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Advancing Women In Leadership

## **Feminist Epistemology: A Reconstruction and Integration of Women's Knowledge and Experiences**

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**ARDOVINI-BROOKER, SUMMER, 2000**

"Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet," said Alice; "but when you have to turn into a chrysalis--you will someday, you know-- and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?" "Not a bit," said the Caterpillar. "Well, perhaps your feelings may be different," said Alice; "all I know is, it would feel very queer to me." "You!" said the Caterpillar, contemptuously. "Who are you?" (Griffin 1992: 56 citing Carroll 1901:95)

Epistemology is the study of knowing. It is the basis for knowing and how it is that people come to know what they know (Johnson, 1995, p. 97). Originating from philosophy, epistemology seems to come to us from a number of disciplines, i. e.: sociology, psychology, and political science, among others (Duran, 1991, p. xi).

These fields have all contributed to what is known as feminist epistemology.. This occurred with the emergence of materials that professed to spelling out what feminist accounts of knowledge entail and what is implied by ways of knowing pertaining to women (p. xi). The term feminist epistemology does not have a single referent. Feminist theorists have used the term variously to refer to women's "ways of knowing," "women's experiences," or simple "women's knowledge" (Alcoff Potter, 1993, p. 1). Therefore, the term feminist epistemology is a means of summarizing, to some extent, and integrating women's knowledge and experiences. Inherent in feminist epistemology is the "multiplicity of women's voices" (Duran, 1991, p. xiii).

The recent literature on feminist epistemology revealed that the word "epistemology" has been "reconstructed" by feminists to include the broadest possible sense of the term. This has been done by drawing attention to areas previously left untouched by traditional epistemologies and research (Duran, 1991, p. 73). Additionally, by creating "gynocentric epistemics," knowledge centered around women's realities, a new knowledge is brought forth. The reason for these actions is the feminist desire to have women's experiences finally recognized and legitimated.

Code (1991) does not agree that feminist epistemology is a means of summarizing or integrating women's

knowledge. She has concluded that the question of "whether a feminist epistemology is possible or desirable must be left unanswered" (Code, 1991, p. 314). However, she believes that feminist can be epistemologists and that the epistemologies that develop from feminism seem to require a basis in assumptions about the essence of women and of knowledge (p. 315). This would risk "replicating the exclusionary, hegemonic structures of the masculinist epistemology, in its various manifestations, that has claimed absolute sovereignty over the epistemic terrain" (p. 315). Hence, Code argued that feminist epistemology, despite its subversive potential, cannot alone provide the theoretical position that is required to develop a true integration of knowledge (p. 317).

The history of feminist epistemology is the history of the clash between feminist commitments to "the struggles of women to have their understandings of the world legitimated" and "the commitment of traditional philosophy to various accounts of knowledge" (Alcoff Potter 1993, p. 2). The history of epistemology has also been one of inquiry into "whether knowledge was possible" (Cartesianism) and "seldom into the conditions producing knowledge" (Feminist epistemology) (Duran 1991, p. 3).

Cartesianism assumes the unproblematic generalizability of knowledge from its context of discovery to a variety of contexts of use (Stanley Wise 1993, p. 191). These approaches also see knowledge as existing independently of the person(s) who produced it.

Feminist epistemology developed as a critique of traditional epistemology and its dominant narrative. Feminist epistemology assume "that those we deem to be knowers actually do possess knowledge" (Duran, 1991, p. 4). Today and in the future, feminist epistemology is comprised of research programs that are moving beyond critique to reframe the problematic of knowledge and unearth the politics of epistemology (Alcoff Potter, 1993, pp. 2-3). Alcoff and Potter (1993) suggest that:

feminist epistemologies should not be taken as involving a commitment to gender as the primary axis of oppression or positing that gender is a theoretical variable separable from other axes of oppression and susceptible to a unique analysis. (pp. 3-4)

If feminism is to liberate women, it must address virtually all forms of domination because women fill the ranks of every category of oppressed people. Feminist epistemology "seeks to unmake the web of oppressions and reweave the web of life" (p. 4).

This is similar to what Code (1991) describes as standpoint epistemologies. In her discussion, "Taking Subjectivity into Account", Code argues that conventional, mainstream epistemologies create the illusion of a universal "Truth" through the removal of "unacceptable" points of view. These "unacceptable" points of view are the experiences of the oppressed. Therefore, according to Code (1991), the goal of feminist epistemology is to overturn "perspectival hierarchies" (Alcoff Potter, 1993, p. 5).

