Feminist Epistemologies in Action 2012-13

Convenor
Dr Karen Throsby
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Autumn Term
Mondays 3-5pm
Ramphal 0.03/4
Welcome to Feminist Epistemologies in Action

The aim of this module is to provide students with a thorough grounding in the extensive feminist engagement with epistemological and methodological questions, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. This should give you a firm foundation from which not only to conduct your own research, but also to read critically the research of others.

The module begins from the premise that the decisions that researchers take in conducting, analysing and publishing research have political, ethical and theoretical implications. Over the course of the term, we will explore what assumptions and expectations underpin claims to “know”, and ask what relations of power are at work in those claims – not only in the context of gender relations, but also in relation to other axes of power and identity (race, class, sexuality etc). We will be asking whose knowledge counts in any given context, and exploring what feminism has contributed to those debates.

The teaching for the module will take the form of a two hour lecture / seminar on Mondays (3-5pm), starting in Week 2. Some minimal required reading is set for each week, but you are expected to supplement this with self-directed reading drawn from the module reading list, other modules you are taking, and your own research-led reading. In addition, I will also be inviting some researchers to come and talk with us about their own experiences of managing some of the dilemmas that we will be discussing. The module works best if everyone comes well-prepared and ready to talk about what they’ve read, problems they’ve encountered, and questions that they want to discuss and debate. There are very few right and wrong answers in this area, but plenty of puzzles and contradictions, so please come ready to discuss and debate.

I’m looking forward to working with you all on this module.

Best regards
Karen
Module aims
1. To provide students with a critical understanding of a range of feminist ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical perspectives and debates;
2. To enable students to apply that critical understanding to their own reading and research

Learning Outcomes
By the end of the module, the student should be able to:
1. Demonstrate a critical understanding of a wide range of feminist ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical perspectives and debates;
2. Demonstrate an advanced understanding and awareness of the significance of difference and power in the research process;
3. Demonstrate independent research skills and oral and written communication skills;
4. Demonstrate the ability to comprehend and critically analyse the relationships between research theory and practice;
5. Demonstrate an understanding of the implications for research (and those involved in it) of different feminist approaches;
6. Critically evaluate the different approaches, drawing on both theoretical and empirical sources;
7. Undertake and present scholarly work;
8. Construct a coherent argument using appropriate evidence.

Teaching
Teaching for the module will take the form of a two-hour weekly lecture-seminar. Students will be required minimally to have completed the key readings and ideally one other reading (either from the reading list, or identified through independent research), and to come to the sessions prepared to discuss those texts. The sessions will also include some guest speakers who will talk about their own experiences of doing feminist research, and some of the challenges, pleasures and problems that they encountered in the process of data collection, analysis, writing-up and dissemination.

Assessment
The module is assessed through a 5000 word essay.

The deadlines for the submission of assessed essays, as well as penalties for late submission, are as published by the Department of Sociology. The Department’s policies on word length apply to all submitted written work.
Module Outline

Week 2: What difference does feminism make to research?

Week 3: Feminist critiques of science and objectivity

Week 4: Feminist standpoint theory

Week 5: Quantitative research – feminism, gender and research methods

Week 6: Reflexivity

Week 7: Feminist Post-Modernism

Week 8: Taking Difference into Account: Race and Sexuality

Week 9: Feminist Psychoanalysis

Week 10: Post-Feminism
General useful reading

Crowley, H and Himmelweit, S (1992) Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge
Buckingham: OUP


Week 2: What difference does feminism make to research?

In this introductory session, we will be exploring some of the key concepts central to the module, and asking what difference feminism makes to research. We will also use this session to introduce our own research interests and to begin thinking about how this module might contribute to that ongoing work.

Seminar questions

1. What is feminist research?
2. What difference does feminism make to research?
3. Why have epistemological questions been so central to feminist theory and research?
4. What is the relationship between method, methodology and epistemology in feminist research?
5. Is there a feminist way of knowing?

Key readings


Further readings


Stanley, L (1992) *Is there a lesbian epistemology?* Manchester

**Week 3: Feminist Critiques of science and objectivity**

In this session, we will explore the ways in which feminist researchers have engaged with, and critiqued, the knowledge practices of “science” and the claims to objectivity that have characterised those practices. We will discuss the implications of these critiques for feminist research and the claims that can be made for it.

