What's in a Name?
Women's Studies or Feminist Studies

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Introduction

LANGUAGE, AND NAMING IN PARTICULAR, have been one of the earliest and most consistent concerns of feminist scholars. The literature on sexist language and its problems is voluminous.[1] It is therefore surprising to find that the literature debating what to name our collective endeavour is exceedingly sparse. This may be partially a reflection of the fact that, in general, there is only a very scarce literature that concerns itself with women's studies as a field of inquiry;[2] by and large, the sociology of women's studies has yet to be written.

Nevertheless, given the awareness of the importance of naming among feminist scholars, it remains an anomaly—and a dangerous one at that—not to expend some more collective effort on the question of how we name what we do.

Looking over the literature and the field itself, we can make four observations concerning the issue of how we—feminist scholars—name what we do at present:

(1) The most commonly used term is women's studies.
(2) There is a bit of dissatisfaction expressed with this label, usually at the level of grammar rather than with respect to its connotations. The dissatisfaction is not frequently voiced. Most scholars seem to accept the label as unproblematic, judging by their silence.
(3) Women's studies tend to be equated, in a non-reflective manner, with a feminist approach.
(4) Nevertheless, the term feminist studies is not usually seen as a viable alternative.

The Current Situation

There are a number of indicators we can use to assess which labels are being used at present. For instance, the two national organizations that represent feminist scholars across disciplines in Canada and the U.S. identify themselves as Women's Studies organizations.[3] The five federally Endowed Chairs of Women's Studies are called just that. With two exceptions,[4] all universities which have offerings in the area list them under the heading of "women's studies." When it comes to publications or centres, the issue is not so clear-cut. Many periodicals utilize the words "women" or "women's studies" rather than something else somewhere in their self identification,[5] but there are some which use "feminist" in their name,[6] as well as some other

This is Report # 3 of the Canadian Women's Studies Project.

designation.[7] As to centres located at universities, some use the women's studies label,[8] others use feminist in their name.[9]

Turning to the sparse literature on the issue of naming our field, Bell and Rosenhan (1981: 541) suggest that the term "women's studies" has:

> two distinct and related meanings. Its broadest meaning was the study of women; its more political and conscious definition incorporated a challenge to sexism in knowledge, declaring a legitimacy to *women's* self-knowledge. This second meaning is embedded in the Constitution of the National Women's Studies Association...

They go on to suggest that the title is "grammatically incorrect and conceptually imprecise" since, in its literal meaning, it includes the study of any topic as long as it is performed by women. "Clearly this is not what we intend." They consider as alternatives "feminist studies" and "women studies."

They reject "feminist studies" as a viable alternative, in spite of some attractive aspects, for the following reasons:

> It is avowedly political and runs the risk of allowing conservative scholars to ignore their own politics while focusing on ours. This risk is compounded by the lack of consensus about the definition of feminism, either as a historical phenomenon or as a contemporary ideology. Using the term "feminist studies" may invite semantic rather than substantive reaction. Finally, this term may frighten potential students whose interest is high but whose consciousness is low. (p. 542)

They recommend as an alternative "women studies" while noting that "Alas, it too is grammatically incorrect..." They argue in its defense that:

> It is precise. It is clear. It avoids the political debate and semantic haggling that can obscure our shared and central concerns. It is sufficiently straightforward to allow the uncommitted to explore the topic. Moreover, it stands in juxtaposition to the supposedly neutral and hallowed "study of man." (p. 542)

Gallop (1985: 15), in her study on Lacan, picks up the issue of the lopped off "apostrophe s." She praises the ambiguity "because it can function as either objective or subjective genitive, in other words, studies of women and studies by women." She asks rhetorically:

> Might not one of the goals of what we so ambiguously call "women's studies" be to call into question the oppressive effects of an epistemology based on the principle of a clear and nonambiguous distinction of subject and object of knowledge?
>
> Rather than attempt to banish it, I would like to take advantage of the ambiguity of "women's studies" in that it retains woman's traditional peculiar vantage point as neither quite subject nor object, but in a framework which sees that vantage as an advantage and not a shortcoming. (pp. 15–16)

She takes up the issue of "woman as knower" and continues:

> Extremely attracted to the notion of *women's studies* as a force that could revolutionize the very structures of knowledge, I wish to pose the question of what a *feminist practice of study* might be... (p. 18)

Note the silent equation of women's studies with a feminist practice of study, an equation that is characteristic of the literature.

In another reflection on the name "women's studies," this time from a linguistic perspective, Shapiro (1982) argues that the label has the peril of "markedness," a term that "designates a hierarchical relationship between members of a pair of opposing categories. The categories appear as complementary opposites within a larger class, yet one functions to subsume the other at a higher level of contrasts" (p. 718). In this specific case, this functions to continue to leave maleness unmarked, thereby continuing to equate masculinity with humanity in general. A corrective focus on women alone may, Shapiro argues:

> appear a necessary short-term tactic, more urgent in some fields than in others. In the long

> run, though, it is self-defeating, for it perpetuates the same structure of gender markedness that feminists have been at pains to eradicate. (p. 720)

Her solution to the problem is to incorporate gender into the title. Note also the implied equation of the area of study with a feminist approach. In an enthusiastic reply to Shapiro, Jain (1983) deplores that India has followed the American practise of calling the field "women's studies" and wishes it could be changed—there and elsewhere—to "gender studies."

