

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND REPRESENTATION: THE IMPACT OF POST-MODERNISM AND POST-COLONIALISM¹

Amanda Gouws

Introduction

The issue of representation is a significant and important one for research as well as for political activity. In the South African context representation involves issues such as who can speak for whom at conferences, who can do research about whom and what are the power relations involved in the research process. In the gender context the suggestions for ways in which these issues should be resolved have led to stark divisions among feminists. These divisions have serious implications for a feminist praxis of women doing collaborative research.

Representation is a contested terrain which involves metatheoretical (epistemological) issues but the debate is seldom addressed on this level. Furthermore, the complexity of the debate derives from the impact of post-modernism on the Enlightenment understanding of the research process. In the Kuhnian sense we have two competing paradigms attempting to critique the underlying assumptions of each other (Kuhn, 1962). As Fraser and Nicholson (1990:20) have noted: '... each of the two perspectives suggests some important criticism of the other. A postmodernist reflection on feminist theory reveals disabling vestiges of essentialism while a feminist reflection on postmodernism reveals androcentrism and political naivete'.

Feminism's concern with gender inequality has led to challenges on a metatheoretical level of foundationalist epistemologies to show how partial and historically situated knowledge has passed as ahistorical and universal truths (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990:26). Yet, in an attempt to correct these metatheoretical inadequacies feminism has created universal truths all of its own, and in terms of the constitution of the subject has often excluded women of color.

In this article I analyse three different epistemological traditions which are important for feminism: feminist standpoint, post-modern, and post-colonial epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology starts from the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and rejects the positivist notion of objectivity. Feminist post-modernism argues that there can be no truth outside the social

location of the researcher and sees all knowledge as infused with power relations, while feminist post-colonialism critiques the global hegemony of Western scholarship which negates cross-cultural differences.

This analysis takes place on an abstract theoretical level and it is necessary to discuss the literature in some detail to tease out the underlying assumptions of the debate in which feminists in South Africa criticise each other's research practices. In the second section, in an attempt to illustrate how certain assumptions are embedded in arguments between feminists I analyse the nature of the South African academy which pits black and white women against each other. I also deal with the essentialist way in which 'experience' is used when women deny that all experience is mediated by structural conditions, and the demand to deal with difference but the actual inability to deal with it. I conclude by arguing that we need a larger structural analysis apart from the analysis of experience. I also argue that it is a feminist standpoint epistemology that makes a feminist praxis possible.

What is a Feminist Standpoint Epistemology?

Any theory of knowledge or epistemology contains within itself certain knowledge claims or grounds according to which knowledge can be justified. Epistemological traditions require that claims to knowledge be verified and that knowledge be useful (Jagger, 1983:385).

Claims in conventional epistemology are based on the following questions (Harding, 1991:109):

- who can be the subjects or agents of socially legitimate knowledge?
- what kinds of tests must beliefs pass in order to be legitimate knowledge?
- what kinds of things can be known?
- can historical truths or socially situated truths count as knowledge?
- what is the nature of objectivity?
- what is the appropriate relationship between the researcher and his or her research subject?
- must the researcher be disinterested, dispassionate and socially invisible to the subject?
- can there be 'disinterested knowledge' in a society that is deeply stratified by gender, race and class.

Feminism is self-consciously political and the question arises as to whether claims stemming from women's conditions or feminist concerns can be considered knowledge. How should the 'bias' that arises from taking research questions from the lives of a particular social group be dealt with (Harding, 1991:108)? Furthermore can feminism be regarded as a serious challenge to the

'impersonal, objective, dispassionate and value-free' knowledge social science has produced?²

Feminist epistemology is linked to a certain ontology - it explains why prevailing representations of reality are systematically male-biased as well as why conditions of theoretical adequacy have been interpreted in male-biased ways (Jagger, 1983:385).

The starting point of a feminist standpoint is that knowledge is socially constructed or situated. Conventional research is challenged because it is viewed as biased, reflecting only a vision that is available to the dominant group (in this case men). A standpoint starting with the lives of women is seen as less partial and distorted because it gives the view of the oppressed. For a position to count as a standpoint is to insist on an objective location from which feminist research should begin and in this case this location is women's lives.

A feminist standpoint epistemology therefore opposes the positivist epistemology of the neutral disinterested observer, as well as the assumption of a so-called Archimedean standpoint outside the reality being observed. It also opposes a Marxist epistemology which denies that such a standpoint exists but that all systems of knowledge reflect certain social interests and values (Jagger, 1983:370).

