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Making a difference – questioning women’s studies

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As the 1980s grind to a close, and we look to the onset of the 1990s, there seems to be little of the political hope and collective confidence with which the struggles and debates of feminism were reopened some twenty years ago. Yet over the past two decades, women’s struggles, feminist struggles and feminist analyses have become an identifiable social force in many parts of the world. But when we try to analyse the present situation of women overall, we are confronted with some glaring contradictions.

On the one hand, a greater public visibility for feminist issues can be observed, as well as a more visible participation of (some?) women in public - economic and political - life. At the same time, it is clear from the evidence, worldwide, that more women are working harder and getting poorer. This overall context reflects shifts in the structures of exploitation and oppression with a sharpening of inequalities within and between nation states, within and between North and South; and, as flexibility becomes the key to the labour market internationally, so great inequalities are generated among women (Mitter, 1986).

It seems important to us as two feminists - one black and one white, both of us taking the label of ‘feminist’, although not unreservedly - who are trained/working in psychology and sociology that we should try to make sense of this overall context and our place in it. In this piece, we want to examine the contradictions which have developed as women’s studies courses have entered formal educational settings, and we want to consider the view that this entry has sometimes been marked by an exiting of feminism. As Currie and Kazi (1987) have asked: ‘Is academic feminism the graveyard of radical ideas?’ We share with other women writers the view that women’s studies is going to be a contradictory project, and that this can be seen among many of the disciplines of the human sciences. We have chosen to look at women’s studies in this book, which focuses on psychology, for we are aware that feminist psychologists are increasingly involved in the setting up and teaching of women’s studies and that this is often linked to challenges to the epistemological and political bases of psychology. [63]

One of the difficulties in trying to challenge the traditional bases of psychology involves overcoming the notion that psychology is the least progressive of the human sciences. While women’s studies can be seen by feminist psychologists as an escape route from the confines of traditional psychology, there are dangers of leaping uncritically into the subject. Although the more radical image of sociology is rarely sustained in practice, and in these ‘new times’ more rarely defended, there has been some room in sociology for feminists to make their voices heard. We hope therefore that our arguments are strengthened by drawing on our different backgrounds. The first question we raised when planning our contribution was ‘What has happened, and is continuing to happen, to feminism?’ Such an opening question may seem far from the central concerns of psychology, but we choose it as a way into a consideration of the wider political context against which we hope to discuss some of the present political and professional problems and challenges facing feminists in psychology, feminists in women’s studies. There are

numerous ways of approaching our question about the current state of feminism. For example, we could consider this question in relation to the fact that areas of Asia such as India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have all had women prime ministers who also defined themselves as anti-colonialist in one way or another, and discuss whether this is an appropriate starting point for such a question. Or we can look at the protests about the 'disappeared' in certain countries in South America. Or we can look at the struggles of black women and women of colour in North America who organized support for the campaign of Jesse Jackson in the 1988 US presidential elections, and ask, how do such campaigns relate to a feminist project? However, if we look at the United Kingdom, we could begin from remembering the lively, if at times emotionally demanding, Women's Liberation conferences which were held annually from the end of the sixties to the late seventies and which now seem to be events of feminist history. Their demise has left a gap. It indicates the lack of a general women's movement which could, and did, provide the arena within which the necessary discussions and debates about theory and politics could be generated.

We do not want to romanticize the experience of national Women's Liberation conferences, but while they still existed it was less possible to forget that women's studies developed from feminist, and therefore political, struggles. But what happens now? Where and how does feminist debate occur? How is practical experience evaluated? How are new ideas generated? The situation has become more fragmented and debates occur in this context. They are more often related to specific campaigns, specialist conferences, and, often developed through print as in pamphlets, Women's Movement publications (such as *Outwrite*, [64] *Spare Rib*, *Trouble and Strife*), feminist publishers/publishing. The setting-up of women's units in a range of organizations and institutions has created, during the 1980s, another base for activity. There are also specialized subject groupings located within academic production; of these the British Sociological Association (BSA) Women and Sociology caucus has been established for many years, as have the groups of women associated with journals such as *History Workshop* and *Feminist Review*. The development of the Psychology of Women Section of the British Psychological Society (BPS) has been in line with these trends in the other social sciences, although more recent. That it is more recent suggests that the struggles to set up such a section and to have it recognized by the BPS is reflective of how psychology in Britain has been slow to acknowledge women's particular contributions.