The implied equation of women's studies—or gender studies—with a feminist approach is not unique to the authors cited. Indeed, it is pervasive. In one of the strongest statements on the issue, Evans (1982: 73) states boldly that "no meaningful distinction exists between women's studies and feminist studies." This is so, because:

> it is impossible to study women and not make radical, and critical, connections between the nature of society and sexual inequality. *Any study of women, however conservative it may be in conscious intent or in unthinking, unconscious lack of thought, sooner or later confronts the fact of universal female subordination.* (p. 73, emphasis added)

It is puzzling that authors generally equate women's studies with a feminist approach while at the same time rejecting the label of feminist studies, or minimally, seeming content with the label of women's studies. This becomes particularly contradictory when reading that the same problems which are attributed to the label "feminist" are problems actually experienced by people involved in "women's studies."

At present, the issue seems to be conceptualized as one of "mainstreaming" (curriculum integration, curriculum balancing) (e.g., McIntosh and Minnich, 1984; Coyner, 1986). Such discussions, however, imply certain assumptions about the nature of our collective undertaking which hinge on how we identify what we do. I believe that we need to address the issue of how to name ourselves directly, prior to deciding which administrative structure to choose. Rather than reflect personally on these issues, a more useful way to address them is by consulting the entire group of women's studies professors in the country.

Fortunately, we have a data set which allows us to do so. In this paper I will draw on parts of a large-scale study of Canadian women's studies/feminist professors and analyze their responses to the question whether there is—or ought to be—a distinction between women's and feminist studies.

The Study

The Canadian Women's Studies Project[10] is a large scale study which has collected a great amount of information on professors who have taught women's/feminist studies at a Canadian university that gives at least a bachelor's degree. The study involved four phases. Phase 1 consisted of writing to all universities and colleges and obtaining their official information on their offerings in women's/feminist studies. Phase 2 consisted of identifying and surveying all professors who had taught at least one course in the area at the university level. Eight hundred and ninety-two of our respondents declared themselves as eligible and returned a filled-out questionnaire. This represents, in our estimation, a better than 80% response rate of the total eligible population. In Phase 3, 100 of the 780 women, selected randomly, as well as 87 of the 112 men in our population, were interviewed, by telephone, in a more qualitative, open-ended interview on substantive issues. These Phase 3 professors are representative of our total population of professors. Phase 4 involved telephone interviews with the thinkers/authors who had been named as the most influential by the entire population about their thoughts concerning women's/feminist studies. The study is described in more detail elsewhere.[11]

This paper will draw primarily on a part of the telephone interviews with the female and male professors of Phase 3. Specifically, we asked the professors, "Is there a difference between women's studies and feminist studies as far as you are concerned?"[12]

In our survey, we used the wording women's/feminist studies in an attempt to be inclusive, and

because we were unsure what meanings different people attached to the two labels. After having analyzed the responses, that turned out to be a good choice. We certainly would have excluded some respondents had we made the criterion for inclusion that they define themselves as having taught a course in feminist studies. We did lose a few respondents who said they had taught a course from a feminist perspective but *not* in the area of women's studies,[13] but many others who fell into that category did include themselves.

Results

The most basic question to ask of the data is simply, "Is the distinction a meaningful one to the respondents?" As it turns out, the answer is a "yes and no."

Is There a Distinction Between Women's and Feminist Studies?

Respondents can be grouped on a continuum that ranges from seeing no difference between the two, to seeing differences in degree, to drawing a clear dichotomy between women's and feminist studies. The overwhelming majority falls into the middle category. They typically phrase their response in comparative terms, such as this female philosopher who states:

> Feminist studies is a more explicit political label for an area which is implicitly political.
>
> I think that essentially they are philosophically and ideologically intrinsically the same, but people like to give them different emphases. So, feminist studies would be a way of making the political mandate more explicit. (#0744)

Nevertheless, 12 of our 100 women and 6 of our 87 men stated categorically that there is no difference. Most of them clearly saw no difference because they felt that women's studies are necessarily feminist. As a female law professor said:

> As far as I am concerned, if it's not feminist studies, it's not women's studies either. (#0904)

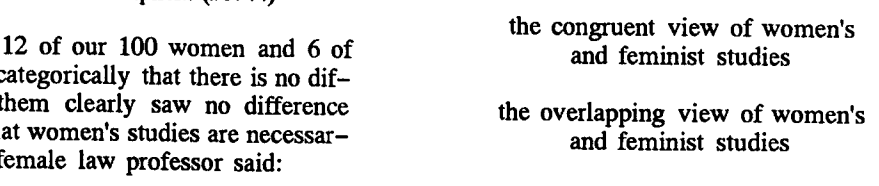
This stance is descriptive of all of the women and four of the six men in this group. However, two of the men have a very different reason for stating that there is no difference; they basically do not see a feminist approach as a relevant issue at all. As one of them, a political scientist, says:

> I've never really heard the term feminist studies in any institutional context. (#0846)

At the other end of the continuum, there is a group of people who draw a clear distinction between women's and feminist studies. There is, however, also a strong theme which runs through the responses that suggests that the distinction is made by "other" people rather than by the respondent herself or himself. *Other* may mean one's colleagues, one's students, the public at large, "the popular mind," university administrators, or those "not in the trade." A male Fine Arts professor, for instance, says that there is no distinction:

> as far as I'm concerned. I can see that there could be for other people. I suppose women's studies can mean all sort of things that needn't, necessarily, be related to a feminist perspective. (#0791)

Overall, then, the vast majority of respondents *do* see a difference in the meaning of the terms women's studies and feminist studies, although this difference is often tempered by being identified as one of degree, or emphasis, rather than kind. We can conceptualize the different perceptions as of three kinds: the congruent view, the overlapping view, and the differentiated view. We can depict the three perceptions graphically as follows:



In the congruent view, no distinction is made between women's and feminist studies. In the overlapping view, the two approaches are seen as partially overlapping and partially distinct, while in the differentiated view the two approaches are clearly separate, and may be even irreconcilable. How far the distance between the two can, of course, vary dramatically, from very short to quite long.