This standpoint epistemology is called a 'successor science' by Harding (1986) because it still accepts research practices and the notion of generalisable knowledge which can be established through the methods of science. Yet, what makes it different is using women's lives as the starting point. Feminist standpoint epistemology thus have implications for the 'context of discovery' as well as the 'context of justification'. Using women's lives as the starting point determines what types of questions will be asked (context of discovery) but also how we proceed to find the answers to these questions (context of justification) (see Harding, 1991:144). Secondly, the notion of self-reflexivity and inter-subjectivity rejects an Archimedean point from which objective knowledge can be derived - in essence a redefinition and appropriation of objectivity.

Harding (1991:121-133) sets out the claims for women's knowledge. Some of them are:

- Women's different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for research. Using women's lives can decrease the partialities and distortions. Objectivity of research can be maximised by overcoming reliance on masculine lives and making use of women's lives;
- Women's viewpoint as *strangers* to the social order through which they are excluded from the design and direction of the production of knowledge

give them valuable insight into the dysfunctional nature of the social order for women;³

- Women's oppression gives them an incentive to become aware of that oppression so that research from the perspective of the lives of the oppressed gives valuable new insights;
- Women give the perspective from the 'other side' in generating less partial and distorted explanations.
- Women's perspective is a perspective from everyday life;
- Women's perspective comes from mediating the ideological dualisms of nature and culture.

It is important to note that these claims do not suggest that biological differences between men and women are bases for feminist analysis, neither do they claim that women's knowledge claims are morally superior as some feminists would suggest.

As Stanley and Wise (1990:23) have noted research based on feminist epistemology will take the following into account:

- the researcher-researched relationship;
- emotion as a research experience;
- the intellectual autobiography of the researcher;
- ways of managing the differing realities and understandings of researchers and the researched; and
- the complex question of power in research and writing.

A feminist epistemology accepts that knowledge is grounded in the material conditions of the researcher/theorist and, therefore, attempts to come to grips with women's distinct experiences through the notion of 'inter-subjectivity' which is based on the assumption that despite our ontological differences there still are shared experiences. These shared experiences enable us to produce generalisable knowledge. Inter-subjectivity allows theoretical descriptions of the social world which can be empirically tested (Stanley and Wise, 1990:23).

Therefore, feminist theory that guides feminist research will have the following characteristics:

- it will be derived from experiences analytically entered into by enquiring feminists;
- be continually subject to revision in the light of that experience;
- will be subject to reflexivity and self-reflexivity (Stanley and Wise, 1990:24).

Feminist standpoint epistemology requires what Harding (1991:138) calls 'strong objectivity'. The concept of 'strong objectivity' acknowledges that all knowledge and scientific beliefs are socially situated recognising sociological,

cultural and historical relativism, yet *rejecting* judgmental or epistemological relativism (Harding, 1991:142). Strong objectivity requires that 'powerful background beliefs' be interrogated (ie the cultural agendas that shape people's attitudes and beliefs). This would also include interrogating power relationships which are the cause of domination.

As Harding (1991:150) puts it:

... in a society structured by gender hierarchy, 'starting thought from women's lives' increases the objectivity of the results of research by bringing scientific observation and the perception of the need for explanation to bear on assumptions and practices that appear natural or unremarkable from the perspective of the lives of men in dominant groups. Thinking from the perspective of women's lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry.

Strong objectivity is contrasted with weak objectivity where the researcher stands outside the social situatedness of the research object. Strong objectivity places the subject of knowledge in the same critical plane as the object of inquiry and therefore introduces the notion of 'strong reflexivity' which forces the researcher to analyse his/her own beliefs - the researcher acknowledges the cultural particularity of the research objects as well as social situatedness of his/her research project (Harding, 1991:163).

What distinguishes the standpoint epistemology from other feminist projects is its destabilisation of what McClure (1992) calls 'scientised politics' while changing the scientific endeavor into 'politicised science'. Scientised politics refers to feminist projects which still adheres to traditional views of science, only adding a view of the political (demanded by feminism which is self-consciously political) where 'politics becomes understood causally and instrumentally, as if from an Archimedean point of sovereign leverage, as the procedures and practices necessary for sustaining, managing, or improving the performance of the social system as a whole' (McClure, 1992:344). In this sense political commitment becomes viewed as loyalty to one specific theoretical explanation of the social world.

