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## Being in the academy: a cross generational conversation

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## **Being in the Academy: A cross generational conversation**

This article builds upon the methodological and intellectual approach taken in our co-authored book *Why Feminism Matters* to explore some of the synergies and disconnections in the experience of being in the academy at different historical moments which range from the 1970s to the present. We use the interrelationship between different feminisms in the context of our lived experiences as a mother and daughter whose experience of the academy has crossed, in the language of waves that of second wave feminism into third wave. It also bridges the mainstreaming of women's studies in many universities, and claims of post feminism. By focusing upon trajectories of change both within the specificities of our own lived experience and the wider terrain of social change, albeit often marked more by continuities than transformation, we examine the particularities of life in higher education in the different roles than we have performed and which we each still have. There have been significant demographic, cultural and legislative shifts, for example within the culture and practice of equal opportunities, but our conversations demonstrate the endurance of imbalances of power and the continuing need for a feminist politics of difference which can engage with contemporary life in the academy with its intersecting axes of inequality.

### **Introduction**

This article arises from our experience as two feminist academics; we are a mother and daughter team who have lived through different eras of feminism within the broader context of the UK, and also more specifically within the academy. This article focuses upon a cross generational conversation between our lived experiences as two white British women and the relationship between a mother and daughter in order to reflect more widely on a conversation between feminist theories and the changing social contexts in the UK. In particular we focus upon the importance of voice and the possibilities which women have to speak as well as the constraints of silence. By adopting a cross-generational approach, we argue that there remain considerable limitations to the expression of gender difference and

inequalities in the academy in spite of the apparent advances that have been made in the promotion of diversity and sex equality and the claims of post feminism. Our focus on a cross generational exchange between women lends itself particularly well to an autoethnographic approach which prioritises the situatedness and wider social and cultural implications of lived personal experience in order to explore what is changing and what remains constant in relation to women in the academy. Our autoethnographic approach highlights the idea of voice, expression and silence and links personal experience to its social context as understood by feminist theorising. We adopt the device of writing as I-Kath and I-Sophie as part of our autoethnographic methodology in order to accommodate subjectivity through the first person pronoun and situatedness and specificity through naming.

This article was triggered by our experience of presenting a paper, based on our co-authored book, *Why Feminism Matters*, at a conference, *Celebrating the Feminist Within*, at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK in the summer of 2009. UEA has particular importance for us in providing the background to the feminist conversations upon which this article is based, because the university was the site of Open University Women's Studies residential schools through the 1980s and 1990s. I-Kath was a tutor on these courses, which were part of an undergraduate programme and I-Sophie came along too with her sister and brothers, looked after by their father, for a family holiday on campus. In 2009 we returned for the first time since the early 1990s, when I-Kath is still working for the Open University but in a full time capacity as Professor of Sociology and I-Sophie, was pregnant with her first

child and also an academic sociologist, albeit on a fixed term contract at Manchester University UK.

Going to summer school in the 1980s and 1990s, I-Sophie remembers attending some of the extra curricular activities, like films (such as *Thelma and Louise*, *9 to 5*), plays and poetry readings by poets like Jackie Kay and Grace Nichols which demonstrated the vibrancy and diversity of feminism and women's studies at the time. Feminist ideas embracing the intersection of different dimensions of inequality became an unstated background to her growing up and childhood. For both of us, UEA was a place where women's studies and feminist ideas were taken for granted and I-Sophie's memories of this place were of her father having responsibility for the children, whilst her mother worked. These personal experiences as part of an auto-ethnographic approach form a route into the construction of a dialogue across generations; the framing question is how change has taken place and what endures, using the example of higher education, and what this means for feminist politics based on challenging inequalities. Using points of connection and disjunction in our own experience we demonstrate the relevance of a feminist politics of difference which persists across generations, albeit reconfigured and differently inflected.

These issues are part of a social and cultural context which is marked by change as well as by the endurance of gender as a key factor which shapes experience as white British women. Our own experiences as a mother and daughter are both related and situated, temporally and spatially. As such, we are aware of the specificity of this conversation, as we are both situated in particular ways. The age gap of thirty years between us covers a period of

political transformation during which, for example more women participated in higher education. We have in common both our kinship relationship and also our places of employment and ethnicity. We both currently work in sociology departments (although I-Sophie trained as an anthropologist), which is worth mentioning as sociology is a disciplinary area with strong links to gender studies and in which feminism might have been said to have been mainstreamed within the curriculum.