What Is the Difference Between Women's and Feminist Studies?

Overall, there is a surprising consensus as to the respective meanings of women's and feminist studies—in spite of much self-confessed doubt as to what the proper definition of "feminist" is in other parts of our data set. There are, nevertheless, also some issues on which respondents disagree. The disagreement seems to be related to whether the respondents have a congruent, overlapping or differentiated view of the women's/feminist studies continuum. We shall first identify those aspects on which there is consensus, and then move to the issues on which there is disagreement.

Taking together the various, surprisingly consistent statements, we can draw the (of course somewhat exaggerated) dichotomous distinctions between women's and feminist studies as shown in the sidebar on this page.

Women's Studies	*Feminist Studies*
Subject area: women	Perspective applicable to all subject areas
Exclude men's studies	Include men's studies
By, about, or of women	For women (not necessarily by or about them)
Image of being less political or non-political or neutral	Self-consciously political and committed
Additive	Transformative
Use of conventional methods, draw on existing theories	Develop new methodological and theoretical approaches
Institutionally safe	Institutionally unsafe

(1) Perspective versus Subject Matter. There was a very strong consensus among respondents which was shared across the lines of sex, language and self-identification as feminist or non-feminist that feminist studies involves a particular perspective, while women's studies denotes a subject area.[14] A female law professor, for instance, expresses this very clearly when she states:

> Des études sur les femmes, ça définit un objet, tandis que des études féministes, je pense que ça définit une perspective ou une approche. (#1036)

(2) Feminist Studies Includes Men's Studies, Women's Studies Does Not. As a consequence of the basic distinction between perspective versus subject matter, what can be included varies by label. In particular, one can include men's studies under the heading of feminist studies, but not under the heading of women's studies. A female historian says:

> I think it's possible to do work from a feminist perspective that might not be defined as women's studies; for example, I think you could do men's studies from a feminist perspective. (#0285)

A male sociologist argues:

> One of the things that is important when studying women is also to study men. ... so feminist studies can be ... undertaken by people who are interested in the relationships between men and women or the comparisons between women and men. (#0678)

(3) Women's Studies: By and About Women; Feminist Studies: For Women. A further extension of the basic distinction into subject area versus

perspective is to interpret the labels as not only denoting content, but as also specifying the doer of the work and the intent of it—in other words, the distinction of teaching ABOUT women versus teaching FOR women. A male sociologist, for instance, suggests:

> I would think that women's studies generally ends up being about women, whereas feminist studies is for women. (#0812)

A female professor of educational administration says about feminist research:

> [la] recherche soit utile aux femmes et leurs permettent de progresser, de se développer à tous les niveaux. (#1111)

(4) Women's Studies: Non-political and Neutral; Feminist Studies: Political and Committed. Everyone who in any form touches upon this topic agrees that feminist studies has a self-consciously political component which is less pronounced (or absent, depending on who is speaking) in women's studies.

A female philosopher says about women's studies that "it doesn't have a political self-awareness of itself" (#0248) while feminist studies, by contrast:

> sees itself ... as a political form of study ... and uses a methodology that raises questions—political questions about victimization, about torment, about the agency of women, more specifically as a frame of reference, and may also have, as its outcome, a set of specific proposals. (#0248)

What varies widely is how self-conscious political awareness is *evaluated*: whether this is seen as a drawback or an advantage. We shall come back to this issue when we look at the differences in opinion.

(5) Women's Studies: Descriptive and Additive; Feminist Studies:Radical and Transformative. Women's studies tends to be associated with adding women in (what has been called "the add-women-and-stir" approach), while feminist studies is seen as implicitly transformative, developing new methodological and theoretical approaches, and drawing on the feminist literature which has already been developed along these lines.

For instance, a female English professor identifies feminist studies as "emancipatory," and "a critique." (#0135) A female sociologist says:

> feminist studies are far more radical, using that in a general sense. They are not simply removing barriers of prejudice, but rather altering the gender structure of society. (#0232)

Another female sociologist describes the nature of women's studies:

> Some of my colleagues, for example, that would feel that they're teaching something in women's studies, I don't think are really focusing that much on feminist material. And, as a matter of fact, they'll use traditional approaches and by adding women in ... believe that it's sort of equivalent to women's studies. (#0579)

A male sociologist who describes his own work as trying to balance particular sessions called "women and ..." with a feminist perspective all the way through says about feminism:

> feminism implies a theoretical approach, a theoretical critique, and with that a politics.... Sometimes, women's studies doesn't have to have that theoretical critique.... It could be, for example, a descriptive study of e.g. women in parliament, or women in the House of Commons, or whatever. (#0078)

A male anthropologist makes a very similar comment:

> Women's studies SEEMS ... to be sort of adding or including women in a study. Whereas feminist studies—feminist analysis, is ... much more potentially transformative—more informed by feminist politics and practice. (#0799)

This seems to be a fair description that would probably be acceptable to some of the professors who prefer the label women's studies to describe

their own work. For instance, a male literature professor describes his own activity as follows:

> What I do is simply introducing something that is missing from the traditional offerings and that ... satisfies the needs that exist and ... students are actually quite interested and thankful that this is being done and I don't think that I bring to it any particular ideological bent. (#1610)

