

## FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND THE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH

Catharine E. Warren  
The University of Calgary

### Abstract

This article explores the implications for research and practice in adult education of the increasing interest in gender issues and of feminist approaches to research and research methodology. It centers on the discussion of these issues in two events in Canada in 1986-87: a national conference on "The Effects of Feminist Approaches on Research Methodology", and the publication of *The Science Question in Feminism*, written by Sandra Harding.

### Résumé

L'auteur présente quelques questions, pertinentes à la pratique et à la recherche dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes, qui proviennent de l'intérêt croissant dans le phénomène de genre et des recherches d'un point de vue féministe. La discussion se concentre sur deux événements au Canada en 1986-87: un congrès au sujet des conséquences des approches féministes pour la méthodologie de recherche, et la publication du livre, *The Science Question in Feminism*, par Sandra Harding.

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We do not think of the ordinary person as preoccupied with such difficult and profound questions as: What is truth? What is authority? To whom do I listen? What counts for me as evidence? How do I know what I know? Yet to ask these questions and to reflect on our answers is more than an intellectual exercise, for our basic assumptions about the nature of truth and reality and the origins of knowledge shape the way we see the world and ourselves as participants in it. They affect our definitions of ourselves, the way we interact with others, our public and private personae, our sense of control over life events, *our views of teaching and learning*, and our conception of morality.<sup>1</sup>  
(emphasis added)

A maximally objective science, natural or social, will be one that includes a self-conscious and critical examination of the relationship between the social experiences of its creators and the kinds of cognitive structures favored in its inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

. . . I doubt that in our wildest dreams we ever imagined we would have to reinvent both science and theorizing itself in order to make sense of women's social experience.<sup>3</sup>

### **I. The Problem**

The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities of Women (CCLOW) circulated a letter in December of 1986 which contained the following statements:

One out of every five Canadian women has less than a grade nine education.

One in every five female Canadian adults cannot read or write.

One in every ten Canadian families is headed by a sole support mother, half of these families live at the lowest levels of poverty.

All too often social reform and policy changes--even those that have equity as an underlying principle--result in a deterioration of women's status in Canadian society in part because *so little is known and understood about the education and learning needs of women in our society.* (emphasis added)

What are we in adult education to make of these facts? In particular, what are we to understand about why social reform and policy changes, and educational programs, ostensibly designed to redress gender inequity seem unable to do? Why cannot our current theories, research tools and methodologies uncover the educational and learning needs of women? Why, too, despite the emphasis and apparent encouragement toward women going into science and technology fields as a way of alleviating future poverty, do so few women still enter these fields?

These are the type of questions which in 1970 at the time of the recommendations of the *Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women*<sup>4</sup> educators thought would by this time not need to be asked. Research into the problems had been done in the 1970's and it was thought to be just a matter of removing barriers and changing social policy. However, issues of gender (and related issues of class, race, and ethnicity) have been found to be much more complex and intransigent in all countries than originally believed. For example, Sweden, a socialist country whose political agenda and government policies are designed to encourage and promote women into the sciences and technology areas in order to improve their status has acknowledged its failure to be able to do so.<sup>5</sup> The fact that gender disparity still exists suggests that inequity cannot be erased by merely removing some obvious barriers but is imbedded in thought itself and knowledge gathering processes. The very premises of science, technology, and research as we have come to know them need to be examined critically.

A comprehensive critical examination of such premises is beyond the scope of this article. However, this problem of inequity because of its poverty implications for women (and children), is serious enough to open up an exploration of why educational research including that of adult education has to date been inadequate in uncovering the educational and learning needs of many women in our society. Any analysis questioning the very premises of research is bound to raise new questions and contradictions but the importance of the problem with implications for the practice of adult education warrants such discourse.

