

# Making the Borders Thin: Reflections on Becoming a Researcher

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## ABSTRACT

Feminists have effectively challenged the dominant Enlightenment epistemology by demonstrating that knowledge and power are always intimately connected, and that Enlightenment claims to truth have excluded other knowledge claims. Feminist empiricism, standpoint, and postmodernist epistemologies are explored for their contributions to the development of my own epistemological position.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les féministes ont défié de façon efficace l'épistémologie dominante du Siècle des Lumières en démontrant que la connaissance et le pouvoir sont reliés étroitement, et que les prétentions sur la vérité qu'a le Siècle des Lumières exclue les autres prétentions sur la connaissance. L'empirisme féministe, le point de vue, et les épistémologies post-modernistes sont étudiées pour les contributions qu'ils ont apportées au développement de ma propre position épistémologique.

How do we know what we know? How do we know about others' experiences? How do we know that what we know is accurate and true? Since the eighteenth century, the answers to these and other epistemological questions have usually been based in logic and reason, influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In recent times, feminists and postmodernists are among those who have challenged aspects of modern Western scholarship that are rooted in Enlightenment thinking. Such challenges are part of what seems to be a fundamental transformation in Western philosophy and culture (Flax 1987).

My explorations of feminist epistemologies arose out of my own questioning of how I could make knowledge claims. As a graduate student in community health, I wondered how I could claim to know about poverty-related health and food issues for women whose lives are very different than mine. My reading in feminist literature was inspired by a qualitative research methodology course, and was particularly influenced by another course I was taking at the same time, on gender and global issues, taught by an anthropologist. I have written this paper in a "modernist" format, imposing order,

simplifications, and a post hoc logic on large bodies of feminist and philosophical scholarship. My intention in this paper is to merely "point" to the literatures which have informed the development of my current epistemological position. I begin with an overview of the Enlightenment and its influence on the development of the natural and social sciences. I then explore feminist epistemological critiques of the Enlightenment, notably feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and postmodern feminism, ending with a statement of my own epistemological position.

## THE AGE OF REASON AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATURAL SCIENCES

As Foucault (1984) explains, the Enlightenment, or "The Age of Reason" is:

an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge,

projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word, even if many of these phenomena remain very important today. (43)

Enlightenment philosophers elaborated a number of important ideas which have been central to the development of modern societies: freedom of thought and expression; critiques of religion; the importance of the individual; a commitment to social progress; and the value of reason and science, rather than superstition and traditional authority, as the way to knowledge (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994). The exaltation of reason and science was one of the central themes of the Enlightenment. One of the key Enlightenment philosophers, Immanuel Kant, "describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority" (Foucault 1984, 38). Reason would dispel the tyranny and darkness of superstition and religion, and would lead Man to freedom and happiness. Enlightenment thinkers considered Woman to be non-rational and associated her with emotion and nature (Lloyd 1996); therefore, there would be no reason, freedom or happiness for her!

The Enlightenment conception of reason owes much to the rationalist philosopher, René Descartes, who developed a new approach to the acquisition of knowledge, "the systematic pursuit of an orderly method" (Lloyd 1996, 152). The Cartesian method involves breaking down all the complicated operations involved in reasoning into their simplest components. Descartes believed that all knowledge came from reason and that anything else obstructed knowledge. He also believed that his method would lead to knowledge in all areas of study. In sharply delineating mind and matter, and thought and feeling, the Cartesian method helped to polarize intellect and emotion, reason and imagination, mind and matter as never before (Lloyd 1996).

Enlightenment thinking, based on the Cartesian method, shaped the particular form of natural science that developed in the eighteenth and

nineteenth century in the Western World. Western science was "... projected as a universal, value-free system of knowledge, which has displaced all other belief and knowledge systems by its universality and value neutrality, and by the logic of its method to arrive at objective claims about nature" (Shiva 1996, 280). Based on a mechanistic view of nature, this science is reductionist, separating objects from their contexts and into smaller and smaller pieces in the search for truth. It is based on the assumption that there is order in nature, waiting to be discovered, described and understood, and that if science could only uncover this order, nature could be predicted and controlled.