An additive approach sees it as entirely appropriate and sufficient to use existing methods and draw on existing theories to explain the situation of women, while a transformative approach necessarily needs to develop new theories and methods. A sociologist says simply:

> I would see women's studies as a more watered down version of feminist issues. (#0612)

(6) Women's Studies Uses Existing Methods and Draws on Existing Theories, While Feminist Studies Develops New Methods and Theories. An education professor provides a good example of how the same fact can be interpreted differently depending on what approach one takes. She says:

> Oui, oui, oui, je fais une différence, bien je fais une différence, mais elle n'est pas toujours pertinente. Études sur les femmes, on peut avoir des études sur les femmes qui n'ont pas du tout une problématique féministe et des méthodologies. Études sur les femmes, bon, ça concerne les femmes, ça s'addresse à des questions concernant les femmes, on peut prendre une méthodologie et on va dire, il n'y a pas de femmes, tandis que dans une étude féministe, on se demanderait à partir d'une approche féministe, comment ça se fait qu'il n'y a pas de femmes, c'est quoi les facteurs culturels, etc. (#0171)

Feminist studies is change-oriented and theoretical, whereas women's studies may be strictly descriptive, as a female sociologist argues:

> The term sex role or gender role usually cues me to the notion that we may not be dealing with feminism here, we simply may be dealing with documenting inequality which I think is where the difference lies. You're either simply documenting inequality and hoping that the liberal version of reality will cause people ... therefore to make a change in that, or you are attempting to renovate versions of thought at a theoretical level.... That would involve feminism ... (#0067)

(7) Women's Studies: Institutionally Safe; Feminist Studies: Institutionally Unsafe. There is a consensus that women's studies seems more acceptable to university administrations and the world at large while feminist studies seems unsafe, non-academic, and so forth. A male philosopher, for instance, muses:

> for those outside the trade, women's studies will probably fly easier in a university than feminist studies.
>
> My impression is that most people have weird ideas about what feminism is, and don't have a clear idea about what women's studies is, but the vague ideas that they have about both lead them to think that women's studies is innocuous and feminism is dangerous. (#0978)

A female history professor suggests:

> feminist studies, I think, is more of a fighting label, in the sense that it challenges more directly the academic structure. (#0317)

So far, people largely agree—although they see these differences as more or less pronounced. However, there is one point on which opinions diverge sharply, namely, whether or not women's studies can be non- or anti-feminist. This is the watershed which determines how the other characteristics of women's and feminist studies are perceived, and also whether the differences are large or small, in kind or in degree.

Can Women's Studies be Taught from a Non- or Anti-feminist Perspective?

As will be recalled, there are a number of respondents—and some strong assumptions within the literature—that view women's studies as necessarily feminist in orientation. However, an astonishingly large number of our respondents—28 women and 12 men—mention incidences in which professors

have taught women's studies from a non-feminist or even anti-feminist perspective. It must be remembered that we did not ask a question to this effect, and that when the issue was brought up, it was done spontaneously by the respondents.

A second group suggests that theoretically, women's studies might be taught from a non- or anti-feminist perspective, but that, really, this hinges on an unrealistic dichotomization of women's studies and feminism, since teaching women's studies eventually leads people to become feminists, even if they do not start out that way.

A third group states flatly that there are no non-feminists teaching in women's studies, and that women's studies is implicitly and necessarily feminist in orientation. This group would include those respondents cited above who argue that there is no difference between women's and feminist studies, because women's studies is necessarily feminist (but we recall that some other people denied a difference for other reasons).

A female history professor who defines feminist studies as "concern with the status of women and desire to ameliorate it" says:

> I don't see that anybody in women's studies in the country probably doesn't hold those views. (#0321)

This group overlaps with the second group in which people admit the theoretical possibility that women's studies might conceivably be taught by non- or anti-feminists, but imply that this is highly unlikely. For instance, a female anthropologist suggests:

> I suppose women's studies could be studies which just describe or analyze what it is that women do. I would think feminist studies would be coming from the point of view that women have been disadvantaged throughout history, and I can see that if you defined yourself primarily as a women's studies person, you might choose to express things in a less ideological way, I guess. But, the conclusions, I think that come out are about the same. So that you can't really study women in history or cross-culturally without ultimately students realizing that women have been disadvantaged. I'm not sure there are people actually in women's studies who aren't basically feminists. (#0677)

At the other end of the spectrum are a considerable number of people who recount personal experiences with non- or anti-feminist colleagues teaching courses under the women's studies rubric. These accounts range across many disciplines, and come from all parts of the country. They flatly contradict the assumption expressed in the previous quotes that basically *all* people who teach women's studies are also feminists.

We know from other parts of the study that the vast majority of the women's studies professors, but not all, do indeed define themselves as feminists. Of the women, 91% define themselves as feminists, and of the men 58% do. Of course, the meaning of the label is not the same for women and men.[15] The feminists are somewhat over-represented in our Phase 3 sample (see Table 1).

More important than the label is whether professors utilize the scholarly work that is available for teaching. We asked them: "Do you use feminist literature in your own work?" The possible answers range from having all one's work informed by a feminist perspective to not incorporating any.[16]

Once again, we find that the vast majority of women (96.6%) and of men (90%) say that all or at least some of their work is informed by a feminist perspective (see Table 2).

Nevertheless, it is important to take cognizance of the fact that although no one identifies himself or herself as an anti-feminist, about 37% of all men and 9% of all women define themselves as non-feminists or prefer some label other than feminist (see Table 1), and 10% of the men and 3.4% of the women do not use any feminist literature in their work—some because they say that none is available in their subject areas, others in spite of the fact that materials are available in their areas (Table 2).

