Feminist research with non-feminist and anti-feminist women:

Meeting the challenge[1]

One of the most potentially liberating aspects of feminist methodology[2] is its commitment to giving women space to voice their realities as they experience them. This is "one of the earliest articulated and still most important goals of feminist scholarship" (Chodorow 1996:22). In contrast to the objectivist stance of positivism, in which omniscient researchers name the reality of those they research, "Feminism insists that women should define and interpret our own experiences, and that we need to redefine and re-name what other people (men, experts) have previously defined and named for us" (Stanley and Wise 1983:194). In the academy, it is feminist methodology which articulates this position, and as such, it places itself in opposition to other forms of conducting research whereby terms of experience are dictated to, rather than by, the participant.

While the term "feminist methodology" is widely used, there is not a real consensus on its intended meaning, and indeed this is a subject upon which there has been much debate (Gelsthorpe 1992; Gorelick 1991; Hammersley 1992 ,1994; Oakley 1998; Ramazanoglu 1992; Williams 1993). Differences notwithstanding, DeVault (1996) claims a "distinctiveness" for feminist methodology in its commitment to three goals: 1) a shift of focus from men's concerns "in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women," 2) a minimization of harm and control in the research process, and 3) a support of research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women (pp.32-33). Chodorow (1996), in her characterization of

feminist scholarship, includes the injunction to "address the researcher's own subjectivity and the relation between here and her research subject" (p.22).

It is the tensions contained within the first of these goals, summarized as "the commitment to excavation and inclusion" (p.33) which we will explore in this article. DeVault comments that "Negotiating the tension between investigating experiences with intense personal meaning and casting wider nets has been a continuing challenge [for feminist methodology]" (p. 33). Documenting women's experiences might well be one goal of feminist methodology, but there are situations in which this may be in conflict with another goal of feminist methodology, that of fighting women's oppression. Kitzinger and Wilkinson describe "the challenge posed to feminist theory by some women's interpretation of their 'experience' (1997:566).   Because feminist social scientists want to be 'nice' to those who participate in their research (p. 572), they are often hesitant to confront the differences which may divide them, either during an encounter or in print. But "Routinely validating women's experience can be positively dangerous in enforcing dominant constructions" (p.573). Kitzinger and Wilkinson believe that "this problem [of 'validating' non- or anti-feminist women's experiences] must be pervasive in feminist social science research, and yet is rarely discussed" (p. 568). If women who speak about their lives do not identify themselves as victims of oppression, how is it possible to both represent their experiences from their point of view, and to claim for them positions which they do not claim for themselves?   How can feminist researchers avoid redefining the experiences of (non-feminist) women, retaining a dual commitment to the integrity of the expressed viewpoint of the participant and to the cause of feminism in general?   Finally, how should a feminist researcher address her own subjectivity and the relation between herself and her (non-feminist) research subject?

This article shall examine some strategies which various feminist methodologists, including myself, have employed in dealing with this problem. Before embarking on this, I feel it is appropriate to locate myself in relation to this topic. Long before I ever knew anything about research methodology, I called myself a feminist. To me, this meant that gender was a central organizing category in the way in which I understood social and political dynamics, and, moreover, I saw myself as "working towards a transformative understanding of women's condition" (Cain 1986:256). Some time after my initial emergence into the life of research, I encountered feminist methodology: here I found an articulation of an outlook which intuitively I had already adopted in my own work. But while feminist methodology embodied much of the spirit I wished to bring to my work, ironically the one issue it did not satisfactorily address was the complexity of gender identity, both shared and not-shared, between myself and the women I interviewed. Thus, the critique I offer in the following pages is from the perspective of one who considers herself "inside" the object of discussion, and who continues to struggle with its contradictions.