### **Ways of Speaking**

This article engages with the problem posed by such experiences, firstly in the context of the teaching and research we do in what can be seen as the ever-widening gap between academia and everyday experience, and secondly by the particularities of what it means to write as a woman, as women, about sexual difference and the politics of gender, in changing social and political contexts. This dilemma is one that informs feminist debates (e.g. Spivak, 1987; Riley, 1988; Di Stefano, 1990; Braidotti, 1991, 1994; Gatens, 1991; Butler, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Ramazanoğlu, 1995; Stanley, 1997; Smith 1997, 1998). Feminists have been concerned with giving women a voice which includes being able to articulate women's experience in the first person in ways which include differences among women (hooks, 1984, Ramazanoğlu, 1989, Spivak 1987 and in the third wave Chakraborty, 2007 or through intersectionality, Hill Collins, 1990 [2000] and Taylor et al 2011) Taylor. This article explicitly addresses the issue of how it might be possible to write in a shared dialogic voice (see Woodward and Woodward, 2009 for a discussion of some of these issues); how to write as a 'we' in a way that also

recognises both the situatedness of that 'we' which does not elide it with a universal woman and also our own positioning as two individuals: I-Sophie and I-Kath.

The practice of collaborative writing is one that is familiar to many academics; there are different strategies of managing this, such as writing separate sections, passing material from one to the other, eschewing the first person altogether in the guise of objectivism, conforming to traditional academic norms or assuming an elitist royal 'we'. We are both aware of the dangers of writing as 'we' as mother and daughter, from a position of privilege as white middle class women, in light of feminist critiques (for example, Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1989, revisiting the issues in Brah and Phoenix, 2004, hooks, 1984, 2000, Hill Collins, 1990 and 2000, Lorde, 1984,) which have demonstrated both the essentialist assumptions which either prioritise biological connections among women or silence differences such as those of race ethnicity and disability. 'We' is necessary for practical reasons often where there are several authors, but this is dialogic 'we' situation in which we are two 'Is', dialogic we as there are two situated 'Is'. The use of we, especially 'we women' has been problematic especially because it might suggest a universal category as if there were no differences among women. Not only has second wave feminism been criticised for its homogenous classification of women, but also intellectually by Judith Butler's challenge to the possibilities of an ontological category woman for its homogenous assumptions of class and race. Feminist theorists of race have shown the liberatory possibilities of Butler's challenge (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) as well as acknowledging the problems that Butler's challenge poses for collective

political action (Chakraborty,2007, Ramazanoğlu, 1989, Woodward and Woodward 2009). Our conversations suggest that there are sufficient points of connection and endurances of inequalities and silences to sustain our argument.

The rationale for the use of the first person is firstly, because of its status within feminist histories in relation to putting gender explicitly into the public arena, and secondly, to situate experience and demonstrate the interconnections between the personal and the political. We have proposed situated 'Is' instead of adopting a process of triangulation, which implies an equivalent relationship between author, text and reader. In exploring feminism across generations (Woodward and Woodward, 2009) there is a gap between feminist theory, practice and language in the academy and women's lived, everyday experiences.

Each of us speaks as an I who is socially and culturally constituted, but within specific and contingent situations. Some feminist commentators have adopted the use of she to locate women's experience (Stanley, 1997; Battersby, 1998) as an alternative, gendered strategy for situating experience as specific to women, but distancing it from an excess of subjectivity and deflecting criticism of prioritising embodied gendered positioning that could be construed as essentialist. This is an alternative version that has some purchase but is problematic in the distance it presents between the academy and lived experience. Although Christine Battersby adopts a phenomenological approach, it is largely only academics, even feminist ones, who refer to themselves in the third person as a distancing strategy which might convey greater objectivity or maybe even create a sense of importance for the author.

An acknowledgement of the subject position permits its location. When I-Kath first entered HE as an undergraduate in the late 1960s scholarly writing always used the third-person pronoun or the passive voice; not only were authorial voices almost always male, they were referred to as 'he' even in the limited number of cases when they were female in what purported to be the language of the academy and of objectivity. Thinking in terms of a speaking subject of enunciation allows the possibility of making clear the choices available to individual speakers and writers and reveals the position they take up in what Kristeva (1982) calls 'the operating consciousness' of representation.