TABLE 1
Self-Definition of Respondents

	All Women		*Phase 3 Women*		*All Men*		*Phase 3 Men*	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Feminist	697	90.9	96	97.0	64	57.7	52	63.4
Non-feminist but concerned about women's issues	40	5.2	2	2.0	33	29.7	22	26.8
Non-feminist not concerned about women's issues	1	.1	0	.0	2	1.8	0	.0
Anti-feminist	0	.0	0	.0	0	.0	0	.0
Other	29	3.8	1	1.0	12	10.8	8	9.8
TOTALS	767	100.0	99	100.0	111	100.0	82	100.0
Missing	13		1		1		1	

TABLE 2
Use of Feminist Literature in Own Work

	All Women		*Phase 3 Women*		*All Men*		*Phase 3 Men*	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
All Work Informed by Feminist Perspective	414	54.1	61	62.2	27	24.5	23	28.4
Some Work Informed by Feminist Perspective	325	42.5	36	36.7	72	65.5	52	64.2
No Use of Feminist Literature but Aware of Materials	15	2.0	0	.0	8	7.3	5	6.2
No Feminist Literature Available in the Area	11	1.4	1	1.0	3	2.7	1	1.2
TOTALS	765	100.0	98	100.0	110	100.0	81	100.0
Missing	15		2		2		2	

Looking at a third indicator of a feminist orientation, namely the answer to the question "Do you read any feminist journals on a somewhat regular basis?" we find that 84.5% of all women say yes and 15.5% no, as compared to only 52.7% of the men who say yes and 47.3% who say no.

In such a context, accounts of personal experiences with non-feminist colleagues who teach women's studies cannot be dismissed as marginal. Although atypical, clearly it happens. A female philosopher recounts:

> I think *in general* ... people in women's studies that I have met *are* feminists, and do approach the work from a feminist point of view. But certainly here on campus we've had problems in at least one instance that I can think of, ... one person—namely a male—who wanted to teach in the women's studies programme. And everyone who knew him was convinced that he was not a feminist. He did not identify as a feminist but he wanted to have his course cross-listed as part of the Women's Studies Programme. (#0508)

A male philosopher ruminates about what to do in such cases:

> I guess my own stance has always been that, in those cases, you try and—you do include the course, but you try and provide an antidote for it. (#0096)

This is, of course, a very problematic attitude, since those students who take this course are still exposed to it whether or not they also take the "antidote," all under the rubric of women's studies.

Interestingly, although women occasionally single out men as being non- or anti-feminist[17] —not without reason, when we look at Tables 1 and 2 and read what some of the men say about themselves—there are, nevertheless, men who say almost the same thing about female colleagues as women say about male colleagues with respect to anti-feminism. Some of the women would probably agree with this assessment of themselves as well.

Here is an example of a male philosophy professor who says about himself "I am compelled by the forcefulness of some feminist theory and so I am ... very intellectually involved in the debates." He draws a clear distinction between women's and feminist studies:

> because, just for example, we have someone at our college that teaches a women's studies course. I think that it is called Women and History, and the first thing that she says is "I'm not a feminist" and I don't think that she is. ... Well, anyway, I would say that she is just about an enemy to feminism even though she teaches in women's studies. To me all the ideas she supports are the ideas that, when spun out, are sexist. (#0483)

A female art professor argues that there should be no difference between women's and feminist studies, implying at the same time that, unfortunately, there sometimes is. She says:

> Let me give you an example. There have been occasionally people [who] propose to teach the course which I teach which is feminist criticism of art and culture. They are women but they have not expressed any feminist inclination, haven't read any feminist literature, haven't declared themselves committed to women per se. The difference between those two things is enormous. Sometimes it's simply a matter of coming out of the closet as a feminist. But I don't think that women's studies should be occupied by people other than feminists. (#0507)

It is clear, at this point, that, while it is not the norm, there are instances in which professors teach courses within women's studies that are non-feminist or even anti-feminist.

Men are much more likely to fall into this category than women but, because of the many more women who teach in the area (about 8 women for every man), there are, in absolute terms, slightly more women who define themselves as non-feminists than men. The problem, then, is not restricted to one sex only, although it is much more marked for men.

Unfortunately, then, Evans (1982) and those of our respondents who argue that one cannot teach women's studies without adopting a feminist perspective are wrong. Non-feminists can and do teach women's studies courses, although they form a relatively small minority of the instructors.

Consequences of Non-feminists Teaching Women's Studies

There seem to be at least three consequences if someone is a non-feminist teaching women's studies, all of them closely tied together. The first is that a feminist perspective is viewed as only one perspective among many, all of which are seen—at best—as of equal validity. Second, if this is so, then it is obviously acceptable—even desirable—to have courses in women's studies taught from a non-feminist perspective. Third, the feminist perspective, as one among several competing perspectives, is seen as inferior, since biased, while the other perspectives are superior, since unbiased. This latter view is premised on the assumption that there *is* some neutral, value-free approach to women's studies, and to science in general.

