

**AGAINST FRAGMENTATION: FEMINISM, KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL WORK
PRACTICE.**

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Urged to Deny the Secrets

**Urged to deny the secrets within our natures
And to reject the differences of others,
We are taught to be fearful of ourselves
and contemptuous of others.
Separated from ourselves and isolated from each other,
We are taught to huddle together for comfort
Under the socially acceptable banners
Of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia -
We are discouraged from seeing the ways in which
We are all connected.
We are thus rendered powerless
And immobilised by our prejudices.
This is not an accident.**

Blanche Wiesen Cook

Introduction.

As social workers many of us have a strong and clear commitment to social change - to change those structures and processes deeply imbedded in our society that create inequitable living conditions for the people we work with. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that there is an intrinsic connection between the process of generating knowledge and the knowledge that is produced, and to illustrate the ways in which this acts to either limit or create possibilities for social change.

Knowledge development is important for social work practice because it is the basis on which we build our understanding of people, their situations, and our social system. In fact, knowledge development processes define what we consider legitimate and acceptable by transmitting the values, principles and taken-for-granted assumptions on which our society functions.

The central position of this paper is that knowledge development is a political process. It serves a very important function by both legitimating the current way in which our society operates, as well as severely limiting the possibilities for change. By exploring and critiquing these current processes we can open up potentials for the development of alternate ways of knowing and therefore the possibility of generating knowledge that may promote fundamental and meaningful change to our society, and hence to the lives of those we work with. Feminist theory has made a substantial contribution to this process and I believe that many of the insights developed from this perspective can be fruitfully applied to our practice as social workers.

As will become evident throughout this paper, I believe our knowledge is a socially constructed process, primarily controlled by those in society with the greatest power and therefore those with the most invested in the current social situation remaining unchanged.

In this sense, knowledge reflects a particular narrative, a way of seeing the world. (Richardson, 1990) Knowledge generation occurs in the context of a meta-narrative, defined by those in positions of power.

"All social scientific writing depends upon narrative structure and narrative devices, although that structure and those devices are frequently masked by a "scientific" frame, which is, itself, a metanarrative. This issue is not whether sociology should use the narrative, but which narratives will be provided to the reader. Can we construct a sociology in which narrated lives replace the narrative of unseen, atemporal, abstract "social forces"?" (Richardson, 1990:117)

Narrative is both a way of understanding and a way of telling about the world. One of the many values of this concept is that it reinforces that the way in which we write and present our information either challenges or reinforces this metanarrative. There is undoubtedly significant pressure on those in academia to only consider valid and credible, those forms of knowledge that are presented in ways that are consistent with this "scientific" metanarrative. Recognising the primary purpose of this paper in challenging these dominant paradigms of knowledge development, the knowledge presented here is not stated as a set of indisputable facts from an impersonal and detached authority, but rather as a series of insights and reflections based on my highly personal experiences and encounters with knowledge development, feminism and social work practice.

Practice Context.

My interest in this area began through my practice. I was working as a youth worker in a residential service for young people who had experienced severe abuse as children and who were now behaving in ways that reflected the enormity of these experiences in their lives. I became aware of two issues that were constantly pervading my practice.

The first issue relates to the disjuncture that appears between theory and practice. It seemed that a considerable amount of my University learning had no relevance here in the real world of people's lives and pain. No matter how hard I tried to integrate my knowledge of theories with my practice, it consistently felt like an unnatural process - square pegs in round holes. This frustrated me greatly, not only because I was keen to believe that the content that I had spent five years of my life so diligently learning was at least partly useful in informing my work now. But also because there was so much that I clearly did not know or understand about the lives of the young people I was working with and about how I might more effectively work with them and work to alter the social conditions that permeate and aggravate their lives.

There is an obvious and important connection between our analysis or understanding of a situation and our actions. Generally speaking, the more developed our analysis, the more likely it is that our actions may be effective. Actions based on minimal understandings are unlikely to lead to substantial change. I could not help but wonder if there was some deeper, political purpose to be served in maintaining this disconnection that I felt between our theory and our practice.

The second issue that consistently arose in my practice related to the ways in which we struggle to bring together individual experiences with broader social issues. Connecting the personal and political elements of our work, which is a dynamic aspect of feminist social work practice, seemed noticeably absent from my traditional social work training. In fact what was clear was that although these two aspects existed, they were rarely perceived in relationship to each other.

It seemed like an on-going battle to keep these parts together. Despite my deep-seated feeling that they belonged together, there seemed to be a strong force that made the joining, in an integrated and whole sense, a constant struggle. Again, I was convinced that the possibilities for change would be unavoidable if, as a society, we were able to connect the personal expressions of oppression with the structures and processes that dominate our society.

I began my PhD studies with these two issues in mind. I wanted to explore the potentials for working in more liberatory ways with young people, based on connecting theory with practice and personal experiences with political issues.

One of my first realisations was that there is an incredibly strong connection between the way in which we generate knowledge and the sort of knowledge that we generate. It was clear that I needed to know considerably more about knowledge generation processes before I could decide on my processes for generating knowledge. If knowledge development is a political process, then those forms of research which are based on unquestioned traditional epistemological principles, will be more likely to reinforce rather than challenge existing social inequalities. Research (as the agent of knowledge generation) is instrumental in facilitating or thwarting social change - through its underlying assumptions, processes and its conclusions.

Traditional Paradigms of Knowledge.

Positivism has dominated knowledge development in Western society for centuries. However, these traditional scientific paradigms are clearly being challenged, suggesting that empirical research may not be the only or always the best way in which to generate knowledge useful to our lives. Feminism has developed a strong critique of positivism and it is this challenge that I am particularly interested in exploring here. However, it is important to recognise that feminism's challenge occurs in the broader context of a 'postempirical crisis' in knowledge development.