The adoption of I-Sophie and I-Kath was a practical device in order to accommodate a book written by two people, but it was also important theoretically and politically. Our device is one that links closely to Luce Irigaray's argument in *Je, Tous, Nous*, where she discusses the need to create a space for mothers and daughters which valorises the relationship and does not subsume it in the patriarchal imaginary for example, when women talk to 'create sentences in which I-woman (*je-femme*) talks to you-woman (*tu-femme*)' ([1990] 2007: 43–4). The device we have suggested is an instance of this where we are given an individual identity from which to speak, which accommodates the distance between us as well as the specificities of our identities and positioning. This also involves an awareness of the fact that we both speak and write as women and thus there is both a commonality and a difference allowed within this. Our aim is to create a shared voice, yet not one that overrules the possibility for the articulation of the differences between us and among women. This allows a reflection up cross-generational



differences and similarities, and also the possibility of adopting an auto-ethnographic stance. By writing as I-Sophie and I-Kath, we are able to draw and reflect upon our situatedness as two authors, as our experiences and academic research forms the basis of the cross-generational dialogue.

### **The context of change**

The differences between us demonstrate the synergies of the contingent social context in which personal experience is lived. I-Kath had the first of her four children at the age 23, not long after leaving university, having studied philosophy and politics on a course where 80% of the students and 100% of the staff were white men, at a time when less than 6% of the UK population attended a university. Men's dominance and that of an academic version of hegemonic masculinity was unremarked because gender was not on the agenda, not yet substantially as part of an explanatory political framework in the UK. Each of us experienced the silence in different ways. I-Kath took for granted the hegemony of masculinity which was as yet un-interrogated within the academy. I-Sophie, conversely took for granted the possibilities and opportunities of gender equality embedded in equality and diversity legislation, in tandem with the more popular discourses of being able to 'have it all'.

Until her early 40s, I-Kath's working life was largely made up of part time contracts, a pattern of employment which was in many respects typical of a woman of this educational, ethnic and class background in the UK when the average age of having a first child for a graduate woman was 23. I-Kath was not of course typical in accessing HE at the time and one of the particularities

of her situation was having a mother who, although she was one of a family of five children of a stonemason had studied science at university in the 1930s and strongly encouraged her daughters to go to university themselves. I-Sophie reflects a different demographic and did not have her first child until she was 31 which is typical of the times in the UK and most of Europe. Furthermore, I-Sophie went to university at a time when it is being accessed by far more women, and studied anthropology – a course that predominantly consisted of female students. Our lived experience is not so different though; I-Sophie began to develop her career and publication record before having a child but still, like so many early career academics in the cost-cutting UK, has had a series of part time jobs and fixed term contracts. The thirty years between these experiences saw the transition from unremarked underachievement of girls and young women in education in the UK to the much remarked and researched underachievement of boys and young men

The politics of the late 1960s may have challenged tradition but patriarchy remained largely unquestioned in the mainstream of academic life. Women's Studies was in its infancy, whereas by the 1990s when I-Sophie went to university (to study anthropology at Cambridge), there were already assumptions that battles had been won and critiques of patriarchy were passé. In the period between our experiences of HE demonstrate two versions of silence and invisibility; from a starting point when women's voices were largely silenced and patriarchy mostly unchallenged because feminist scholars and social reformers were only just starting to ask questions, through to a time when equal opportunities for women seemed to have achieved and the politics of difference no longer had a part to play in the academy. This

period covers a shift from a much higher representation of men in H E to a culture of anxiety about the underachievement of boys at all levels of education.

Third wave feminist writing suggests that the gains won by second wave feminism are taken for granted by many young women born since 1964 (the 'daughters of feminist privilege', Morgan, [1999] 2004: 59). This sense of 'entitlement' (Findlen, 1995: xii) arises from the perception that the gains made by the activists categorised as part of the 'second wave' when I-Kath was teaching women's studies in H.E., often in what was then called extra mural, or continuing education departments, form an expected backdrop to young women's lives today. Women's Studies (and its transformation into Gender Studies) were part of I-Sophie's biography. The residential schools for undergraduate students at UEA, which were part of the biggest Women's Studies programme in the UK, which I-Kath taught, were literally part of I-Sophie's life. Such courses have all but disappeared in UK universities in the twenty first century and with the implementation new HE funding with high student fees for all but STEM subjects (science technology, engineering and mathematics) (HEFCE, 2011). There will be even fewer critical thinking, modules in the humanities and social sciences which, in the UK, were the most likely home for women's and gender studies. The position of women and the politics of sexual difference in the new social movements from the 1960s often involved struggle for recognition with other strands of politics, which prioritised race, sexuality (men's) or social class and saw women's issues as secondary. Struggles were more effective through permitting both empirical spaces for women and, especially conceptual tools with which to critique

