

# FEMINISM AND METHODOLOGY

Social Science Issues

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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Feminism and methodology :



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## CONCLUSION

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

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How should the analyses produced by feminist research in the social sciences be justified? In one sense, we do not need to ask this question since every researcher provides evidence that is intended to justify the results of her or his research. However, the kind of evidence presented often would not be acceptable to people who assess men's experiences, values, and judgments as the paradigm of human experience and women's as only an immature, partial, or deviant form of men's. In some respects, the epistemologies assumed in the new analyses of women and gender directly conflict with traditional ones, and they do so in ways that are not always recognized. Therefore, questions about how to justify the analyses do frequently arise. Moreover, in certain respects the feminist epistemologies also directly conflict with each other. These conflicts *between* the feminist justificatory strategies also have been overlooked.

Once we undertake to use women's experience as a resource to generate scientific problems, hypotheses, and evidence, to design research for women, and to place the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject, traditional epistemological assumptions can no longer be made. These agendas have led feminist social scientists to ask questions about who can be a knower (only men?); what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge (only tests against men's experiences and observations?); what kinds of things can be known (can "subjective truths," ones that only women—or only some women—tend to arrive at, count as knowledge?); the nature of objectivity (does it require "point-of-viewlessness"?); the appropriate relationship between the researcher and her/his research subjects (must the researcher be disinterested, dispassionate, and socially invisible to the subject?); what should be the purposes of the pursuit of knowledge (to produce information *for* men?).

Each of the above issues could be the topic of a lengthy discussion. Instead, I want to provide an overview of some important tensions between the feminist analyses of such issues and the traditional theories of knowledge from which these feminists borrow, and between the feminist epistemologies themselves. I shall look at these tensions as they have emerged in response to two problems. First, I outline contrasting attempts to account for

the fact that it is politically value-laden research processes that are producing the more complete and less distorted social analyses. We can see here the tension between "feminist empiricist" and "the feminist standpoint" epistemologies, and between each of these and the traditional theory of knowledge from which it borrows. Then, I turn to examine briefly the tension between both of these epistemologies, on the one hand, and postmodernist skepticisms about just such attempts to tell "true stories"—or at least less false ones—about ourselves and the world around us, on the other hand.<sup>1</sup>

### Can Politicized Inquiry Produce More Complete and Less Distorted Research Results?

A major source of feminist challenge to traditional epistemologies arises from the following problem. Feminism is a political movement for social change. Looked at from the perspective of science's self-understanding, "feminist knowledge," "feminist science," "feminist sociology"—or psychology or economics—should be a contradiction in terms. Scientific knowledge-seeking is supposed to be value-neutral, objective, dispassionate, disinterested, and so forth. It is supposed to be protected from political interests, goals, and desires (such as feminist ones) by the norms of science. In particular, science's "method" is supposed to protect the results of research from the social values of the researchers. And yet it is obvious to all that many claims which clearly have been generated through research guided by feminist concerns, nevertheless appear more plausible (better supported, more reliable, less false, more likely to be confirmed by evidence, etc.) than the beliefs they replace. How can politicized inquiry be increasing the objectivity of inquiry?

#### Feminist Empiricism

The main response to this problem by social researchers has been feminist empiricism. In research reports one frequently finds the argument that the sexist and androcentric claims to which the researcher objects are caused by social biases. Social biases are conceptualized as prejudices that are based on false beliefs (due to superstition, custom, ignorance, or miseducation) and hostile attitudes. These prejudices enter research particularly at the stage when scientific problems are being identified and defined, but they also can appear in the design of research and in the collection and interpretation of data. Feminist empiricists argue that sexist and androcentric biases are eliminable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry; it is "bad science" or "bad sociology," etc, which is responsible for these biases in the results of research.

But how can the scientific community (the sociological one, psychological one, etc.) come to see that more than individual biases are the problem here—that its work *has* been shaped by culture-wide androcentric prejudices? Here is where we can see the importance of movements for social liberation, such as the women's movement. As Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter have pointed out, movements for social liberation "make it possible

for people to see the world in an enlarged perspective because they remove the covers and blinders that obscure knowledge and observation." The women's movement has generated just such possibilities. Furthermore, feminist empiricists often point out that the women's movement creates the opportunity for more women researchers, and for more feminist researchers (male and female), who are more likely than sexist men to notice androcentric biases.