The politicisation of science on the other hand, is the normative commitment to expose gender oppression and attempts to reveal the asymmetry of power relations based on gender. This normative commitment is used as a criterion of theoretical adequacy which distinguish feminist from non-feminist research projects (McClure, 1992:350).

It challenges the epistemological basis of scientific authority and destabilises scientised politics. As McClure (1992:361) notes:

[standpoint epistemology] is less a displacement of political questions onto epistemological controversies within science than an insistent politicisation of the methodical production of scientific knowledge itself, particularly as this has been institutionalised within the contemporary configuration of 'the political'.

While the unit of analysis for standpoint epistemology is still women it does not require any kind of feminine essentialism but, as Harding (1990:99) argues, it analyses the essentialism that androcentrism assigns to women and attempts to locate its historical conditions. It is not based on the assumption that women are different from men in that they are free from racism, classism, homophobia, etc.

The Post-Modern Critique

The post-modern critique against standpoint epistemology can be divided into three categories: essentialism (based on Enlightenment notions of foundationalism leading to totalising theories); ahistoricism; and an inability to deal with difference.

Post-modernism interrogates the grand-narratives of Enlightenment destabilising the idea of a universal 'innocent' truth based on reason and rationality. It casts doubt on knowledge itself, exposes power relations and deconstructs the self and language. Flax (1990:41-42) summarises the qualities of the Enlightenment with which post-modernism has a quarrel:

- the existence of a stable coherent self with reason to understand the 'laws of nature';
- reason can provide an objective, reliable and universal foundation for knowledge;
- the right use of reason will yield 'true knowledge';
- there are complex connections between reason, autonomy and freedom. Freedom consists in obedience of laws that conform to the necessary results from the right use of reason;
- by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome;
- science as the model of the right use of reason is also the paradigm for all true knowledge;
- language is transparent - language is merely a medium through which representation occurs.

The production of knowledge according to post-modern assumptions rejects reason and universality as bases for knowledge. Knowledge is socially

constituted and the self is an embodied self. There cannot be any truth outside the social location of the researcher. The relationship between knowledge and power is mediated by science (Flax, 1992:449).

Concepts and methods are infused with power relations. The interrogation of these power relations is not to embark on nihilistic relativism but the very precondition for a politically engaged critique (Butler, 1992:6). This type of analysis aims at establishing the theoretical uses that establish foundations and precisely what it excludes and forecloses. The creation of universal categories (such as women) has been exposed as ethnocentric and their transcendental claims reflect the experience of a minority of people (mostly white males) (Flax, 1990:430). Butler (1992:8-9) argues that any totalising concept of the universal will shut down discourse - post-modernism avoids this problem by leaving the universal permanently open, contested and contingent in order not to foreclose future claims for inclusion. Similarly, the subject is interrogated not negated in order to understand if its construction is based on a foundationalist premise.

The Enlightenment offers us a pre-given subject and therefore does not acknowledge that agency is always and only a political prerogative (Butler, 1992:3). The constitution of the universal subject 'women' takes place through exclusion. As Butler (1992:15) notes: '... any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance*, will necessarily produce factionalisation ...'.

The importance of rejecting the totalising concept of women is that it opens up the category of women for contestation through which agency becomes possible. The constitution of the subject position of women is not only determined by gender but also by race, class, sexual preference, etc.

The rejection of universal knowledge does not necessarily lead to relativism because relativism is only a problem from the point of view of the universal. In the scientific process relativism is only acknowledged when it threatens the hegemony of traditional science.

The Post-Colonial Critique

Post-colonial theorists extend the critique of post-modernists to the power relations experienced by "Third World women"⁴ which is theorised as imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations. These women are treated as a homogeneous group due to the ahistorical notion of the sameness of their oppression (Mohanty, 1991:56). In their theorisation feminist scholars (mostly white and middleclass) view these women only as victims of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, illiteracy, poverty and religious fanaticism (Mohanty, 1991:5).

This type of theorisation gave feminism a negative connotation among Third World women who also came to reject the notion of 'sisterhood is global'. The demand arose from third world feminists for theorising women's specific social locations and the historical specificity of their struggles.