patriarchal systems. Changes in our experience reflect the move from activist women's groups within the academy and debates about whether these groups should be women only to much more informal networks and a sense that such groups should no longer be necessary. I-Kath has worked in equal opportunities and diversity projects within the academy, but such activities have increasingly been subsumed into bureaucratic systems and responses to legislative requirements rather than initiating action.

In the UK sex equality legislation preceded race equality and legislation based on disability, sexuality and generation, all of which came together in the 2010 Equality Act following the merger of the Equal opportunities Commission with the Commission of Race Equality under the aegis of human rights. Equal opportunities in education have been won in no small part thanks to the work of feminists who drew attention to the inequities of the post war curriculum when education was segregated by gender, with a domestic skills focus for girls and technical education for boys. In the UK, there was a selective secondary school system with twice as many places in the grammar or technical schools available for the highest achievers in the selection examinations for boys than for girls (Arnot, 1986, 1999) The opportunity to do well and to aspire to a career as well as educational success is taken for granted among many of these groups of young women today.

Writers in the 'third wave' (Walker, 1992; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000) shift the debate to highlight personal experiences of inequalities and the complexity of feminist experiences (Walker, 1995). Whereas, for the feminist activists, the victories won by the second wave are seen as incomplete or based on problematic notions of woman, in the cases of post-feminism, the

illusion of contemporary gender equality (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2008) is seen to negate the need for feminism as a political movement or as a label with which women can identify. Although it is very common within writings on the third-wave and post-feminism for women to define themselves in opposition to each other, there are strong commonalities within the positions, notably in the focus on pleasure and choice and the tendency for both to distance themselves from second-wave feminism (e.g. Wolf, 1993), with exceptions such as Heywood and Drake (1997). As Henry (2004) notes, the reduction of feminism to a generational metaphor also assumes a rejection of the 'mother's feminism' of the second wave within an ideological framework which may acknowledge little of the achievements of this generation of feminists. This tension was important to our conversations, especially in relation to assumptions about the extent of sex equality and the apparently diminished relevance of second wave feminism in I-Sophie's experience of working in HE. These tensions were present both in terms of the experiences of HE and also within popular culture more broadly. What the discussions within post-feminism highlight in their assumptions of being able to 'have it all' is a popular culture in which I-Sophie grew up, with an assumption that many battles had been won and that feminism as a political movement was no longer needed. It was only on entering the world of work, in tandem with becoming more critical of this popular culture, that I-Sophie started to feel frustrated with these claims of post feminism. This is where many of our feminist conversations began. These debates demonstrate the tensions that are both generational and intellectual. Understandings of feminism remain polarised in many ways and expressed as binaries, both

theoretically and in terms of the mother–daughter cross-generational relationship. By constructing a dialogue between the two of us, although acknowledging the specificity of this conversation, we focus on how these may be bridged.

### **Can we say something?**

Much of the discussion of the devaluation of women's experiences has been within the context of how far women are both visible and audible. Whereas I-Kath only became aware of the silences through engaging with the women's movement and in particular women's studies in the academy, I-Sophie, and in turn her own second year undergraduate students when she worked in an art and design department in the twenty first century, perceived the contradiction between assumptions about the achievements of equality and their own feelings of discomfort that something is not quite right, which is resonant of Betty Friedan's 'problem with no name'(1963) albeit in a very different context. It became more difficult to talk about a problem with no name when issues have been rehearsed, explored and codified in law; the problem having been resolved. What our conversations show is that however voluble the debates and detailed the classificatory systems of inequality there remain inequities and silences which are difficult to articulate, especially in the relationship between paid work and motherhood. The question of gender is empirical in relation to how gendered categories of women or men are situated in different social contexts. Work on gender studies usefully draws upon empirical evidence, for example of statistics showing levels of educational achievement,

earnings and the distribution of women and men in different forms of employment.

