think and talk about the theme in which they were so involved. With her choices of implementation of the interviews, Hanna managed with the mutual knowledge they shared to challenge their most striking ways of thinking. During a fluid interaction process, they found new areas they could share or learn to know and the interview process could continue.

There were, however some uncomfortable situations that had to be dealt with during the research process. At the home of one the interviewees Hanna was served warm sausage sandwiches. Hanna is a vegetarian but in the situation she realised the rudeness of declining the offer. At the beginning of the interview, rejecting what had been served would not have been a very good starting point of interaction and the differences between the generations would have been unnecessarily elucidated.

Commonly, differences between the parties of a research process can be seen as a problem. For example Reinharz and Chase (2002: 230-232) argue that if the interviewers' and interviewees' social locations, such as ethnicities, classes, ages and sexual orientations, differ dramatically, it is not easy to achieve a satisfying interaction. Because of differences in social locations, the interviewer and the interviewee may have difficulties in "hearing" and thus achieving a gratifying research relationship (see Riessman 1991, Ronkainen 1989). We too considered these differences as problems at first but then we tried to challenge our own way of handling them.

We came to notice that differences can be utilised, and we actually had already made use of them unintentionally. Hanna-Mari was not an expert on rural development or enterprising (even though she was sometimes treated as if she was), whereas the interviewees had practical knowledge about enterprising. This frame made it possible to ask unauthorised and naïve questions which, in turn, helped to overcome the governing enterprising discourse.

In Hanna's case, there existed a great age difference between herself and the women who took part in the research. Their lives rich with experiences could be employed as a background for asking about the past, like wartime experiences.

All the examples above give an idea how our shared thoughts about grasping emerging small issues, interpreting them and creating togetherness, and how these were put to use in a unique manner in diverse interviews. When we first found out that idea of how to conduct an interview, we were then able to sort out sections in the transcribed interviews in which we were doing situational acts, combining intuition and planning, and navigating within various interview episodes.

We came to the conclusion that differences in social locations can be useful – not only problematic, as they are said to be. In spite of different social locations, we think that the interviewees are not total strangers to the researcher. Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that a “stranger” is somebody we know previously since the stranger is already constituted as strange in relation to the familiar. In other words, several subjects that are discussed in interviews may be unfamiliar to the researcher on the level of personal experience but they may still be culturally identifiable. What we now think about differences in the interview process is that they can be overcome by finding something to share with each other and by entering into the other's communities of knowing. In all cases this is not probable or even necessary and then one can make use of the differences which always exist between two people. The differences can for example open up new perspectives and offer new ideas for analysis.

### **Concluding thoughts: between stand and post**

Sandra Harding (1991) criticises modern science for theorising knowledge disconnected from the knowing persons and their contexts. In the same vein we have in this article wanted to maintain that the context, in which the research material is produced, is significant for knowing and the knowledge that is subsequently gained. Knowledge produced through interviews is produced through interaction in which the researcher is present. If we take the fact that entering into other people's social and cultural communities are ways towards



knowing in interview situations, it has to be taken into account in the analysis, too. But what might this mean for the analysis in practice?

At least it could lead to the notion that the interpretations we present out of our material have to be related to the interviewees' everyday life. They live in the middle of certain local and general discussions and practices and produce e.g. gender from these perspectives. We may wonder about some of their ways of thinking and acting but we have to be careful in criticising them. Taking into account the fact that we have by ourselves encouraged them to speak openly, it would be unethical to forget the context in which they live and speak from. Jane Ribbens (1989) has puzzled over how a feminist researcher should engage with women's culture that is not apparently feminist, how to treat what is said with respect even though one does not agree, and how to be close to participants' own perceptions and provide a researcher's interpretation of them at the same time. She makes reference to Sue Wise (1987: 84) who has written that we have to recognise the power a researcher always holds and deal with it wisely as feminists (see Ribbens 1989: 590). Also Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002: 105-106) point out that making knowledge claims across differences calls for responsibility because a researcher has the power to contribute to knowledge that has effects on women's lives.

That means that we cannot locate the research material directly in the contexts of academic Women's Studies, for example. If we are wondering or want to criticise something, it has to be directed towards a cultural way of acting, a dominating discourse etc. instead of the interviewees. Theories, concepts and other research findings can offer channels from interview stories to a theoretically informed analysis. By theorising and conceptualising we may, however, lose notable parts of the liveliness of the women's lives we initially were attracted to and wanted to valorise.

When we are dwelling on how we should conceive the relationship between ourselves and the interviewed and whether we can criticise some viewpoints they present, we are at the same time in the middle of a discussion on the standpoint and postmodern ways of practising feminist research. In our studies, both of us have some aspects of standpoint feminism: we have been asking questions directly from real women about real life. We have been interested in certain phenomena and expressly the women's experiences around them. However, we also find aspects typical to postmodern thinking in our cases: we share the idea of the discursive nature of things and the understanding that subjects can always be represented in

various, ideologically coloured ways. We understand the gender of our researched people to be intertwined with vectors of power (DiPalma and Ferguson 2006: 134). We have wanted to deconstruct the phenomena we have been dealing with, bring some new – multiple – aspects to them and represent them more from a counter-discourse perspective.

With regard to feminist political projects, which academic feminism must not forget, the dichotomy between standpoint and postmodern theories is fruitless. The aim is not to sustain opposite views or claim better knowledge than those who have been before us but to gain a better understanding because of those precursors (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2004). We are in agreement with Nancy Hirschmann's (2004) elaboration of standpoint theory that emphasises materiality alongside with postmodern discursivity. It is materiality that constructs the concrete and abstract communities of knowing and thus the knowledge that can be produced. We are always situated in different communities, times and places, and realising this helps us make it a resource. Hereby one can yield knowledge that is conscious of its restraints and thus less partial and strongly objective, as Sandra Harding (2004b) has stated. Also Haraway insists on maintaining the commitment to objectivity because it is politically necessary (see Code 2006: 159).

Donna Haraway (1991) has articulated the idea about inevitable but complex situatedness. With this she refers to the fact that a researcher is always situated, but that site is neither deterministic nor freely selectable. Also objectivity is attached to specific historical positions but does not cast aside the possibility of alliances. (Op. cit.) We would like to suggest that the idea of distinctive locations and permanent as well as temporary assemblies is tenable also in concrete interview research. We consider the importance of this as well after reading Haraway. For Haraway (1991), objectivity means learning to see well – but that not everybody can see in the same way. Seeing well does not just happen. These are exactly the positions and contexts we have tried to describe in our article that lay at the core of seeing (or listening to, interpreting, experiencing, knowing) well. We gain different kinds of visions in multiple contexts. In order to be able to see well one has to be conscious of one's own position and the contexts from which she or he faces the others, for example those she or he is studying. One can reflect upon his or her own position although not disengage from it.

In this article we have endeavoured to show what seeing well might mean in empirical study and particularly in interview research. We have reflected where we could be located: on whose shoulders are we standing (Bordo 1990: 141) and whose fingerprints can be found in

our research (Harding 2004b: 128)? The Harawayan (which is parallel with other standpoint approaches influenced by postmodern ideas) stance locates us somewhere in-between or towards post-standpoint.

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## **German Women Writing about the End of the Second World War – A Feminist Analysis**

### Abstract

*This article gives insight into a research project still in progress about diaries written by German acknowledged women during National Socialism, particularly, the Second World War and the period immediately after the War and the breakdown of the NS system. Such research from a feminist standpoint proves to be complicated. On the one hand, women were marginalised by the fascist system. On the other, being acknowledged as German granted them privileges over those considered non-German or degenerated (ranging from being included in the welfare state system to the privilege of not being sterilised and/or murdered). The interest in this analysis is an archaeological investigation of cultural memory of this period still influential. Apart from this discussion the paper entails an example of an interdisciplinary feminist analysis of passages of two diaries written immediately after the breakdown of the system. The methodology is a discourse analytical approach that makes use of studies from different disciplinary contexts in order to show the different discursive layers within the texts such as the image of the female comrade of a soldier and the unfaithful women. In both cases, aspects of a 'new' female German identity become visible in which parts of the 'old' German identity were transformed and re-integrated. This process involved the rejection of aspects clearly linked to the NS system and, not surprisingly, a projection of the immorality of this system onto women who sexually engage with foreign soldiers. Thus, making them responsible for the betrayal of the national German community just as the NS system had done prior.*

Key words: Gender; Sexuality; German identity; National Socialism; cultural memory; diaries

### **Introduction**

This article gives insight on work still in progress about diaries written by women during the Second World War who were acknowledged as being German by the National Socialist system. I will, first, introduce some general problems of conducting such research and display some of my related aims for it and, second, give an example of the methodology I currently develop for my analysis.