Other than the work of Paulo Freire<sup>6</sup> pertaining to class which has comparable implications to the theoretical aspects of gender inequity, little theoretical work has been done in adult education on gender inequity. Thus, other social science sources need to be explored. It is the aim of this paper to review current feminist thought in several disciplines in order to support the contention that we as adult educators also need to re-examine in a more thorough fashion the premises underlying our own research programs.

## II. The Location of the Discourse

Canadian sociologist Margrit Eichler<sup>7</sup> in 1985 spoke of four historical stages of feminist studies in Canada. Stage one, a focus on women, was begun in 1970 with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Stage two identified a focus on sex (gender) roles. Stage three saw the development of a feminist approach, while stage four, started in the

1980's and which continues in the present, is a search towards a new epistemology.

Eichler notes that with this last approach, the issue of feminine contribution to knowledge is now a debate involving several disciplines (and with a variety of theoretical perspectives within each discipline). Feminist scholars in Canada may be seen as concentrating upon the very nature of knowledge itself, examining its premises, and *how* we know what we claim to know. The debate not only involves several disciplines but necessarily cross-cuts disciplines as well as national boundaries.

Of special interest recently is the epistemology of science and its affiliate, technology. Until quite recently, science has received less scrutiny than other disciplines by feminist scholars, perhaps because of its avowed stance of objectivity and value neutrality (and the societal acceptance of that stance). With the work of scientists such as Thomas Kuhn<sup>8</sup> who first published in 1962, this protective veneer has been penetrated for scrutiny by a variety of scholars. As philosopher of science Sandra Harding<sup>9</sup> has noted, physics, chemistry, mathematics and logic, have been found to bear the cultural fingerprints of their distinctive cultural creators no less than do anthropology and history. Furthermore, the use of phenomenological models of inquiry in many disciplines has encouraged the re-assessment of positivist and empirical scientific models. Phenomenological models tend to favor more subjective and intuitive approaches, ones which generally acknowledge that knowledge is socially constructed. Thus the whole field of what constitutes research endeavors and what constitutes knowledge obtained by research inquiries is undergoing re-examination not only by feminist scholars but by others as well.

This epistemological interest concerning feminist research may be viewed as but one intellectual discourse pertaining to the epistemological questioning of all knowledge in a variety of disciplines. For example, interest in critical theory demonstrated at the 1987 Canadian Association of Studies in Adult Education meetings may be viewed as an example of interest in a discourse pertaining to the premises of knowledge in adult education. Critical theorists collectively have in common strands of concern regarding epistemological "*critique of science and technology, analysis of the social psychology of domination and emancipation, and interpretation of the paralysis of class conflict*".<sup>10</sup>

Thus, feminist discourse (or discourses) at the stage four level may be viewed as paralleling and often intersecting with other intellectual

discourse streams including critical theory and post-modernism as they grapple with epistemological questions and the contradictions inherent in any work in progress. Furthermore, it is apparent that there is not one but a number of feminist views depending upon the location of the discourse within a theoretical perspective. Nevertheless, the invidious nature of gender inequity and the relatively low priority often assigned to feminist discourse within any one theoretical perspective or discipline has encouraged interdisciplinary discourse amongst feminist scholars.

This article will review aspects of feminist discourse as expressed primarily in two events in Canada in 1986-87. The first was a national conference, "The Effects of Feminist Approaches on Research Methodology",<sup>11</sup> in which invitational papers on the topic were presented from sixteen disciplines including: philosophy, law, sociology, psychology, social welfare, literature (French and English), drama, economics, chemistry, and computing science. Implicit in the conference design was the recognition of the intractability of gender inequity in society which becomes reflected in all disciplines.

The second event reviews the work of philosopher of science Sandra Harding who visited several Canadian universities in 1987 and whose recent book *The Science Question in Feminism*<sup>12</sup> has stimulated much discussion. Are there insights from the discourse related to these events which can shed light on the problem of research pertaining to understanding the learning and educational needs of all women?