This justificatory strategy is by no means uncontroversial. Nevertheless, it is often thought to be the least threatening of the feminist epistemologies for two reasons. Most importantly, it appears to leave intact much of science's self-understanding of the principles of adequate scientific research as they are taught to students, quoted to Congress, and viewed on television (regardless of whether scientists actually believe them). This justificatory strategy appears to challenge mainly the incomplete way empiricism has been practiced, not the norms of empiricism themselves: mainstream inquiry has not rigorously enough adhered to its own norms. To say this in other words, it is thought that social values and political agendas can raise new issues that enlarge the scope of inquiry and reveal cause for greater care in the conduct of inquiry, but that the logic of explanation and research still conforms to standard empiricist rules.

Moreover, one can appeal to the forces responsible for the origins of modern science itself, as well as to later widely recognized moments of scientific growth, to increase the plausibility of this kind of claim. After all, wasn't it the bourgeois revolution of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries which made it possible for early modern thinkers to see the world in an enlarged perspective? Wasn't it this great social revolution from feudalism to modernism which removed the covers and blinders that obscured earlier knowledge-seeking and observation? Furthermore, wasn't the proletarian revolution of the late nineteenth century responsible for yet one more leap in the objectivity of knowledge claims as it permitted an understanding of the effects of class struggles on social relations? Finally, doesn't the twentieth-century deconstruction of European and American colonialism have obvious positive effects on the growth of scientific knowledge? From these historical perspectives, the contemporary women's revolution is just the most recent of these revolutions, each of which moves us yet closer to the goals of the creators of modern science.

Though feminist empiricism appears in these ways to be consistent with empiricist tendencies, further consideration reveals that the feminist component deeply undercuts the assumptions of traditional empiricism in three ways: feminist empiricism has a radical future.<sup>2</sup> In the first place, feminist empiricism argues that the "context of discovery" is just as important as the "context of justification" for eliminating social biases that contribute to partial and distorted explanations and understandings. Traditional empiricism insists that the social identity of the observer is irrelevant to the "goodness" of the results of research. It is not supposed to make a difference to the explanatory power, objectivity, and so on of the research's results if the researcher or the community of scientists are white or black, Chinese or British, rich or poor in social origin. But feminist empiricism argues that women (or feminists, male and female) as a group are more likely than men (nonfeminists) as a group to produce claims unbiased by androcentrism, and in that sense

objective results of inquiry. It argues that the authors of the favored social theories are not anonymous at all: they are clearly men, and usually men of the dominant classes, races, and cultures. The people who identify and define scientific problems leave their social fingerprints on the problems and their favored solutions to them.

Second, feminist empiricism makes the related claim that scientific method is not effective at eliminating social biases that are as wide-spread as androcentrism. This is especially the case when androcentrism arrives in the inquiry process through the identification and definition of research problems. Traditional empiricism holds that scientific method will eliminate any social biases as a hypothesis goes through its rigorous tests. But feminist empiricism argues that an androcentric picture of nature and social life emerges from the testing by men only of hypotheses generated by what men find problematic in the world around them. The problem here is not only that the hypotheses which would most deeply challenge androcentric beliefs are missing from those alternatives sexists consider when testing their favored hypotheses. It is also that traditional empiricism does not direct researchers to locate themselves in the same critical plane as their subject matters. Consequently, when nonfeminist researchers gather evidence for or against hypotheses, "scientific method"—bereft of such a directive—is impotent to locate and eradicate the androcentrism that shapes the research process.

Finally, feminist empiricists often exhort social scientists to follow the existing research norms more rigorously. On the other hand, they also can be understood to be arguing that it is precisely following these norms that contributes to androcentric research results.<sup>3</sup> The norms themselves have been constructed primarily to produce answers to the kinds of questions men ask about nature and social life and to prevent scrutiny of the way beliefs which are nearly or completely culture-wide in fact cannot be eliminated from the results of research by these norms. A reliable picture of women's worlds and of social relations between the sexes often requires alternative approaches to inquiry that challenge traditional research habits and raise profound questions which are no longer marginalized as deviant.

Thus feminist empiricism intensifies recent tendencies in the philosophy and social studies of science to problematize empiricist epistemological assumptions.<sup>4</sup> There is a tension between the feminist uses of empiricist justificatory strategies and the parental empiricist epistemology. However, empiricism is not the only resource that has been used to justify the intimate relationship between the politics of the women's movement and the new research on women and gender.

