

## Women's Studies in Focus

### Women's Studies, Who Is She? The Discipline According to SSHRC

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Read a paper, browse through a book store or walk the halls of a university campus and you can't help but see that feminist scholarship is alive and well. Research by, for and about women has not only added to the store of knowledge about women's lives, bodies, actions, spirits and creativities, we have also challenged old theories and methods and developed new ones. Feminists could be forgiven for thinking that what is known and how humans know it, as well as what we teach and how we teach it, has changed, radically and for the better.

The government and quasi-government bodies which support research in Canada have been changing too, but not always in ways which should cause great rejoicing in women's studies circles. Recent changes at the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) are a case in point. Two major changes affect feminist researchers: SSHRC has included Women's Studies as a recognized discipline but then grouped it with other disciplines in ways that exclude many Women's Studies scholars. Second, SSHRC has ended the Women and Changes Strategic Grants theme and not replaced it with any program aimed specifically at women. I will consider each of these in turn. Another feature of our work as researchers is the policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects; I will discuss some of the issues SSHRCs policy raises for women's studies scholars.

#### **SSHRC STANDARD RESEARCH GRANTS**

Applicants for SSHRC grants must identify themselves and their projects according to a series of codes: there are "Occupation" codes,

"Institution" codes, "Discipline" codes, "Geographic" codes and "Research Area" codes. Of greatest concern to women's studies scholars in the past have been the "Discipline" codes. Corresponding to more traditional disciplinary boundaries, this list used to include 28 Humanities and Social Science disciplines, plus "Natural Sciences and Engineering" and "Medical Sciences. Most disciplines offer a series of up to 25 sub-disciplines. So, for example, "Medieval Studies" is a main category, code 53000, and "Medieval mysticism" is a sub-discipline, code 53012; "Psychology" is a main discipline (63000) and "Sports psychology" is a sub-discipline (63026). Until the 2000 competition, "Women's Studies" did not appear anywhere on this list. In fact, the word "women" appeared only once: as a subcategory of "History" (code 51000) called "Women's history" (51032), one of 17 such sub-categories. In those years, the only option for Women's Studies scholars unable or unwilling to locate themselves amongst the traditional disciplines was "Interdisciplinary Studies," code 70000, with no sub-categories. A further refinement was available in identifying the "Research Area Codes": among the 30 options listed was "Women."

There are debates among women's studies scholars about whether or not Women's Studies is or should be a discipline, or if Women's Studies is an inter-disciplinary area, trans-disciplinary area, anti-discipline or even a post-discipline. Others would say the question is beside the point. While I consider debate a good thing, and am glad there are people out there reminding us not to take our institutional selves too seriously, we can see, nonetheless, that the exclusion of Women's Studies from the list of disciplines would be likely to create

problems for researchers trying to acquire funds to build a body of knowledge by, for and about women and our attempts to create change. Particularly disadvantaged have been those Women's Studies scholars who are both intellectually and institutionally outside the bounds of traditional disciplines. While these debates were going on, some universities were starting MA and PhD programs in Women's Studies, and/or hiring people into full appointments in self-contained Women's Studies programs or departments. There is thus a growing group of scholars for whom the only thing like a "discipline" they have is Women's Studies. Recent papers at the Canadian Women's Studies Association (CWSA) and NWSA conferences by candidates in and graduates of the new PhD programs in Women's Studies suggest the difficulties which arise from the failure to recognize the very different nature of the scholarship and the institutional locations of interdisciplinary women's studies scholars as compared to feminist scholars within traditional disciplines. I would argue that, while it is important to change the traditional disciplines through new scholarship on women and through feminist challenges to theories and methodologies, it is at least as important to do interdisciplinary feminist research which draws on the traditions of Women's Studies, and on the theories and methods most likely to produce knowledge of use to the feminist revolution. Interdisciplinary Women's Studies, produced from and for other interdisciplinary scholars and scholarship, is not easily captured by traditional boundaries, and that "outside-the-boundariness" is important for feminism. Where would new PhDs in Women's Studies have located themselves in the old SSHRC codes?

The consequence of SSHRC codes has the most impact when the applications are read by the peer-review adjudication committees. Applications are reviewed by one of a series of "adjudication committees," and applicants are asked to indicate their preferred committee. Information on the SSHRC application form (now only available via the internet) instructs the applicant to choose the committee "based on the subject or research area of your proposal, *not* your discipline" (all quotes by SSHRC are taken from its web site: [www.sshrc.ca](http://www.sshrc.ca)). Previously, there were 15 such committees: Classics, History, Fine arts, Literatures, Linguistics,

Archaeology, Economics, Sociology, Geography, Psychology, Political science, Public administration and law, Education, Anthropology and folklore, Administrative and management studies, Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies. Applicants to the last-named interdisciplinary committee, Committee 15, were instructed to "attach a letter which explains the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary nature of the proposed research by referring to the theoretical approaches and methodologies to be employed and how the proposed research will contribute to a multi- or interdisciplinary body of knowledge." The way these committees were constituted showed no awareness that many Women's Studies applications would not be able to apply under any other head. Furthermore, the interdisciplinarity that is Women's Studies is not necessarily the kind of interdisciplinarity that has been represented on the committee.