**Seminar questions:**
1. What is the science question in feminism?
2. On what grounds have feminists critiqued science?
3. What can we learn from sex difference research?
4. What are the implications of feminist critiques of science for social scientific research?

**Key readings**


**Further reading**


Fausto-Sterling, A (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* New York: Basicbooks (esp. Ch. 3 Of Gender and Genitals: the use and abuse of the modern intersexual; and Ch.7: Do sex hormones really exist?)


Harding, S (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism* Buckingham: OUP


Tanesini, A (1999) *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies* Oxford: Blackwells (esp: Ch. 3: Feminism and Science; and Ch. 7: Objectivity and Feminism)


**Week 4: Feminist Standpoint**

In this session, we will explore feminist standpoint theory and the ongoing responses to it. We will discuss the appeal of standpoint for conducting feminist research, as well as its limitations, and we will ask what standpoint theory has to offer contemporary feminist researchers.

**Seminar questions**

1. What does it mean to adopt a feminist standpoint?
2. What critiques have been offered of standpoint theory? What possibilities does it provide?
3. What does it mean to value “experience” in research? What challenge does this pose to conventional scientific values?

**Key Readings**


**Further Readings**


Hekman, S (1997) “Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited”. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture* 22 (2) 341-365. (this same issue also includes a series of responses to this paper from Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith, followed by a reply by Susan Hekman).


Tanesini, A (1999) *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies* Oxford: Blackwell (Ch. 6: The Importance of Standpoint in Feminism)
**Week 5: Quantitative research – feminism, gender and research methods**

In this session, we review long-standing debates around the compatibility of particular research paradigms with feminist research, interrogating the long association of feminist research with qualitative methods, and conversely, a historical (?) hostility towards quantitative methods. We will investigate the ethical and epistemological approaches that underpinned those commitments, and explore attempts to challenge that dichotomy.

**Seminar questions**

1. On what grounds did (some) feminists argue that quantitative methods were incompatible with feminist research?
2. How have those arguments been countered?
3. What assumptions about qualitative and quantitative research underpin those critiques?
4. What can quantitative research bring to feminist research?

**Key readings**


**Further readings**


Oakley, A (1998) “Gender, methodology and people’s ways of knowing: some problems with feminism and the paradigm debates in social science”. *Sociology* 32 (4): 707-731


Rienharz, S (1993) “Neglected voices and excessive demands in feminist research” *Qualitative Sociology* 16 (1): 69-76

Reinharz, S (1990) “So-called training in the so-called alternative paradigm”. In Guba, E (ed) *The Paradigm Dialog* Calif: Sage


**Week 6: Reflexivity and Power**

In this session, we will explore the issues of reflexivity and power in the research process. Reflexivity has been commonly conceptualised within feminist research as a means of overcoming / circumventing / disrupting the conventional power relations within research. Through the introduction of reflexivity, the researcher is, in theory at least, able to position herself within the research process as fully implicated in the production and interpretation of data. From this perspective then, research data and analysis is not “discovered”, but made. However, the mobilisation of reflexivity within feminist research has also exposed it to accusations of self-absorption and solipsism; of politically disabling relativism.

**Seminar questions**
1. What does it mean to be reflexive in research? What problems is reflexivity trying to solve?
2. What opportunities and challenges does reflexivity offer for feminist research?
3. What is the relationship between reflexivity and power?
4. What are the risks and possibilities of writing the self into research?

**Key readings**


**Further reading**
Bott, E (2010) “Favourites and others: reflexivity and the shaping of subjectivities and data in qualitative research.” *Qualitative Research* 10 (2): 159-173


Pillow, W S (2003) “Confession, catharsis or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research.” Qualitative Studies in Education 16 (2): 175-196


Week 7: Feminism and Postmodernism

Postmodern theories offered considerable potential for feminist theorising in its potential to unseat unitary and often deterministic identity categories and “truths”. However, they have also been treated with suspicion by some feminists as potentially rendering the category “woman”, around which so much feminist activism has been oriented, meaningless. In this session, we will explore some of the ways in which feminists have engaged with both the challenges and possibilities of postmodernism for feminist research.

Seminar questions
1. What questions does postmodernism pose for feminism?
2. In what ways have postmodern theorising been critiqued by feminists?
3. What does postmodern theorising have to offer feminist researchers?
4. What knowledge claims can be made for research conducted from a postmodern perspective?
5. How might a postmodern theoretical approach impact upon / be reflected in research practice?
6. What feminist research have you read that is informed by a postmodern theoretical perspective? Did you find it persuasive?