Our concern is to explore some of the current problems which feminists, involved in higher education and in the development of women's studies, face in this situation of fragmented feminism and in relation to the wider social and political contradictions already noted. We see the issues raised here as part of a prolonged and multi-faceted struggle about the nature of education, of knowledge, of social relationships. This struggle has to be multi-faceted in the face of the complexity of the social relationships of the institutions of education. They are structured and constrained by prevailing economic and class interests, by neo-colonialist and racist assumptions and practices as well as by patriarchal traditions, all of which combine to prop up that tendency to reproduce social inequalities of, for example, gender, 'race', and class. It is our argument that as feminists we want to resist, undermine and ultimately transform these tendencies. Within this framework the development of women's studies in psychology and the concerns of feminist psychologists can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the political issues for women in education as well as for women's studies more generally. It seems important that we should try to identify the feminist problems (and possible solutions) around women's studies and more traditionally defined disciplines such as psychology so that we can have more

understanding of where present problems, practices and struggles may lead us in the future.

Dilemmas

The lack of a coherent general political forum for the generation of debate has also meant the dilemmas associated with developments of women's studies need to be continually renamed. The most acute of these dilemmas relate to accountability, accessibility and political direction. Take accountability - for example in relation to feminist [65] theoretical journals. If the accountability within such journals is to the academic community, it can operate to reproduce elitism and notions of expertise, 'better' consciousness and the notion of professional feminists. On the other hand, how else do we make inroads into the conventionally established disciplines? The challenge is how to sustain the connection to political struggles and the radicalism of such projects against the possibly corrosive influence of established academic standards, interests and competitive argument.

This links to the dilemma of accessibility. The lack of a Women's Movement within which debate can be presented can mean that such debates, especially if located within academic discussions, can become too abstract and thus prove incomprehensible to all except those who initiated the debate. The difficulty with this is twofold. First, this may mean that some of the women about/for whom the debate exists may not be able to participate in it. Second, a central premise of feminist analyses, derived from some of the struggles of black writers and debates (Farnham, 1987), is that theory is intimately connected to politics. By this account, theory must, itself, develop and take its lead from grounded/concrete/specific experiences. Abstract discussion may generate further abstractions and become divorced from specific historical material instances, so not only placing itself outside the feminist canon but also, if defended, locating itself within a vanguardist approach to politics - an approach we reject. But it *is* a dilemma. Sometimes, the complexity of the issues to be addressed is unavoidably reflected in a language whose terms are not accessible to everyone. Such issues have to be dealt with in ways which ensure that intellectual production is always just that; so that the productions of ideas and arguments is seen as part of an overall political project, and not only as a means of entering certain career structures or competing successfully among certain academic elites.

Accountability and accessibility can be seen as part of the problem of political direction. Given the protracted nature of the struggles to set up and sustain women's studies within formal academic settings, and the unavoidable compromises with malestream institutional practices, how do we assess what we achieve in relation to any notion of a feminist political project? The question appears to centre around a dilemma which has been present for a long time within many progressive struggles: 'Is the main aim to join the "academy", or to change it?' Although there is no consensus among feminists (or others) involved in women's studies in higher and further education, we need to clarify differences of political emphases and objectives.

As with equal opportunities policies, there is a vital political distinction between projects which enable previously underrepresented groups (black women and men, black and white women) to enter the [66] institution and progress on equal terms with white men and transform the institution in that way, and projects which enable 'new' disciplines (such as women's studies) to enter the curriculum, and so transform the curriculum. Though this distinction is crucial in informing practices, we are clear that it is also necessary to liaise between such projects. For example, in the setting up of women's studies, is our interest to add women to courses and the subjects of study, or to increase the career prospects of women? Row is it

possible to change the kinds of social relations associated with intellectual work and transform what is understood as knowledge? And how far can women's studies contribute to such a process? How can education help in the realization of visions and the promotion of equality and social justice - how can it be harnessed to service political and social change?