Conducting feminist research on the period of National Socialism in Germany is a difficult issue. The fascist system marginalized women. Nevertheless, women acknowledged as German were privileged as the superior race and as such took part in the system of power. Some were even actively involved in the death machine. As a result, it is impossible to speak of women on the whole as victims of the particular patriarchal system of National Socialism (Leck 2002) like some authors argued in the 1980s (e.g. Bock 1986). The debate amongst historians arguing for and against German victimization in terms of expellation and bombing 'in general' (as usual meaning mainly male victims or perpetrators) was followed by another on whether German women could for the most part be seen as victims or perpetrators. Claudia Koonz (1987) as well as Karin Windaus-Walser (1988) argued that by agreeing to the national socialist female role as housewife and mother German women morally supported the fascist system and were thus perpetrators. However, this argument has been deconstructed by Birthe Kundrus (1995) who states that by accusing housewives of genocide one deflects from the real perpetrators. The individual involvement therefore has to be differentiated. The feminist problematic of portraying women as victims is thus further intensified, since any form of German victimization needs to be carefully approached within the wider frame of the German state as aggressor (cf. Assmann 2006). As a result, the biggest challenge is now seen as investigating the role of women beyond the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (cf. Herkommer 2005: 78). This goal can be pursued by analysing the complexity of gender relations during this period of time and by investigating the continuity of some aspects of these relations.

In my research, I therefore focus on the end of the Second World War, hence, the end of National Socialism and as a consequence, the start of a new national identity. Since the population has not yet been divided into two states there is still no split into Eastern and Western German identities. However, national identity is always gendered and as a result, women and men relate very differently to the loss of the war, the change of the system and the discovery of war crimes such as the genocide of all Jewish people in Europe. Moreover, individual men and women reflect on these issues very differently according to their relation to National Socialism as well as to other aspects such as their class background. Furthermore, it is of particular interest to investigate how these 'old' issues were transformed and integrated into a new national identity immediately after the war.

The sources I investigate are unpublished diaries written between January and September 1945 by women acknowledged as German. Despite the fact that diary writing was

supported by the National Socialist State and consequently blossomed throughout that period especially during the Second World War in Germany (cf. Nieden 1993: 59), there are few studies about them. In 1993 Susanne zur Nieden published the first monograph focusing on unpublished diaries of women in Berlin. Other researchers like Margarthe Doerr (2002) used diaries in addition to interviews in order to reconstruct women's daily life at the 'home front'. Again others like Regina Mühlhäuser (1998) and Atina Grossmann (1994) focused on diaries already published (by authors themselves or relatives of them) in order to examine narratives of sexual violence. Even though diaries are never private, never the pure inner voice of a person (cf. Dusini 2005: 68), published diaries appear to be more polished, maybe rewritten afterwards for the broader public. Some of the unpublished diaries I found were also subsequently rewritten for relatives and friends. However, in contrast to many diaries that were published twenty or more years later (and hence most likely rewritten), unpublished diaries were mostly rewritten immediately after the war. As a result, they still bear the witness of the same period, because they were not altered according to changing social discourses.

My interest in this period of time is not just historical, I also aim to discover the "the historical sedimentation of many-layered discursive products, this stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements and expectations about women or female identity [...] tattooed on our skin" (Braidotti 2002: 41). In other words, my intent is to investigate the present German cultural memory of National Socialism in its gendered structure. Rosi Braidotti reminds us that psychoanalysis is not only a cultural theory, but also a cure from inscribed stereotyped images (2002). In order to make half conscious aspects of the cultural memory in Germany visible I do not psychoanalyse myself or other individuals. Rather, I analyse discourses which I find in the diaries written by women acknowledged as German. Some of these discourses are silent sub-layers of German cultural memory – making them visible will hopefully facilitate finding a cure from them.

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to provide an example of my interpretation methodology which consists of amalgamating historical research with sociological and cultural analyses. I combine historical research on National Socialism, German nationalism and the gender relations within them with theoretical work on gender relations, femininity, masculinity, sexuality and nationalism. Together these form the background against which I read and interpret the diaries. In the following, I will exemplify

this methodology with statements from two diaries written by different women in the northern part of Germany which became the British zone in spring of 1945. They exemplify how discourses about gender and race were transformed and integrated into new forms of German identity.

### **Observing Prostitution**

Nelly: "The women are already jumping at the chance to have a go with the others, how is that possible – for a piece of chocolate they stroll all over the marketplace in Biel. No, no, it's just not right."<sup>1</sup> (May 22, 1945)

In this passage Nelly reports on what she interprets as prostitution. She describes the women as active not as victims. They pursue prostitution not for basic material needs, but for what they consider luxury goods such as chocolate. The subject of the "erotic fraternisation" of Austrian and German women after the Second World War (Nieden 2002: 313) is not new to feminist research. The Australian researcher Hsu-Ming Teo (1996) interpreted prostitution during that period in Germany as part of a continuum of sexual violence starting with violent acts such as rape and ending at courtship caused by hunger. Related to her approach are theories of sexual violence as a war strategy to humiliate the enemy repeatedly as well as to recreate the male community (Card 1997). These theories remain valid. In the case of the Second World War and sexuality in Austria and Germany there is additional research focusing on the women themselves. Research conducted by Susanne zur Nieden (2002) as well as Ingrid Bauer (1996) suggest that women having sexual relationships with foreign soldiers moved on a continuum between being forced into prostitution in order to survive and feed their children, and striving for new experiences after a long war (Bauer 1996: 111).

Nelly interprets the women's behaviour as probably striving for amusement and/or luxury. Additionally, in a passage preceding this quote Nelly describes the British soldiers as being correct and cautious ("korrekt und zurückhaltend"). Whereas, she views the women as playing the active part, she admires the soldiers from a distance for their politeness. Given that her interpretation of the activity of those women is right and that she does not condemn

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<sup>1</sup> „Die Frauen ziehen schon alle los mit den Andern, wie ist das möglich, für ein Stück Schokolade flankieren sie auf dem Platz von Biel. Nein, nein, das ist nicht richtig.“

hungry women, their interest in new experiences is easy to understand from today's perspective. The question remains: why does Nelly not agree with them? In order to find plausible explanations for this, other diary passages as well as the discursive context on femininity, masculinity, sexuality, prostitution, National Socialism and the war need to be taken into account.

The above passage is dated May 22, 1945 – two weeks after capitulation. Her description of the women as "already" being in contact with soldiers is reminiscent of the myth of the "quick capitulation" of German women after the Second World War. Sexual relationships with foreign soldiers were commonly interpreted as failure and betrayal of the sense of community among the German *Volk* (cf. Nieden 2002; Bauer 1996: 111). For many at the end of the war, this was most likely no longer related to a National Socialist community but to one's relatives, friends and acquaintances. If one considers other passages it becomes clear that Nelly shared this view. Even though she knew about and was uncritical towards the National Socialist "attempt" to solve the "Jewish question" ("der Versuch die Judenfrage zu lösen", 28.09.1943), she was relieved that Germany lost the war. She was neither a member of the National Socialist party nor the women's association and feared being discriminated (10.05.1945). Nevertheless, she mourned that all the sacrifices, especially of male soldiers at the front, had been in vain ("alle Opfer umsonst gewesen", 15.05.1945). Hence, it seems that in her view the women prostituting themselves or looking for courtship of the foreign soldiers behaved badly towards those men who fought (also for them).