Research concerning feminist epistemology, i. e.: Fox-Keller (1985), Bordo (1987), and Harding (1986) uncovered themes in traditional epistemology. Fox-Keller's (1985) analysis of Plato's philosophy of sexual love and its link to metaphysics found a relationship between androcentric epistemology and Plato's philosophy. Similar to Fox-Keller's work, Bordo's 1987 study of Descartes Meditations also found androcentric epistemology in traditional science. Harding's 1986 analysis offered the feminist responses to the androcentrism inherent in science. All three theorists concluded that there is a "masculinist, androcentric tradition that yields a hypernormative, idealized, and stylistically aggressive mode of thought" (Duran, 1991, p. 8).

Harding (1987), in her analysis of the androcentric epistemological assumptions of science, argued that feminist epistemology, particularly feminist standpoint epistemologies, must "seek to epistemically valorize some of the most discredited perspectives of knowledge" that have been ignored (Harding, 1986, pp. 25-26). Harding identifies herself as a feminist standpoint epistemologist. Yet, Harding does not go as

far as embracing relativism. She suggests that feminist standpoint epistemologies will increase and strengthen women's ability to achieve objectivity. Objectivity can be done through the use of a methodology that involves (Harding, 1986):

starting thought, from the lives of marginalized people...this will reveal more of the unexamined assumptions influencing science and will generate more critical questions, thus producing less partial and distorted accounts...this research needs to be undertaken by everyone, not just by the marginalized themselves. (pp. 25-26)

Stanley and Wise (1993) disagreed with Harding's suggestion. They advocated women as the knowers and the doers. Stanley and Wise also viewed feminist epistemology a bit differently, defining feminist epistemology as a "framework or theory for specifying the constitution and generation of knowledge about the social world; that is, it concerns how to understand the nature of reality" (Stanley Wise, 1993, p. 188). Therefore, based on the definition, women's realities differ from men's realities and feminist epistemology is women's epistemology.

Feminist epistemology specifies what women's knowledge is and how it may be distinguished from the knowledge which dominates men's knowledge. This is done by specifying who are the "knowers," female or male. Specifying who are the "knowers," female or male, specifies the type of knowledge utilized by the researcher/theorist. Feminist epistemologies also examine by what means someone becomes the knower and "the means by which competing knowledge-claims are adjudicated and some rejected in favour of another/others" (Stanley Wise, 1993, p. 188).

Stanley and Wise (1993) alleged that feminist epistemology is fundamental to feminism, "for it is around the constitution of a feminist epistemology that feminism can most directly and far-reachingly challenge non-feminist frameworks and ways of working" (Stanley Wise, 1993, pp. 188-189). They use, for an example, key areas of the feminist research process that draw from feminist epistemology. These key areas reflect such feminist epistemological assumption as (Stanley Wise, 1993):

1. The researcher/research relationship is a hierarchical relationship; this should not occur;
2. Emotions are aspects of the research process which, like any other aspect, can be analytically interrogated;
3. Critically unpacking conceptualizations of "objectivity" and subjectivity' as binaries or dichotomies, integration must occur;
4. The researcher's "intellectual autobiography" affects their "understanding" and their "conclusions", use the "intellectual autobiography" of researchers, that is, know where the researchers is "coming from" to be able to describe the process by which "understanding" and "concluding" are reached;
5. There are different "realities", consider the existence and management of the different "realities" or versions held by researchers and researched;
6. There is those who hold authority and power in research, be aware of issues surrounding authority and power in research;
7. There is authority and power in the written representation of research, perhaps more crucially be aware of these issues that affect research. (p. 189)

The above noted feminist epistemological assumptions are implemented in theory and research in a

variety of ways. According to Harding (1986), there are three main categories that feminist epistemologies fall into: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint, and feminist postmodernism (Harding, 1991, p. 106). Harding's categorization of basic epistemological assumptions is based upon her view of feminist epistemology as "feminist ways of knowing" or "feminist critiques of traditional accounts of ways of knowing" (Duran, 1991, p. 81 citing Harding, 1986, pp. 25-26). Harding's (1986) first category of feminist epistemologies is feminist empiricism, described by Duran (1991) as offering:

an account of the functioning of the empiricist (and even quasi-positivist) portrayals of knowledge acquisition as beyond criticism has tended to focus on rather more straightforward issues of women's role within sciences, such as the number of women functioning in scientific endeavors, and the effect that the training of greater number of women would have on the sciences. (p. 81)