Key Readings:

Fraser, N and Nicholson, L (1997) “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism”. Ch. 7 in Meyers, D T (ed) Feminist Social Thought: A Reader. (Course extracts)

Further readings
Benhabib, S (1992) Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics Cambridge: Polity (Ch. 7: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism)


Hartsock, N (1990) “Postmodernism and political change: issues for feminist theory” *Cultural Critique* 14: 15-35


Tanesini, A (1999) *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies* Oxford: Blackwells (Ch. 10: Feminism and Postmodernism)


Week 8: Taking Difference into Account – Race and Sexuality

“Difference” has been an ongoing point of discussion (and tension) within feminism, with attempts to organise, research, theorise and agitate in the name of “women” flattening out significant differences between women. This has been experienced by many as exacerbating the many and varied oppressions that mark the process of “Othering”, both within and outside of feminism. Looking primarily at race (but also class, global location…and we could also include sexuality, (dis)ability etc in this list), we will investigate the epistemological, ethical and methodological challenges of “difference”, and look at the critiques mobilised by those whose who have spoken out against the exclusions that can occur within the rhetoric of inclusion.

Seminar questions

1. If the issue is “difference”, then different from what?
2. What challenges (epistemological, ethical, political) does “difference” pose for feminist researchers?
3. In what ways have feminists responded to “difference”?
4. How might these debates apply to your own research?

Key Readings


Further readings


Week 9: Feminism and Psychoanalysis

As we have seen, social identity is gendered, and in order to achieve social change, we need to understand how these gendered identities are constructed. Psychoanalysis teaches that ‘biology is not destiny’, and as such, it provides a useful framework for understanding “sexual difference”. However, it is not without its critics; many feminists have accused it of ignoring factors related to racial, class, and cultural differences. This week we will examine the debates surrounding the use of psychoanalysis in feminist research and the ways in which “the social” may be incorporated.

Seminar Questions:

1. How do feminists critique psychoanalysis?
2. Is it possible to incorporate “the social” into psychoanalysis?
3. What is essentialism?
4. What is sexual difference?

Key readings:


Young, I (1997) “Is Male Gender Identity the Cause of Male Domination?”. Ch. 1 in Meyers, D T (ed) Feminist Social Thought: A Reader (hard copy from KT)

Further readings:


Brennan, T (1990) Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis London: Routledge


Irigaray, L (2004) “The Intimate Require Separate Dwellings” Ch. 4 in Luce Irigaray: Key Writings London: Continuum


Week 10: Post-Feminism

Post-Feminism. Third-wave feminism. Feminist backlash. Many of the conceptual frameworks we have studied originated in the Second-wave feminist movement, but how do they address 21st century critics who claim feminism no longer exists? In this final week we will consider the future of feminist paradigms, and specifically look at the concept of intersectionality as a (possible) way forward.

Seminar Questions

1. What problems do post-feminism and third-wave feminism pose for feminist research?
2. What is intersectionality?
3. Is there a space in 21st-century research for feminist way(s) of knowing?

Key Readings


Further Readings

Aronson, P (2003) “Feminists or Postfeminists? Young Women’s Attitudes Towards Feminism and Gender Relations” Gender and Society 17(6): 903-22

Chow, Y (2011) “Moving, Sensing Intersectionality: A Case Study of Miss China Europe” Signs 36(2) : 411-36


Garrison, Ednie Kaeh (2007) “Contests for Meaning of Third Wave Feminism: Feminism and Popular Consciousness” pp. 185-197 in Third Wave Feminism

Gill, R and Scharff, C (2011) New femininities: postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity Houndmills: Palgrave (available electronically)


Feminism operates on various feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and methods. While there is no consensus on how to organize or label these, there are a few generalities that can be drawn between these epistemologies, particularly in the international relations (IR) context. Classifying these epistemologies generally under the umbrella (or in the constellation) of postpositivism makes clear the contrasts between positivist social science and more critical approaches. Summary and Keywords. Feminism operates on various feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and methods. While there is no consensus on how to organize or label these, there are a few generalities that can be drawn between these epistemologies, particularly in the international relations (IR) context.