Even though these feelings might have been privatized and not related to National Socialist ideology anymore, they still fit into the system. During the war women were activated as the warriors companion(s), keeping the home front, supporting male soldiers and waiting for them. There were regulations which ensured that only 'Aryan' women could become a soldier's wife and those who did were supported more generously in Germany than in other countries (cf. Kundrus 1995). This strategy was chosen in order to secure the moral support of the population. However, a soldier's wife could be deprived of the financial support if she was found to have been unfaithful (cf. Kundrus 1995). If these relationships were with foreigners, the treatment was even harsher (cf. Kundrus 1995: 380ff). Underlying this was the construction of race. On the one hand, 'Aryan' German women were born 'Aryans', yet on the other hand, their racial status was related to social success and

appropriate behaviour. As a result, one could also lose one's status. Prostitutes, like gay men for example, were considered 'deteriorated'.

So far my interpretation has shown that prostitutes were found unacceptable by both the old National Socialist system and the new German identity that was just starting to develop. However, there were still other aspects to the debate on courtship between German women and foreign soldiers. These I will discuss based on the second diary.

### **Observing *Observing* Prostitution**

Inge: "Everywhere there is outrage at the women seen being courted by the soldiers in broad daylight. "Hitler raised whores, that's what he wanted", an old man said. ... The BdM education didn't last a week." (5562, 1035).<sup>2</sup>

With these words, Inge describes how people became indignant about German women seeking sexual relationships with foreign soldiers. There are two astonishing breaks within this passage. The first is the quote of the old man saying Hitler had intended to raise whores. The second is the author's statement that the education of the state invented girls' association (BdM) did not last long. What do these breaks imply?

To begin with, it is remarkable that Inge does not write about peoples' outrage about the death camps. Bergen Belsen was a prime example of a one who did. She knew about the camps and was upset about National Socialism. She was relieved to be living in Hamburg where the war had ended a bit earlier and was occupied by the British Army. That people were infuriated by women either prostituting themselves or having love-affairs with foreign soldiers confirms that people became very obsessed with sexuality after the Second World War (Nieden 2002). The debate on female sexuality is not unique to Germany. In her work on the relationship between young women and US soldiers in Britain during the Second World War, Sonya O. Rose (1998) discovers similar strands. British women went out with US soldiers who were not only foreign, but also better off than their British colleagues and thus triggered similar discussions in Britain. Rose argues that female sexuality is frequently

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<sup>2</sup> German original: "Überall Empörung gegen die Frauenzimmer, die man bei hellem Tag die Soldaten umbuhlen sieht. 'Huren hat der Hitler erzogen', sagte ein alter Mann, 'so wollte er es ja'. ... Es hat ja die BdM-Erziehung keine Woche vorgehalten."



debated during periods of change and that by examining female sexuality people discussed what it meant to be British (Rose 1998). Similarly, one could argue that in Germany by being irate about women having sexual relationships with foreign soldiers a new German identity was being discussed.

This argument is based on the well researched observation that women increasingly become the representative of moral qualities and cultural values during the development of different nationalisms. According to Mosse (1987) the figure of the chaste woman became the symbol for continuity and stability of a nation (Ibid. 21). This meaning was further advanced by Christina von Braun (1997) who stated that through secularism the meaning of the pure blood of Jesus was translated to the pure blood of a nation. Purity, thus, became the symbol for the unity of a nation or a people's body excluding everything foreign, everything that could cause impurity. Hence, 'purity' appears to have a double-meaning in relation to female sexuality: firstly, it is connected to chastity and secondly, to a woman's choice of a sexual partner within or outside a social group (cf. Dane 2005: 97ff).

As Dagmar Herzog (2005) pointed out the National Socialist system was sexually restrictive for all 'non-Aryans', but provided increased sexual freedom for all 'Aryans', and in particular for men. As a result there were repeated debates between conservative groups such as Catholics and National Socialists about sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Herzog (2005) gives examples of families refusing to let their girls go to the local BDM group (Bund Deutscher Mädel/Association of German Girls), because they feared their girls would learn to have a lax sexual attitude. However, sex with foreigners (civil or forced labourers as well as prisoners of war) was in most cases strictly prohibited, and only in exceptions allowed with other 'Aryan' races such as French civil workers (cf. Kundrus 2002). Thus, National Socialism mainly built upon the second meaning of purity, the purity of the nation's body. As a consequence, this old man could state that the increased sexual permissiveness during National Socialism (as well as the absence of men to watch their daughters and sisters) would ruin the moral of young women.

Subsequently, BDM education was in most cases not about (or at least not only about) sexual permissiveness. During National Socialism everything was designed to serve the war. The BDM groups were intended to educate the National Socialist women who would support

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Roos (2002) exemplifies this repeated debate in relation to prostitution policy.

a male soldier to fight and give birth to new soldiers (Rose 1998).<sup>4</sup> Marriage was not a value as such and was instead supported mainly for strategic war reasons. Since these policies aimed also at keeping young women away from foreign men failed, Inge could write that the education promoting them only lasted for a short while.

Ingrid Bauer (1996) argued that the women having sexual relationships with US soldiers in Austria caused outrage, because they acted against the idea of a 'pure' race and nation. This is definitely the case here, too. However, there is yet another important aspect. The old man links these women back to National Socialism. In doing so he draws on other meanings associated with femininity. In early modernity the assumption was held that women were closer to sexuality than men. Since sexuality was still a sin, thus, related to evil, women were seen as being prone to becoming a witch and hence, a mate of the devil. This traditional association between femininity and evil resonates in the quote from the old man. As a result, female sexuality was associated with the continuation of the NS system. The obsession with sexuality therefore, implies a deflection from the real scandal to women seeking relief either from hunger or from war experiences. As a second consequence, female sexuality was able to be very easily put back into its place in the 1950s (cf. Herzog 2005).

## **Final Remarks**

In Germany there is a highly developed, official, memorial culture in terms of the Second World War and the genocide. However, there is still an imbalance in discussing issues such as how much people bought into or actually agreed to certain policies of the system and to what extent discourses of this period of time were transformed and re-integrated into a new German national identity after the Second World War. As mentioned earlier, my aim is to make such discourses, the history "tattooed on our skins" (Braidotti 2002: 41) visible. These few passages only exemplify the methodology I am still developing for exposing these transformed and re-integrated discourses (that as a consequence, might still be present in the contemporary German cultural memory of that period) as well as the deflections from the war

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<sup>4</sup> However, according to Sonya O. Rose the BdM leader often failed this political goal and offered a space for doing things such as playing games, singing and knitting.

crimes to little moral sidesteps. There are still many open questions to solve, such as which parts of them can still be traced today and what shifts have they undergone since then.

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### **How do we do it?**

#### **Methodologies, methods and subject foci in Gender Studies student's degree projects**

##### Abstract

*This article stresses the issue of methodology in an interdisciplinary field of research and education. The focus is on students and how they handle the situation with teachers coming from a number of traditional disciplines. These teachers bring a variation of research foci, methods and skills. For the students this could result in a wide range of possibilities to approach research from different angles. Yet, problems emerge when they are supposed to carry out their own projects. The article is based on my Master's thesis. The research interest was on what students in Gender Studies actually do in their degree projects on what is called 'advanced level I'. A query was how they related to feminist methodologies, which methods and theories they used and what research problems they were interested in. In the projects examined most of the students seem to be familiar with, and use feminist theory. While the same could not be said about the methodology. This article points to a serious lack of methodological awareness, both in a more theoretical sense, but also as practical skills. The students do not seem to articulate very well what they actually do. The article suggests a practically oriented, ongoing discussion on methods in Gender Studies, especially in undergraduate education. Such a discussion should be grounded on methodological and epistemological theories with emphasis on research skills and methods.*

Key words: interdisciplinarity, methodologies, methods, practical skills, Master's theses, Gender Studies

##### **Introduction**

This article is written from a student's perspective. It is based on my own MA essay, which focuses on how students use methods and theories when writing essays at undergraduate level in Gender Studies in Sweden. I will argue that there is a significant difference between the acute theoretical awareness in students' essays and, what I term, their uncertainty regarding methods and methodological issues. For us, in the first generation of PhD students in Gender

Studies<sup>1</sup>, this situation can be problematic. This raises questions about what kind of a subject Gender Studies actually is. What are our unique skills, trained as we are in such an inter- and multidisciplinary field?