Sex and gender are also philosophical and conceptual terms which provide explanation of the distribution of power. A focus on gender questions the binary logic of sex and the assumptions that it is only women who are marked; men are the norm and demonstrate the intersection of different aspects of social exclusion and inequality (Taylor et al 2011). Within the academy this raises several questions, for example about women's employment status and which positions they occupy in the career structure; more women are employed in HE but the proportion of professors is still very heavily weighted in favour of men: in 2010, 19.1% of professors were women, about a percentage point up on the previous year (HESA 2011). A point of connection in our conversations suggests that the perception of many men in the academy are caught up in patriarchal systems which suggest that the presence of *any* women in senior or middle management positions infers complete domination by women.

Gender does not only describe this state of affairs which persists most powerfully in I-Kath's current field of research, sport where I-Kath is marked as a woman at research sites, such as boxing that are predominantly masculine (Woodward, 2006, 2009) ; a woman is marked as not a man. It also raises questions about the sources of these inequalities and also about how power might be exercised at all the different sites in which social relations are experienced and played out. It is not only a question of which jobs women and men do, it is also about whether women are able to voice concerns and speak

as women; a phenomenon formerly expressed in the equality and difference debate within feminism which highlights the contradictions and necessity of requesting equality through different treatment, for example in relation to maternity leave and child care. Post feminism and the destabilising of the category woman may have some responsibility for silencing women by denying the possibility of putting women's issues into discourse. This includes the reluctance to speak in public gatherings such as meetings (Cixous and Clément 1987) which was addressed by second wave feminism. There are however, many questions to be raised about the structure and language of the management of HE, especially at times of economic recession and cost cutting when discourses of restructuring and targeted voluntary staff reduction obscures the affective dimensions of experience which has strongly gendered inflections, especially those that associated with emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983).

### **Women, Theory and Practice**

One of the questions which links theory to practice and may point to a disjunction between feminist theories and lived experience is the extent to which it is possible to speak as a woman who is part of a collective and thus possibly political active, category of women. In the 1970s women were underrepresented empirically in HE, but there was, albeit relatively small scale, more activism based upon the identification of women's groups, whether as trades union caucuses, consciousness raising groups or feminist reading groups. Such groups remain of course, but without much public recognition and unlikely to be with a recognition of research workload



commitment, for example in a culture which in the UK in 2011 women's studies no longer has a panel in the Research Excellence Framework which evaluates HE research and allocates resources on this basis. The destabilization of the category woman manifest in our cross generational conversations raises questions about possibilities for action and agency and giving expression to women's experience within the academy and the wider social world in which universities are situated.

Gender equality has been superseded firstly by assumptions that the battle has been won and other aspects of inequality which can be treated separately are now more important and secondly by the claim that accounts of experience do not have to be accepted as a transparent reflection of reality. Such accounts however, provide a means of capturing what Bev Skeggs has discussed as a way of 'understanding how women occupy the category "women", a category which is classed and raced and produced through power relations and through struggles across different sites in space and time' (1997: 27). Skeggs uses quotation marks as she is concerned not 'to argue for experience as a foundation for knowledge, a way of revealing or locating true and authentic "woman"' (1997: 27). Quotation marks have been used to connote the instability of the category woman along with the scare quotes used around 'race' to question any biological essentialist substance. In our conversations each of us understood the moments of being made invisible as women in the academy. Skeggs clearly recognises the value of holding on to women's voices as a meaningful source, but at the same time fails to acknowledge that her subjects do not experience themselves in scare quotes and outside the routine practices of daily life and experience. Skeggs is still

invoking the second-wave feminist claim that experience is the basis of feminism as a social movement and part of a process through which women, by speaking and acting collectively, were able to make sense of their subject positions and of the connections between the personal and the political for example in the apparent excesses of consciousness raising which characterised parts of the women's movement in second wave feminism.