### **III. The National Conference on Feminist Approaches to Research Methodology**

The kinds of questions raised at the conference which have epistemological implications include: Are feminist criticisms of the premises of science justified? What difference has feminism made to the methodology of research or to the way research is conducted? Is there a new crisis between feminism and methodology, centering around objectivity and subjectivity? Have feminists created a dichotomy between the rational as masculine and the subjective as feminine? To what extent is the feminist criticism of the knowledge of science related to the knower? While an underlying current of some feminist thought has been toward relativism (the assumption that no value-directed inquiries can be objective and therefore all are equally justifiable) are not some modes of voice better even from a relativist position than others? Surely not every position (e.g. a racist one) is able to give rise to truth?

To what extent is methodology not a static entity, but one reflective of current social structure? Is there more methodological tolerance in some disciplines than in others? Are some of the questions addressed in methodology by feminists not really methodological questions but more rightly questions about management styles in organizations? How do the values of individualism and the role of the expert in our society go against the value of the inclusion of women in the *design* of technology and its systems? How can feminists in Canada engage in cross-cultural studies of *all* women (by race, class, ethnic origin) to prevent new knowledge from becoming egocentric and ethnocentric?

Are there ways of constructing new language which say what we want to say without the limits of conventional language? Is there a post modern language that can validate the intuitive knowledge claimed by women? To what extent is contextual thinking important, sometimes resulting in the difficulty of coming up with neat and tidy theories immediately but nevertheless of paramount concern? Is there value in dichotomous thinking in epistemology? These and many similar questions were addressed from a number of feminist perspectives but cannot all be addressed here. One major theme concerned subjectivity, objectivity, and relativism which seems of particular importance in the quest for insights into educational and learning needs.

### **subjectivity, objectivity, and the question of relativism**

Sociologist Thelma McCormack<sup>13</sup> in her keynote address at the national conference raised a central question of the extent to which feminist discourse has created a crisis for feminists pertaining to appropriate methodology. She stated, "This crisis is related to the two versions of the truth, the insiders and the outsiders, subjectivity and objectivity".<sup>14</sup> Her assessment is that feminists themselves are divided on the issue with the debates being so intense that methodology has become an end in itself, not a means of inquiry. However, one can respond that if the methodology used does indeed distort the truth, or prevents the experience of some kinds of knowledge being expressed or valued, then indeed it does need to be at the center of the debate.

Feminists who argue for knowledge obtained by subjective means (i.e. the autobiographical knowledge of the insider) do not always believe such means are more important forms of knowledge for uncovering the experiences and insights of women than are objective means (but may doubt that objectivity is possible). The feminist critiques of the three epistemological positions as presented by Harding later in this article

lead one to acknowledge that subjectivity probably is inherent in all research regardless of one's epistemological position. To acknowledge its presence allows one to engage in research with a rationality and an awareness of the conscious implications pertaining to all aspects of the research enterprise: topic choice; effects of researchers on the researched; interpretations of the findings; and the consequences of the findings. This is as true for the natural sciences as it is for the social sciences.

McCormack, however, cautions us not to reject objectivity and rationality:

. . . subjective feminism versus objective feminism . . . is a no-win situation. It paralyzes us and distracts what we are trying to do. Neither of the options can do what needs to be done: to prove the unprovable, to demonstrate that gender equality is a viable option in modern social life and that the oppression of women through symbolic systems destroys the richness and decency of a culture.<sup>15</sup>

Many researchers would agree with McCormack on the value of an approach toward research in which researchers value equally objectivity with subjectivity. Such an approach would lead to a more wholistic and balanced view of reality just as self-actualization theory in personality development demands a balance between the two kinds of knowing for the individual. What is at issue here, though, is that one kind of knowing, the rational and the more objective, is valued more highly in our research environment than is a knowing rationality based upon the subjective and the intuitive. Because the rationality of the subjective and the intuitive is not always understood, it is often assumed to be irrational or non-rational, and since it is more likely to be associated with women than with men, as a way of knowing it is not as highly valued in research circles or in public life. For example, Monique Begin, a cabinet minister in ex-prime minister Trudeau's cabinet for seven years noted at the conference that when she left the cabinet, Trudeau told her that her political acumen astounded him.<sup>16</sup> Never, he said, had he met a politician whose political sense of knowing seemed right on two fronts: the rational and the intuitive. Nevertheless, Trudeau often felt uncomfortable with Begin's intuitive judgement because he could not follow its logic and hence felt uneasy with the knowledge she gained about her political constituency in this way.