Firstly, I will give a short introduction to my own experience at the University of Göteborg, the methodology that I have used, and how my project was designed. This will be followed by a quick overview of curricula on methods in undergraduate courses at Gender Studies departments in Sweden. Following this, I will focus on the essays in question, looking at them from different angles, thematically arranged according to my research questions. Finally, I will raise issues relating to the legitimacy and relevance of the general field of Women's Studies. I will conclude with some reflections concerning what can be done to strengthen the field by helping the students to navigate through the deep ocean of methods, methodology and theory in Gender Studies

### **A heritage that caused me trouble**

My interest in research methods in Gender Studies arose during my own undergraduate studies in the subject. I was surprised by and sceptical of our methods courses. The literature and the lectures were more about methodology and epistemology than about methods and skills. In other words, we read more about how different methods could be understood and conceptualised rather than their practical application. For me, and other students with an earlier background in courses in other disciplines, this was not that much of a problem. We had previous experiences that we could rely on. For those of us who took Gender Studies as their first subject at the university the situation was more confusing.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1990, it has been possible to take a PhD-degree in interdisciplinary Gender Studies at Tema Genus in Linköping. The PhD students have, however, different disciplinary backgrounds, some of which may have undergraduate training in gender Studies "on its own". The first university in Sweden to provide PhD training in Gender Studies as a "discipline", i.e. at a department running undergraduate education, was Örebro in 2002. Today they have two PhD students in Gender Studies, even if both have an undergraduate background in political science. (22 Feb. 2007 <[www.oru.se/templates/oruExtIntroPageLevel2.aspx?id=6953](http://www.oru.se/templates/oruExtIntroPageLevel2.aspx?id=6953)>) In Göteborg, PhD training in Gender Studies has been available since 2004. Today the department has five PhD students, of which all but one have an undergraduate degree in Gender Studies. (22 Feb. 2007 <[www.hum.gu.se/institutioner/genusvetenskap](http://www.hum.gu.se/institutioner/genusvetenskap)>) Since 2006, the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Lund also has a PhD programme based on undergraduate training in Gender Studies. At the moment there are three PhD-students in Lund. (22 Feb. 2007 <[www.genus.lu.se/](http://www.genus.lu.se/)>) (See also Liinason & Holm, 2006 and Lykke, 2004.) Some of the Women's and Gender Studies centres/departments at other universities/university colleges also strive for PhD education, however, at a time when the higher education policy in Sweden now works towards a higher concentration on resources to fewer institutions.



When the time came for our essay at advanced level I, we knew a lot about feminist criticism from traditional disciplines, we knew a lot about epistemology and, to a lesser degree, about research ethics. But our training in particular methods were more rudimentary. We had read some texts about interview and interpretative techniques, as well as having had an introduction to discourse analysis. However, our skills and experiences in using these methods were very limited.

This was the situation from my perspective, although the other students did not seem to be as obsessed as I was with the lack of training. Since then, I have realised that my interest in methods may have come from my undergraduate years at university. I was academically trained at a department of political science where the watchword for our courses on methods was *if you can't count it – it doesn't count.*<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, my interest in methods has to do with my positivistic heritage from political science. Nevertheless, during my courses in Gender Studies the old heritage had met with resistance from feminist criticism. The issue on value neutrality was one of them. In *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Alessandra Tanesini asks "how do we tell the good bias from the bad bias." (Tanesini 1999: 86) She is one in a line of researchers who have questioned the traditional image of value neutrality in research. She does so when she compares how values are given divergent significance in the context of discovery, and in the context of justification. She argues that the deliberate use of feminist values can be a way to improve research standards. My understanding of this is that the methodological transparency demanded by traditional science needs to be followed by an epistemological transparency, and this is where feminist research can make a contribution.

For Marjorie Pryse (2001), there is an epistemic challenge to produce knowledge that does not fit the academic structure. For her, criticism becomes a *de facto* methodology in feminist research, which gives a necessary, but not a sufficient method, to develop feminist epistemology. With the help of Sneja Gunew, she raises the interesting question: "from what "position" do feminists construct "a new body of both knowledge and theory"?" (Pryse 2001: 7) The opposite, and traditional view can be found in *Metodpraktikan* (Esaiasson et al. 2003). This is a pedagogic handbook on methods written by some of my former teachers at the department of political science in Göteborg. According to the authors, the most evident examples of a deficient lack of value neutrality are to be found in "value homogenous"

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<sup>2</sup> Later on, I have realised that the formulation emanates from O R Holsti. (Holme and Solvang 1997: 87)

research milieus (Esaiasson et al. 2003: 24). It is not unreasonable to assume that Gender Studies is seen as such a milieu.

In *Liberating Method – Feminism and Social Research*, Marjorie L. DeVault claims that “feminist methods” are often understood in terms of a “how-to-do”-manual. Feminist methodologists have generally resisted this “cookbook” or “how-to conception” (DeVault 1999: 21). She refers to Sandra Harding, and claims that it is not feminist researchers’ methods, but their methodology, or thoughts on methods, that are important. For the student in Gender Studies, this is a useful clue *only* if you have access to knowledge on existing methods and how they are carried through. If you have, for instance, read *Metodpraktikan* and practised some of its methods, Harding’s criticism of the concept of objectivity receives meaning and substance. Likewise, you will be able to understand discussions of feminist standpoint theories or of situated knowledge and privileged positioning. With no previous experiences of scientific methods these epistemological discussions will be difficult to relate to and hard to handle in the practical work of your project.

### **Purpose and planning of my project**

This was my starting-point when I designed my MA essay on advanced level II<sup>3</sup> in Gender Studies (Alnebratt 2005). My purpose was to examine what Gender Studies students actually do in their degree essays at advanced level I<sup>4</sup>. I was interested in their choice of subject foci and how they dealt with methodological issues in theory as well as in practice. My questions were simple:

- Which subjects are chosen?
- How can the subject topics be described?
- Which methods are used?
- In what way do the methods chosen rely on methodology discussions in Gender Studies?

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<sup>3</sup> 90-120 ECTS

<sup>4</sup> 60-90 ECTS

At the time, courses at advanced level I in Gender Studies could be studied at ten universities in Sweden. Since I wanted to do an exhaustive study, I contacted these departments for copies of their essays from the last course given. Approximately, I would say that I have been able to scrutinise at least seventy percent of all essays<sup>5</sup>. It was not my purpose to “evaluate” the essays I studied. I did not want to discuss whether or not the methods used were relevant or how well the students succeed with their projects. My idea was to investigate the incidence of methods and subject foci to be able to discuss what Gender Studies meant to these students. To be able to answer the last question, I had to scrutinise the curricula on methodology taught in basic education in Gender Studies in Sweden.

In my dissertation project it is my intention to broaden and enter more deeply into this field by scrutinising interdisciplinary Gender Studies research in Sweden during recent years. So far, my very simple questions are: “What is Gender Studies today actually about?” and “How is it done?” It is by describing, analysing and discussing the variations within the field and how multifaceted it is that we can strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of our field. However, in this limited investigation of student essays I wish to provide an image – a cross-section – of Gender Studies done at the undergraduate level.

### **What do the students read?**

Of course the literature used in the courses is multifaceted and impossible to present in its total range. Here I just want to give a quick picture of some important and frequently used examples. In my review of the curricula that students study in the undergraduate courses on methods, it was clear that most of what was presented was on qualitative research. The students in Uppsala have the opportunity to reflect on methodological choices, while they read Ann Oakley. In an article in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, “Science, Gender and Women’s Liberation: An Argument Against Postmodernism,” (1998: 133-146) Oakley tries to capture some of the reasons for the preference of qualitative research methods in Gender Studies. According to her, the second wave feminists inherited and reacted to a

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<sup>5</sup> Six of the departments responded positively, which gave me an empirical material containing twenty-seven essays. I know that one of the departments that had problems with my request had only one essay finished from their last course.

science that paid no attention to women as a social group; a science characterised by logical positivism with a focus on quantification, objectivity and control. Oakley argues that the opposition between feminism and science goes far back and involves the dialectical relations between natural and social sciences. Furthermore, it involves the discussion about the status of knowledge and separate methodological traditions. She ends her brief historical exposé by saying: “Science thus acquired its modern character as a major cultural agent in transmitting ‘oppressive fictions’ about women’s bodies and minds.” (Oakley 1998: 134)

In Lund, the students also read Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook. Their book *Beyond Methodology – Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (1991), is an anthology in which some of the names on reading lists of the other departments can be found. The students in Uppsala and Göteborg also study Patricia Hill Collins. Johanna Esseveld, who contributes to the Fonow and Cook anthology, is also studied in Umeå. In Malmö, Hesse-Biber & Yasier’s *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* is used. This book, as well as *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* by Linda Nicholson (ed), used in Uppsala, Lund, Karlstad, and Sandra Harding (ed) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, used in Göteborg, are all examples of anthologies with several authors. In these books, the student will examine epistemological issues and meet stand-point theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, bell hooks, Alison Jaggar and Maria Mies, to mention a few.

