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If I am woman, who are 'they'? The construction of 'other' feminisms

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ABSTRACT

Characterizations of feminist identities are presented, represented and, arguably, misrepresented within current public debates and popular media. Issues of sameness and difference have come to the fore as both timely and politically relevant. This paper aims to address issues arising from engagement with feminisms, in particular those which we experience as 'other' but which, concurrently, resonate with many of our concerns. Conflicting views revolve around the viability of constructing stable political identities for women who elect to include the term 'feminist' in their self-description. These debates become increasingly complex when contextualized within relative power positionings of knowledge production in differing arenas. Drawing on the literature around the legitimization of gender and political identities, the authors reflect in this paper on the possibilities of engaging with these identities, both in our capacity of 'others', but also as individuals whose theoretical positioning resonates with the issues under consideration.

KEYWORDS

Othering, sameness, difference, identities, commensurabilities

TO BEGIN: WHO ARE WE?

This article is the product of informal meetings and discussions between the four authors. The series of debates that ensued between us were borne out of discussions of the potential possibilities of forging workable political relations between Western and non-Western feminisms. In the course of these conversations the debate extended to questions of whether we can or should engage with multiplex strands of feminist thought within the broad category of feminism more generally and how such an engagement might be played out. Our discussions of the question put forward in the title became increasingly complex as the similarities and differences between the perspectives of each of the authors became apparent.

Whilst we, the authors, would broadly describe ourselves as Western feminists, there are innumerable points of convergence and divergence between our theoretical standpoints. Moreover, we are similar and we are different along a number of fault lines. For example, two of the authors are in their twenties and two of the authors are in their forties. There are also a number of connections as well as differences between all four of the authors in terms of ethnic background. However, three of the authors would broadly describe themselves as white and one author would refer to herself as of mixed 'race'. The ways in which aspects of our experiences intersect and diverge further illustrates this point. For example, we all work in psychology departments but

we are all at different stages in our careers. Through our discussions of this question we became increasingly engaged with each other and concerned with understanding our resonances and differences. Our attempts to engage with the question proposed underscored the ways in which our attempts to engage with each other are always already framed within varying dimensions of similarity and difference.

The question that we ask in the title has already received serious attention within the academic and feminist literature. However, given the range of views and the differing ways in which each of us could be represented, we found it productive to explore this complex subject further through the written medium. In this article we aim to address issues arising from engagement with feminisms, in particular those feminisms which we experience as 'other' but which, at the same time, resonate with many of our concerns and understandings. In engaging with this question, we aim to trace a path through the debates and highlight how we have sought to engage with these as a group rather than solely as individuals.

FEMINIST IDENTITIES

Characterizations of feminist identities are presented, represented and, arguably, misrepresented within current public debates and the popular media. In spite of the many dominant discourses in our culture that conceptualize 'feminist' as a stable and essential identity, be it a favorable or (more often) an unfavorable one, feminism is not monolithic. The diversity of dialects of feminisms makes it difficult for us to conceptualize feminism in the singular at all (Hemmings, 2005). To construct a watertight definition would be exclusionary whereas a definition with too few descriptions could render the term meaningless (Allwood and Wadia, 2002). Moreover, and particularly over the past decade, the tensions and conflicts between feminist positions have made it hard, if not impossible, to define not only *what* feminism is, but *who* a feminist might be.

The increasing heterogeneity of feminist identities has developed not just as a continuum along the political spectrum, but in the form of differences - and often divisions - along generational, ideological and religious lines (e.g. Johnson, 2002). Moreover, many of these differences are constructed along dimensions of power (see for example Burns, 1999) and frequently expressed in terms of binary oppositions (e.g. white/black, heterosexual/lesbian, first world/third world, and so on). Neither 'white' feminism nor 'black' feminism are essentialist categories (nor are they in opposition); rather, they are fields of contestation inscribed with discursive and material processes and practices in a post-colonial terrain (Brah, 1996, p. 111). Feminism is only ever prefixed by 'white' when it is being problematized: most of the time its whiteness is rendered invisible by its universalist pretensions (Young, 2000, p. 50). The various instantiations of feminism do not simply reflect the extent of diversity between women, but the power differentials and inequalities that exist therein (e.g. Byrne, 2003). As Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) argue, "we must not assume that gender unites women more powerfully than race and class divides them" (p.2).