Changes for the 2000 competition for research grants appear to improve this situation considerably. The Discipline Codes for 2000 include "Women's Studies" as a discipline. Sub-discipline categories still exist, though not for Women's Studies or a few others. Sub-discipline lists have been refined, some in ways that appear to reflect changes in the field (as in the addition of "Content and Discourse Analysis" to the "Communications and Media Studies" list), others which appear more to reflect government priorities (as in the addition of at least one category of research involving "Health" to most of the disciplines). The word "women" does not appear any more frequently in the sub-discipline lists, though "man" appears anew: "Manpower Mobility" is now a subdiscipline of Industrial Relations. "Feminist" does not appear at all. An expanded Table for Areas of Research now allows for "Gender issues" in addition to "Women."

For reasons I have just listed, many Women's Studies scholars will undoubtedly welcome the recognition of Women's Studies among the list of disciplines. Indeed, feminist scholars across the country have lobbied for years for such inclusion. On May 28, 2000, the CWSA unanimously passed the following motion: "That Women's Studies/études féministes be recognized as a discipline by SSHRC and have a place among the discipline committees." This reiterated a motion

which had been passed in October 1991 at a symposium on "Women, Research and Strategies," a motion which was supported by the then-existing Social Science Federation of Canada and the Canadian Federation for the Humanities. It took nearly a decade (or three, depending on how you count!), but Women's Studies is now recognized as a discipline by SSHRC.

It is our place among the adjudication committees that has, however, given rise to concern. The number of committees has increased from fifteen to twenty, including, as Committee 20, "Health Studies, Social Work and Women's Studies." This inclusion of Women's Studies with these particular other subject areas aroused our particular concern. As President of the Canadian Women's Studies Association, I wrote a letter to the President of SSHRC and his Special Advisor in late November. The letter said:

...The Canadian Women's Studies Association appreciates SSHRC's recognition of the importance and distinctiveness of Women's Studies, as indicated by its inclusion in SSHRC's list of "discipline codes" in the Standard Research Grants program. We do, however, have some concerns about the inclusion of Women's Studies in the selection committee, "Health Studies, Social Work and Women's Studies."

As you know, women's studies scholars and our association have consistently stressed the wide and diverse scholarship within women's studies and the particular need to find wording and implementation mechanisms which encourage interdisciplinary work across the social sciences and humanities. While the Committee grouping proposed does fit well with the work of some of our members, it does not work for the majority. The other disciplinary areas are clearly social science related. We are concerned, therefore, that such a committee would not be able to properly assess work grounded clearly in the humanities, or work which is interdisciplinary and crosses the social

science/ humanities divide; Cultural Studies, for example.

Perhaps of greater concern is the message that this sends about the kinds of research by, for and about women which SSHRC considers valuable. The implication of grouping Women's Studies together with Health and Social Work, seems to pathologize women, situating us as objects of "help" rather than subjects of our own lives and actors in the social, cultural, economic, psychological and historical contexts within which those lives are framed and changed. Clearly, some approaches to Women's Studies which situate themselves within the areas of "Health" and "Social Work" share this latter view of women; many do not. We are concerned that by excluding so many approaches to understanding and changing women's lives, SSHRC sets a moral agenda about the kinds of scholarship which are appropriate for those of us who locate ourselves in Women's Studies.

We are aware that a recent evaluation of the Women and Change Strategic Program showed that "the number of applications with gender preoccupations in the standard research grants program has increased significantly" (letter from Janet E. Halliwell, Special Advisor to the President to Susan Heald, CWSA President). Indeed, feminist scholarship is growing; we believe this is evidence that a dedicated discipline code and selection committee are required. In the absence of a discipline code for Women's Studies and with the restrictive nature of the Strategic Grants program, we have had to be creative about where to situate our work. With the creation of the new selection committee, we continue to need this creativity - together with its perils - but the message is confusing: there is a category for Women's Studies, but it does not include the work many Women's Studies scholars do.

The Canadian Women's Studies

Association, representing feminist scholars across the country, continues to call for a selection committee composed of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary Women's Studies scholars for projects where the disciplinary code "Women's Studies" is selected...

On December 6, 2000, copies of this letter were distributed to CWSA members via e-mail, asking if anyone wanted to be a signatory to the letter. In less than a week, 78 members had replied, and the letter was sent to SSHRC listing their names and affiliations. (Approximately 10 people responded after this date, but it was unfortunately too late to include their names.) Many included comments and anecdotes about experiences with SSHRC. As of this writing, January 29, 2001, no reply has been received from anyone at SSHRC.