Fonow and Cook devote their studies to feminist epistemology and methodology. In various examinations they show how feminist research in different disciplines often contains a critique of how the discipline in question has studied women and gender relations. Among other topics, they have scrutinised publications on sociological research during a period of nine years. They claim to have “identified several underlying assumptions in the literature on feminist methods” (Fonow and Cook 1991: 2). Some of these underlying assumptions are grouped into four points, which they argue, are significant for feminist research. These points are reflexivity, action orientation, an attention to the affective components of the research, and finally, something they call “use of the situation-at-hand” (Fonow and Cook 1991: 2).

The most frequently occurring book in method courses in Gender Studies in Sweden is *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992) by Shulamit Reinharz. It is an overview of methods used by feminist researchers and how they use them. The span is wide and goes from qualitative methods like oral history and ethnographic research to survey studies and psychological experiments. In the concluding chapter, Reinharz summarises feminist research

in ten points. She states that feminism is a perspective, not a method, and that feminist research includes an ongoing criticism of non-feminist research. The methods feminist researchers use are not different from those used by other researchers, but they are used in a perspective based on feminist theory. Furthermore, they are distinguished by an ethical view on the relation between the researcher and the research object (Reinharz 1991: 240).

The most striking insight gained by this short review is that most of the literature is rather old. In contemporary feminist theory several different approaches can be found. Post-colonial and race-inflected feminist approaches, which argue for the necessity of intersectional analyses, are important to acknowledge. Critical men's studies focussing on hegemonic masculinities and queer theoretical criticism on heteronormativity are other important perspectives. In opposition to Reinharz' understanding of feminist research as a (*one*) perspective, it is today more adequate to see Gender Studies as a field of education and research allowing several perspectives and different approaches; perspectives and approaches combined with different research methods depending on the topics being studied. One example is the recent book *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed, which shows how old approaches and methods can be combined with newer perspectives.

### **Subject foci in the essays**

What did I then find? My first reaction was that Reinharz' conclusion that "[f]eminist research is amoeba like; it goes everywhere, in every direction" (Reinharz 1992: 243) was a good description. Everything from handicraft to the nerd, Sámi writers, and the issue of order of succession to the throne were of interest to the students. However, the answer to the question on subject foci is that the students are mainly interested in the question of gender construction and understandings of the same and that this is often scrutinised in every-day-situations. Women's life conditions, equality work and issues related more to ideology/politics are also of interest to the students. On a closer look some obvious categories occur.

The most frequent area of interest is the construction of gender in various milieus and contexts. In fifteen out of twenty-seven essays analysed, this was the main issue. In this category I include essays scrutinising midwives' views on parenthood and their

understandings of gender relations, gender constructions in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the possibilities for the butch to function as a male role model for children. All of these topics have a primary interest in analysing how masculinity, femininity and gender are constructed, reproduced and understood in different arenas.

Four essays deal with equality work in one way or other. One investigates conditions for gender equality workers in a certain organisation, another the responsibility of the management in a school, one essay deals with evaluations of equality work at university level and the last one scrutinises understandings of sexual harassment by leaders and their responsibility to prevent such harassment.

The third category can be characterised as those essays with an interest in women, their life conditions and activities. Here we recognise essays with themes like the situation for refugee women from Iran, young female handicraft workers' view on their crafts, women's psychological health problems in relation to working life and family life, and a study of the relationship between gender patterns in families and women's participating in civic society in Niassa, Mozambique.

Finally, we have four remaining essays. In two of them there is an ambition to "re-read" female authors, with a purpose to visualise their ideas and significance. Another one questions discrimination on the basis of sex in commercials as a political phenomenon. The last one, which does not automatically fit into a category, is about the debate in Sweden on the issue of female succession to the throne. It could be argued that these four essays in different ways touch political/ideological issues.

It is obvious that the students pay great attention to how gender is constructed and can be understood. In most of the essays there is a wish to deconstruct various masculinities and femininities, as well as the preconditions for specific groups. Questioning and visualising the impact of heteronormativity on phenomena in the society is another frequent theme. These themes in the essays are even more obvious when we look into the theoretical frameworks used.

## Students use of methods

In relation to methods, firstly it can be stated that all of the essays examined had a qualitative approach. Interviewing is the most common way to gain information and empirical material. In addition, different kinds of textual material are examined, fiction as well as interview books, information material, protocols from the government and equality plans, to mention but a few. But what the students actually do in his or her project is one thing, what they call their methods is something else. While a piece of critical work can be termed an interview investigation, it can also be called a discourse analysis. The difference between these two methods in the essay is not always that clear. To be able to scrutinise this, deeper qualitative analysis is required. Four of the essays had no defined method at all. A closer look at them might give a clue, I thought, even to what the other students with more or less vague descriptions of methods, actually where doing. A closer analysis did indeed show a certain pattern. Let me give some quotes on methods from the essays<sup>6</sup>:

*Ex 1. More developed, this means that I will study if and how the choices which the four analysed characters depend on or are linked to intersectional structures.*

*Ex 2. I used Berit Ås' "ruling techniques" to be able to understand the methods used by the opponents to the reform, when they tried to diminish the struggle for female succession to the throne, [...].*

What I found was a number of essays in which the authors did not mention their methods. On a closer examination of these essays, I found a more or less obvious "perspective" based on feminist theory, which was the basic framework for the analysis. To their empirical material – texts or transcribed interviews – a framework of feminist theory was applied.

When I tried this methodical thinking in relation to the other essays, which I had already ordered in other method categories, about twenty of them can fit into this method of analysis. I am aware that "about twenty" is a vague number, but since there is a significant

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<sup>6</sup> With my translation



element of interpretation, it is hard to be more precise.<sup>7</sup> A good example of this is an essay, in which a methodically adequate film analysis is performed, but at the same time the author underlines:

*... I have tried to practice several species of readings on the material, [...] tainted by feminist critique and with one eye constantly open to practices of power.*

In this essay, there is one section in which the feminist theories, which form the basic framework for the above-mentioned readings, are presented. In seven other essays a similar kind of thinking is expressed. In quite a few of the remaining essays this is *de facto* what is done, even if it is not explicitly expressed.

When I analysed these essays and compared them to essays with a more explicit account of methods, I found a more or less obvious “perspective” pertaining to most essays. One could argue that the application of feminist theory to various empirical data is the most common method used. However, few students seem to be aware of what they actually do, at least they seem to have no language to talk about it.

It is striking how few references the students have in their methods chapters. In nine out of twenty-seven essays there are no references at all. In the rest of the essays there are some references, mostly on interview techniques or on reflections on the craft of research. A significant number of the methods chapters are more or less working descriptions – the student describes what she/he has done. This does not necessarily say anything about the quality of those essays, but it could be a sign of an uncertainty about their own methodical skill. To me it is obvious that a number of the students have no language that enabled discussions about methods. This may raise problems when it comes to the legitimacy of the work being done.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, I had problems with my own essay, which was part of the material. Did I use this method? I described my method as a textual analysis, while what I actually did was to read the author Ellen Key through what I called a Key discourse. This discourse was captured by a study of recent feminist Key research.

### **Feminist theory and other characteristic features**

One of the central “demands” in feminist methodological discourse is about the connection to feminist theory. In most of the essays scrutinised there is a theory chapter, in which earlier research and theory connected to the subject is described and discussed. Five out of twenty-seven essays have, what I call, a weak theory discussion. By weak, I mean less than three references. Of course, the number of quoted authors does not necessarily say anything about the quality. In an essay that deals with R W Connell's theory on masculinity, it may not be necessary to have many references. On the other hand, if an essay should be considered to have a strong theoretical basis it must “use” earlier research and discuss it in relation to its own subject. At least eleven essays can be considered to have such a strong theoretical basis. Hence, they have references to a number of authors and the theory chapters are extensive and well argued. This can also, to a lesser extent, be said about the remaining eleven essays.