Mohanty (1991:10) summarises third world feminists' writings as follows:

1. the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism;
2. the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles;
3. the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency; and
4. the differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal to third world women's organisations and communities.⁵

The criticism on an epistemological level is aimed at the creation of global hegemony of Western scholarship by producing (ethnocentric) universal knowledge which negates cross-cultural differences. Women as an analytical category is treated as an already constituted group. It is in essence a critique of epistemological foundationalism which reflects the authority and standpoints of those who have the power to control knowledge production and dictates to but also silences those who are not scientists (Yeatman, 1994:189).

Yeatman (1994:192) argues that a post-colonial epistemology challenges the authority of a foundationalist science by:

- ... disrupting the we-ness of the community of knowers and locating all knowledge-claims within the politics of contested domination, the epistemological force of the politics of difference is to refuse any vantage point for knowledge outside or beyond this field of contested domination.

A politics of representation is therefore established which attempts to answer the questions: 'who has the authority to represent reality?', or 'who must be silenced in order that these representations prevail?' (Yeatman, 1994:191). This politics of representation denies the consensus of a community of foundationalist scholars by showing how this consensus depends on the systematic exclusion of the voiceless. All knowledge-claims are, therefore, located within the terrain of contested domination.

Within the academy women are branded as subaltern intellectuals who are in Yeatman's (1994:193) words:

- admitted into the class of intellectuals on just the same terms as women have been educated to make good wives and mothers, and colonials have been educated to rule on behalf of the metropolis

within colonies: namely, as intellectuals whose authority as intellectuals is qualified, by and indeed subjected to, their lack of authority in being positioned as subordinates. Because subaltern intellectuals are those who are refused entry to the new class elites...

Women who enter the academy face a crisis of accountability and the tension of being situated as subaltern intellectuals between the (male) intellectual elite and non-intellectual constituencies. For the acceptance of their academic work they have to accept the standards of the former, yet they still have to be accountable to their constituencies (Yeatman, 1994:196-7).

Post-colonial epistemology accepts the post-modern assumptions of difference and challenges the authority of feminists who have for the purposes of research assumed a unified category of 'black women'. It also challenges the nature of the academy.

Response from Standpoint Epistemology on these Critiques

Standpoint epistemology counters the critique of post-modernists (also post-colonialists) by arguing that post-modernists can only justify their knowledge claims insofar as they are critiques of the taboos of Western humanism. It is the politics of the solidarity of fragmented identities (Di Stefano, 1990:74). Di Stefano (1990:76) poses the question whether fractured identities can be embraced without the parallel construction of new fictions and counter-fictions. As Martin (1994:631) points out, by rejecting essentialism the idea of false unity can easily be substituted for false difference.

The most serious problem with post-modernism is that it prevents feminist politics (or any type of politics) and feminism cannot survive without a subject (women) or a standpoint.

Both Di Stefano (1990) and Harding (1990, 1991) argue that feminist standpoint contains within it elements of the post-modern in its questioning of universal epistemology and the belief that reason is socially located, while post-modernism still contains elements of the Enlightenment as there still is a concern with epistemology and not a total rejection of it. Post-modernists still believe in social progress. Harding (1991:187) points out that giving up telling more 'true stories' (assumed by traditional science) does not mean giving up telling less false stories and this assumption is also contained in post-modernism by telling stories from the vantage point of the social location of the subject. Flax (1990:42) goes so far as to argue that feminist standpoint epistemology belongs in post-modernism because feminist notions of the self, knowledge and truth are contradictory to that of the Enlightenment.

The notion of 'strong objectivity' is viewed as a product of the post-modern multiple consciousness because it acknowledges the dialectical relationship between the subject and object of research (Menkel-Meadow, 1991:233).

Feminist standpoint epistemology counters the post-colonial critique by arguing that standpoint theories focus on the differences between men and women but do *not* ignore the differences between women. By allowing for the social location of women, as a dominated group, as the starting point of the research process, the researcher exposes the process of construction of multiple forms of oppression through analysing the interaction between the different systems of domination (eg race, class etc). Through reflexivity the researcher also opens herself up for her own biases.

From the point of standpoint epistemology the category of 'women' cannot be completely deconstructed because it would make feminism unnecessary. Feminist standpoint epistemology opens the space for a richer understanding of heterogeneity and diversity, yet is still built around coalitions and commonalities which makes a feminist praxis possible.