### The Feminist Standpoint

A second response to the question about how to justify the results of feminist research is provided by the feminist standpoint theorists. Knowledge is supposed to be based on experience, and the reason the feminist claims can turn out to be scientifically preferable is that they originate in, and are tested against, a more complete and less distorting kind of social experience. Women's experiences, informed by feminist theory, provide a po-

tential grounding for more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's. Thus the standpoint theorists offer a different explanation than do feminist empiricists of how research that is directed by social values and political agendas can nevertheless produce empirically preferable results of research.<sup>5</sup>

This justificatory approach originates in Hegel's insight into the relationship between the master and the slave, and the development of Hegel's perceptions into the "proletarian standpoint" by Marx, Engels, and Lukacs.<sup>6</sup> The argument here is that human activity, or "material life," not only structures but also sets limits on human understanding: what we do shapes and constrains what we can know. As Nancy Hartsock argues, if human activity is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups (such as men and women), "one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse." Men in the ruling classes and races reserve for themselves the right to perform only certain kinds of human activity, assigning the balance to women and men in other subjugated groups. What they assign to others they rationalize as merely natural activity—whether this be manual labor, emotional labor, or reproduction and child care—in contrast to what they regard as the distinctively cultural activity that they reserve for themselves. Of course, their "ruling" activities (in our society, management and administration) could not occur unless others were assigned to perform the social labors they disdain.

For these theorists, knowledge emerges for the oppressed only through the struggles they wage against their oppressors. It is through feminist struggles against male domination that women's experience can be made to yield up a truer (or less false) image of social reality than that available only from the perspective of the social experience of men of the ruling classes and races. Thus a feminist standpoint is not something anyone can have by claiming it, but an achievement. (A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective.) To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see nature and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women's social experiences instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the "ruling gender" experience of men.

Like feminist empiricism, the feminist standpoint reveals key problems in its paternal discourse. Where Marxism suggests that sexism is entirely a consequence of class relations, a problem within only the superstructural social institutions and bourgeois ideology, the feminist version sees sexual relations as at least as causal as economic relations in creating forms of social life and belief. Like feminist empiricism, the standpoint approach takes women and men to be fundamentally sex classes. In contrast to Marxist assumptions, they are not merely or perhaps even primarily members of economic classes, though class, like race and culture, also mediates women's opportunities to gain empirically adequate understandings of nature and social life. Just as feminist empiricism's radical future pointed toward epistemological assumptions that empiricism could not accommodate, so, too, the feminist standpoint's radicalism points toward epistemological assumptions that Marxism cannot contain.

The reader needs to remember at this point that standpoint theorists are not defending

any form of relativism. I argued in the introductory essay that feminist researchers are never proposing that women's and men's characteristic social experiences provide *equal* grounds for reliable knowledge claims. This kind of relativist claim is not being advanced at the level of these epistemologies or justificatory strategies, as I noted earlier. For instance, it is not *equally true* that men's experiences provide the only legitimate origin of scientific problems, as traditional social science has assumed, and also that women's experiences provide a legitimate origin of scientific problems, let alone *the best* origin, as the standpoint theorists argue. For the standpoint theorists, this inequality is due to the fact that the activities of men shape the horizons of their knowledge and support interests in ignorance of the misery generated by the domination of women.

Should one have to choose between feminist empiricism and the feminist standpoint as justificatory strategies? I think not. A justificatory strategy is intended to convince, and it is important to notice that these two are likely to appeal to quite different audiences. Feminist empiricism is useful precisely because it stresses the continuities between traditional justifications of scientific research and feminist ones, as these would be understood by social scientists. In contrast, the feminist standpoint stresses the continuities between the radical upheavals in social understanding created by nineteenth-century class struggles and those created by feminist inquiry. These can be appreciated by political economists and those familiar with the post-Kuhnian histories and sociologies of science. The two epistemologies also appear locked into dialogue with each other. The relationship they have to each other reflects the struggles in mainstream discourses between liberal and Marxist theories of human nature and politics. Perhaps choosing one over the other insures choosing more than feminism should want of those paternal discourses; we are shaped by what we reject as well as by what we accept.

The tensions between the two feminist epistemologies and the tensions within each one suggest their transitional natures. They are *transitional epistemologies*, and there are good reasons to see that as a virtue. Let us see what these are before turning to the second question that has elicited contradictory feminist epistemological responses.

### Transitional Epistemologies

Transitional epistemologies are appropriate for transitional cultures. In one sense or another every modern culture (as opposed to a traditional one) is undergoing changes and thus is transitional. Perhaps every legitimate modern epistemology is transitional. But some moments in history are more transitional than others, and we live in one of those moments.