Harding also makes clear that although subjective understandings may be favoured by many feminists, this does not mean a leap to relativism.

Similarly, philosopher Marsha Hanen<sup>17</sup> in her conference paper notes that from the perspective of feminist discourse, not all positions are viewed as acceptable and not every point of view is expected to yield truth. However, this position seems not to have been well understood. Hanen points to the difficulty which the construction of a feminist epistemology poses for many people.

She says:

. . . to date there has been little constructive feminist epistemology, partly, I think, because of the difficulty that people trained to accept traditional notions of scientific rationality and objectivity have in introducing "subjective" or "personal" elements without feeling they have fallen into an unacceptable relativism. The problem of adducing grounds for rejecting certain views as incorrect while at the same time allowing that we cannot tell which from among the remaining intellectual positions is correct, even when these are incompatible with one another, is one for which we have no clear methodology. Perhaps different ones of these positions are acceptable in different contexts and for different purposes, and we do not have to choose. Women are sometimes said to be better able to deal with ambiguity and inconsistency than are men, and this is often attributed to women's greater involvement in the complexities of day to day living and personal relationships.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Harding cautions us to note that agnosticism and recognition of the hypothetical character of all scientific claims are quite different epistemological stances from one of relativism. Thus, while persons may wish to reject feminist discourse on the ground which it shares with other intellectual streams in post modernism and critical theory (e.g. criticism of science and technology), care should be taken before rejecting it on the basis of its assumed relativism.

#### **IV. The Work of Sandra Harding**

In the remainder of this article, I propose to review critically the premises underlying the kind of studies which have been done pertaining to gender. Using a framework which is that of Harding,<sup>19</sup> research



studies involving gender can be classified into five kinds of programs. At least three kinds of epistemological positions are represented by these programs. Each position and program can be subjected to rigorous critical examination. The criticisms of many scholars as well as those of the presenters at the 1987 conference will be incorporated in the discussion. Many of the conference presenters often unknowingly used classification systems of research studies in their fields which were similar to those of Harding.

### **types of research programs addressing gender inequity**

Harding presents five different but related research programs which are currently in use in the research of gender. Each program exemplifies a feminist critique of science while at the same time raising epistemological questions which can best be addressed by another program. It seems to be Harding's contention that the five programs demonstrate an evolutionary development from a more simplistic critique in vogue in the past to a program entailing a more complex critique, one which she hopes can evolve eventually into a feminist theory of science.

#### **1. equity studies**

The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.<sup>20</sup>

The first program concerns itself with equity studies. These studies which were especially prevalent after the Royal Commission report, documented the "massive historical resistance to women's getting the education, credentials, and jobs available to similarly talented men", and, "the psychological and social mechanisms through which discrimination is maintained even when formal barriers have been eliminated".<sup>21</sup> Included, too, are motivation studies which show why boys and men more often want to excel at science, engineering and math than do girls and women.