(1) Feminism As One Perspective Among Many. A male psychologist who says about himself that "I would not describe myself as a feminist" explicates the feminism-is-one-among-many-perspectives notion:

> I guess one can do women's studies from various perspectives, one being a feminist perspective. (#1443)

A male demographer who says about himself "I don't focus on women or feminism per se" says:

> Within women's studies as the overall umbrella, I think there are several kinds of approaches to it, and one of the approaches, I think, is what might be called "the feminist approach" —not as opposed, but complementary to ... a general women's studies approach. (#1645)

It is, however, not *only* non-feminists who may see feminism as one perspective among many within women's studies. A female language professor argues:

> in a university it's very important for people to think for themselves, and to come to their own truths, so, you know, I wouldn't prescribe anything to my students. ... They have to come to their own conclusions, and what is the truth for them, so I wouldn't say you have to have a feminist perspective, or you have to be a feminist. ... I think that it's very dangerous when feminists start just laying down the law ... because the whole point about feminism was questioning what people said was the truth about women, and I don't think that feminists should now say, "Oh, we've got the truth," and then try and impose that on other people. I think it's very dangerous, and I think that there is a certain segment of feminists who are very dogmatic, ... and I find that very irritating. (#0539)

This professor is one of only two female professors who have expressed the problem of presenting feminism as one-perspective-among-many while clearly identifying themselves as feminists. The men who have put forward this approach did it from the perspective of non-feminists. The difference is subtle but, I believe, crucial. When non-feminists argue that feminism is only one perspective among many, the implication is that it is an intellectually inferior alternative, as we will see below. When feminists express a similar concern, it is a concern with a doctrinaire approach—about not imposing a particular interpretation on students. It is thus essentially a pedagogical concern, which stems from intellectual humility, rather than intellectual arrogance.

There is, as yet, no uniformly agreed upon definition of a feminist perspective, although there is a large consensus on the various elements that form a part of it. One of the tasks that lies still ahead of us, as a collectivity, is to evolve a definition of a feminist perspective that recognizes differences in approaches, is non-doctrinaire, acceptable to the large majority of practitioners, applicable to all disciplines, and sufficiently sophisticated to incorporate academic rigour with a recognition of the in-

evitable value-ladenness of all academic and other research.[18]

(2) Women's Studies Should be Taught from Many Perspectives. If one sees a feminist perspective as only one among many—and not necessarily as the best or most appropriate one, either—it follows that it is not only appropriate but, indeed, desirable that there be non-feminist courses taught within women's studies offerings. A male political theorist, for instance, argues:

> I think there is certainly room for non-feminists to be teaching courses on the history of women or other courses that pertain to women's studies. (#0959)

A male historian elaborates:

> I think it's dangerous to advocate a particular political point of view if that is distorting the historical emphasis or the historical picture that you're trying to recreate for students... (#0443)

This comment leads to our next concern, namely the implication that a feminist perspective is biased.

(3) A Feminist Perspective as Biased. The most dangerous consequence of having non-feminists teach women's studies is their assumption that a feminist perspective is biased, as contrasted to their own perspective, which is unbiased, neutral, scholarly, and characterized by academic rigour.

Here is an interesting example of one male psychologist who does not read feminist journals and who describes his own approach as follows:

> I don't go at it with any particular a priori feminist agenda. I go with it with a liberal agenda, I think. But I guess if there's a conflict between politics and science, I do my science as faithfully as I can and I insist on, sort of, my liberal agenda whether it's supported by data or not. ... I simply have to go where my data takes me as a scientist. (#1301)

He goes on to describe women's studies, as compared to feminist studies, as *unbiased*. He seems unaware of the internal contradiction in his own statement in claiming that he has to go where his data take him while also stating that he sticks to his "liberal agenda whether it's supported by data or not." A male education professor who has defined himself as a non-feminist "other," who does not read feminist journals and who says that there is no feminist literature in his area (a point of view not shared by other education professors), recounts what he replied when he was asked by a colleague whether he approached his course on women and sport from a feminist perspective:

> J'ai dis non, je n'essaie pas d'indiquer une voix ou une autre. Je présente des faits et les étudiants jugeront si ils ou elles doivent pousser plus ou moins que ça, c'est à eux, je n'essayais pas de mettre une connotation féministe dans mes propos, j'essayais de dire les propos tels qu'ils étaient, quand j'avais des exemples dans les journaux. (#1733)

The implication is that while a feminist approach is biased, their own approach is not.

Conclusion

This look at the simple question of how we name what we do has generated some important insights into our collective endeavour. We found three things. First, the majority of women's studies professors *do* draw a distinction between women's and feminist studies, which is surprisingly consistent. Second, the degree of difference that is attributed depends on whether their view of the women's studies/feminist continuum is congruent, overlapping or differentiated. Where it is congruent or overlapping, the difference is seen more as one of appearance than substance, where differentiated, it is seen as a substantial one.

The congruent and overlapping versus the differentiated view seem to depend on whether people acknowledge that non-feminists do teach in women's studies. To have a differentiated view does not require the respondent herself or himself to be a non-feminist, but merely to know that there are such people *in women's studies*. And this is the third thing we found: that there is a minority of

professors who consider themselves—and are considered by their colleagues—non-feminists.

The implications of this are serious and deserve our full attention. I shall briefly consider (a) the historical juncture of women's/feminist studies in Canada at the moment, and (b) the implications for naming that derive from this historical moment.

The Contemporary Historical Juncture for Women's/Feminist Studies

Women's/feminist studies is a relative newcomer on the academic scene. While there is a long history of feminist thinkers (see, e.g., Spender 1983), this is the first time that women's/feminist studies has been taught, as an academic subject and an identifiable area of study at universities and other official places of learning. While we have no generally applicable periodicization scheme yet,[19] the area has experienced considerable development —an explosion of materials, sources, specialized publications, and so on.

It is only reasonable to expect that the people involved in producing this explosion of knowledge will themselves have evolved in their thinking and teaching. This is evident from our interview materials, in which professors describe shifts in their thinking, in the past as well as some which are taking place at present. People often located themselves historically when answering our questions. Here is an example from a female legal expert who no longer teaches at the university level, and who places her lack of distinction between women's and feminist studies into the context of the time at which she was engaged in teaching.