In transitional cultures, epistemologies and sciences are frequently in tension with each other. We can look back in history and see that scientists have often used justificatory strategies which their own substantive scientific claims have undermined (sometimes inadvertently). For example, the early modern scientists routinely appealed to religious beliefs as a justification for their scientific claims; one important reason their claims should be accepted, they said, was because science "increased piety and learning" as it revealed

in detail the goodness of God's designs. Some may have thought the appeal to religious authority merely an expedient move in light of the history of church censorship of scientific claims. But many scientists apparently believed what they said. Evidently, they didn't notice that their scientific claims were in the process of creating a world in which appeals to God would no longer provide satisfactory explanations of natural phenomena for many people.

We can see the tension between epistemologies and the sciences in the feminist epistemological discussions. We, too, live in a transitional culture: feminism is both a product and a cause of the changes underway. Perhaps sciences and epistemologies should always be in tension with each other: if the grounds for accepting knowledge claims are in perfect fit with the claims advanced, we should worry about what kinds of knowledge are being suppressed, subjugated, sent underground. After all, it is just such a hegemonous science/epistemology to which feminist scholars object. Androcentric biology and social sciences "proved" that women were biologically and socially inferior to men in myriad ways, and androcentric epistemology insisted that only men could be "knowers" and, therefore, legitimately question biological and social science claims. No wonder it had been so difficult to gather support for feminist social analyses.<sup>7</sup>

There are, thus, good reasons to regard the tensions within and between feminist empiricism and the feminist standpoint as valuable ones. Each paternal epistemology implicitly appeals to kinds of authority (of the individual, asocial observer; of the male wage-worker) that inquiry based on women's distinctive experiences is in the process of challenging. But in our transitional world, it is liberal and Marxist understandings that are still regarded as the legitimate ones in the social sciences. If women's authority in matters of knowledge were already recognized, that would be because we no longer needed a distinctively feminist social science. The tensions within the feminist epistemologies show that we are in no different a situation than were the early modern astronomers who appealed in one breath to the "increase in piety and learning" which the use of the telescope could advance. Perhaps the tensions between them point to, but do not themselves provide, directions toward a world in which piety toward traditional androcentric authorities will not be the most plausible way to justify new learning.<sup>8</sup>

### Can There Be Feminist Science?

A second set of epistemological issues has arisen between the feminist empiricists and standpoint theorists, on the one hand, and the feminist critics of Enlightenment assumptions—the feminist postmodernists—on the other hand. The empiricists and standpoint theorists are both attempting to ground accounts of the social world which are less partial and distorted than the prevailing ones. In this sense, they are attempting to produce a feminist science—one that better reflects the world around us than the incomplete and distorting accounts provided by traditional social science. This science would not substitute one gender-loyalty for the others, but, instead, advance the objectivity of science. The



feminist postmodernists raise questions about this epistemological project. Can there be a feminist science, or is any *science* doomed to replicate undesirable—and perhaps even androcentric—ways of being in the world?

There appear to be two at least somewhat distinct origins of skepticism about the kind of epistemological project in which both the feminist empiricists and the standpoint theorists are engaged. One emerges from feminists who participate in the agendas of such otherwise disparate discourses as those of semiotics, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. The other has appeared in the writings of women of color.

The discourses mentioned are all deeply skeptical of universalizing claims for reason, science, language, progress, and the subject/self. Thus both of the feminist epistemological strategies we examined are legitimate targets of such skepticism, since they assume that through reason, observation, and progressive politics, the more authentic "self" produced by feminist struggles can tell "one true story" about "the world": there can be a kind of feminist author of a new "master story," a narrative about social life which feminist inquiry will produce. The critics respond, but "perhaps 'reality' can have 'a' structure only from the falsely universalizing perspective of the master. That is, only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole, can 'reality' appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations."<sup>9</sup>

This kind of criticism points to the way science constructs the fiction of the human mind as a glassy mirror which can reflect a world that is out there and ready-made for reflecting.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, we can detect ("in reality"?) that at any moment in history there are many "subjugated knowledges" that conflict with, and are never reflected in, the dominant stories a culture tells about social life. Moreover, some argue that women are a primary location of these subjugated knowledges—in fact, that the female subject is a "site of differences."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, there can never be a feminist science, sociology, anthropology, or epistemology, but only many stories that different women tell about the different knowledge they have.

A second source of criticism of a unitary feminist perspective implied by the two epistemological strategies emerges from women of color. For instance, Bell Hooks insists that what makes feminism possible is not that women share certain kinds of experiences, for women's experiences of patriarchal oppression differ by race, class, and culture. Instead, feminism names the fact that women can federate around their common resistance to all the different forms of male domination.<sup>12</sup> Thus there could not be "a" feminist standpoint as the generator of true stories about social life. There could, presumably, only be feminist oppositions, and criticisms of false stories. There could not be feminist science, because feminism's opposition to domination stories locates feminism in an antagonistic position toward any attempts to do science—androcentric or not. These strains of postmodernism are richer and more complex than these few paragraphs can reveal. But one can already sense the troubles they create for other feminist epistemologies.