The South African Debate

A feminist debate in South Africa about representation has been ongoing for a few years now and is presented in heated exchanges at women's conferences and in the women's journal, *Agenda: Journal for Women and Gender*.⁶ The debate reflects feminist standpoint, post-modern and post-colonial epistemological viewpoints but seldomly takes place on an epistemological level.

The main questions posed in this debate is who can speak on behalf of, about, or for whom? Can a white middleclass woman, for example, do research on an African working class woman, or the other way around?

Women's conferences in South Africa have been characterised by divisions between grassroots activists and academic women as well as between white and black women (see Bazilli, 1991; and Serote, 1992). The debate about representation has three major components: first, the under-representation of black women in academe; second, the issue of the misrepresentation of black women's position/oppression; and, third, the question of who has the right to represent whom embedded in questions of mandates and the accountability of researchers (Hassim and Walker, 1992).

Participants in this debate claim a post-foundationalist/ post-colonial epistemology of difference, yet at the same time revert to notions of *experience* in a very foundationalist way.

Post-modernism requires that women interrogate the differences that exist among them, while post-colonial epistemology demands that women make

visible the power relations which they experience as subaltern intellectuals or objects of study. In South Africa a post-modern epistemology forces women to analyse existing differences, yet at the same time post-colonial epistemology, drawing on experiences of apartheid racism and domination, pits black and white women against each other in a binary opposition due to their differential social locations in the (previous) apartheid system of domination.

Nature of the Academy

The conflict between grassroots women and academics or what Bazilli (1991:44) calls 'a self-defined group of women who felt uncomfortable and/or angry with what the conference process symbolised and they/we wanted to actively participate in making the conference process to be one of political engagement', is essentially one in which the university and academic conferences have become sites of struggle.⁷ It is a conflict that challenges the nature of the academy. As Bazilli (1991:46) suggests, the notion of what a university is, has to be redefined. It is a challenge to the power relations of a community of knowers who have excluded women, and have specifically marginalised black women. In this regard see the excellent analysis by Govinden (1994)⁸ of the position of black women and research.

The debate reflects the tension that women experience as subaltern intellectuals in the academy. Firstly, there is the demand to be accountable to their constituencies of grassroots, marginalised women in accessible language and at the same time produce academic work of quality. This tension is felt doubly by black women, who as subaltern *women* intellectuals are located in subordinate positions to men intellectuals but as *black* women are also located in subordinate positions to white women who have had the intellectual authority to set the agenda for the women's movement. This makes it very difficult for black feminists to be accountable to their grassroots constituencies. Entering into intellectual authority on grounds of a post-foundationalist epistemology means black feminists have to put themselves in a contestatory relationship with the foundationalist assumptions of male dominated science but also have to challenge the research endeavors of white feminists even if they are based on a feminist standpoint epistemology.

It is for this reason that women who may engage in research from a standpoint epistemology are accused of being racist because from the post-colonial perspective white women are in positions of power compared to black women and white women can, therefore, not situate themselves on the same critical plane as black women. This is why Hendricks and Lewis (1994:72-73), for example, do not engage the standpoint epistemological assumptions of some of Funani's

critics but rather accuse them of racism and the wilful denial that racism is a white problem.

Experience

Racism in this regard is considered as structural conditions of power, privilege and domination which shape the *experience* of black women as a group and of white women as a group. It is the specificity of the experience of racism or privilege and how it has shaped gender oppression that is invoked as a knowledge claim. The suggestion is that this experience be interrogated by black and white women separately. Funani (1992:68), for example, argues that black women 'need our own space to explore our own realities, first, before we can make this space available to others'. It has also been suggested that white women interrogate their own racism.

Race, and not gender, becomes the category of analysis through which differences among women are perceived to be constituted. In this way race requires the characteristics of essentialism. There is always the danger of the trap of 'false unity' if race is used in such an essentialist way. As Aziz (1992:302) has cautioned:

Any line of argument chosen to emphasise black/white difference will tend to deny the complexity of both black and white experience. This may be unavoidable, but unless it is explicitly acknowledged a racial essentialism can emerge through the back door of fixed and oppositional identities.

The appropriation of experience, and in this case an experience of oppression or of privilege, cannot be used as a knowledge claim because experience is not self-explanatory. It has to be mediated through concepts and theorised (Code, 1988:190). Invoking experience as a knowledge claim is no different from that of feminists who claim they use a feminist standpoint epistemology and then use women's experience in an unmediated way as the only source of truth. It is based on the notion that the view of the oppressed is the only true understanding of social reality or history (Wolpe, 1994). Hassim and Walker (1992:82) caution against this 'view from below':

While we argue for the need to validate women's experiences, we are concerned with the absolute privileging of experience as the sole arbiter of knowledge. For one thing, if taken to its logical conclusion it invalidates the entire research process, and not only for those researchers who can be defined as 'privileged' or white.