The basis of the feminist critique of positivism lies in the central question of whether "the traditional view that something called an **objective** nature exists, corresponding to some clearly discernible **reality** that the human mind can understand through the simple and direct process known as **reason**." (Farganis, 1989:207)

Traditional knowledge development has been characterised by a number of dimensions. One of the most significant aspects is the notion that there is one truth - an identifiable, knowable truth; and that pure scientific methods are the only valid way of establishing that truth. Stressed in the scientific process is the notion that research must be objective and independent of the influence of the researcher. There needs to be a distinct separation between the subjective emotions of the knower and the object to be known. In this sense the knowledge gained is considered to be uncontaminated and therefore objective and true.

This conception of knowledge is not a feature of **human** life, but rather a development that has been constructed and controlled by men. In the context of our patriarchal society, men have been, and continue to be, the primary power holders and decision makers. Feminism suggests that women's involvement in the construction of knowledge can only be created by exposing current knowledge as a masculine development.

"An open avowal of the **masculinity of knowledges** is necessary for feminists to clear a space within the 'universal' and to reclaim women's places in it. In attributing a masculine status to knowledges which present themselves as universal, objective, truthful and neutral, as free of all sexual determination, feminists may for the first time be able to claim a space within theory for women **as women**." (Grosz, 1988:97)

Hierarchical Dualisms.

Traditional knowledge development is characterised by hierarchical dualisms. (Wilshire, 1989) The existence of these dualisms is evident throughout the knowledge generation process. It is also through the feminist exploration of these dualisms that the possibilities for tracing the connections between traditional knowledge development, change and social work practice become clear.

The separations of theory/practice, individuals/society, body/mind, public/private, subject/object, are all fundamental to traditional knowledge development and to the underlying assumptions of our society. Feminism suggests that the central dualism that underpins all others is that of male/female. (Wilshire, 1989)

Not only are these elements separated but they are valued differently. For example, our society values theory, intellect, and objectivity substantially more than practice, emotion and subjectivity. And those most valued dimensions are typically associated with masculinity in our society. It is in this fundamental and deep-seated way that knowledge construction in our society is gendered.

This concept of hierarchical dualisms forms a central point of relevance for social work practice. Hill Collins (1990) links this concept to the processes of maintaining oppressive forces over people's lives. By constructing dualities and valuing one over the other, we create the conditions for the oppression of some social groups over others. We are encouraged to believe that there is one ultimate set of characteristics to aspire to (consistent with positivist views of ultimate truth) and anything that falls outside this ideal is devalued on the hierarchy of human worth. Hierarchical dualisms generate an intolerance of difference and in this sense oppressive forces are justified.

It became clear to me that the separations that I had found so pervasive in my practice experience, that had so limited the possibilities I had felt for change, were indeed no accident. In fact, these separations appear to be intrinsic to the survival of the social system. To connect these elements would eliminate the possibilities for us as a society to value one person over another. Clearly, our social system is based on this hierarchy of human worth. The value of recognising the constructed nature of these separations though, is in the creation of a space for change.

Feminist Epistemology.

Feminism has made a substantial contribution to the debate about knowledge development through both the critique of dominant paradigms as well as the construction of alternate ways of developing knowledge. Feminism has attempted to develop epistemological principles, based on the experiences of women, that challenge the assumptions that characterise positivism. In essence, a feminist approach to knowledge creation attempts to explore and value connection rather than separation, to value the subjective and emotional elements of our knowledge, to recognise and celebrate the diversity and difference embedded in our experiences of the world.

"For feminists, the known are also the knowers, research objects are their own subjects; objectivity is a set of intellectual practices for separating people from knowledge of their own subjectivity." (Stanley, 1990:11)

Given that the primary agenda for feminism is change to the position of women in society, one of the central aims of feminist epistemology and research is social change. This action focus in feminism seeks to transform the existing social system and create social structures and processes based on egalitarian values and principles. (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986) Feminist epistemology seeks to explore the ways in which change is limited by traditional research practices and to then develop alternate methodologies that may challenge rather than reinforce the social system.

Feminism recognises the crucial importance of acknowledging the context of our knowledge production. All knowledge is created in a particular context (historical, cultural, etc) and by naming this we can ensure, not only that the influence of our context is considered, but also that this knowledge is not inappropriately generalised to other contexts for which it may not be valuable.

The role of reflexivity in feminist epistemology has been a consistent feature of this perspective. There is a commitment to continually reflecting on the research process and our role as researchers. (Fonow & Cook, 1991) In distinction to traditional approaches to knowledge creation, feminism recognises that it is not possible, nor desirable, to eliminate the effect of the researcher in the process. What becomes important then, is an awareness of our role and the effect that it may have on the knowledge that we generate. In this sense, insight and emotion become forms of knowledge in their own right.

Working with these principles in practice has meant the development of methodological processes that are participatory, qualitative, and action oriented. A great deal of feminist research practice is evidence of these epistemological principles in process.

Implications for Social Work Practice.

In my own search for alternative approaches to knowledge generation that may lead to more liberatory social work practice, I have found the growing body of knowledge within feminism inspirational and highly consistent with the values and goals of a social work practice that continually seeks to address the imbalances of power in this society that create oppression and disadvantage.

I have discovered new and exciting ways of proceeding in my practice and my research that may at least contribute to this broader challenge to our dominant social paradigms. This disjuncture between theory and practice and between individuals and society can indeed be challenged and collectively addressed in ways that will promote meaningful social change. To not do so, actively and vigorously, will almost certainly mean that the conditions of our lives will remain embedded in the hierarchy of human worth.

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