The Problem of the Omniscient Feminist

Many feminist scholars, like researchers in general, believe that most people lack the critical and analytic tools to make sense of their lives - they are often are not aware of or do not understand "the systems which surround and constrain them" - and it is the responsibility of the researcher "to illuminate these systems using [participants'] experiences and illuminate their experiences using these systems." (Millen 1997: para. 3.5) Feminist researchers are not immune to the criticism which we have directed at others: we feel that we know better than those who participate in our research about the underlying structures which give or deny meaning in their lives. It is argued that sexism, like other forms of oppression, can be deeply internalized, and hidden from the conscious (MacKinnon 1987). Adopting a Marxist position that "most

fundamental social relations occur 'behind the backs' of the actors," some feminist scholars argue that the structure of sexual oppression is obscured by the contradictions of daily life (Gorelick 1991:463): women who do not articulate the importance of gender are not aware of or do not understand the forces which influence their lives. We researchers, those to whom they tell their stories, are not so blind; we have a "greater knowledge of the issues raised and of the theoretical framework of the research and of social life generally" (Millen paragraph 3.4). But this claim of greater knowledge lies in direct contradiction to "feminism['s] insist[ance] that women should define and interpret our own experiences..." (Stanley and Wise 1983:194-5).

Herein lies the problem. Gorelick (1991) summarizes the tension within this position in the following way:

> If social relations occur "behind the backs of the actors," how can the researcher know them, unless she claims a source of knowledge or understanding beyond that of her respondents? If she makes that claim, doesn't she run the risk of elitism? But if she does not attempt to uncover social relations and structures of oppression that may be hidden from her respondents' view, is she not limiting her contribution to them and to feminist science and political practice? (p. 466)

Consciousness: False, Raised or Feminist?

Fifteen years after its original publication, the work of Stanley and Wise (1983) still provides one of the most honest and cogent treatments of the problem of false consciousness. Stanley and Wise identify consciousness as a central concern of feminism, and they describe the existence of an implicit and sometimes explicit three stage model of consciousness, which pervades the

material on and reported experiences in consciousness-raising groups. This model begins with false consciousness, proceeds to raised consciousness, and culminates in feminist consciousness. This model is "sequential and temporal" and "implies a movement from something less desirable to something more desirable, from something lower to something higher, from something which doesn't see and understand truly to something which does" (1983:118)

The often-cited work of Bartky (1977) identifies a similar phenomenon, but offers not a critique but a celebration of this movement: "... the acquiring of a "raised" consciousness, is an immeasurable advance over that false consciousness which it replaces. The scales fall from our eyes" (p. 33). Women who do not have a feminist consciousness are somehow truncated in their development; they are "pre-feminist" (which one might argue is at least preferable to being "post-feminist"). Stanley and Wise say they "reject the idea of true and false consciousness" (p.121), claiming that "the notion that feminism and feminists occupy a higher plane of understanding about the true nature of social reality must be exposed" (p. 121). Simultaneously, however, the same authors write "when we say that feminist consciousness isn't 'true'... we don't mean that we don't find it preferable and in some sense better than any other consciousness" (p. 120). Even those who critique this hierarchical model of consciousness cannot resist placing themselves within it, at the highest level. In an attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction, the authors then propose a somewhat murky alternative to the earlier model: rather than visualizing the development of consciousness in a linear fashion, they suggest, one should instead think "in terms of a circle or spiral" (p.120). But the curvature alters nothing, and ultimately, the progression model remains intact.

Gorelick (1991) finds difficulty with the concept of false consciousness, not on the grounds "that it asserts that people may have an imperfect understanding of their own conditions" but rather

because of its implication that a) there is a true consciousness that is known and complete, and b) the researcher-activist know it, and the participant does not (p.468) At the same time, she rejects the notion that "the nature of the world [is] merely a matter of opinion" (p.468). When researchers and researched occupy different locations in relation to feminist consciousness (and maybe even gender consciousness more generally[3]) are elitism - claims of superior knowledge - and relativism - all opinions are equally valid - the only options available for the researcher?