A feminist critique of such studies includes such questions as: Should women want to become just like men in science (or like male lawyers, like male physicians, etc.)? Is not equality or sameness with men a "low" goal for women? Furthermore, as law professor Lynn Smith<sup>22</sup> has noted, the getting of more women into law says nothing about the general participation of women in the larger society. Furthermore, in the case of law, studies from this program perspective do not question whether the law is as equitable for *women* as it is for men. The assumed neutrality

of the law (which other feminists would argue has a male bias) has been left untouched. The important aspect in law from this orientation is to ensure that all individual women are treated the *same* way as men. Similarly, with this program the norms of science (and the canons of literature, too) have been left untouched. Later in this discourse it will be questioned whether the treating of women in the same way as men is equitable for women. As Smith indicated, finding comparable male situations in order to compare females in the case of law has led to ridiculous situations. For example, in one case in Canada it was argued that the touching of a man's beard on a bus by a woman would be similar to the touching of a woman's breast on a bus by a male (breasts and beards being viewed as secondary sex characteristics). Thus, if the male did not view this act on his person as sexual harassment, neither should the female view the comparable act on her person as sexual harassment. The male norm therefore becomes the standard for judging equity.

## **2. studies of the uses and abuses of biology, the social sciences and their technologies**

Studies within this perspective aim to indicate "the way science (or research) has been used in the service of sexist, racist, homophobic, classist social projects".<sup>23</sup> Examples of these kinds of studies would include studies which show that despite work force legislation, domestic workers and particularly immigrant women, are treated differently from other workers. While images of motherhood and the value of the nuclear family are upheld and venerated, at the same time social support and daycare facilities for single mothers and non-nuclear families is shaky. Such studies demonstrate that we have different reproductive policies, forms of domestic labor, and forms of work place discrimination for women by class and race.

Like the first research program, studies in this program area do not question the norms of science itself. Researchers and practitioners "assume there is a value-free, pure scientific research which can be distinguished from the social uses of science, and that there are proper uses of science with which we can contrast its improper use".<sup>24</sup> Like the first research program, the problem here is "bad" science. It is bad science because these studies reveal the way that "research" can be harnessed into the service of sexist, racist, homophobic and classist social projects.

In both kinds of research programs, equity studies and uses and abuses studies, the epistemological stance from which such programs arise is

one which Harding calls *feminist empiricism*, empiricism referring to the search for knowledge by observation and experiment.

The discourse behind a feminist empiricism indicates that sexism and androcentric attitudes seen in science are evident especially amongst male researchers but these are conditions which can easily be corrected as soon as social movements "make it possible for people to see the world in an enlarged perspective because they remove the covers and blinders that obscure knowledge and observation."<sup>25</sup>

In law, the legal approach to problems would be to accept the objectivity of the law but to note that there may be exceptions which need to be found to make sure they are made consistent. This approach does not question the underlying legal principles on which the law is practiced but rather the way it is practiced.

From the perspective of feminist empiricism the questioning of feminists is at the level of questioning "bad" science practice (or "bad" legal practice). The solution as presented to society and to researchers in various disciplines is relatively attractive for a number of reasons. The most important attractive aspect is that it does not pinpoint the existing norms of methodology as the problem (nor existing laws) and thus does not attack "science-as usual" as the problem. Rather, it points to the "bad science" done by some of its practitioners, a practice which can be alleviated once the practitioners are aware of their bias and once more women become practitioners.

However, the difficulty with this solution is that it is not really viable for it contradicts the scientific method. The feminist solution proposed by feminist empiricism is that feminists (male or female) as a group are more likely to produce unbiased and objective results than are men or non-feminists. However, this solution goes against the norms of the scientific method, those norms which indicate its capability of eliminating any bias due to the color, race, or gender of the individual researcher. Furthermore, the concept of empiricism does not address a key origin of androcentrism which pertains to the *selection* of problems of study. The norms of empiricism were meant to apply only to the testing of hypothesis and interpretation of evidence (i.e. to the context of justification) and not the *context* where the problems for research are identified and defined. Harding concludes that ". . . feminist attempts to reform what is perceived as bad science bring to our attention deep logical incoherences and what, paradoxically, we call empirical inadequacies in empiricist epistemologies".<sup>26</sup>

### 3. studies questioning the value-ladenness of all inquiry

The first two programs have in common two underlying assumptions. ". . . in the first case the assumption that equality with men . . . should be our goal, and in the second case that pure science is value free and distinguishable from its social uses, and that there is somehow a clear distinction between the proper and improper uses of science".<sup>27</sup> Later programs begin questioning these assumptions.