We think that it is unfortunately not possible to assume a transition between joining and changing (academic) institutions unless the latter is persistently addressed. Fundamental to this is the further question: whose interests (which women? which men? which institutions?) are being addressed by, through, in women's studies? And who, within academic production will ask this question? These political dilemmas are not new nor are they unique to intellectual work. In part, they are the dilemmas of work within established institutions and the structures of white bourgeois patriarchal power. Our argument here is that as feminists we can never afford to forget these most awkward political questions, even if they are not being asked directly of us. The institution will not ask such questions of us - and, in fact, it blocks such questions being asked. In the absence of a coherent political forum we must devise some means of keeping these issues to the fore - a feminist ethics.

We are therefore suggesting that the lack of a Women's Movement within which debates can be generated and presented means that there is a gap which is not adequately filled by journals, nor by discussions only within higher education. This gap means that the dilemmas of accountability, political direction and accessibility assume a particular type of significance. Further, the difficulty of political/theoretical debates not being grounded can also mean that issues of accountability, political direction and accessibility are sometimes not seen, or are dismissed by the use of conventional academic, as distinct from feminist, arguments.

Women's studies in two senses

Besides exploring such double-edged problems, it may also be useful to think of women's studies in two ways. First, women's studies can be understood as women studying, women as students, women in [67] education. In this sense it is placed in the context of the development of women's education both within and outside the formal schooling and academic systems. Some significant initiatives have taken place in recent years in the development of courses for women which, under the impact of feminism, go beyond the traditions of women's education in conventionally feminine subjects and skills. We include here the various kinds of courses offering women 'new opportunities' of access back into academic education or into employment, of access into conventionally masculine areas of expertise and skill such as technology, physics, science (projects like Women into Science and Engineering) and manual trades. There are also courses for women in, for example, creative writing, and courses mainly about white women in society/history/science/ psychology. There are, too, courses about women and disability, lesbian writing and history, courses on women in therapy and so on. Some of these courses do try not to be exclusive, and include black women in their conceptualization - but still too few do so. There are also Access courses which attempt to encourage black people - both women and men - to enter institutions of higher education. We would argue that such courses do have to be seen as part of some project of feminism and, therefore, women's studies. This is because such courses not only facilitate, at times, the entry of some black people into higher education, but also because both black and white feminists will sometimes work on setting up and teaching these courses. And then, of course, black women will have a much greater presence in the institution. This first sense of women's studies/women studying includes courses which have been organized

by both state and non-state organizations; and many of the initiatives have come from outside higher education, from community-based groups including black groups of women and men, black women's groups, black and white feminist groups, the Workers' Educational Association, community and further education units and sections and so on. The often 'outsider' ('marginal') status of many of these initiatives, combined with the direct involvement of feminists in some of them, has meant that, in varying degrees, they have been able to break out of some of the conventions and constraints of the racially structured malestream education and academia. For this reason, we would argue, such developments are a central reference point for 'academic' women's studies while, of course, often being a route on to such women's studies courses. In this way, they are also a source of organic links between studying for degrees and an overall political project, part of whose aim is to empower women.

But women's studies can also be understood in the sense of the development of analysis of the world through women's eyes, in the [68] growth of feminist intellectual work and the development of feminist theory. These developments claim a recognition within academic settings not simply on the basis that women's academic contributions are of the same weight as those of men, but on the notion that women's work in some areas has contributed, and is continuing to contribute, to a transformation of what is defined as knowledge. However, there continues to be a strongly Eurocentric bias in much 'western' feminist work, indicating a serious limitation to the transformation that so far has been achieved. In other words, women need to be discussed as a disaggregated category; this is not a point we will develop in this chapter but we want to draw attention to it. For example, there have been challenges by black and white feminists and feminists of colour about the exclusionary, if not racist, nature of some of the current feminist analyses and practices (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986; Carby, 1982; Davis, 1981; Mohanty, 1988; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Richardson, 1987). Such discussions have forced some white feminists as well as other progressives, within higher education, to take on challenges about the uneven and exclusionary nature of such feminist approaches.

