

On Doing the Splits Collectively: Introduction to the Canadian Women's Studies Project

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ONE OF OUR RESPONDENTS DESCRIBED HER WORK as "sometimes I do the splits." In several ways, this project exemplifies a group of feminist researchers doing the splits—in juggling competing personal and professional demands, in trying to find a common language and approach across linguistic and cultural differences, in attempting to reconcile issues seen as politically urgent but unrelated to this project, and in attempting to balance individual career concerns with collective project concerns.

The genesis of this project dates back to a meeting in my living room with students I supervised in 1986, when one of them said she wanted to interview outstanding feminist professors for her Ph.D. research. I raised the question of how she would identify appropriate subjects given that we had no data base on who constitutes the overall population, and how, in the absence of such data, she would interpret her findings. The student eventually decided to find a different topic, supervisor, and institution for completing her Ph.D., but the questions stayed with me. It would, I thought, be fun and about time for someone to do a research project on those professors who had carried forward (and still do) the perhaps greatest rethinking of our times: feminist or women's studies professors.

These thoughts eventually led to a grant application to SSHRCC for the present project, prepared

by Rhonda Lenton (RL) and myself (ME). As always, this application had to be prepared in a rather short time, and between a large number of competing obligations. We always conceived of it as being a national (this was before Meech Lake) bilingual project and such was only possible with the active collaboration of a Québécoise feminist researcher, not only at the stage of analysis, but during the drafting of the research plans. We noted in our application to SSHRCC that we were going to try to find such a francophone collaborator, and that the submitted instruments were therefore likely to be changed. After the proposal had been submitted and before we knew that we had received funding, we searched for a collaborator and continued to work on the research instruments. Several telephone calls established that, clearly, Louise Vandelac (LV) would be the ideal collaborator. We did not know each other personally, but she did agree after a telephone conversation to join the project.

Early in 1987, we were notified that we had been funded for two out of the requested three years, with an option to reapply for the third year, at a lower level than requested, with no option of appeal. Take it or leave it.

We considered and took it, knowing we would have trouble, which we did. For instance, SSHRCC

had ruled out specifically the computer for which we had asked, with the rationale that institutions in general had received enough hardware so that they should be able to furnish their own. *Should* be—but OISE was not. It eventually found a computer for us which did half the job we needed to have done. So, we wrote a new grant application, meanwhile limping along with inappropriate hardware and software. Of course, a new grant application (to a new grantor) required a new sub-project added on, since SSHRCC rules prohibited applying for a project that *supposedly* was already fully funded (SSHRCC has since changed its grant application processes). Therefore, every time we asked for new monies in order to be able to complete the research, we needed to take on a new obligation for some type of data gathering and/or analysis for which we had not originally planned, all within the same time frame. We thought about it seriously, and did it very reluctantly; however, without such additional monies, we would not have been able to do the necessary work, even on the shoestring on which we operated.

Meanwhile, we had hired Rosonna Tite (RT) as the Research Officer for the project, and it is entirely due to her outstanding organizational and intellectual skills that the project, in spite of great objective difficulties, was carried through successfully.

The people involved in the project throughout its duration were the three collaborators (ME, RL and LV), RT as paid staff (60%), and Nicole Groten (NG), the project secretary, at 50%. We hired temporary staff for interviewing and data inputting and for some other tasks. This help was of course crucial and indispensable, but very temporary.

During the duration of the project—from May 1987 to the present—we individually had to cope with a large number of issues that competed with the project. Three of us (in chronological order: RL, LV and RT) wrote, revised and defended their Ph.D.s during this time, all on entirely unrelated issues. Two of us got divorced (ME and RL); one re-married, set up a new household, acquired a

stepdaughter and subsequently had a daughter (RL); one of us built a house and had to commute every day three hours to her job while raising two small children and supporting the family (RT); another gave birth to a son (LV), and one (ME) launched her son into adult life during this time. Two of us (RL and RT) taught for the first time at the university level. One of us (ME) became convinced that one of the most important political issues of our times was to look critically at the New Reproductive Technologies, and organized a national lobby which pressured the federal government to set up a Royal Commission on the topic. Conceived as a one-year activity, it took two years of concerted effort. One of us (LV), who had been deeply involved in these issues (among other things as a member of the Council on Bio-Ethics in Human Research and a Canadian representative of Finrrage), actually serves on the Commission which was eventually set up. This was a coincidence which had nothing to do with this project.

One of us (LV) was coordinator of a feminist research group (GIERF) at UQAM and prepared the creation of a feminist institute there; one of us (ME) was elected President-Elect and currently is the President of a national learned association (CSAA); one of us (LV) commuted for one term between Montreal, Toronto, and wherever the Royal Commission was meeting (i.e., all over the country). All of us had other publications and professional commitments which had to be completed during this time (including four books—LV and ME) and over ninety articles (*excluding* all those related to the project). Almost none of the various activities overlapped. All of us taught, participated in regular (and sometimes extraordinary) administrative activities, and three of us supervised graduate students with their manifold theses on a large range of topics. All of us participated in many regional, national and international conferences, usually involving extensive travelling, primarily as presenters, but also as chairs and organizers—over 100 different conferences or paper presentations in all. All of us had various personal crises. All of us were in different ways personally affected by the various crises the feminist movement, and the country, were going through during this time.

Given these circumstances, not everything in this project was done or done in the manner we would have preferred. In particular, we had planned a paper (in French) examining the differences and similarities between francophone and anglophone professors. This paper, unfortunately, did not materialize.

As the project neared its end, we were concerned to turn back some of the information that people had given to us in the speediest manner possible. Indeed, although by many small miracles and a lot of effort the project was always right on schedule, it seemed that three years for data collection and processing was a long time. Therefore, we decided that we would make research reports available as soon as they were in some acceptable format to everyone who had participated in the project or who had otherwise expressed an interest in the results. Since there was no money to do this, we had to charge for copying and postage; however, if one charges money, that requires someone to look after orders—in itself a costly business. We applied for and retained our project secretary (NG) for one day a week to handle these matters.

Originally, we had planned two books. Preliminary discussions with publishers convinced us that it would be better to plan for one book on Phase 4 of the project and to publish the other papers in article form. We then asked *Atlantis* whether it was interested in bringing out a special issue, and many months later—here we are. This is not the only outlet in which we are publishing (citations of other papers are in the text) but it contains the basic information on which all other publications are premised. Although the grants have ceased, and the project is officially closed, with the exception of the last phase on influential feminist thinkers, we will individually and collectively continue to analyze the data, and we welcome other researchers to use our data, *provided that this does not involve unreasonable demands on our time or require any finances*.

We will try to continue to do the splits—hopefully without straining ourselves.