The multiple positionings within feminism raise a number of questions, not least of which is how feminism can engage with relevant 'each' others. Diane Richardson (1996) argues that variation is such that feminists have begun to locate alternate positionings within 'feminism' precisely as feminist 'Others'. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (1996) describe the almost paradoxical situation whereby "Western academic feminists, committed to the articulation of what is Other in relation to patriarchal male values, now have to confront the challenge of other Others for whom they themselves constitute a new hegemony, and in relation to whom they stand in positions of power and domination" (p.7). The relationships between feminists around these issues at local, national and international levels have been so tense as to cause Lynne Segal (1999) to speak of "feminists even frightening each other" (p.9).

Within this context, the theoretical and political difficulties of according authority to (other) feminisms, and the processes and discourses by which feminist behaviors and ideologies are constructed as legitimate and 'appropriate' (Ussher, 1991) become relevant. There are conflicting views about the possibility of constructing recognizable and stable political identities for women who elect to include the term 'feminist' in their self-description.

I AM 'WOMAN'?

One response to the issue of difference between feminisms has been the development of unifying or totalizing strategies. It is argued that unity amongst women is desirable and perhaps necessary for organizing political action (Young, 1990). Woman as 'individual' has been constituted as the place where psychology and politics - psyche and citizen - become enmeshed. This individual thus becomes crucial to the construction of and theorization of the political project of feminisms.

However, the rubric of feminism includes prolific, fractured, sometimes contradictory identities, which reflect differing concerns of women who are variously positioned and constituted within particular social and cultural contexts (Hepburn, 1999, 2000). A key point here is that the complex interweaving of gender with issues such as race and class calls into question the assumption that the category 'woman' provides a foundational grounding for fluid relations between feminists and women generally (see also Hekman, 2000).

Judith Butler (1990), amongst others, suggests that the particular basis for identification between women, the unitary subject, can work to exclude those who do not fit certain conceptualizations of what constitutes the category of 'woman'. This can be seen in early feminist work, where theorizations reflected the concerns of specific kinds of women, positioned as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle class (e.g. Nicholson, 1990; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997). In this way a unifying strategy may be undermined by its potential to create an excluded, subordinated other. As Dongxiao Qin (2004) points out, it is impossible for any one feminist self-theory to articulate an all-encompassing 'truth' about women as 'truth' is partial and culturally contingent. These analyses render questionable the assumption that the category of 'woman' in and of itself can provide a fixed, stable or essential relation

between feminisms. 'When "identities" become pure...the potential for diverse and democratic collectivities is threatened' (Caraway, 1992, p.1).

However, global and eco-feminists (e.g. Howell, 1997; see also Mendoza, 2002) argue that refusing to engage with 'other' feminisms, or keeping them separate, is not an alternative. This is to 'silence women' and render invisible the cultural abuses of women around the world (Hodechenedel and Mann, 2003). In emphasising the common humanity of all women, these feminists advocate the need to build international feminist links, 'in order to influence public policy makers internationally, nationally and locally to embrace the principle of "women's rights as human rights"' (Mbire-Barungi, 1999, p.435). Elahe Povey (2001) suggests that this "could have a great impact not only on gender relations, but also on the process of democratisation and secularisation" (p. 44). Proponents of this view have argued that "by promoting discourses of difference and identity, academic feminists have disunited and castrated the feminist movement" (Hodechenedel & Mann, 2003, p.6).

WHO ARE 'THEY'?

The dimensions of gender, 'race', sexuality, social class, and culture indicate that feminists *are* different (and potentially 'other') along *many* dimensions of power or powerlessness. It is extremely difficult to tease apart the power dynamics between different feminisms, and hence the processes by which 'other' feminisms are constructed.

They are 'other'

Feminists such as Carol Gilligan (1982) have argued that the recognition of difference and otherness is not only undeniable, but also desirable. Drawing on the Lacanian notion that 'the self *needs* the other in order to be a self at all' (emphasis added) (Sampson, 1993, p.153), others suggest that 'otherness' should be acknowledged and celebrated. Similarly, Iris Young (1990) problematizes the assumption of necessary homogeneity, arguing that notions of unity, community and mutual identification have been deployed as alternatives to values engendered by capitalist patriarchal society. However, in attempts to accomplish this ideal, diversity between and within political groups has been suppressed and downplayed. Young suggests that from this framework, disparity in and between groups can be and has been conceptualized as a transgression of the notion of sisterhood. According to Young, this particular framework is born out of the lack of exploration of alternatives for feminist political activity. She proposes that acknowledging the presence of others need not rest on understanding another's perspective; difference should be embraced and celebrated, and diverse groups allowed political representation (see also Squires, 2001).