Women's studies, women's careers?

Feminism, through both indirect and direct influence on women and on institutions, has had some (limited?) impact on academic career structures. The growth in women's scholarly work, the establishment of women's studies, the adoption of equal opportunities policies as well as higher and more diverse aspirations among some women, all these are among the trends contributing towards a situation where some women, almost always white, may gain a foot- (or do we mean toe-?) hold in the career positions most often held by white men. There are for example, women professors of psychology, sociology, social policy; women who hold positions as deans and as members of directorates in higher education. Yet these achievements are fraught with contradictions both for the successful women in such positions and for other feminists, potentially providing symbols of feminist victory or betrayal, a minefield for misunderstandings and lost illusions. Politically, it is useful to recognize that the career system is divisive and individualistic. At the same time, this system is also indicative of what is valued, of who, and what work, counts institutionally.

In the latter sense the movement of women into career and management positions can be seen as validation for women. In a discipline like psychology where the student majority is female while the majority of teachers and 'authorities' are male, such a transparently [69] patriarchal arrangement must be challenged by endeavours to increase the representation and

opportunities for women as teachers and in positions of power.

But while entry into career and management structures will carry with it material and status advantages at a personal level, as well as bringing entry into more powerful and privileged groups, it may be accompanied by pressures to adopt more careful, cautious, 'appropriate' perspectives and priorities. In the present political framework of enterprise culture and market forces such pressures can push towards the side of the so-called 'new times' and 'new realism'. Moreover, while it is mainly white women who rise into such positions, this apparent challenge to patriarchally organized institutions may actually replicate neo-colonialist political and economic relationships in which white people hold power over black women and men. We have each had to deal with these issues - working in and being judged by institutions which uphold masculinist, racialized, elitist and individualistically competitive values: all of which are antipathetic to our understanding of feminism. And it is in this context that collective work for change has to struggle endlessly against such odds.

In identifying these problems and contradictions, we want to emphasize that we are not simply being critical in a negative sense, but are suggesting that the very process of acknowledging the problems is a prerequisite of understanding and of disrupting the damaging effects. The question, 'What part does entry into management structures play in the feminist political project?' is important to discuss, leading to a consideration of, for example, how entry into the position of 'honorary-white-male' can be avoided and how feminist principles can be both protected and promoted. To carry this forward more positively, women's studies could be grounded in a more explicit awareness of the struggles and diversity in women's lives. The logic of this is that as we try to develop women's studies with this focus, such courses will have integral to them a sense of a system of accountability which goes outwards. The insistence on reference points outside institutions of higher education may also provide a means of sustaining the politics of women's studies.'

Women's studies - making a difference

When we were students (one of us more than three, the other less than two decades ago) there was barely a trace of feminist thought to disturb the curriculum offered to either of us. To the extent that women's studies has been set up and that feminist inroads into psychology and other disciplines and courses have been achieved, we can argue that women and feminist work have insinuated themselves/ourselves into [70] the curriculum. Joining a women's studies course within or outside a formal educational setting has become one way of gaining access to a body of feminist ideas. Yet the very existence of these courses can obscure the feminist struggles through which such courses were created and on which they continue to depend (both for their inspiration and for their continuation). How is this history of struggle to be retained? Whose responsibility is it to ensure its visibility?

We have discussed two senses of women's studies. First, in the sense of women as students, women in education and, second, as promoting a woman-based world view. But we have also pointed to the relationship between them. For example, the organic links which may be forged by some women entering higher education, and the existence of women's studies courses are intimately related through the ways in which the teaching and assessment are organized. This may involve struggles with the academic establishment for the recognition of collective work both by students and teachers, and for greater diversity and choice in modes of assessment. Women's studies are often under-resourced, which can mean that students struggle financially to

remain on such courses, and the teachers juggle already seemingly impossible workloads and teaching responsibilities in order to teach on such courses. While it is necessary to recognize that teachers have more power than students, and some teachers have more power than others, the teachers themselves may be under pressure and politically isolated. However, there will also be different combinations of class background, sexuality, 'race' and disability which may produce differing political priorities and which may also cut through the basic staff/ student division.

