

Situated knowledges: Feminist research practices in academia

Educational Material

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The project is implemented by:

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought much greater public attention to the ongoing gender and other inequalities that structure our societies. Universities are no exceptions here, and since the start of the pandemic, numerous reports have been released that document women's deteriorating position over the past few years. For example, soon after the start of the lock downs, several top ranking journals reported that female researchers' productivity had dropped significantly, whereas for male researchers, it had increased. Women's greater employment precarity in universities, which is coupled with their under-representation in higher level university posts, contributes to this, as do their greater caring responsibilities, both within their workplaces, and in their homes and communities. All these inequalities have been further intensified by the pandemic.

Gender inequality in academia is therefore shaped by the above factors, which relate primarily to the working conditions that shape knowledge production. In addition, it is also reproduced by those conditions that determine what is considered legitimate or useful knowledge today. In this workshop, participants will focus on this second aspect of gender inequality in academia; exploring the question of what constitutes scientifically valid knowledge, and how research projects can be shaped in order to further the goals of a feminist research ethic, broadly defined.

ACTIVITY 1: GROUP DISCUSSION ON THE GENDERED NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION (20 MINS)

Inputs: This discussion could be based around clips from the audio podcast on women in academia and the videos listed in the programme for the workshop on Women and Science.

Steps 1: Exploration (10min)

The activity can be broken down into two parts. In the first, the group could explore the gendered nature of workplace relations in universities. In the second, these can be connected to a discussion on the gendered nature of conceptions of scientific knowledge.

- **Gender inequality in the university as a workplace:** The moderator can introduce the discussion by talking about what is likely a more familiar aspect of the workshop's topic: the gender inequalities in universities as *workplaces*. So they could provide statistics relevant to their context about gender and employment in the university; for example the representation of women and men as heads of department or in different types of research, research and teaching outputs by gender and so on.
- **The gendered nature of knowledge production:** The moderator could introduce this topic by outlining some of the key precepts of feminist epistemology; highlighting the aspects that are relevant to participants. The work of Donna Haraway and Patricia Hill Collins are particularly useful here.

Step 2: Discussion (10min)

Key questions to explore in this moderated discussion:

- How is knowledge production gendered?
- What constitutes knowledge? What are the criteria used to separate 'scientific' knowledge from other types of knowledge?
- Who is excluded from knowledge making?
- Who decides and polices this, and what mechanisms do they have to enforce it?

ACTIVITY 2: SITUATING THE SELF IN WEBS OF POWER RELATIONS (20 MINS)

Step 1: Introduction (5min)

Much feminist scholarship and activism starts from the idea that the political does not only include the sphere of the state or parties, that is beyond the home or individual. Instead, the political is also much more intimate. It includes the way in which we are socially constructed as individuals whose worth and capacities vary depending on our race, class, gender and so on. These differences shape what we can know and say in the world. This runs contrary to the claims made by dominant science that it can and should be 'detached' and 'neutral', to produce fully 'objective' knowledge. It follows that the struggle for equality, as indeed to build a socially useful scholarship, should base itself on these insights. This is also a principle that underlies feminist epistemology, or the study of knowledge. In this first activity, participants will begin exploring these issues by using these tools to situate themselves very concretely in the space of the workshop, in relation to each other and to wider webs of power.

Step 2: Situation yourself in the space of the workshop (15min)

- Bearing in mind the discussion on power relations and situated knowledge, write some notes on how you feel situated right now as a participant in this workshop.
- Some things to consider: your gender, class, age, languages, relation to technology, caring responsibilities, etc.
- How do these affect how you feel in this space, what you bring to the workshop, what you would like to get from the workshop etc?
- Pay attention to anything that you feel especially comfortable /positive or uncomfortable with.

Step 3: Take notes (10-15min)

Take 10-15 minutes to write down some notes – or draw a map, whatever feels most appropriate.

INPUT: FEMINIST RESEARCH ETHICS INTRODUCTION (10 MINS)

Before moving on to the group activity, the moderator can introduce the idea of a feminist research ethic and feminist research practices. This introduction can be followed by questions that relate the ideas presented to the specific context of the workshop.

The following are two useful statements on feminist research:

My Feminist Research Manifesto in Progress

<https://fieldnotesfromafeministresearcher.wordpress.com/2020/01/14/my-feminist-research-manifesto-in-progress/>

Applying Feminist Principles to Research

<http://www.svri.org/blog/applying-feminist-principles-to-gbv-data-collection-lessons-during-covid-19-pandemic>

ACTIVITY 3: DEVELOPING A FEMINIST RESEARCH PROJECT (70 MINS)

Step 1: Introduction (5min)

In this activity, participants put some of the ideas explored above to work in the design of a research project. Here, they work in groups.

For this activity, the moderator should prepare several broad outlines of research projects on topics of relevance to participants. The description should be quite general and not specify method or methodology, as this is what participants will work on. It would be good for some of the proposals to be about studying groups/institutions that are powerful and some to be about studying those not usually perceived as powerful, in order for there to be contrast in the discussion. The moderator can also talk through a relevant concrete example as they introduce the activities.

You are now going to apply the principles we just discussed to the design of a specific research project. You will do this in 2 stages. In the first, you will situate yourselves in relation to the topic and the people you will work with. You will also think about whether there are any obvious ethical dilemmas posed in the research proposal given these positionalities. In the second, you will define a set of methods to use in the research, keeping in mind that you are developing a feminist research project.

Step 2: Devising a set of ethical questions to guide research (25min)

Look at the proposal and think about how you as a research group would relate with the question/topic/people the proposal describes. Ask if there is anything about the proposed research that might provide an opportunity to rethink the normal relations between researchers and researched. Are there any immediate ethical difficulties you perceive in implementing the project? List at least 5 questions about your relation with the research/subjects that you will ask yourself several times throughout the research. The questions will keep you aware of the power dynamics (of class, race, gender and so on) that are always part of research, and they should help you think about how to respond ethically and effectively to these.

Step 3: Investigation (25min)

Now ask each group to choose two methods for investigating their topic (for example, a survey, interviews, video diaries, ethnographic research, discourse analysis of media/policies, archival research etc) and explain why they have chosen them. Ask them specifically to answer the following questions:

What are the advantages of this method(s) for your project, in terms of

- a) producing a useful/accurate account of reality and
- b) feminist research ethics?

What potential challenges could this method(s) present in terms of

- a) producing a useful/accurate account of reality and
- b) feminist research ethics? How could you address these?

Step 4: Group discussion (15min)

Ask the groups to share their work and discuss the different approaches, and any difficulties or dilemmas they faced.

CLOSING (10MIN)

Recap the day's main insights; ask participants for feedback on activities they most/least enjoyed, ask if they learned anything that surprised them.

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