Most of the theorists referenced in the essays are Swedish authors. Yvonne Hirdman is the most frequent reference; other frequent names are Lena Gemzöe, Maud Eduards, Maria Wendt Höjer and Anna Wahl. Something that obviously interests the students is queer theory. In seven of the essays this theoretical field is discussed, with references to Judith Butler and Tiina Rosenberg, often in combination. In two essays the students also have references to Don Kulick.

In nine essays, theories of masculinity are discussed. Swedish as well as international research is quoted. Most common is R W Connell, whose theories occur in seven essays. Swedish authors can also be mentioned such as Bo Nilsson and Tomas Johansson. Female masculinity is also discussed. In two essays there are references to Judith Halberstam.

When it comes to feminist theory, my examination gives reason to claim that students in Gender Studies are well aware of the theoretical discussions in feminist research. In the essays that I have scrutinised, there is a clearly stated gender perspective, by which I mean that the empirical material is tested or analysed with feminist theory. In contrary to what is argued in *Metodpraktikan*, the students seem to be well aware that they raise different questions. The reliance on feminist theory was one of the basic demands I found in feminist methodology curricula taught in courses in Sweden.

Other “demands” examined relate to reflexivity and action-orientation. In almost all essays the students, in one way or another, reflect on their own research position. In those essays where interviews were conducted, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee was discussed. A lot of the essays examined contain suggestions for change of policies or are based on a will to visualise gender construction in various contexts.

### **Gender Studies on its own<sup>8</sup>**

In the autumn of 2005, more than eight hundred students applied to the first level course of Gender Studies at Göteborg University. The increasing numbers of applicants reflected the increased interest in the society for feminism and gender equality, but we do not know what these students expect from their studies. For some of them, this is their first meeting with the University. For others, Gender Studies is a complement or a way to deepen earlier studies. Some of them may want to become “better” feminists, while others are looking for a future as gender equality experts in the public sector. A few of them, finally, choose Gender Studies as their main subject with their mind set on research.

Institutionalisation and/or disciplination of Gender Studies are ongoing processes. Today one can take a PhD in (inter) disciplinary Gender Studies and at the same time, gender perspectives are more or less integrated into traditional disciplines. At a department of Gender Studies the senior researchers and the teachers are usually trained in other departments like literature, philosophy or sociology. This brings a plurality of views, directions and practices. What unites them is often their criticism of traditional scholarship, their feminist standpoints and/or common research interests. For students this means that they will have opportunities to approach society and research from various angles. But, as I have shown in this article, it may cause problems for them when they are supposed to work on their own projects. If method courses focus more on epistemology and methodology than on practical skills it can be problematic.

When Shulamit Reinharz provides an overview of methods used by feminist researchers she states, among other things, that feminism is a perspective, not a method and that feminist research contains an ongoing criticism of non-feminist research. Methods used

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<sup>8</sup> The heading refers to the book *Women's Studies on its own*, ed Robyn Wiegman (2002).

by feminist researchers are not different from those used by others researchers, but they are adopted from a perspective based on feminist theories. Another difference is the view of the researcher, the object and the relation between them (Reinharz 1992: 240). According to Reinharz, feminist research was, when she wrote her book, in a time of “Feminist Culture Building, or Feminist Renaissance, and that we will be self-correcting” (Reinharz 1992: 269)

Obviously, this is not a new discussion. There is an ongoing tension regarding issues related to methods and methodology in the history of modern Gender Studies. When questions such as, “What is typical for this field?” are raised, different researchers, representing different scientific schools, give different answers. For some it is the deployed method that matters. This includes the ongoing feminist critique of traditional disciplines and could be argued to be common among researchers from interpreting traditions. For others, this being the most typical for feminist research and Gender Studies, is the object of research or, in other words, that “the subject matters”. One approach does not have to exclude the other one. Of course, theories, methodologies and methods are intrinsic to each other. The choice of method depends on material, theoretical adherence and so on. Together, material, theories used and methods affect each other and produce the end result.

Plurality in methods used is a sign for research in this field. Hence, the students at undergraduate level in Women Studies should have the opportunity for training in a number of methods. But, if undergraduate courses do not provide the students with proper training in methods they will not be able to use them. As one in the first generation of PhD-students in Gender Studies in Sweden, I think it is important to raise the question posed at the beginning of this article: What are our unique skills, trained as we are in such an inter- and multidisciplinary field?

### **Reflections on what can be done**

For the on-going development of Gender Studies, and to be able to answer to demands and expectations from all the students, I argue for further studies and discussions on issues that emerged in my study. This is important, not least to enable us to face and challenge scepticism and sometimes even explicit criticism of our area of research.

I argue that there is a lot more to ask for when it comes to methodological awareness and methodical skills. In several of the essays examined there is a significant uncertainty relating to methods and methodological matters. In comparison to the theoretical awareness, methodological references are almost absent in most of the essays. Even references to more methodical issues rarely occur. In my opinion, after having done this study and as a PhD-student in Gender Studies, I am positive that we need further studies on what we actually do in our research projects. Perhaps, Gender Studies departments should reconsider what is taught in their method courses? What can be done to help and encourage the students to handle and use the theoretical knowledge they have gained?

It is obvious that the students are more aware of Gender Studies theory than of methods. With more methodical awareness we could be clearer and more specific about how we use these theories and strengthen the claims we make. By this I do not demand a certain set of methods – approved for Gender Studies – on the contrary! I would like to see a broader spectrum of methods used. I agree with those who say that the day Gender Studies becomes a discipline with rigid rules on methods and a closed canon it will lose much of its dynamic (Holm 2006: 19ff). But there is no contradiction in that and, on the other hand, a wish for better methodical training at undergraduate level. It is striking how the significant element of methodological literature in the courses has almost no correlation to how the students use it in their projects. Perhaps, the distance between abstract discussions and the practical craft you do when you write an essay is too far. And maybe it is in the intersection between these two that the need for student guidance is most required.

With teachers from such various backgrounds, it would not be that hard to provide the students with a veritable toolbox in methods. Just by using their own experience as researchers, the teachers could be both excellent tutors and inspirers for the students. By introducing and showing how to use different methods to scrutinize a common subject, the method courses, at an interdisciplinary department, have an opportunity to be a place for concrete and interesting discussions on what can be gained in using one method and what you lose with another. By introducing methodical training in theoretical courses, even more could be won. What I ask for is something that could be called the methods of “perspectivism”; a conceptual framework for how we use feminist theory to understand and interpret and an ongoing practical training in how to do it.

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Harding, Sandra and Kathryn Norberg (2005) 'New Feminist approaches to Social Science Methodologies.' In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 30 no. 4.

Good research methods are supposed to be culture free, value free. But feminist scholars realised that this standard had not been and could not be met in practice. In their opinion it's not only unachievable but is also as a matter of fact, undesirable. The (controversial) feminist researchers' notion that research itself can contribute to producing a liberatory, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group, was the subject of a special issue of *Signs*, edited by Sandra Harding and Kathryn Norberg.

Feminist theory includes in particular concerns about how to understand the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other structural features of societies. But feminist scholars also understand the impossibility of accurate interpretation, translation, and representation among radically different cultures. The notion that gender patterns are socially constructed and thus closely knit to knowledge and power makes it complex. This is, furthermore, the major theme of the ten articles in this issue of *Signs*. More precisely, they are occupied with on the one hand the issue of power in methodology, and on the other power between researchers and the researched.

If participation is a form of power, then power cannot be avoided in doing research, realizes Mike Kesby in his article. Here, Kesby gives a good example of the impact of power on feminist methodology in the search for a more reciprocal exchange between participation and post structuralism. The difficulty lies in the notion that power is not concentrated and 'not inherent within powerful subjects but is dispersed throughout the complex networks of discourse, practises, and relationships that position subjects as powerful that justify and facilitate their authority in relation to others' (Clegg, 1989, 207). In his article, Kesby reformulates the conception of empowerment as a reaction to some recent pointed criticism of participatory action research, in which the issue of power is not possible to avoid. So, he states, in return: '...I suggest that it must be worked with'.