One of the starting points for our conversations about the need for a cross-generational dialogue was an occasion on which I-Sophie was carrying out some research into women's wardrobes. At an informal presentation of the work, there was a lengthy discussion of what a 'woman' is and indeed why 'women' were (or could be) the focus of the research (see Woodward, 2007). These discussions were informed by post-structuralist debates over the category woman, and a desire to not appear essentialist. It raises methodological issues, as speaking and writing as a woman in the academy has come to be seen as problematic in the twenty first century in much the same way as the category woman, which has become subject to instability, questions and challenges. The statement 'speaking as a woman' is often assumed to be making universalising claims in post feminist times when differences among women are asserted as more important than solidarity and commonalities. This presents problems for us as co-authors of this article (and previous book) which is also a conversation between two different but related people, who speak from different places at different times, but who wish to speak from a situated position as women. There are questions about the strategies to deploy and how troubling these choices might be. If the category of woman has been destabilised and the authorial 'I' decentred, the

difficulties in arriving at the decisions that have to be made are both linguistic and political. Whilst challenging the homogeneity of 'we women' as expressed in second wave feminism has been very productive especially in the politics of race and sexuality in challenging essentialism, there are some dangers in relation to women. Rejecting the possibility of any commonality among women might also subvert the political possibilities of collective action (Ramazanoğlu, 1989).

Feminist approaches can be invoked to lend support to robust responses to the contradictions of experience. You know you want to say that this is your experience and it is only by speaking that your experience becomes meaningful and acknowledged and lead to action as well as reflection, which emerged from the conversations between I-Sophie and I-Kath. I-Sophie welcomed the opportunity to read second-wave feminism, much of which was seen as part of a feminist past, yet through re-reading these, and conversations between the two of us these become as way of rethinking feminist theory and politics in the current supposedly post-feminist world.

We wanted to explore the productive promises of ethnographic writing from personal experience as developed in auto-ethnography, yet specifically feminist, exploring the insights and challenges of creative thinkers like Carolyn Heilbrun (1989) and what has loosely come to be called French feminism, especially in the work of Hélène Cixous (Cixous and Clement, 1986) and Luce Irigaray (1985), made it possible for women to speak and write as themselves in a moment of recognition, from Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman* (in hooks, 1981) to a realisation that 'I am that name' (Riley, 1988). In postmodern times when authors have been decentred, it is hard to explain the liberatory

feelings that accompanied the realisation that women could speak and write but these possibilities underpin the points of connection in our conversations in which paid work and motherhood play an important and often contradictory part. In our case, the auto-ethnographic is not employed just in terms of the research that is done, but in particular to the process of writing and the conversations, as the auto-ethnographic involves a consideration of each of our own situated experiences as a white British woman, in particular working in HE. Drawing upon these situated experiences formed part of the conversations as we both reflecting upon changes between our experiences and continuities in areas of inequality.

Feminist analyses of the second wave of the intersection of the personal and the political and the assertion that the personal is political put politics on the agenda and demonstrated the inextricable links between personal and political life (Davidoff and Hall 1987) and, increasingly, working life, including working in the academy. A focus on the personal which was interpreted through women's lived experience and given expression by women's voices and words was framed by an understanding of the power relations in play. I-Kath's earlier experience of teaching in HE was expressed through an evaluation of women's collective experience and identification of a curriculum that put women into history. The development of women's studies in the academy played an important role in putting sexual politics into discourse. Whereas I-Sophie's experience of teaching fashion and design students suggests that young women in spite of their visibility and volubility in the sexualised spaces of popular culture in the twenty first century, still lack a voice in articulating their experience and their situation.

## **Collective action**

If a major issue to arise from our conversations is how to give voice to women's experience, one which is closely linked is how to act and to redress the inequalities that underpin that experience. Activism requires some recognition of commonalities and some sense of points of connection in shared experience. Being able to speak and act collectively is crucial. Collective action presupposes shared experience and shared knowledge, which is not there in the academy, especially in the current economic climate of financial crises and cut backs in HE. Increasingly in the UK and many western countries that firstly legislation, including the UK 2010 Equality Act is seen to have addressed the major issues and secondly the expanding field of diversity (Taylor et al, 2011) has generated more categories, for example those of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning...) making the field one in which it becomes impossible to suggest that there could still be a problem with no name; names proliferate.

The use of 'women' as a collective can, of course, be strategic. As Caroline Ramazanoğlu (1989) argued, there is a problem in uniting so diverse a group into a collectivity but nonetheless this is a vital part of feminism as a political project. An overemphasis on divisions among women could challenge the political imperatives of feminism, even more so abandonment of a category of women who could speak as a collective 'we' at any point would subvert and destroy the politics of feminism.