## POSITIVISM AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Much of the history of the social sciences has been an attempt to be more like the mechanistic, reductionist, value-free model of natural science, a philosophical approach called positivism. (Ironically, some of the natural sciences, notably physics, have rejected this model.) There are four principle tenets of positivistic social science: there are no fundamental differences between the natural and social sciences; the aim of social science should be to derive scientific laws or principles that explain social events and describe the particular conditions under which those events will happen; social reality can be explained by what is observable and measurable; and social science must be value-free and therefore can speak only about what is and how it came to be, not about what ought to be (Wilson 1983). Positivistic social scientists wrestle with the unavoidable problem that unobservable inner states, such as values, beliefs, and attitudes, have a major role to play in governing human behaviour. They have developed a number of "solutions," such as the creation of "objective" numeric scales of measurement, in attempts to overcome this problem.

In the positivistic tradition of social science, the researcher distances him/herself from the researched and remains detached and uninvolved from those under study. This perspective "... assumes that the researcher is

objective about observing, judging and interpreting the life and meanings of his/her subjects" (Wolf 1996, 4). Through story, caricature, and pointed analysis, Rosaldo (1993) clearly details the impact of practicing ethnography and cultural anthropology from a positivistic social theory framework. His tale of the Lone Ethnographer paints a picture of the strong, solitary, detached, and impartial male anthropologist living in exotic lands. (One can imagine the "pure science" counterpart of the strong, solitary, detached, and impartial natural scientist in his white lab coat searching for the Laws of Nature in his lab.) The Lone Ethnographer wrote "classic" ethnographies, portraying the cultures of other societies as coherent totalities of systems and patterns. "Ethnographies were storehouses of purportedly incontrovertible information to be mined by armchair theorists engaged in comparative studies. This genre seemingly resembled a mirror that reflected other cultures as they 'really' were" (32). Observations which did not fit into the system or pattern were considered "unanalyzable," and labelled "exceptions, ambiguities or irregularities." According to classic ethnographers, the culture and social structure of traditional societies existed independently of individuals, determining their personalities and consciousness. In this framework, traditional societies were fixed in time and did not change, providing a "self-congratulatory reference point against which Western civilization could measure its own progressive historical evolution" (31). Classic ethnographies described the cultures of other societies as appearing "to 'need' progress, or economic and moral uplifting" (31). The objectifying, "scientific" format of classic ethnography led one non-anthropologist to wonder "How...could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? What did they have to do to themselves?" (Pratt 1986, 33).

### **THE FEMINIST CHALLENGE TO MODERN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP**

Feminism's most powerful epistemological insight and challenge to modern Western thought

has been its connection of knowledge and power, especially the recognition that the validation of knowledge claims is bound up with the domination and exclusion of other knowledge claims (Lennon and Whitford 1994). Feminists share epistemological concerns about knowledge and power with other intellectual movements, such as Marxists and critical theorists, postcolonial scholars, queer theorists, radical philosophers of science, and postmodernists. Marginalized groups' critiques of modern Western scholarship and its underlying assumptions have centered on its purported value-neutrality and consequent claim that knowledge and power are separate; claim to universality; exclusion of marginal groups as knowers; exclusion of marginal groups as subjects of research, or objectification and exploitation of marginal groups as subjects; and distancing of the researcher and the researched (Shiva 1996).

### **FEMINIST EMPIRICISM**

Feminist empiricism was the first feminist response to the sexist and androcentric biases of science. According to feminist empiricism, the sexist and androcentric natures of science are really just the result of "bad science" and these biases can be eliminated by stricter adherence to the scientific method. Indeed, sexist and androcentric biases in science must be eliminated in order to achieve the goal of objective knowledge. Feminist empiricists point out that the women's movement enabled more women to become researchers and that they are more likely than men to notice the androcentric biases of science and to be "unbiased" (Harding 1991).

As Harding (1991) points out, the conservatism of feminist empiricism is both a strength and a weakness. Feminist empiricist research in biology and the social sciences has given us a more complete or "less false" picture of the subjects under study and has left intact the conventional understanding of adequate scientific research. "It appears to challenge mainly the incomplete practice of the scientific method, not the norms of science themselves" (113). This has the advantage of making it easier for women as

scientists to gain respect and access to funding, teaching and research. However, feminist empiricism has radical implications. First, feminist empiricism suggests that the context of discovery is important in the elimination of bias. For example, after the women's movement, scientists could see biases in their research that they couldn't see before. Second, feminist empiricism shows that the scientific method is inadequate in eliminating some types of bias, such as those in the identification and definition of research problems. Third, feminist empiricists have shown that some androcentric bias is inherent in the methods and norms of science (Harding 1991). The feminist empiricist recognition of the importance of *difference*, in this case, gender difference, undermined science claims for objectivity - that the knower is inconsequential to what is discovered and known. This has created tension between empiricist epistemology and its uses by feminists. Some feminists, interested in ensuring that female subjectivity left its mark on knowledge production, as male subjectivity had for generations, turned to the development of standpoint epistemology (Lennon & Whitford 1994).