With the third program, questions are raised about the fundamental value-ladenness of *all* knowledge seeking, and especially questions the selection and determination of what should be studied, what requires explanation, and what is of interest. From this research perspective, it is maintained that there are "cultural fingerprints" in what is designated as worthy of study. Because the experiences of men differ from the experiences of women, one can expect that research problems arising out of the experiences of male researchers as males will be the ones selected for study. While on the one hand one could say it is "bad" science for male researchers to only select problems which are of importance to them based on their experience, on the other hand, will not the selection and definition of problem always bear the "cultural fingerprints" of the dominant group in a culture? The work of Carol Gilligan<sup>28</sup> would be an important example of a study coming from this kind of research program. Her work does not use male standards for the women but alternatively demonstrates the meaning which the experiences of women have pertaining to moral development, a meaning which is not inferior to but different from the meaning of moral development as derived from male subjects.

It is from such a critique that one can see a burgeoning number of studies which seek to capture the "perspective of women". One popular way has been through biographical studies. As oral historians have sought to capture the voices of working class people usually unrecorded in history, so studies attempt to give voice to women of various age, class, race and ethnic origin. A number of studies relying on biographical or life history approaches can be cited here, such as the work of oral historians Susan Trofimenkoff, Eliane Silverman, and qualitative sociologists such as myself.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup>

A recent American study relying on life history materials obtained from the interviews of women from a variety of classes, ages and races, and ethnic origins bears consideration. In particular, this study may shed light on the illusive motivation questions faced by adult educators and alluded to in the introduction of this article. Inspired by the work of

Carol Gilligan and William Perry, the four psychologist authors operated from the premise that some women collectively are as rational as some men but that the rationalism is itself different because it arises out of the experience of gender. Experience of gender in the home and school thus leads to different epistemological assumptions of how one knows what one knows. In their work, *Woman's Way of Knowing*,<sup>32</sup> the authors outlined five epistemological positions, each with its own rationale based on experience, used by the women in the study.

The five ways of women's knowing identified in the study were: *silence*, in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless; *received knowledge*, in which women experience themselves as capable of receiving knowledge from an external authority but not creating it themselves; *subjective knowledge*, in which truth is thought to be personal and private; *procedural knowledge*, in which women use traditional "objective" procedures; and lastly, *constructed knowledge*, which is contextual and in which both objective and subjective strategies are employed.<sup>33</sup>

What are we as adult educators to make of the implications of these five ways of knowing for understanding the learning and educational needs of women? One view would be to see these five ways of knowing in a hierarchical fashion in which the last, constructed knowledge, is the highest order of knowledge and valued the most, with silence as the lowest order and valued little. But from a phenomenological perspective, one could ask in what situations and under what circumstances is each way of knowing valuable and perhaps unique in obtaining knowledge? To what extent do program designs take into account the various ways of knowing and place value on each and on the participants who use them?

A second aspect of this work could also have important implications for adult educators. Regardless of the "level" of knowing, the metaphor of "voice" (and hearing) was more important for the women than were the metaphors associated with "seeing" (e.g. blind justice, veil of ignorance, double blind tests). The study raises interesting speculation about the extent to which many adult educator practitioners as well as clients may feel more comfortable with "voice" modes of knowing than with "visual" modes.

This third research program clearly raises the epistemological question of relativism and its relationship (or non-relationship) to subjectivity. Must objectivity always be satisfied only by value-neutrality? And if so, does the feminist critique then force us to subjectivism, and to relativism, an assumption that *no* value-directed inquiries can be

objective and therefore all are equally justifiable? Such questions are addressed by the next research programs.