They are 'different'

Some feminists have criticized the process of 'othering' and the very notion of 'other'. They suggest that this notion should be replaced by the broader, and more

neutral, concept of 'difference' (see for example Carabine, 1996), mainly because the mere fact of representing the 'other' may disempower and distort, or at least patronize and essentialize, those who are othered. This works to reinforce and reproduce the very structures of power and dominance which feminists should arguably be trying to undermine (c.f. Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997).

As Hannah Frith (1996) has noted, "not all differences are equal" (p.181). This raises a number of questions. How are differences constructed and bounded? And crucially, who defines which differences matter? (c.f. Burman, 1996). Engagement with these questions might provide some insight as to why and how some feminisms come to be seen as not only different but as 'other'. These questions have practical implications. For instance, Frith (1996) has highlighted the difficulties young women have in identifying with the multiple and shifting identities of feminism (c.f. Budgeon, 2001).

Hotly debated issues within feminisms, such as concerns about pornography and the politics of heterosexuality, have served as flashpoints. In research which explored women's accounts of pornography (see Ciclitira, 1998), a participant ("Wendy") voiced anger and disillusionment with feminism and its political activities. In her view, anti-porn feminism has created unnecessary categories and oppositions (including feminist/non- feminist):

There's loads of meetings, pornography, let's, let's do a march, 'take back the night march', and all this crap, in bloody Tottenham, go and march in bloody Hampstead, you cheeky buggers, and throw a brick through a pornography magazine window. They really think they've done something. You know I find that amusing, and I'm being cynical there. And they call, these so called feminists, I am not a feminist, and then again what is a feminist? But they've defined it, what it's supposed to be, number one you've got to be a lesbian, number two you've got to be this, well it seems that way to me.

In noting the difficulties that the category 'feminism' has caused her, Wendy reproduces stereotypical representations of what feminists are and do. In her view, middle-class white lesbian feminists marching in the UK against pornography and rape do not speak for a black working-class sex worker. Her own self-defined 'womanist' stance suggested a personal dilemma of feeling politically aligned to women's issues, and yet unable to accept certain perceived feminist dogmas and practices. Some black feminists gave up waiting for their experiences to be represented in mainstream feminist literature and adopted (like Wendy) a womanist approach (Wise, 1987) in which the issue of race is central (Collins, 2000; see also Boisnier, 2003).

However, multiplicity is seen as especially important in the context of feminism(s) because the factors of 'race', sexuality, social class and culture make it difficult to define what is 'same' and what is 'other', and therefore to determine boundaries within feminisms. Arguably, before we even ask ourselves which differences are most salient in the process of 'othering', we should be questioning the very notions of sameness and difference, challenging essential and exclusivist

'us'/'them' categorizations (Bulbeck, 2000), and deconstructing absolute boundaries between 'other' feminisms. Michelle Fine and Judi Addeleston (1996) have warned against explanations that use only 'sameness' and 'difference', arguing that institutional power depends on using both discourses. Indeed, the power of institutional narratives, as well as those of resistance, lies in the way they can avail themselves of manifold discourses.

Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) similarly argue that both denying and affirming otherness is problematic. To neglect otherness is to 'homogenize women's experience ... straining to disregard ethnic, racial, class and other distinctions' (p. 11), which are possibly more salient than shared gender (see e.g. Phoenix, 1994; Chantler, Burman, Batsleer & Bashir, 2001). The differences between women are complex and not always transparent. Feminists in the West may appear to have freedom of speech, and compared to those living in non-democratic countries are able to speak out. But even a successful 'white' Westerner such as Susan Sontag (2001) became a target of fierce media criticism, death threats, and calls to have her citizenship revoked, after daring to offer a critical reading of the tragedy of 9/11.

CONSTRUCTING 'OTHER' FEMINISMS

These issues of sameness and difference have come to the fore as both timely and politically relevant. In the current world climate, one of these differences is that between western and non-western cultures, with its associated religious and ideological differences - an abundance of 'otherness'. This distinction is currently at the heart of heated controversy as to whether it is possible, or even desirable, to find a common ground between Western and non-Western feminists, especially where Islamic feminism is concerned. Val Moghadam (2000) has argued that both the term and referents of 'Islamic feminism' are subjects of controversy and disagreement. In this context, as was mentioned earlier, some feminists would dismiss the idea of engaging with 'other' feminisms. For instance, Julie Burchill (2003) in the *Guardian* expressed skepticism about this particular conjunction, describing "women claiming to find feminism in Islam" as an example of "people who should know better searching for something (and often claiming to find it) where it never could be" (p.5).