### **FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY**

Feminist standpoint epistemology draws on Hegel's reflections on the master/slave relationship and Marx, Engels and Lukacs' development of Hegel's ideas into "the standpoint of the proletariat," the foundation of Marxist theories of the operation of class society (Harding 1993). The standpoint of the proletariat is based on the assertion that what we do shapes and constrains what we can know (Harding 1991). Feminist standpoint theory has two major points: that all knowledge is socially situated (i.e., divisions such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation mediate an individual's understanding of reality and thus inform all knowledge claims), and that some social situations are better than others for knowledge production. Stratification of society by gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality organizes the activities of those at "the top," giving them a distorted, ideological view of reality while those at

the bottom of the social hierarchies are in a better place to understand human relationships with each other and with the natural world. "So one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know; some social situations - critically unexamined dominant ones - are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief" (Harding 1993, 54-5). According to this perspective, male sociologists doing research on women are seriously handicapped because they are often unable to take the role of the women they study (Millman & Kanter 1987).

Harding (1991) gives several reasons why she thinks women's standpoint research provides a less partial and distorted view of nature and social relations than conventional research: women have been devalued and neglected in conventional scientific research; are "outsiders," having been excluded from the design and direction of the social order and the production of knowledge; have less interest in staying ignorant about the social order and maintaining the status quo; struggle against oppression; use their experience of "everyday life" to formulate their perspective on the world; mediate ideological dualisms by transforming natural objects into cultural objects; are "outsiders within," working both "inside" and "outside" the conventional social order; and use the conflicting demands imposed on them by the social order as an opportunity to "see" the sex/gender system as an object of knowledge.

Feminist standpoint epistemologies have given rise to feminist research methodologies, based on the principles that feminist research should be nonhierarchical, nonexploitive, and dialogical; involve researcher disclosure; and ensure that participants benefit from the research (Fonow & Cook 1991).

### **CRITIQUES OF FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY**

Harding's account of feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) has been critiqued from a variety of perspectives. Her arguments are often

essentialist. She assumes that women, by virtue of their gender, will recognize their oppression and the contradictions of their lives imposed by the social order, have something insightful to say about it, and come to feminist consciousness. She also assumes that the link between experience and analysis is unproblematic. Although the social construction of knowledge - that both men and women, their experiences, and the way they think about things are shaped by the society in which they live - is key to some of her arguments about the nature of science, Harding often seems to forget about the social construction of feminist standpoint epistemology. As Holmwood (1995) explains, those who are judged to be oppressed may not define themselves that way, and in fact *will not* if they have internalized the dominant ideology or if their identities are "fractured." I would argue that it is not one's social position that gives one insight into the social order but rather critical reflection and an ability to make the everyday "problematic." The proponents of FSE seem to want to provide *a* way, free from uncertainty, to truth, just as Descartes believed that *his* method would lead to truth.

Lazreg (1994) argues that feminists' use of experience as the basis for a theory of knowledge positions feminist standpoint epistemology neatly within the empiricist school of philosophy, though feminist standpoint theorists don't seem to recognize this nor the consequent epistemological problems. Ironically, this brings them back to the epistemological territory from which they were trying to escape. For example, this treatment of knowledge accepts the Enlightenment claim that reason and emotion are gendered (Hawkesworth 1989). In appealing to women's experience as the basis of knowledge, feminist standpoint theorists conflate "the disparate issues of knower and known," associating rationality only with men. Feminist philosophical inquiry finds itself in a dead end by focusing on knowers as the source of knowledge:

The pervasive tolerance for and indulgence in "gender symbolism" within feminist discussions of epistemology reproduce patriarchal stereotypes of men

and women - flirting with essentialism, distorting the diverse dimensions of human knowing, and falsifying the historical record of women's manifold uses of reason in their daily life. (Hawkesworth 1989, 546-47)

Espousing standpoint epistemology worked well for feminists "...within the critical moment of theorizing. Attention to women's experiences/position/perspective was able to throw into relief both the gaps in accepted theory and the masculinity of their narratives" (Lennon & Whitford 1994, 3). But when feminists confront "...the reconstructive moment in knowledge-production, it is less clear why the narratives which are produced from their standpoint should be considered as less distorted/more adequate than the masculine one" (Lennon & Whitford 1994, 3). As Bar On (1993) eloquently explains:

A socially marginalized group does not have the power to exclude, silence, and command obedience from a dominant group. Its claims for epistemic privilege, lacking a social power on which to base them, cannot yield the same results as the self-authorizing claims of a dominant group and are, therefore, merely normative, compelling only for those who are theoretically persuaded by them, usually members of the socially marginalized group who find them empowering. Although the empowerment of its own members is an important goal for every marginalized social group, by claiming an authority based in epistemic privilege the group reinscribes the values and practices used to socially marginalize it by excluding its voice, silencing it and commanding its obedience to the voice of the dominant group. (97)

Bar On points to a significant problem with FSE - that it is easily ignored and dismissed by those in the dominant group, men. The flip side of

that argument is that even those men who are sympathetic to feminism have been "scared off" feminist research by the claims to epistemic privilege based on women's experience, which men, by definition, do not share (Rabinow 1986). Feminist (women) anthropologists were outraged when an influential group of male anthropologists published a collection of essays (Clifford & Marcus 1986) which considered the contributions of "the new ethnography," steeped in postmodernism, towards renewing the purpose of anthropology, while ignoring comparable feminist contributions (Behar, 1995). This may be a result of the exclusion of men from feminist circles.

Another problem with FSE is that other dualisms fracture the gender solidarity of the woman's standpoint. After feminists problematized the experiences of men and women, some feminists began to wonder about the differences among women. Other standpoint epistemologies developed, based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, history of colonialism ("First World" versus "Third World"), and so on. These standpoint perspectives, or "epistemologies of insiderness" (Reinharz 1992, 260) also focus on "the knower" rather than "the known" and echo the feminist standpoint. For example, Ladner (1987) states that "it is simple enough to say that the difference between the two groups - the oppressor [White people] and the oppressed [Black people] - prevents the former from adequately comprehending the essence of Black life and culture because of a fundamental difference in perceptions, based upon separate histories, life-styles, and purposes for being" (77).

As a result of the "identity politics" of standpoint epistemologies, the challenge was on to determine who was most oppressed.

When one among a multiplicity of socially marginalized groups is claimed to be epistemically more privileged than the others, the usual criterion for justifying such a claim is the extent to which the group in question is peripheralized. Epistemic privilege then becomes a function of the distance from the center. Presumably, the more distant one is from

the center, the more advantageous is one's point of view. (Bar On 1993)

Bar On describes how a lesbian writer, Marilyn Frye, staked a claim for lesbian epistemic privilege, since lesbians do not exist in "the conceptual schemes of phallogocracies" (89). Frye's claim was contested by others who claimed epistemic privilege for lesbians "whose sexual practices are more transgressive than... 'vanilla' lesbian-feminist practices" (Bar On 1993, 89). (These "more transgressive" practices include transsexuality, sadomasochism, and "cross-generational" activities.) Presumably a "sexually transgressive" lesbian who was black, working class, and from the Third World would be most marginalized and thus be in the best place to understand the social world. There is no apparent end of "fracturing" and competition for epistemic privilege, and no indication of who arbitrates the degree of marginalization and how.

This fracturing of identity and notion of the epistemic privilege of the knower has carried over into the political realm. Dosanjh (1996) notes her frustration as a feminist in the Indo-Canadian community in Vancouver, battling against sex selection. She relates that her white colleagues in the women's movement all shared the erroneous belief that sex selection is part of Indian culture:

But certain things - and this is one of them - are wrong regardless of culture. It was frustrating and infuriating to hear, particularly from those whom you expect to be more understanding. "We can't do anything about this; we don't know your culture." It should not matter whose rights we are fighting for - women's rights, gay rights, or other minorities' rights. We must understand the issues and not shirk our responsibility by saying, "It's their issue, let them fight it out." We have to look beyond colour, gender, or race and come together to build a caring and just society. (71)

Otherwise, those who are least powerful are bound

to remain so.

Reading about and reflecting on the identity politics of standpoint epistemologies helped me "name" my fear of not being able to justify what I could know about other people's experiences. As a white, heterosexual woman in the privileged position of graduate student in a highly industrialized country, I could share the "epistemological high ground" with other women of the homogenous "woman" category, but not with women whose identities and epistemic privilege fracture along other lines - for example, women of colour, lesbian women, poor women, or women from developing countries. If I really pushed my epistemic privilege, I could flaunt my small town, working class background. But what would that mean in terms of the lives I could *really* understand, and the action for social change I could join? And what does it mean that I have spent half my life moving away from my small town, working class background, and have spent the last few years in the very privileged position of graduate student in one of Canada's most prestigious universities, in its largest city?

