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Feminist historiography: Reconstructing histories that include women and gender-diverse individuals.

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Theory/concept: feminist historiography

Illustrative example: breaking out of “official” archives

“Feminist historiography” is an approach, used by both scholars and lay persons, that brings together different kinds of feminism (e.g., liberal, radical, postcolonial) with ways of re-telling the experiences of ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals who lived in the past.

Reconstructing histories that include ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals

Stefanie Ruel (Author) and Kaitlynn C. Hammel (Illustrator)

Take a moment to ask yourself: How could you find stories about ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals, who lived in the past, when there is minimal to no information about them on the internet or in publicly available corporate documents? For example, say you were interested in learning about Black ciswomen who worked as mathematicians during the U.S. race to the moon in the 1950s and 1960s but they were “hidden” (Shetterly, 2016) among more prominent and celebrated White cismen, like Neil Armstrong or Senator John Glenn. What steps could you take to learn more about these Black ciswomen?

Much of what we can know about the past is captured in documents —official letters, copies of speeches, court recordings — or in published texts, such as newspapers and pamphlets, and more recently as digitized documents. These types of “official” archives are largely focused on retelling “[cis]man’s story” (Wallach-Scott, 1983, p. 174), however, like those space stories surrounding Neil Armstrong or Senator John Glenn. Undoing discriminatory practices today and in the future, by sharing histories that are more diverse and inclusive, is a noble goal to strive for; structural barriers, such as governmental or institutional bureaucracies, that impact what is deemed to be important-to-keep versus what-is-to-be- discarded makes attaining this goal challenging.

Feminist scholars in ciswomen’s and gender history, as an example of those who use **feminist historiography**, strive for more inclusive processes to be put in place in the practice of social history. Feminist historiographers try to uncover the stories of ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals, and then strive to share these stories in either academic publications and conferences, or with the public in workshops and events at museums or in public places including shopping malls. In so doing, such scholars and lay persons aim to change societal imbalances, in part by bringing individual experiences to light that have previously been excluded from those “official” archives. Ciswomen’s and gender history is a broad field where some may approach this field as a study of fragmented “factual” events of the past while others see the field as an act of resistance, calling on their ability to be introspective in order to uncover and reconstruct stories surrounding ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals.

Feminist historiographies meld **feminism** (e.g. liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, transnational/postcolonial, etc.) with historical studies. These types of historical studies are not

always focused on creating “a realistic record of every event and experience in time” (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 152), however. In their practice, feminist historiographers can incorporate oral accounts retold and handed down through time, personal diaries, personal letters, blogs and social media, and when possible interviews with the individual in question. These historians also develop more encompassing methods, including tracing patterns of thought/ideas in storytelling practices, and accepting that a fragmented re-telling of the past through small vignettes is a plausible history.

Feminist historiographers also look to social contexts, that have rules and meta-rules that are in place to impose an order; these rules and meta-rules can be written or unwritten, formal or informal, and can influence how individuals act. For example, in the 1950s, once a North American woman married, she was expected to immediately stop working. Feminist historians attempt to unravel such an informal and, in some cases, a formal meta-rule in a way to reveal power dynamics among individuals, like those that Doris Jelly (1932-2021) experienced. Ms. Jelly was a trained physicist, mathematician, world traveler, and a woman who worked on Alouette I, the first Canadian satellite launched into space in 1962. She recognized early on in her career that if she wanted to work in space, she could not marry, and so she chose to have two live-in partners, at different times in her life. In the post-World War II historical period that Ms. Jelly worked in, this practice of taking a partner was not as common as it is today in the Western world. The power dynamics here showcase Ms. Jelly’s courageous choices in light of such discriminatory practices. Notably, while many Western ciswomen were under tremendous pressure to conform to a meta-rule of choosing marriage over career/work, others had to live in “hidden” fashion, like Ms. Jelly did. Cismen, on the other hand, did not have to make such choices.

Feminist historiographers also call for the development of more inclusive archival policies and practices, so that institutional and “official” records can evolve. Ultimately, these more inclusive sources and methods will help to undo the “hidden” existence of ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals. **Feminist historiographies** are, in essence, acts of resistance against the proliferation of White masculine-centric narratives and stories that seem to dominate our understandings of the past and that, as a result, reinforce the marginalization of ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals. By untangling these “grand narratives” of history and by looking for more complex and fragmented meanings and lived experiences, we can arrive at a more nuanced and varied understanding of our histories and cultures.

Discussion Questions:

- Question 1: Based on your reading of this vignette, how would you explain feminist historiography to someone who has never heard of it?
- Question 2: Why do you think this approach is important?
- Question 3: Think of a woman or a gender diverse individual in the past, say someone who was born prior to the 1950s; it could be a family member or a distant friend of a friend – the idea is that it not be someone ‘famous’, like say Indira Gandhi. List some

ways you believe you could find out more about them. How would you share what you found out about them with others?

Exercises:

Within the particular growing area of contemporary war histories, considered to be circa post 1800, Brookfield and Glassford (2019) focus their efforts on Canadian ciswomen's experiences, in or outside of the home. There are also other ciswomen's and gender-diverse individuals' stories post 1945 which are bubbling to the surface. These include welcoming soldiers home and the necessity for a conspiracy of silence (e.g. Bruce, 1985; Korinek, 2004), immigration and care for children (e.g. Brookfield, 2012; Freund, 2009; Sangster, 2007), and ciswomen earning a university education and going to work outside of the home, along with the growth of the middle-class (e.g. Guard, 2004; Iacovetta, 2000; Ruel et al., 2020; Strong-Boag, 1994). These ciswomen and gender-diverse individuals, depicted in Figure 1 as a non-binary person and in the black and white of the past, are attempting to break through the current barriers of "official" archives, depicted in color. The care and responsibility required to undertake such acts of breaking through "official" archives, in contexts of say science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), needs courageous people to work together at revealing these ciswomen and gender-diverse people's contributions.

Exercise 1: In an effort to create your own feminist historiography, keeping in mind your answer to Discussion Question #3:

- a. Do a preliminary search on the internet to find some basic, high-level information about your person of interest.
- b. Go to, call, or email your local library, whichever is most convenient. Talk to the librarian about the different ways you could find out more about this individual and their past. Specifically ask the librarian for contact information for a variety of archival sites, such as community-based archives or university-based archives, or in the case of oral histories, contact information for Indigenous elders or band councils that may be of assistance to your search.
- c. Communicate with these archival sites or individuals/organizations to see how they could assist you in finding out more about this person of interest.
- d. Document what you learned about this person of interest, in such a way that you can recall and use this information for exercise #2.

Exercise 2: Given what you did in exercise 1, how would you like to share what you found out about this individual in the past? Think of creative ways to share this person's past, like a drawing, or a collage, or a story. Then share this depiction with someone, and ask them for some feedback (i.e. was the story coherent, did you want to learn more about this person, is there something missing that would help to understand this person better, etc.).

Exercise 3: What are some of the challenges that you encountered when you went through these exercises? Document these challenges, and then consider and note down what you could do to overcome them.

Additional Resources:

Additional Links

The following movies may be of interest: *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Agora* (2009), and *Paris is Burning* (1990). Ask yourself why these particular films or documentaries were included – are they legitimate history? Or, are they plausible histories, with fragments of stories melded together? Are they valid examples of where we can go to collect information about someone, beyond “official” archives?

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