Feminist empiricism is an attempt "to bring the feminist criticisms of scientific claims into the existing theories of scientific knowledge by arguing that sexist and androcentric results of research are simply the consequences of 'bad science'" (Harding, 1991, p. 48). The emphasis of this category has been at the cost of examining what other feminists, i. e.: Fox-Keller, have regarded as the underlying issues in the structures of the sciences (Duran, 1991, p. 81). Harding's second category of feminist epistemology is feminist standpoint. This category has been described (Duran, 1991) as:

those lines of feminist critique that have in general taken a post-Marxist view of the division of labor on our planet, and that have argued that women are privileged to have an epistemically different perspective from males by virtue of the state of their oppression and the tasks that, as members of an oppressed group, they are asked to perform. (p. 81)

Feminist standpoint epistemologists argue that the problem of science, research, and knowledge is more extensive. The dominant conceptual scheme of the natural and social sciences have been cultivated from "the experience that Western men of the elite classes and races have of themselves and the world around them" (Harding, 1991, p. 48). Feminist standpoint epistemologists also support the starting of research from women's lives, which will result in a more inclusive, less distorted explanation of social phenomenon. Here the term epistemology is divorced from its use in the analytic tradition of what makes knowledge. In this category, knowledge is viewed as a social construction and contextually bound.

The third and final category is feminist postmodernism, or "those strands of feminist analysis, influenced by such thinkers as Lacan, Foucault, Cixous, Heidegger, and Derrida" (Duran, 1991, p. 81). The feminist works that fall within this category have been described as (Harding, 1986; Duran, 1991) "fixed firmly within the Continental tradition and that see the pretended unity of science, society, and indeed Western culture itself as a shattered or fragmented pattern that never had the authority it purported to have" (Duran, 1991 p. 81-82).

Feminist postmodernism rejects foundationalism in all its forms. Feminist postmoderns also reject all "grand narratives", including feminist grand theory explaining women's conditions and oppression (Stanely Wise, 1993, p. 189). Feminist postmodernism also dismisses (Stanley Wise, 1993):

any notion of a representational, effectively one-to-one, relationship between reality and textually based (written, verbal, visual) accounts of it. Postmodernism claims to be the originator of these epistemological claims. (p. 190)

Stanley and Wise (1993) do not concur with the rejections of feminist postmodernist epistemology. Stanley and Wise argued that feminist postmodernism partakes in colonizing activities, intellectual imperialism, and "lay claim to these ideas as instead the common property of a number of divergent intellectual

traditions (Stanley Wise, 1993, p. 190). Collins (1990) also explored feminist epistemology. She described a feminist epistemology that is encompassed in Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology category. Collins (1990) examined black feminist epistemology and describes this particular epistemology as encompassing four defining attributes:

1. Concrete experiences are the criterion of meaning and are predicated upon an assumption of the ontological basis of knowledge;
2. Dialogic means must be used to assess knowledge-claims;
3. The basis of relationships between people is the ethic of caring;
4. There is an ethic of accountability that is central to black feminist epistemology. (pp. 201-220)

I would argue, along with Stanley and Wise, that these attributes are the basis of all feminist epistemologies and are not exclusive to black feminist epistemology. Stanley and Wise disagreed with Collins and did not accept the existence of difference as a means for a hierarchical relationship between the degrees of different voices. Stanley and Wise also granted a view that contradicted the privileging of feminist epistemology seen in Hartsock (1987), Jaggar (1989), and Harding's (1991). These attributes also demonstrate that there are no relationships between ontology, epistemology and ethics. As Stanley and Wise (1993) stressed, "these have epistemological consequentiality, such that the one is mutually subsumed within the other: a perfect union" (Stanley Wise, 1993, p. 226). I argue that the union of ontology, epistemology, and ethics is also true for feminist theory, methodology, and pedagogy as well as for practitioners.

As we have seen, feminist epistemology not only integrates ontology, epistemology, and ethics, it integrates women's knowledge with their experiences. As feminists have reconstructed epistemology in order to incorporate women's voices, they have illustrated the inherent connection between women's knowledge of the world and their construction of realities within that world. Feminist epistemologists argued and still argue that our "womanness" or "maleness" affects how we view the world. The female view of the world is traditionally ignored in the social construction of knowledge. Therefore, feminist epistemologies are the "golden keys" that unlock the door to women's ways of knowing, being, and experiencing. Feminist epistemology illustrates the multiplicity of women's voices while integrating their knowledge and experiences. Once this door is unlocked, a better understanding of women's lives can occur and the end of oppression may be plausible.

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