> You have to recall this was between '73 and '80, and the picture was somewhat different in the law school in that I was just starting to open up a tiny, tiny niche. There were no women's studies programmes in the law school, I can assure you, at that time. There was me and the three law students who were in my first course. And so, to have worried about the distinction between women's studies and feminist studies would have been a bit of a luxury at that time. I was certainly approaching it from what I thought of as a feminist perspective and I know that the few other women who were trying to do women and the law courses, at that time, were also feminists, but, you know, it wasn't ideological, extremely sophisticatedly articulated. (#1421)

Others describe their own evolution. A female history professor, for instance, recounts:

> I started, I suppose, by trying to look at women's history with much the same method as I would have used to do more traditional sorts of studies, and I found that I really couldn't do that. I had to think [of] it, of issues in method, and come to a feminist method to make any headway with it. (#0938)

This process of rethinking is obviously still going on. A home economics professor says about her own work:

> I wouldn't call it feminist although I am moving in that direction now. (#0654)

Just as individuals engaged in inventing a new field change in the process of doing so, so will institutions who provide the setting at which much of this activity takes place. At this time,[20] we are clearly moving towards a new stage in women's/feminist studies at Canadian universities. Several universities are, at present, in the process of preparing or submitting proposals for graduate programmes in women's studies. This represents a new stage of incipient institutionalization. With graduate programmes, there are typically regional screening organisms that regulate what types of degrees can be awarded under what sets of conditions (see Filteau, 1989). Once these types of conditions have been elaborated and put into place, they cannot be ignored. The various bodies have the power to grant or deny the power to universities to award graduate degrees in particular areas.

We are thus at a critical juncture, at which the course will be set for the future.

Implications for Naming What We Do

We have seen above that the most basic difference between women's and feminist studies on which the large majority of respondents agree is that women's studies describes a subject area, whereas feminist studies describes an approach. We have also seen that in the past and at present, there were and are some non-feminists who teach in women's studies. This is not an easy matter to control. One women's studies professor, who has sat on committees that deal with the establishment of women's studies, describes the difficulties in preventing non-feminist courses from being offered under the women's studies rubric. She points out that women's studies courses:

> don't necessarily have a feminist perspective. ... I think that's a problem that in many instances we don't want to confront, or we don't want to deal with, because it gets confused with issues about academic freedom, ... many of the arguments being that—well, you can't supervise or monitor other people's courses, to make sure that what they're teaching about women is from a feminist perspective.
>
> In fact, my experience is that women who are working in women's studies programmes try to avoid those issues, and ... try to avoid a confrontation, particularly with male professors, over whether or not that course can be acceptable in a women's studies programme. (#0079)

So what is the problem with having non-feminists teach in women's studies? If feminism is one perspective among many possible ones, it might be enriching to provide a range of approaches to any given subject area.

And this, of course, *is* one of the problems: the identification of a feminist perspective as one among several competing ones which at best are considered equally valid and at worst are considered superior—since supposedly unbiased. Non-feminists tend not to read feminist publications, that is, not to keep themselves up to date on exactly that scholarship which created and continues to re-create the field.

The most important problem, however, is the notion that their own approach—whatever that may be—is neutral, "unbiased," whereas a feminist approach is "biased." This view fails to grasp one of the most central insights of feminist scholarship—that *no* approach can ever, in principle, be "neutral." Most non-feminist scholarship is sexist.[21] Sexism is a summary label for a syndrome of problems which distort our perception of reality, and misrepresent the experience of both women and men. Professors who see feminist scholarship as biased not only misperceive the nature of the work that has been done, but also fail to grasp the problem in their own approach.

Given that we now know that such views are taught under the label of women's studies, we should guard against them. Naming is relevant in this context, although, of course, not a cure-all.

If we define *a subject area* as an area for graduate studies, it is difficult to make an argument that it needs to be coupled with a particular perspective, precisely because of the tradition of academic freedom, which, of course, is one of the most important and valuable aspects of modern universities. We also exclude from the area many matters that—I would argue—should be included in feminist studies, such as men's studies, and other issues which on the surface seem not to be directly related to women (for instance, environmental concerns). The same applies, with slightly less force, to the label "gender studies."[22] Although it includes men's studies, it still describes a subject area, and is therefore open to all types of perspectives being brought to it.

This leaves either some neologism (e.g., feminology or some such label, all of which describe subject areas in various ways) or "feminist studies." Calling what we do feminist studies would not completely eliminate the problem of having non-feminists teach in it—witness the attempts of right-

wing anti-feminist groups to call themselves the "new feminists"[23]—but it would certainly greatly reduce the likelihood.

There are, of course, difficulties attached to choosing this course of action. As we found, women's studies are considered institutionally safer than feminist studies, and there might therefore be considerable administrative resistance to using this label. These difficulties must be weighed against the specific circumstances at different universities. However, the long-term difficulties we may create for ourselves by continuing to use the problematic label of women's studies should not be underestimated either.

We need to understand the labels in a historical context. As a female philosopher said:

> I think that the differences are historical and institutional. Women's studies is the earlier term. Feminist studies I think started being used at a time when the emphasis shifted from undergraduate programs to graduate teaching and research. And so that is a historical shift. Women's studies tends to be an earlier term. (#1695)

Naming ourselves as what we are—and the vast majority of us are feminist scholars—seems not only honest, but also smart.