Similar arguments have emerged around the question of whether feminism(s) are commensurable with particular religious affirmations. This is clearly evident in recent debate over the Vatican document entitled 'on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and the world'. The document calls in to question feminist(s) views on gender equality arguing that feminism(s) disrupt the 'natural' family structure of mother and father, and sets up men and women as enemies. It specifically constructs radical feminists as problematic for attempting to equalize power differentials between men and women (Owen, 2004). For some the document represents a return to religious fundamentalism and a reinforcement of traditional gender roles (e.g. "Vatican Attacks Feminism," BBC, 2004). Whilst for others the document represents a furthering of particular feminist aims in that the document calls for the presence of women in the workplace (e.g. "Head to Head," BBC, 2004).

These debates become increasingly complex when contextualized within relative power positionings of knowledge production in differing arenas. Shahrzad Mojab (2001) argues that Western feminist theory is in a state of crisis, since it is challenged by the continuation of patriarchal domination in the West despite legal equality between genders. She believes that it also overlooks oppressive gender relations in non-Western societies, and while rejecting Eurocentrism and racism, it endorses the fragmentation of women of the world into religious, ethnic and cultural entities with particularist agendas. In evaluating Islamic perspectives, Mojab argues that gender is a site of the exercise of power, which is unequally distributed and hierarchically organized. She concludes that patriarchy is not simply a problem of religion, nor can Islam be degenderized as if it were neutral as regards gender relations.

Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Maria Holt (1996) have argued that Islam can function as a radical and empowering ideology, particularly when contrasted to Western perspectives. They differ in that Holt sees this ideology as requiring the repudiation of specific needs by women, while Mernissi attributes this requirement to the historical imposition of Western values rather than to the development of Islam itself. For Holt, allegiance to Islam is presented as involving a voluntary abrogation of power by women. For Mernissi, it is not Islam itself that constructs difference, but the need to differentiate itself from the 'other' (i.e. the West). In this sense, the West's promotion of human rights in the Third World can be seen as a strategy for facilitating the circulation of Western goods and services (Majid, 1998).¹

(IN)CONCLUSIONS

So where does this leave us in terms of 'other' feminisms? Current forms of feminisms are so varied that it is perhaps unsurprising to find so little agreement over this issue. One side of the debate claims that the heterogeneity of feminism constitutes 'a political tragedy' (Hodechedel and Mann, 2003, p. 6). The other asserts that 'the ability to deal with difference is at the centre of feminism's survival as a movement for social change' (Bulbeck, 2000, p. 36) and that 'difference –in all its multiplicity – might be understood as the true energising force in feminist theory, the source of its more radical and transformative discoveries' (Johnson-Roullier, 1997, p.1188). The conflicts seem to stem, in part, from contrasting conceptualisations of 'womanhood', with one side emphasising homogeneity', sisterhood, and feminist solidarity (Caraway, 1992), with the other focusing on difference, otherness and dynamics of power. We are stretched, it seems, between women's sameness and women's differences.

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990) contend that the solution lies in "replacing unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity" (pp. 34-5). This does not mean neglecting women's or feminists' similarities, but allowing, as de Lauretis (1986) says, for a "more inclusive feminist frame of reference" (p. 14). As Lynne Segal (1999) has argued, solving the tensions and conflicts between feminisms may not always be possible, desirable, or even responsible.

Both gender and political identities become recognized, stabilized, and legitimized in manifold ways. Perhaps the real questions are when and how this 'constructing of reality' occurs. When do these identities become so resistant that they can produce political consequences? What are these consequences? Is this an interesting or useful focus for the construction of a political project? Do we need to judge feminisms as 'same', 'different' or 'other' - effectively to evaluate them 'good' or 'bad'? Might it not be more productive to trace the path of feminisms as objects in and of themselves? To ask how recognition as feminists occurs rather than to focus on whether or not it is appropriate? For example, in what way might feminisms need to be part of a global protest?

It may be more fruitful to recognize commensurabilities that exist in practice and to work with these, rather than questioning their legitimacy. Many of the worries which energized feminists in the 70's persist, but the inequalities and divisions between women themselves have dramatically deepened (Segal, 2000). To avoid polarization in political debates is not easy but can be helpful (Bulbeck, 2000). Engaging with these as recognized political forces, where relevant to and resonant with our own work, might be more productive than to try to become gatekeepers.

Endnote

¹ Stephen Frosh (1997) has argued that it is fundamentalism not religion which is frightening, because of its certainty and its refusal to tolerate difference or opposition. Among the most characteristic features of fundamentalism is its gender politics, which considers women's adherence to communal values and practices as crucial. It is particularly seductive because it offers solace to lost souls. Based on omnipotent fantasies and the denial of otherness, its refusal to acknowledge the existence of legitimate controls and alternative ways of being offers release from the pain of uncertainty.

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