The debates over the word 'we' centre on the critiques over presumptions of an identity shared by all women, in particular where this shared identity is

presumed to be white, able-bodied and middle-class. With the deconstruction of the category woman that comes with poststructuralism this raises the issue as to where this leaves the possibility for feminist solidarity (Ramazanoğlu, 1989). This is also a problem that characterises third-wave feminism – that it is never seen as a coherent political movement like second-wave feminism was in spite of its divisions, most of which were classified as factions; instead, it is focused on highly localised instances of activism. This debate is often framed by discussions of essentialism, where essentialism is tagged negatively with being too reductive of difference. Feminists have rightly countered arguments that women constitute an essentialised category of sex gender which reduces women to biology and the anatomical body, associating men with culture and women with nature, but this can have led to an over socialised, discursive view of embodiment (Woodward, 2009) and an abandonment of the politics of difference (Woodward and Woodward, 2009). It is largely only the category woman which is questioned however. This was marked in I-Sophie's research into women's wardrobes in *Why Women Wear What they Wear* (2007) when she was challenged about the focus on women. There was no challenge to other ethnographers about their choice of subjects of research. Researching women was seen as anachronistic, unnecessary and markedly problematic. Moreover, this indicated a disconnection between empirical research and discussions within the academy, as none of the participants in the ethnography who saw themselves as anything other than women. Men, especially in sport, take masculinity as the hegemonic and dominant gender identity which does not need to be marked because it just is (Woodward, 2009).

If feminists claim women have a voice and can occupy a subject position, this is seen to imply essentialism. Feminist standpoint theorists have been criticised for overstating the privileging of women's experience as rooted in essentialism, but this too is a polarisation that distorts an epistemology which foregrounds lived experience (Harding, 1987, 1993). Riley (2005) locates this problem in language and suggests that shared experience can be productive; indeed, what has been vilified as essentialism could be productive. The possibilities for collective action can then be framed in terms of Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' (also discussed in Stone, 2007). Chakraborty makes a case for this in considering the relationships between race and feminism, as she argues that woman is an 'essentially racialised category' (2007: 102). This question is epistemological and also raises the question of language – that is, the use of the words 'we' and 'I'. Acknowledgement of a gendered, collective identity and some sense of agreement or at least points of connection is political and paves the way for a critique.

Collective identification with we women always has to be in dialogue with the limitations of essentialism and reductionism. Empirical concerns with women's experiences of employment for example may focus on women's particular embodied experiences such as childbirth and mothering. Feminist theory, such as that of many radical or material feminists of the second wave, sought to celebrate embodied gender difference whether framed by corporeal, historical or metaphorical constructions of women. Irigaray has been accused of essentialism for foregrounding women's embodied experience and its possibilities for the reworking of language and symbolic systems (Whitford, 1991). This may indeed be reflected in the anxieties that persist among

women in the academy of acknowledging the specificities of the motherhood in a transformed culture where employment practice in relation to childbearing is framed as the rights of parents in a gender neutral language and women may be reluctant to invoke any embodied differences which could be construed as vulnerability. Women in HE in the UK may have generous maternity rights but, as I-Sophie is now finding, there are no concessions for academic women who have taken such leave, for example in terms of research publications and funding or tenure; different apparatuses of governance but the same outcomes for women, especially mothers as in I-Kath's youth.

We argue that giving voice to the collectivity of women is not a peripheral or a coincidental matter, but is pivotal to redressing issues that have hindered the advancement of feminist thinking. In particular, we challenge the opposition of the third and second waves of feminism. We have used the wave classification strategically and as shorthand for temporalities, but are concerned to question their ultimate usefulness, especially in providing boundaries between different feminist theories and activism. As Astrid Henry notes, referring to the 'third wave' signifies that there is 'not only a resurgence but also includes the notion of progress on from the second wave' (2004: 24). Indeed, this is often seen in the supposed 'knowingness' of feminism now in opposition to an assumed naivety of a feminism that used the term woman. This is seen markedly in poststructural feminism, where, as Henry suggests, this is particularly marked in strands of lesbian feminism, where the alliance with queer theory allows more discussions of fluidity and the inherent assumptions of sophistication. As Henry adds, this alliance with men through



queer theory moves away from the consideration of women as something that needs to be critiqued. Henry argues that the same charge can be levelled at the seemingly opposing form of post-feminism as it both celebrates heterosexuality and is anti-academic (seen in magazines such as *Bust*).