As Hekman (1997) notes, when feminist standpoint epistemology first emerged, it was exactly what was needed at the time:

a method for naming the oppression of women grounded in the truth of women's lives.... [However], as the theory developed... questions of how feminists should theorize differences among women and the status of feminism's truth claims became impossible to ignore - and equally impossible to answer within the confines of the original theory. (356)

On philosophical, political, and practical grounds, many feminists have moved away from standpoint epistemology's claims to epistemic privilege. In struggling to develop more complex feminist epistemological, methodological, and political stances, many have turned to postmodernism for inspiration. In the next section, I take up some of the interactions between feminism and postmodernism.

## FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM

Behar (1995) characterizes feminism and postmodernism as "two critical projects of the 1980s that emerged separately, like parallel lines destined to never meet" (3). I am not so sure that they were never destined to meet, since they have posed many of the same challenges to modern Western thought. Feminism and postmodernism started from somewhat different places: Feminism started from women's experiences, their oppression, and observations about the gendered nature of social structures, while postmodernism started from philosophical observations of the inherent problems of "grand narratives of legitimation," such as the Enlightenment story of the gradual progress of reason and freedom (Fraser & Nicholson 1990), in the face of twentieth century phenomena such as genocides, totalitarian regimes, the spectre of global nuclear destruction, and environmental catastrophes. In the 1990s, many feminists have engaged postmodernism, invigorating feminist theory and discussions of epistemology. Some feminists argue that this new feminism has arisen from within feminism and the contradictions of standpoint epistemologies; others acknowledge the influence of postmodernist philosophy.

Postmodernism is not a coherent, unitary body of theory, but postmodern thinkers tend to share some common characteristics. Flax (1987) explains that postmodern discourses all seek to make us question or deconstruct taken-for-granted beliefs about truth, knowledge, power, the self and language. She lists eight modernist beliefs derived from the Enlightenment that are under scrutiny by postmodernism:

- 1) The self is stable and coherent, capable of reasoned insight into its own processes and "the laws of nature."
- 2) Reason provides an objective, reliable and universal foundation for knowledge.
- 3) The correct use of reason will lead us to a true understanding of reality.
- 4) Reason is transcendent and universal, existing independently of the self's bodily, temporal and social experience.

5) Reason, autonomy, and freedom are connected in complex ways. Claims to truth and authority must be grounded in reason. Freedom consists of obeying laws that conform to the right use of reason.

6) Conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power are overcome by reason. Truth can serve power without distortion and freedom and progress will be assured by using knowledge in the service of power. Knowledge can be both neutral and also socially beneficial.

7) Science is the exemplar of the right use of reason and is therefore the paradigm for all true knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents but socially beneficial in its results.

8) Language is the transparent medium through which the real is represented.

Almost all feminists agree with the core feature of postmodernism, a rejection of "mirror theories of knowledge" in which "true" knowledge reflects an order of being outside itself (Yeatman 1994). According to postmodernists and many feminists, all knowledge is situated and partial. There is no way to step outside of our historically and socially situated conceptual frameworks or discourses in order to check the legitimacy of our interactions with reality. Postmodernist feminists believe that feminists:

...have to give up the project of providing a totalizing theory of the nature of reality and recognize that we cannot unify into a coherent whole the multiple and diverse experiences which derive from the multiple situations in which knowledge-producers are placed. Fragmentation and contradictions are inevitable and we will not necessarily be able to overcome them. (Lennon & Whitford 1994, 4)

While some feminists have embraced postmodernism, others remain skeptical, and some are scornful of it. For example, Harding (1987) and Di Stefano (1990) wonder if only men can afford the relativism of postmodernism, since they have

already had their Enlightenment. Mies (1996) considers postmodernism part of the academic matricide that is destroying and rewriting the history of feminist research. Hawkesworth (1989) thinks "it is a bit too cruel a conclusion and too reactionary a political agenda" to throw away reason just at the time when reason is starting to hold the promise of women's equality. Assiter (1996) states that the relativist's position - that all one can do is tell stories and choose the story one likes best - is morally and politically reprehensible in a world in which there are horrendous wars, environmental destruction, and mass starvation. These feminists have been repulsed by the excesses of postmodernism, a postmodernism which has overturned the "constraints and illusions" of modernity to embrace a relativistic nihilism and individualistic consumerism. Such a postmodernism is not shared by all those who call themselves postmodernists; however, postmodernism does raise fundamentally destabilizing questions for feminism.