### **SSHRC STRATEGIC GRANTS**

Strategic Grants at SSHRC are aimed at research which would lead to policy recommendations. Themes are chosen which presumably respond to government policy needs. From 1984-1992, the first such theme aimed at women was "Women and Work." From 1993-2000, the theme was "Women and Change." Because Strategic Grants accommodate and even encourage collaborative and community-based research, many feminist scholars have been able to use these grants to work with women's groups to expose the realities of women's lives, often using participatory and action research methods.

Strategic themes do not usually run for more than eight years. SSHRC asked Prof. Joanne Burgess to evaluate the Women and Change program. Burgess found, among other things, that few humanities scholars participated in Women and Change, and that not much of the research "addressed a broad or long-term time frame which in turn hindered studies of 'macro-social structures governing change.'" Burgess also found that "Feminist research and research about women are now well established and important in both SSHRC's Standard Research Grants program and, at least since 1998, in a number of its other strategic theme programs." Burgess recommended that the strategic theme Women and Change not be

extended after 2000. SSHRC has agreed with this recommendation. Burgess also recommended that "SSHRC solicit proposals for a new Strategic Theme about women during its next public consultation on future strategic theme programs," and "That in selecting a future strategic theme about women's issues, particular attention be paid to the research gaps identified in this evaluation." SSHRC apparently did not agree with these recommendations, citing women's success in other SSHRC programs as a major reason. Instead, SSHRC has decided to investigate the possibility of what it calls a "Strategic Joint Initiative" with Status of Women Canada. SSHRC says that the "basic purpose of the Joint Initiatives Programs is to encourage government, private sector and/or community organizations to work with SSHRC in co-developing and co-funding new programs for thematic research in areas of particular interest and need." It is hard to imagine how this collaboration would result in a greater inclusion of humanities scholars or an expansion of the time-frame being researched. Further, the CWSA has communicated to Status of Women Canada that the "co-funding" element of SSHRC's Initiative would need to involve new money for Status of Women Canada. Funnelling Status of Women's current research funds through a SSHRC Joint Initiative would not be acceptable. Concerns have also been raised about the way that, in the case of collaborations between university researchers and non-profit women's organizations, SSHRC's requirements tend to lead to increased work-load on the part of women's groups without the project being able to properly recompense these (usually) cash-strapped organizations for the additional strain on their human and organizational resources. The Board of the CWSA also encourages Status of Women Canada to help the Association support women's studies programs and feminist researchers; for example, by jointly establishing a database of feminist researchers. We continue to wait for word from SSHRC and SWC; meanwhile, we are concerned that this collaboration will further narrow the kinds of research acceptable under the previous Strategic Research grants.

## ETHICAL RESEARCH?

Even if an applicant secures a grant - a small percentage - there are further obstacles placed in the way of feminists, who have to do double duty to comply with policies for ethical research. In September, 1998, SSHRC, together with NSERC and the Medical Research Council, released The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. In a SSHRC press release announcing this, SSHRC President Marc Renaud called the policy statement "a living document." The press release also said that: "The new Tri-council statement is the result of several years of discussions, consultations and consensus building involving Canadian academic researchers..." In May, 1999, the first meeting of the Advisory Group ("group responsible for making the policy a living and evolving document") took place. The Advisory Group has 6 members. Two members who do not appear to be science- or medicine-based are both from Psychology departments.

The Advisory Group "identified several areas for future revisions, including: Research involving aboriginal peoples;...research involving women...Research on collectivities will be addressed later." At a November, 2000 of the Humanities and Social Science Federation of Canada (HSSFC), members of the Advisory Committee assured the audience that attention had been paid to making sure that the policy document reflected the needs of humanities and social science researchers, and was not just based on "the medical model" of research. Nonetheless, he also informed us that the committee was aware that the policy document remained inadequate in terms of aboriginal people, women and collectivities, and did not take into account qualitative research, action research, or participatory research. The Committee's representative suggested that anyone falling within these categories would have to make a special case to the research ethics committees at their universities.

Besides the fact that qualitative research, plus research with women, aboriginal people, or "collectivities" would likely be far too large a majority of applicants to SSHRC to be considered "special cases," the Tri-Council Committee on Ethics has placed an undue burden on researchers who fall outside of the narrowest definition of

"research." It is in these areas where many women scholars, and most feminist scholars, live and work.

Feminist researchers have been at the forefront of raising concerns about the ethics of research, and have expanded the meaning of the concept to encompass the assumptions about the process of knowledge-making embedded in documents like the Tri-Council Statement.

By requiring us to repeatedly try to fit ourselves into male models of disciplinary boundaries and ethical research (considered outdated even by many male scholars), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada holds back the development of scholarship which could help feminists create a better world. In spite of all we have accomplished, we have not created a level playing field for feminist researchers, yet.