Post-feminism, third-wave feminism and poststructural feminism all tend to have in common an assumption that the second wave was naïve and uncomplicated. In *Catching a Wave* (2003), Dicker and Piepmeier argue that 'we' live in a different world from the second wave and third wave which are 'concerned not simply with "women's issues" but with a broad range of interlocking' issues (2003: 10). There is a setting up of a 'we' against the 'them' of the second wave, where the opposition is defined within feminism in generational terms. Indeed, the third wave often defines itself as pro-sex and multi-ethnic, as a critique of the perceived whiteness of the second wave. However, as Henry notes (2004: 32), what this obscures are non-white second-wave feminists. Indeed I -Sophie, well versed in the critiques of the second wave, was surprised when I first saw I-Kath's collection of *Spare Rib* magazines stashed in the back of the wardrobe, from the 1970s and early 1980s, which she keeps in her wardrobe, and noted how prominent the discussion of race and accusations of racism were in these magazines.

Some third wave writers (e.g. Roiphe, 1993; Denfeld, 1995) are openly hostile to the second wave. Even though these writers have been criticised by academics, nonetheless these are all writers who achieved high media profiles and therefore became part of the popular consciousness and understanding of what feminism is and how it is stereotyped. As Henry has argued, this hostility to the previous wave is often written about it in the

language of the mother–daughter relationship. For instance, Naomi Wolf, in the *Beauty Myth*, is pro-‘peer-driven feminism’ (1991: 281), because ‘no matter how wise a mother’s advice is, we listen to that of our peers’. The third wave seems to be colluding with the patriarchal denial of the mother daughter relationship which Irigaray identified (1985). In Rebecca Walker and Naomi Wolf, this is in a literal sense, as both of their mothers were involved in second-wave feminism. Henry uses Rich’s notion of ‘matrophobia’ and women’s desire to ‘become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free’ (Rich, cited in Henry, 2004: 41). Rich points to the social and cultural configuration of motherhood as an institution (1977). Motherhood impacts upon all women’s experience, as Irigaray also argues in that there is an elision of mother and woman in the everyday exchanges and situations whereby all women are categorised as carers and nurturers whatever their situation in a way that fatherhood does not characterise masculinity. By the two of us writing together, we are attempting to move beyond this to a more productive consideration of the mother–daughter relationship. Without romanticising or demonising it, we argue that it can provide a new way of thinking inter-generationally, one that focuses on situations and takes advantage of the points of contact between two women and that are part of a relationship that spans generations.

## **Conclusion**

The points of connection manifest in this dialogue between I-Kath and I-Sophie across generations show that personal lives are always situated and located within the wider social, political and cultural terrain and that

inequalities based upon sex gender remain. They are not always articulated in the language of equality and diversity and can only be voiced through cross generational feminist conversations.

Motherhood is still central to the systems through which inequalities are forged as is the relationship between mothers and daughters, which remains a relatively under represented and researched field. The specifics of the experience of mothering and motherhood are differently accentuated and structured according to class, race, ethnicity, disability location and sexuality. HE is more accommodating than most workplaces but, as Irigaray argued it impacts upon all women (1985) because of its cultural and political implications as an absent presence, however detailed the legislative frameworks of diversity.

Women do have a much more prominent presence within the academy, especially in some parts in the twenty first century than they did forty years ago. There are however endurances in the inequalities that are in play and the extent to which women, for example are able to express their experience of some of these imbalances of power and inequities. In what may be called post feminist times there may indeed be a new problem with no name, albeit it differently experienced and expressed in the academy. Women may have the rights to maternity pay but women's experience of fixed, short term contracts makes decisions about having children difficult because these decisions are still underpinned by both cultural assumptions about who has responsibility for making the decisions and acting upon them in terms of childcare and, the materiality of embodiment; it is women who give birth. The claim that we live in post feminist times when battles have been won makes it even more

difficult to voice the experiences of inequalities that are deemed not to exist any longer. This is evident in the dialogue between the feminisms of mothers and daughters, which is a conversation that requires further attention within the academy and in developing explanatory frameworks for the inequalities that endure in all areas of contemporary social life. The visibility of women in the sexualised public arena as experienced by I-Sophie's female students and the language of empowerment masks the inequalities that persist. Gender has to be incorporated into a politics of difference which allows for the expression of sexual difference and the giving voice to experience, especially in the phenomenology of lived experience.

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