#### **4. literary criticism, historical interpretation, and psychoanalytic studies**

With such studies, research using these related techniques "have been used to 'read science as a text' in order to reveal the social meanings--the hidden symbolic and structural agendas--of purportedly value-neutral claims and practices".<sup>34</sup> Such studies suggest to Harding that the concern about maintaining dichotomies in science and epistemology (such as objectivity vs. subjectivity, mind vs. body, reasons vs. emotions) are not reflections of necessity for science to progress, but rather are related to a specifically masculine and probably uniquely Western bourgeois needs and desires.

Examples of studies probably inspired by this tradition include that of Nancy Chodorow in her *Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*.<sup>35</sup> In this pioneering work, one can see the possibility of re-examining the psychoanalytic tradition and re-formulating the extent to which the importance of the symbolic world suggested by a misogynist Freud still has validity as a symbolic system. The importance is one based on gender socialization within cultural norms rather than upon those derived from fixed biological norms. Is biology really destiny as Freud thought or are we socialized to believe that biology is destiny? Chodorow demonstrates in this work the profound mental consequences on both males and females which result from having women designated as the prime caretakers of babies and young children.

From studies such as these Harding raises a number of questions such as: What relevance do the writings of the fathers of modern science have to contemporary scientific practice? What theory would justify regarding these metaphors as fundamental components of scientific explanations? And finally, her searching question which leads her to the fifth and last research program: Can we imagine what a scientific mode of knowledge-seeking would look like that was not to distinguish between objectivity and subjectivity, reason and the emotions?

#### **5. epistemological inquiries**

The last research program concentrates upon epistemological inquiries related to science and research. Harding describes three kinds of alternative epistemologies which are themselves challenges or

alternatives both to each other and to the dominant epistemologies of science. Not only do these epistemologies pose problems in relation to the present dominant epistemologies of science, but they have paradoxical implications for each other, as has been already anticipated by the questions raised earlier in the discussion of the five kinds of research programs.

The three kinds of epistemological inquiry which Harding has named are: feminist empiricism; feminist standpoint; and feminist post-modernism.

Earlier, *feminist empiricism* was discussed particularly as its premises applied to the first two research programs. It is with the research program which begins to question not only *how* research is done but the *content* selected for research study that a second epistemological position emerges: that of the feminist standpoint.

### **the feminist standpoint**

The feminist standpoint epistemological position can be said to have its roots in the work of Engels and Marx. Their work saw that due to ownership of property, one class (the ruling class) dominated another class (the proletariat), and that the domination of knowledge. However, the dominant class, because of its position, developed only partial and perverse understandings, whereas the proletariat had the potential for a true understanding of the real nature of the world. In a similar way, the feminist standpoint argues that men's dominance in economic and social life has created a male culture which not only prevents an equitable distribution of power and resources but results in a male perspective which allows for only a partial and distorted view of the way of the world. By way of contrast, women's subjugated position provides them with the possibility of a more complete and less distorted view of reality.

This perspective does not argue for multiple realities (i.e. a masculine perspective and a feminine perspective) as far as truth is concerned. Rather it argues that the view of the "underdogs" (or under-women) because of their experiences is closer to the truth than that of most males. Thus, this perspective does not reject the possibility of "one truth" but encourages the search for it. The feminist standpoint as viewed from this perspective is "a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations of nature and social life".<sup>36</sup> The works of Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith<sup>37</sup> and of British sociologist Hilary Rose<sup>38</sup> would be good examples of feminist research inspired by this epistemological position.

Such a perspective will clearly have problems from a scientific empiricist view which denies that the gender (or class, or race) of the researcher affects the view of truth. But the perspective also raises tensions for many feminists as well because this perspective, like feminist empiricism, assumes that a value-free science is possible.

A major problem arising from such a perspective surely is: Can there be a *single* feminist standpoint if women's social experience is divided by class, by race, and by culture? Surely there are black, white, working-class, professional class, Canadian, Mongolian, and Indian standpoints? While this epistemology is the basis for most of the research studies in the third program of studies, nevertheless, studies such as Belenky, *et. al.*,<sup>39</sup> although inspired by a collective of women's views of knowing, nevertheless is not arguing from a standpoint perspective that women's way of knowing is "better" and "the truth", but rather that there are multiple ways of knowing based on reason and experience.