Kapadia (1995:368) calls it a 'cultural "fundamentalism" where Non-Third World writers are not allowed to speak'. Lazreg (1994:46) points out that it is

possible to use 'experience' in the same way that positivist science uses it. It shows the same signs of essentialism because experience is used to provide women *because they are women*, with a privileged position in pursuit of the truth. Feminists have given 'experience' multiple meanings, assuming it to be self-explanatory. Sometimes it refers to feelings, emotions, the personal, personality, discrimination, etc (Lazreg, 1994:50).

She argues that in its struggle against positivist foundationalist science feminists have used 'experience' in an *ontologised* form - the very view that they reject. It has also leads to closure in the debate about representation in South Africa.

This problematic use of experience jeopardises the feminist project as Lazreg (1994:52) points out:

The feminist position is doubly jeopardised in that it does not recognise that an epistemology based in experience may not yield access to knowledge of the *social structures* within which experience takes place or to the social antecedents of that same experience. Furthermore, it does not recognise that the 'female world' so constituted is the creation of neither females nor males alone and requires for its elucidation a genuinely integrated theoretical effort ... (emphasis added)

She points out that white feminists have done this and have managed to overlook the specificity of black or lesbian or disabled women.

A further danger is that if these separate experiences of black women and white women define the world there is no independent criteria against which to test a black woman's or a white woman's construction of that world. We would, therefore, still be in need of a way to legitimise our knowledge. Experience taken as self-evident reproduces rather than contests existing knowledge (see Scott, 1991). While experience can be the starting point of the research process it has to be tested against competing knowledge claims.

Dealing with Difference

There has been a constant call for women to deal with the differences among them in more than an additive way - ie arguing that those women who suffer from race, class and gender oppression suffer from a 'triple oppression'. Yet, it is unclear what it means. Does it imply that we have to analyse how identities are constituted through the intersections between race, class, gender, disability, etc? Or does it mean the interrogation of the structural conditions that lead to the constitution of identity?⁹

It has become commonplace for women scholars in South Africa to invoke the assumptions of post-modernism for their analysis, arguing that we have to take into consideration all the different identities of women in order to understand their subject positions. The post-modern call for sensitivity towards difference is used as a mantra, or as something that gives us absolution to continue doing what we warned other scholars not to do.

A post-modern epistemology of knowledge has its own dangers for a feminist project. As many feminists have noted, the positivist view from 'nowhere' becomes replaced with the post-modern view from 'everywhere'. Nicholson (1990:10), for example, argues that postmodernism can become an invocation of abstract ideals such as difference rather than the understanding that difference follows from and is limited to the demands of a specific political context. It is the replacement of the essentialisation of experience with the essentialisation of difference.

Difference cannot merely be used to imply diversity. It has to mean more than that, such as the exposure of relationship of power and domination. Experience, therefore, cannot be analysed one-sidedly. Feminists may have abandoned knowledge claims based on universal categories, such as women, but looking merely at own experience is not helpful either. One's own experience is always influenced by that of others and mediated by structural conditions. White racism cannot be analysed in isolation from black oppression, otherwise each one of us could claim to have a perspective and because we are not making generalisations we could leave our perspective intact, accepting that others have different perspectives. But we need to understand how our own experiences affect others and are affected by the experiences of others (Strickland, 1994:268). The subject is always mutually constituted and social location is always contested and negotiated.

We need, as Strickland (1994:268) suggests, larger-scale structural analyses of social and economic systems as well as employing concepts and general categories that deal with gender. Strickland (1994:270) challenges the idea that giving up the myth of the Archimedean point means that we have to retreat into a plurality of conceptual schemes whose claims can only be understood from within. We have to ask what our own experiences mean in relation to that of others and we have to adjust our theories on grounds of the answers we find. (It also means that women have to start looking at their own experiences in relation to that of men).