From another perspective, Christine Halse and Anne Honey reflect on some of the sticky moral questions as they work to transform a research proposal into an application for an ethics committee approval. Seeing that researchers can be placed in an awkward moral

space between compliance and defiance, legal and transgressive action, instrumentality and sensibility to others, they suggest an ongoing collaborative process shaped by dialogue and responsive relationships that are guided by principles of justice.

In 1991, Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook published one of the most widely used feminist methodology texts, *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Now, they reflect on changes since that collection was published, in an article that is worthwhile reading in this special issue of *Signs*.

The laborious attempt to eliminate power differences between the researcher and the researched, furthermore, is described by Shahnaz Kahn. She reflects on her double identity, as being a Pakistani Canadian and realizes that hierarchies among women frequently are dismissed. Her ambivalent position makes her an outsider: 'I am an outsider to marginalized feminist debates in Canada because I am not white, and in Pakistan because I do not live there.' Some Pakistani argue that Kahn is not one of them because she is not sharing their risk. As a native informant, furthermore, she may not be authentic enough to be taken seriously. Kahn reacts to this by situating herself within a multilayered process, able to identify the contradictory and contested location from which she informs the west. That position gave her a possibility to nuance the stereotype of third-world woman, often presented as oppressed and voiceless. Kahn started an empowerment group with fourteen women in prison in which she gathered data for her research, simultaneously as her work could offer some benefits for the women. The participation of these veiled women convinced her that the conventional views regarding this group had to be rethought.

Moreover, the intersections between power relations between men and women and power relations between researcher and the researched, are explored in this special issue of *Signs*, by Sabine Grenz in her interview study of clients of prostitutes. Her study aims to unravel the secrecy around that surrounds these men and to investigate the ways in which masculine identity is discursively reproduced through commercial sex. In addition, her article also gives a bright example of how the power relation between researcher and researched may be reversed. In her study, all participants were white men and native Germans, some of them asking her if she would be able to tolerate it if he masturbated during the interview. Or: 'May I also show you my penis then?' Another man called for a 'little punishment' as a reward for the interview. 'However', Grenz concludes 'these requests also show that men feel they are allowed to ask for such favours, which again marks their position of power.'

Lois Presser reports a similar negotiation process, studying violent criminals. In his article, Presser demonstrates a systematic investigation of how relations of power between interviewer and participant may become part of the interview data. ‘The researcher’s goal’, he writes, ‘is not to emancipate the authentic story of the narrator – none exists – but rather to expose, as much as she can, of the relations that influence the construction of the story that is told.’

The standard of culture and value free research could not be met in practice. According to feminist scholars it is likewise undesirable. A fruitful (and therefore necessary) example of participatory feminist research is described by Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp in their study of drag queens. . ‘[t]he experience also led us to reflect on the complex gender and sexual dynamics at play in such a project.’ The contradiction they encountered proved to be productive for their thinking about how the drag queens play with and deconstruct gender and sexual categories in their performances and the way this makes gender and sexual fluidity oppression visible ‘

The research projects in this issue deal with specific research problems in particular social surroundings. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to apply these careful ‘solutions’ to the readers own research situation. In addition, the goal of this volume is to be useful for the scholars in their own search for effective and progressive ways of thinking about and practising feminist social research. And as such, this is an inspiring and powerful start, thinking about the definition and the formulation of how to do good social research.

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Wiegman, R. (2002) *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 502 pp. ISBN 0-8223-2950-6.

The institutionalization of Women's Studies within the academy has provided scholars and activists with a productive space, however fractured, in theorizing the possibilities and limits of a field steeped in interdisciplinarity. Editor Robyn Wiegman, along with twenty eight contributors to *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, take to task assessing the ways in which the field of Women's Studies has evolved over the past 30 odd years while reflecting upon its future in producing feminist knowledge, despite, or perhaps in light of the manifold differences that exist in writing/theorizing "woman."

Many ideas from this collection stem from a series of informal discussions in which Wiegman and fellow colleagues exchanged both their hopes and frustrations with the "historic project" of Women's Studies (Wiegman 2002: 2). Divided into four sections: "Histories of the Present," "Institutional Pedagogies," "The Shadow of Capital" and "Critical Classrooms," this volume proffers a cartographic sketch, or what Wiegman calls a "positive political grammar", in accounting for the ways in which feminist scholars configure knowledge, organize within academic institutions, respond to corporatized campus culture, and develop pedagogical strategies. Doubling as both a historical primer and theoretical atlas, *Women's Studies on Its Own* provides academics in general and feminist scholars in particular with a valuable resource in thinking through the intellectual possibilities of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Apropos to the various debates and theoretical contentions that have defined the field of Women's Studies,<sup>1</sup> this collection presents divergent views on the project of academic feminism as it emerges vis-à-vis institutions in the United States, Canada, and Australia. In

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<sup>1</sup> Academic feminists have, in recent years, been divided over where to "house" feminist scholarship. To this point, Brown's essay, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," provocatively argues against stand-alone Women's Studies programs and departments, citing the intellectual and theoretical limitations of a field too often mired in identity politics. She thus concludes that feminist knowledge production has greater critical purchase within traditional disciplines.

addition to its exploration of the ways in which Women's Studies differs from its more *disciplined* counterparts, so too do the contributors take analytic stock of how interdisciplinarity promotes, stifles, and at times stalls feminist scholarship from developing more nuanced theoretical languages of intelligibility. How, for example, can Women's Studies cultivate both a breadth and depth of knowledge that does not mimic disciplinary moves toward canonization? Though the strength of interdisciplinarity rests in its flexibility and creativity, one wonders if such flexibility simultaneously arouses a kind of institutional displacement or what Rachel Lee describes as the "seduction of non-territoriality," which to her mind proves more paralyzing than productive (Lee 95).

On a different though equally significant note, Dever, Cuthbert, and Pollak explore the ways in which Women's Studies degrees might be translated into vocational skills (Dever, Cuthbert, and Pollak 316). The authors point toward the confusion that exists when individuals outside the academy, particularly potential employers, have little if any knowledge about what one *does* with a Women's Studies degree. As evidenced by the aforementioned and seemingly disparate examples, *Women's Studies on Its Own* reads more like a theoretic web of interconnected ideas and points of departure than a seamless anthology of like-minded essays.

In an effort to "trace the difference that resides in the present and to judge that difference in relation to the institutional project of academic feminism," (Wiegman 2002: 3), *Women's Studies on Its Own* explores questions ranging from the abstractly theoretical to the routinely practical. Points of critical inquiry include but are not limited to:

- What interdisciplinary practices might foster a more dynamic relationship between political activism and feminist knowledge production? (Zimmerman 189)
- How might feminist practitioners better engage with knowledge produced at the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality? (Lee 85)
- Is departmentalization the most efficacious way with which to secure tenure faculty lines? (Warhol 225)
- In what ways are feminist practitioners responding to the increasing corporatization of the academy on the one hand and the increasing

marginalization of adjunct Women's Studies faculty on the other? (Subbaraman 259)

- What pedagogical strategies and tactics prove useful in challenging asymmetrical dynamics of power and “curricular remembering and forgetting?” (Moallem 369)

It seems interesting to note that in the same moment that Women's Studies departments and programs in the United States have become more securely entrenched within the academic establishment, however temporarily, concerns have mounted as to whether the current disciplinary configurations of feminist knowledge reflect the field's earlier aims; namely to serve as the “academic arm of the women's movement” (Zimmerman 184). Without waxing too nostalgic about the days in which academic feminism was, or at least gave, the appearance of being inextricably connected to political activism, this collection nevertheless explores the current relationship between theory and praxis, and why, as Sneja Gunew finds, such binarized distinctions between *thinking* and *doing* remain unique to US academic feminism.