NOTES

1. For a sampling, see Blaubergs, 1980; Eichler and Lapointe, 1985; Moulton, 1981; Silveira, 1980; Vetterling-Braggin, 1981; Yaguello, 1979.
2. Some exceptions are Andre, 1984; Banner, 1986; Bowles, 1983; Bowles and Klein, 1983; Boxer, 1982; Colby, 1978; Coyner, 1983; Evans, 1982; Kelly and Pearson, 1983; Klein, 1983, 1984, 1987; Payeur, 1984; Rendel, 1980; Rosenfelt, 1984; Schuster and Van Dyne, 1984; Strong-Boag, 1983; Tobias, 1978; Westcott, 1983. This list covers discussions of women's studies in various countries. In general, the literature deals with feminist approaches to various subject matters, *not* with the teaching or learning of women's studies *per se*. Given the strong orientation of women's studies towards a sociology of knowledge approach (see Eichler, 1985), this is surprising.
3. The Canadian Women's Studies Association and the National Women's Studies Association, respectively.
4. Université Laval with GREMF, and Université du Québec à Montréal with GIERF.
5. For example, *Women's Studies International Forum*; *Atlantis, A Women's Studies Journal*; *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*; *Canadian Woman Studies*; *NWSA Journal, A Publication of the National Women's Studies Association*; and others.
6. For example, *Resources for Feminist Research*; *Reproductive and Genetic Engineering, Journal of International Feminist Analysis*; *Recherches Féministes*; *Feminist Review*.
7. For example, a new journal, *Gender and Education*.
8. For example, the Centre for Women's Studies in Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; the Institute for the Study of Women, at Mount Saint Vincent University; Institut d'étude et d'apprentisage féminin, at the Université de Moncton, and others.
9. For example, Groupe interdisciplinaire d'enseignement et de recherche féministe (GIERF), at the Université du Québec à Montréal, and the Groupe de recherche multidisciplinaire féministe (GREMF), at Université Laval.
10. Various aspects of the overall project have been financially supported by the following grants: SSHRCC grants #482-86-0007 and #482-86-0016 (M. Eichler and R. Lenton), OISE SSHRCC grant #0920 (M. Eichler), grant #234.02 of the Ontario Women's Directorate (M. Eichler), a McMaster Arts Research Board grant (R. Lenton), a grant from UQAM (L. Vandelac).
11. See Eichler with the assistance of Tite, 1990. For other reports, see Eichler, 1990 and in press; Eichler with the assistance of Vandelac, 1990; Lenton 1990a and b; Tite with the assistance of Malone, 1990; Vandelac, 1990.
12. Since the interviews were open-ended, there are slight variations in the wording. The question quoted was the third question. The first two questions were oriented towards clarifying "How do you yourself define the area in which you are working?" in order to arrive at a label for each respondent that could be used throughout the interview. If the label supplied did not specify a concern with women but offered a traditional disciplinary label (e.g., history, sociology, education, etc.), we followed up with: "Within your area or discipline, how would you define yourself and the work you do related to women?" Since a fair number of respondents made comments on the nature or difference between women's and feminist studies in their effort to label themselves, I have also drawn on their answers to the first two questions.
13. More detail can be found in Eichler with the assitance of Tite, 1990.
14. There were three respondents (out of a total of 187—two females, one male) who interpreted feminist studies as being studies about the feminist movement, rather than a perspective that cross-cuts all subject areas.
15. See Eichler with the assistance of Vandelac, 1990, for a detailed discussion of this issue.
16. The possible response categories were:
    - All my work is informed by a feminist perspective;
    - At least some of my work is informed by a feminist perspective;
    - I do not incorporate feminist literature in my own

work but I am aware of the available materials in my subject area;

There is no feminist literature in my subject areas; please list your subject areas.

17. See Eichler with the assistance of Vandelac, 1990, for a discussion of the role of men in women's studies.
18. There are, of course, several attempts to do just this in existence. Personally, I think that Christine Overall's definition of a feminist perspective goes some distance. She defines as "minimal but essential components of a feminist perspective" the following five points:

> First, a feminist perspective involves a commitment to understanding women's experience, beliefs, ideas, relationships, behaviour, creations, and history. ... second, ... an awareness that women as women have been and are the victims of oppression under patriarchy, the system of male dominance. ... third, ... some sort of theory about the origins of the oppression of women. ... Fourth, ... a determination to avoid perpetuating or acquiescing in the oppression of women and to contribute, whenever possible, to the further understanding and dissolution of sexual inequality. ... Finally, ... the deliberate and self-conscious (in a positive sense) nature of its worldview. (Overall, 1987, pp. 2-3)

I have some trouble with the third criterion and am not sure whether the whole covers the natural sciences sufficiently, but it is certainly a good start.

19. For two attempts, both of them discipline-bound, see Eichler, 1985 and Strong-Boag, 1983.
20. This is being written in early 1990.
21. For an elaboration of this concept, see Eichler, 1988.
22. As one anonymous reviewer of this paper noted, "the term 'Gender Studies' is being used by groups eager to co-opt, yet depoliticize the other two terms, Women's Studies and Feminist Studies... this trend [is] particularly evident in the more conservative U.S.A. and therefore in danger of seeping north."
23. For a good discussion of feminists and anti-feminists, see Rowland, 1984. For an example of this distortion of language in the Canadian context, see Eichler, 1988.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Rhonda Lenton, Roberta Mura, Ruth Pierson, Rosonna Tite and Louise Vandelac for their comments; Jacqueline Ferris for pointing out many typos and stylistic errors; and Jacqueline Ferris, Judith Grant, Dianne Hallman, Riva Love, Nigel Moses and Evelyn Sommers for helping me reconceptualize the various perceptions of the relationship between women's and feminist studies.