Should feminists be willing to give up the political benefits which can accrue from believing that we are producing a new, less biased, more accurate, social science? Social scientists might well want to respond to the postmodernist critics that we do need to

federate our feminisms in opposition to all of the ways in which domination is enacted and institutionalized. But it is premature for women to be willing to give up what they have never had. Should women—no matter what their race, class, or culture—find it reasonable to give up the desire to know and understand the world from the standpoint of their experiences *for the first time*? As several feminist literary critics have suggested, perhaps only those who have had access to the benefits of the Enlightenment can “give up” those benefits.<sup>13</sup>

There are good reasons to find valuable the tension between these two epistemological positions. We need to think critically about the fundamental impulses of knowledge-seeking, and especially of science, even as we transform them to feminists’ (plural!) ends.

One can easily see that the new feminist analyses unsettle traditional assumptions about knowledge as they challenge familiar beliefs about women, men, and social life. How could it have been otherwise when our ways of knowing are such an important part of our ways of participating in the social world?

#### NOTES

1. An earlier but fuller discussion of these issues can be found in my *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

2. Zillah Eisenstein has made this point about liberal feminism, which is the political theory represented in the epistemological domain by feminist empiricism. See *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981) and Catharine MacKinnon’s discussion of the connections between empiricist “objectivism” and liberalism in the law in her paper in this volume.

3. For example, it is a problem that in most social sciences it is a norm of inquiry to have only male researchers listen to only male informants’ reports of both men’s and women’s beliefs. It is widely recognized that men provide androcentric understandings of both men’s and women’s beliefs and behaviors.

4. Examples of these other recent sociological critiques of empiricist epistemological assumptions can be found in David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); Karin Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981); and Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: the Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979). For critiques of empiricist epistemology owing more direct debts to Marxist perspectives, see, for example, Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*, trans. N. Guterman (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1969); and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

5. If pressed, social scientists who advance empiricist defenses of their feminist research might well admit that drawing on women’s experiences does more than merely enlarge the scope of inquiry. For instance, though Millman and Kanter are reasonably read as advancing an empiricist justification in the opening paragraphs of their essay, in the balance of the paper they appear to be fully aware that the insistent partiality of traditional sociology results in perverse views of women and social life. If feminists were merely arguing that men’s experiences provide only a partial grounding for knowledge claims, then relativism would be an appropriate epistemological stance—contrary to the arguments I made in the introductory essay. Instead, it is precisely because we cannot “add women” and gender to the existing bodies of social scientific belief that relativism is inappropriate. Existing bodies of belief do not just ignore women and gender; they distort our understanding of all of social life by ignoring the ways women and gender shape social life and by advancing false claims about both women and gender.

6. In this volume, the feminist standpoint epistemologies are developed in the papers by Dorothy

Smith and Nancy Hartsock. See the citations in their essays. Other influential papers exploring this epistemology are Jane Flax's "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. S. Harding and M. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel Publishing Co., 1983); Hilary Rose, "Hand, Brain and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1983). See also my "Why Has the Sex-Gender System Become Visible Only Now?," in Harding and Hintikka, *Discovering Reality*. Is MacKinnon also proposing a standpoint epistemology?

7. This is a good place for the reader to test her/his ability to explain why it is that feminist inquiry does not fall into this epistemological trap.

8. See the discussion of the "New Science Movement" in England in W. Van den Daele, "The Social Construction of Science," in *The Social Production of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. E. Mendelsohn, P. Weingart, and R. Whitley (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel Publishing Co., 1977). In chap. 9 of *The Science Question in Feminism*, I point to the interesting similarities between the goals of these 17th-century political and scientific radicals and those of the contemporary women's movement.

9. Jane Flax, "Gender as a Social Problem: In and For Feminist Theory," *American Studies/Amerika Studien*, Journal of the German Association for American Studies (1986): 17. It is interesting that one of the theorists responsible for contributing to the development of the standpoint epistemology here voices skepticism toward it. I think that postmodernist skepticisms of the sort indicated can be found in all of the feminist standpoint theorists—another good reason to see both as transitional epistemologies.

10. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) provides a powerful criticism of the philosophical groundings of these assumptions.

11. Teresa de Lauretis's phrase, in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. T. de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 14.

12. Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

13. See Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," and Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. T. de Lauretis.