The standpoint position leads one to the question of whether there are multiple realities which can lead to multiple truths. While Smith acknowledges there will be more than one feminist version of reality, all versions she feels nevertheless will be more complete and less distorting than is possible with a science whose knowledge production is limited by a ruling class culture.<sup>40</sup>

Harding notes that perhaps the idea that there is only one reality which dominates this epistemological position comes from the falsely universalizing perspective of the dominant master. "Only to the extent that one person or group can indeed dominate the whole does 'reality' appear to be governed by one set of rules".<sup>41</sup> It is with queries such as these that one enters the realm of the last feminist epistemological inquiry, that of *feminist post-modernism*.

### **feminist post-modernism**

Feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemologies basically see good science and research as essentially objective and capable of value neutrality. Although strands of feminist *post-modernist thinking* appear also in these two epistemologies, in contrast, feminist post-modernism sees science and research as necessarily bearing "the cultural fingerprints" of the dominant groups of a society, not only in the selection and definition of the problems but of the knowledge claimed. Feminists from this epistemological position are questioning the very premises of science and research as they exist today as being



essentially androcentric and see the need to evolve a truly universal science, one which presumably could bear the cultural fingerprints of all people. It is this epistemology which essentially informs the fourth research program and of course is the culmination to date of epistemological thought for the fifth research program. It shares along with other intellectual movements a "profound skepticism regarding universal (or universalizing) claims about the existence, nature and powers of reason, progress, science, language, and the 'subject/self'".<sup>42</sup> In view of space, this article can not do justice to all of the tensions implicit in this epistemological position.

It is perhaps in the area of affecting the canons of literature, both in English and French, that post-modernism has most affected the products of a discipline. Pam McCallum<sup>43</sup> noted at the conference that writing by feminist writers has taken the task of not so much a construction of a genre unique to itself but rather a re-thinking of the whole idea of genre itself. She commented upon the influence which the new French writers have had upon writers in English, particularly with respect to language. As Dale Spender<sup>44</sup> has pointed out, words often are just not there in English for women. For example, there are words such as "nymphomaniac" and "frigid" to describe some sexual states of women, but no words for in-between states. The question arises then, are there ways of constructing a new language? What might a new language look like, a language in which the conventions of writings are changed? New writing by feminists often seem difficult at first because we are used to certain canons or rules, such as knowing the sex of the writer or characters which are not apparent in this writing. "The main way of writing (in post-modernism) is that the writing disrupts the conventions in order to speak in a new way".<sup>45</sup>

## V. Conclusions

This article started out with the observation that gender inequities in Canadian society which would seem to be remediable through educational programs to date remain relatively intractable. It would be of value for all of us as researchers in adult education to re-examine and re-assess the research models which are in current use. It may well be that the epistemological assumptions of these models undermine our abilities to obtain real advances in our understanding of the invidious effects of gender (and class and race) upon our educational programming. Attention to feminist critique in other disciplines may provide insights into inequity problems and into the relative sterility into which we as adult educators have fallen in trying to address inequity and motivational concerns.

While some may view epistemological concerns on any topic as remote or unrelated to the practice of adult education, for many female clients such attention is urgent. As an adult education practitioner responsible for designing programs for women for over eighteen years, I am convinced today that the best way to be "client-centred" in practice is to revise our premises of research. Until we can make systemic changes for women, based on new knowledge pertaining to the real educational and learning needs of women, as practitioners and educators we are but perpetuating inequity for successive cadres of female clients and ministering to the symptoms of that inequity with our programs.

It is to be hoped that the search for a disciplinary autonomy in adult education does not prevent us from participating in interdisciplinary feminist discourse and the search for real equity for women.

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