While *Women's Studies On Its Own* succeeds in critically accounting for the theoretical inconsistencies and institutional limitations of producing feminist knowledge in an increasingly corporatized academic landscape, there nevertheless appears to be an underwhelming exploration of how globalization and the transnational flow of ideas and bodies have contributed to how we think about and theorize the field(s) of Women's Studies. With the exception of Sneja Gunew's piece, “Feminist Cultural Literacy: Translating Differences, Cannibal Options,” and Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal's chapter, “Transnational Practices and Interdisciplinary Feminist Scholarship: Refiguring Women and Gender Studies,” this volume remains particularly specific to North American feminism(s) in general and American Women's Studies departments and programs in particular.

To this point, Sneja Gunew draws upon Braidotti's notion of feminist knowledge as “situated practice,” and argues that newfound feminist collaborations across the globe are necessary in order to “dispel the prevailing notion that North American feminism is a homogenous colonizing force” (Gunew 57). Rather than promoting a revamped version of global sisterhood<sup>2</sup>, however, feminist scholars might instead invest in what Kaplan and Grewal's refer to as “transnational feminist practices” in charting the movement of feminist

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<sup>2</sup> See Robin Morgan, ed. 1984. *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. New York: Anchor Press.

subjectivities, policies and practices between and across institutions and borders (Kaplan and Grewal 7).

Despite its particular focus on the institutionalization, departmentalization, and professionalization of Women's Studies within the North American academic landscape, *Women's Studies on Its Own* nevertheless provides students, researchers, and activists with a theoretically engaging and programmatically useful guide to one of the academy's more dynamic fields of study.

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Martin, J. R. (2000) *Coming of Age in Academe - Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy*. Routledge.

Jane Roland Martin's book *Coming of Age in Academe - Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy* from 2000 revisits academe and its changes due to the emergence of Women's Studies. In the writings of Women's Studies' history Martin emphasises women's lives and socially ascribed tasks as the point of departure for the whole discipline of Women's Studies, a perspective that is now out of focus for feminists in academe according to Martin. The book is written in an easy manner, taking the reader by the hand to join Martin on her excursions through the academic field. To make sense of Martin's first priority, her point of departure and motor of argumentation, one has to start with the book's conclusion. There we are told about the television documentary on the US-American suffrage movement that inspired her to make a comparison between the outrageousness the suffragettes represented in their own time – and the view on women's right to vote as something completely natural in our time. Change is possible, this is Martin's conclusion. But it is not for free and it takes a pro-active attitude to make change possible.

Martin starts her excursions questioning the well-spread assumption that women have achieved equality in academe. To make change happens, she argues, we have to acknowledge that women still have problems entering, working and being successful in academe. Furthermore, women live in divided worlds entering the university described as an environment that neglects the outside world. Women and feminist scholars must change the academe from within, rejecting the distanced approach towards the world that men in the university have developed and maintained in academic culture. Coming from the philosophy of education Martin analyses concepts taken from the discussion on women's education from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* and onwards. In Woolf's spirit she does not only see education as a matter of individual development but as a tool for changing social reality. The book is a passionate vindication of education as the main path to

equality between men and women. One may also see it as a part of a critique against the fundamentally conservative education-system loosely labelled “feminist pedagogy” which challenges traditional approaches to education both in elementary school and at universities. This critique seems to coincide with the fact many of the founders and pioneers of women’s studies now have reached positions in academe that allow them to engage in a new feminist approach to education as a system but also in the everyday situations of meeting students and junior researchers.

Martin uses an analogy between immigrants coming to America and women entering the academic field. The question of assimilation and changes are at the centre of the discussion and Martin is sketching a rather dark picture of women scholars in today’s universities. Education and its integrated curricula for men and women has developed a new form of gender tracking, a division of educational paths and professions between men and women. According to Martin this situation has put women in a crisis much like the one immigrants experience coming to an environment where neither the old customs nor the new ones are of any use or comfort. Martin traces the crisis for women back to the loss of traditional gendered divisions of labor. “The brain drain” as understood by Martin is an overall loss of “the 3 Cs”; care, concern, connection, qualities that Martin does not see in academic practice or class rooms. She argues that the 3Cs are what complete knowledge production and make it mean something outside of the university. But how does she track down the loss of care, concern and connection? Using yet another analogy, that of the adolescent girl who is losing her self esteem and “herself”, Martin traces the loss of the 3Cs to the “coming of age”, a stage in the development of Women’s Studies characterised by self-criticism and self-awareness. This should lead to an unjust hostility among women scholars. Both within and outside of women’s studies environments Martin sees women turning to each other with harsh criticism in a manner that male colleagues would not. One example is the lively debate on power structures intersecting with gender, such as class, race and sexual orientation, but instead of seeing this as a necessary and vital development of gender studies Martin describes it as we “accuse women scholars of racism, classism, and heterosexism” (p. 68). This is all, to a certain extent, true. Of course one can see the development of an intersectionality perspective in this manner. But, one may ask, does not the criticism towards an altogether women-oriented Women’s Studies discipline have any legitimacy? On this Martin does not touch, and that’s the book’s weakness. Instead of taking up the complex issue

of power relations between women Martin insist on the singleness of women's experiences, arguing that women have the most to gain from each other and to keep up practices associated with traditional femininity.

The use of a discipline specific language, unspeakable and incomprehensible for anyone outside of the subject area is her main example of how women scholars distance themselves and their work from other women's everyday life. What Martin calls the education-gender system rewards women scholars who are able to adjust to the male dominated academic field. This process also includes the use of language. However, Martin argues, this creates a split and a loss in women, the loss of contact with everyday life and the concrete problems that women face.

Martin's own use of language is often informal. She tends to refer to women outside of academe as our mothers, sisters, half-sisters, aunts and female cousins. This may seem like an innocent stylistic mode - or in a more radical interpretation - as a way to corrupt and change the academic language characterized, in Martin's opinion, by an aerial distanced and exclusion. However, I am not sure if that intimization of the use of language is the right way to go. Even if one avoids the traps of essentialism, universalization of women's experiences and the construction of a non-conflictual women's togetherness based on consensus seldom helps when it comes to describing the actual problems of women - whether outside or inside of academe.

The same problem occurs in Martin's use of empirical material. Since she is looking for the real situation of girls and women at colleges and universities she is using a large number of reports and surveys but also her own observations and experiences both as a student, a teacher and a professor. Her material, even when it is interesting and/or upsetting is not systematized geographically or historically. This also gives the impression that the university and the elementary school is organized in the same way all over the world, inhabits the same problems and offers the same - insufficient - solutions. At least Martin should comment on the problems of comparison between such diverse empirical materials as autobiographical texts, such as Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory*, fiction such as *Pygmalion* and strictly numerical counting, which in the end becomes Martin's main method for proving her point. The quantitative survey of the number of female professors, the number of feminist courses in the universities' curricula and the number of students that can enrol for

these courses; all this is to prove that the battle of the university is far from won and women can still not enter the academe on equal footing.

What is Martin's solution to these problems? In the last section of the book "Actions Great and Small" women's togetherness is once again emphasised. To have coffee together, talk and exchange experiences is a way for feminist and women scholars to keep up close relations to other women and the everyday life and tasks that traditionally are carried out by women. The coffee break should represent both the idea of togetherness but also a resistance against the university's overall demands on its employees to be hard working, career chasing, ambitious and in constant competition with each other. The coffee break should thus offer an alternative way of looking at the world in another perspective, in a small scale. Beyond the coffee breaks, the small scale solution of the isolation of individual women scholars Martin sees women joined together in *Lysistrata*-inspired protests against sexism, harassments and chilly classroom climate for women students and teachers.

On an interesting note, Martin gets her inspiration to this coffee break utopia from Sweden that happens to be my own academic environment – I find it important to include my own opinion. Not so much for her visionary ideas, which are quite refreshing, but for the one-sidedness of her view. She is so obviously turning to a US-American audience, in an almost fairytale telling manner: "In a country far far from here scholars are living in a happy community with no hierarchal problems: professors are having coffee with their student and the administrative staff! They are talking about giving birth, and having domestic problems, just as if they where all equal!" True, the Swedish educational system is characterized by an informal approach to each other, including several coffee breaks and everyday-life issues as part of the conversation. However, this does not in any way mean that the system is free from hierarchical relations. The informal/formal system makes, in the worst case scenario, students and junior researchers dependent on their professors and teachers appreciation – based on personal liking and disliking. However good intentions one may have, I should be very careful calling this an ideal way of dealing with the education-gender system.