Holland-Muter's (1995) suggestions for challenging white privilege goes a long way in achieving the above mentioned aims. Yet, we have to be careful that our dialogues, discussions and debates do not merely become conversations

which do not destabilise power relations. These encounters have to be uncomfortable where, as Strickland (1994:271) points out, 'you go away angry and hurt and defensive of your own point of view, but can't forget theirs, which you keep mulling over and in the process, gradually altering your own point of view ...'

Conclusion

In the debate about representation women draw on the assumptions of post-modern and post-colonial epistemology but their knowledge-claims revert to certain essentialist notions such as 'experience' which belong to a positivist epistemology or to an unacceptable use of feminist standpoint epistemology. A closer look, however, shows that research that is acceptable to many feminists, who invoke the assumptions of difference, is research done from a feminist standpoint perspective where reflexivity is used in a very original and sensitive way (see, for example, Hendricks and Lewis, 1994:73-74).

The shift from using the assumptions of a post-modern epistemology to a feminist standpoint is a consequence of the fact that women still need to legitimise their knowledge. Lennon and Whitford (1994:4) aptly point out that the 'problem of legitimation remains, so long as the *only* alternative to a discredited value-free objectivity appears to be a postmodern pluralist free-for-all'.

As feminists we need the category of women and knowledge of the lives of women (not used in an essentialist way) to validate our knowledge, otherwise we don't need feminism anymore. We need to understand the individual experiences of women but we also need commonalities to be ascertained and experience to be made collective. We need an epistemology that can guide our choices in research through which we can justify them to ourselves and others. If we want to engage in feminist praxis some choices for action should be better than others and these choices depend on some form of generalisation otherwise research becomes only 'self-interested self analysis'.

Post-modernism offers us a politics of identity, yet the solidarity of a women's movement is still a necessity for feminist praxis. This does not mean it has to be the discredited notion of 'sisterhood is global'. Yet, the commonality of experience is the very precondition for praxis that is denied by a post-modernist politics of identity.

Post-modernism opened the spaces to deal with difference and fractured identities as discursive analysis but women's lives are not only a discursive practice. Post-modernism is strong on generating excellent criticism of power relations but short on guidance on how to do research.

Feminist standpoint epistemology offers us a research praxis as well as an engagement with differences. It also offers us a political praxis that opens the possibility for agency. This agency stems from the contestation that comes about when relinquishing the Archimedian point of objectivism. It makes representation possible. This does not imply that we use the concept of women in an essentialist way - but any feminist theorising/praxis needs to start from the analytical category of women otherwise feminism has become obsolete.

NOTES

1. A earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Second Biennial International Conference of the African Studies Association of South Africa, July 5-8, 1995 in Port Elizabeth. The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.
2. A standpoint epistemology is a complex and self-conscious epistemology which starts with the lives and experiences of women. Harding (1991) makes it very clear that a standpoint epistemology starts from the *lives* of women. She is reluctant to use the concept experience but rather views the starting point as the lives of women. Her reluctance may stem from the essentialist way in which feminist have used the concept 'experience', especially those who use the body as a starting point. Experiences of reproduction and sexuality have often been used by feminists, especially radical feminists, as homogeneous across race and culture. The essentialist use of experience has become discredited and Harding has developed arguments for a non-essentialist use of experience.
3. For an explanation of the nature of women's exclusion of knowledge and theory production see Pateman and Gross (eds) (1986), chapters 1-3.
4. The concept of 'Third World women' is placed in quotation marks to show that this concept is rejected by post-colonial theorists because of its use to treat women in third world conditions as a homogeneous group.
5. For an elaboration of these arguments see Mohanty (1991:11-40).
6. See numbers: L Funani 'Nigerian Conference Revisited', *Agenda*, 15, 1992; F Fouche 'Nigerian Conference Revisited', *Agenda*, 16, 1993; F Funani 'The Great Divide', *Agenda*, 17, 1993; A Gouws 'The Angry Divide', *Agenda*, 19, 1993; C Hendricks and D Lewis 'Voices from the Margins', *Agenda*, 20, 1994; S Holland-Muter 'Opening Pandora's Box: reflections on "whiteness" in the South Women's Movement', *Agenda*, 25, 1995.
7. See Kadalie (1995) for a discussion of the marginalisation of academic feminists.
8. Forthcoming in *Knowledge, Method and the Public Good*, HSRC, 1996.
9. Martin (1994), for example, argues that the constant call for difference (in the American context) has made women afraid to use many concepts for fear of being essentialist. The consequence is a 'chilly research climate' for women which stunts the growth of intellectual inquiry.

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