In this chapter we have considered political challenges and dilemmas currently facing feminists teaching in higher education. We have discussed these issues in general terms in order to demonstrate their widespread and pervasive character. However, these issues seem to us to be particularly relevant to the present position of feminists in psychology. Psychology, a female-dominated (in terms of student numbers) discipline, has been less receptive to feminist initiatives than some other social sciences. As other chapters in this volume suggest, this may have something to do with its aspiration to be a science, and the meanings that 'science' is held to entail. But the situation is currently undergoing change, whereby some limited opportunities are opening up for women and for feminists. The concerns of this chapter have been to contextualize this development and to demonstrate how the possibilities of challenge or subversion - or co-optation, collusion and deradicalization, that follow from this change in structural [71] position, call for a politicized understanding of what is involved in the development of women's studies. We have suggested that as some women who define themselves as feminists become promoted, so this promotion may itself be at the expense of other women, including, for example, black women. This effect of 'divide and rule' can be partly countered both within the classroom and within the broader life of educational institutions by developing critical strategies. In this way, more women can then join in creating a collective awareness of such processes and their potentially discriminatory consequences. As Corinne Squire's chapter in the next section of this book shows, women's studies is an increasingly attractive option for feminist psychologists, although we have argued here that it has mixed effects, carrying with it the pitfalls of erosion of radicalism, or else reproducing some of the inequalities that structure higher education. We want to raise these questions now, when feminists are beginning to make some impact in psychology, when there is some movement away from being marginal to becoming recognized within the academic and bureaucratic structures of psychology.

Jan Burns documents in chapter 9 how questions such as 'inside vs outside' have characterized the debates of feminists in other disciplines or in professional organizations outside Britain for some time. In this context (and in the same chapter), Sue Wilkinson emphasizes the importance of consultation with, and accountability to, feminist psychologists who position themselves outside the psychological establishment. We have attempted, in this chapter, to broaden this perspective and to identify some of the processes of fragmentation and isolation of feminist academics, to comment on how they have occurred and to argue for a wider accountability of feminist academics. Such an accountability is not simply to the circle of feminists within a particular discipline or interest grouping but to the wider national and international feminist community. Such an overarching frame of reference brings us face-to-face with the differences among women. Thus, knowing these differences, and situating them within a framework for change, becomes part of the content and methodology of women's studies.

We have argued that the future of feminism politically, and of women's studies as an area of feminist activity, depends on recognizing, analysing and confronting practices in relation to difference among women. This can be done in a variety of ways which both interrogate and

extend central themes of women's studies. This would include both welcoming the process of re-evaluating past heroines so as to learn from the full complexity (and contradictions) of their lives and a readiness to abandon the notion of an established feminist orthodoxy. [72]

A significant factor in the current economic and political climate seems to be that some women have opportunities opened up to them in a way which may not have been envisaged previously; and we are suggesting that this calls for the development of more reflexive discussions and approaches. As part of a feminist political project women's studies lays claim to being different, to analysing difference, to making a difference. It is crucial to hold on to this radical vision, recognizing that the question of how 'we can lift as we climb' (Davis, 1988) has to be central for all feminists as we enter the last decade of the twentieth century.

Notes

Although our names are not given in alphabetical order at the head of this chapter, there is no junior author. As our last article was published as Bhavnani and Coulson, we wanted to write this as Coulson and Bhavnani.

- 1 What does 'good feminist practice' look like in this context? The following list may provide a starting point for thinking about this:
not cutting off from a broad base of awareness of women's struggles
feeling/acting accountable being honest
accepting challenges
establishing a reference group not defending the indefensible
always acknowledging the problems/the contradictions/the inequalities
not losing sight of the possibilities. . .

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