First, if, as we must, we acknowledge that there are many realities that women inhabit, how does this affect the status of the truth claims that feminists advance? Second, if we abandon a single axis of analysis, *the* standpoint of women, and instead try to accommodate the multiple, potentially infinite standpoints of diverse women, do we not also lose the forces of our argument?... If we abandon the monolithic concept of "woman," what are the possibilities of a cohesive feminist politics? (Hekman 1997, 349; italics in original)

There are no easy answers to these questions, versions of which plague other identity-based social movements, including Afro-centric and gay and lesbian social movements. However, some postmodernists have developed complex, nuanced, and moderate postmodernisms which hold possibilities for nurturing epistemological pluralism, integrating ethical and political concerns into social knowledges, and

working towards visions of a more just world. They see opportunities in postmodernism for a renaissance of morality, a rethinking of the ways we live together as humans that recognizes and embraces diversity without essentializing aspects of humanity or homogenizing difference (see for example, Ang 1997; Bauman 1991, 1993 and 1995; Dean 1996; Felski 1997; Seidman 1996 and 1998; and the collected essays in Squires 1993). Seidman (1996) explains that the value of human studies that abandon foundationalism (i.e., "arguments that authorize particular standards and types of discourse as knowledge" (707)):

...would pivot on what its discursive practices allow us to say and do - for example, the kinds of dangers or social stress points it can alert us to; the ways its social descriptions provide coherence and purpose to our collective lives; its accounts of the social sources of discontent and its proposed remedies; the usefulness of its social knowledges for social groups ... In short, judgments about the value of ... [social] knowledges would depend less on whether they are true in the sense of a correspondence or coherence between the word and world than on their social purpose and consequences. A shift from a truth-driven, foundational scientific culture to a pragmatic culture would mean that ... [social] knowledges would be formed...by an engagement with public life .... Standards of critique or assessment ... [would be] framed pragmatically or by asking after the purposes or consequences, the aims, and intellectual, social, and moral implications of a discourse or social practice. Critical judgments and social negotiations would be situational, provisional, or temporary and involve ad hoc discursive strategies. (711-13)

Many feminist researchers are being pragmatic and getting on with their work in the best way they know how, while trying to live with the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with

embracing diversity and rejecting foundational claims to knowledge and truth. Many have rejected the "insider-outsider" dichotomy of standpoint epistemologies, which homogenizes and essentializes those on both sides of the boundary (Narayan 1993; Wolf 1996), and are moving from an identity-based epistemology to one "based on an engagement with one's politics of location in articulating partial perspectives based on 'situated knowledges'" (Lal 1996, 188). As Lal (1996) argues forcefully, social science research *necessarily* reflects the social world in which it is situated and that a researcher's identity is not fixed or predetermined. The researcher's identity is situated in the research situation:

...by the micropolitics of the research interactions and the macropolitics of societal inequality. To expect a researcher to become an insider is to demand that she transcend these politics, to escape the differences that are embedded in the everyday life that we examine. The feminist injunction for nonhierarchical research relations can thus only be met by an *escape* from reality - it is a search for positionality "outside the text" - a position that is politically irresponsible, empirically impossible, and epistemologically indefensible. (197; italics in original)

## CONCLUSION

In researching this paper, I have come to some conclusions that allow me to feel more comfortable with my uncertainties as a researcher. I recognize that there will *always* be boundaries and borders between the researcher and the researched, but that some will be wider and thicker than others. The researcher's job is to try to make those borders as thin and transparent as possible, in order to gain understanding of and insight into the situations and experiences of others. This requires empathy and understanding, but also a realistic assessment of the researcher's situatedness and limitations, the situatedness and power of those s/he studies, and

the limits and possibilities of the discursive practices of the academic culture. The claim to truth of any research project will always be partial, changing, contextual, and historical, requiring that the researcher learn to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. But abandoning a foundational claim to knowledge or truth does not mean that we have no way of discriminating one account from another. A reasoned defence of a claim to truth will appeal, as it always has, to the interpretive conventions of communities of knowledge. Claims to truth will be judged by "how useful or interesting that way of looking at things is to an audience... What can you see that used to be invisible?" (Becker 1986). And for those who wish to promote social change, claims to truth will be judged by how much they contribute to building a more just society.

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