There are a variety of measures used by feminist scholars to overcome the "problem" when difference of feminist consciousness becomes apparent in a research setting. Amongst these, three stand out for me: 1) reliance upon the concept of false consciousness; 2) the construction of research as a platform for "dialogue" culminating in the resolution of differences; and 3) the redefinition of feminism. After describing each of these, I shall then explore a fourth option, that of "situating gender [and gender consciousness] as a relational and relative category both in itself and in relation to the social and cultural whole" (Chodorow 1996:43). Finally, I shall discuss my own struggles with these strategies in my research with a small group of old[4] women.

The first strategy, that of using false consciousness to "explain away" differences is one which I have already discussed. Not surprisingly, researchers vary in the extent to which they are willing to openly embrace this concept, especially in more recent years when the problematic nature of its underlying assumptions have been the subject of much critique (Chodorow 1996; Gorelick 1991). In the wake of second wave feminism, in the late sixties and early seventies, the superior nature of "feminist consciousness" from the point of view of those who were imbued with it, was unquestioned and even unquestionable. This position became somewhat modified in light of critiques outlined above regarding its incompatibility with professed principles of feminist commitment to representing women's lives as women experience them. More recent feminist

scholarship has recognized "the need to fully understand and base research from the perspective of women's lives, while pointing to the impossibility of merely holding up a mirror to reality"(Henwood and Pidgeon1995:15). Not surprisingly, 'feminist consciousness' has reflected the changing concerns of feminists over the last quarter of a century, with the focus shifting from equality and autonomy to difference, diversity, and deconstruction. But the dynamism that is the heart of this consciousness – as welcome as it may be - does not in itself resolve the problems identified here.

The tension between balancing unqualified regard for the superiority of feminist knowledge - which presumes a feminist consciousness – and respecting differences of location and experience of women in general, is represented in current debates in feminist standpoint theory[5] (Cain 1986; Henwood, et al. 1998; Harding 1991; Hartsock 1983, 1998; *Signs* Volume 22, Number 2, 1997). Over the twenty-five years since the theory was first articulated (Smith 1974), feminist standpoint theorists have sought to address "the crisis of relativism in modern epistemology" (Henwood and Pidgeon 1995: 17). Arguing against the possibility and desirability of value-neutral knowledge, standpoint theorists argue that "knowledge is *always[6]* situated and constructed from the perspective of particular social positions and locations" p. 14) and, moreover, "marginalized groups can have special insight, as outsiders to dominant patriarchal frameworks of thought, since they can see what is invisible from within that order" (p.17). Female experience, far from being an obstacle to real knowledge, constitutes a *more* valid basis for it, "because it gives access to a wider conception of truth via the insight into the oppressor" (Millen 1997: para. 7.2).

But what happens when women's perceptions of their realities differ? Critics of feminist standpoint argue that it relies on an essentialist construction of women's lives, and one of its most

pronounced weaknesses is its theorizing of diversity (Henwood and Pidgeon 1995; Ramazanoglu 1989). While it may be true that "women's lives structure an understanding of social relations" (Hartsock 1983:233), not all women share the same experiences, and nor are we equally oppressed. As Barbara Katz Rothman comments: '"We" doesn't really get one very far… We who? Can I use "we" only for "women like me"? And what makes a woman "like me"?' (quoted in Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996:24). How can the differences be resolved, and is it desirable that they should be so? Some feminist scholars suggest that the apparent binary opposition between standpoints and differences, or the "feminist-poststructuralist axis", is unnecessary (Henwood, et al 1998) and the present article is intended as a contribution to the task of deconstructing this polarity.

Feminist scholars in general, and feminist psychologists in particular, have devoted considerable attention to "whether, and how, we should represent members of groups to which we do not ourselves belong" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996:1), but the focus of such discussions has tended to be on members of groups "oppressed in ways we are not" (p.1). Although some feminist researchers may well not regard non-feminist women as being oppressed in ways 'we' – those of us who identify ourselves as feminist – are not, one importance of such discussions of 'otherness' which is particularly relevant to the concerns raised in this article, is the injunction to recognize ourselves in the 'others' we construct. As Burman comments "if the Others I represent are in some respects also me, then *my* representation of *them* should reflect on its process" (1996:140). We feminists who are trying to describe the lifeworlds of women who do not identify themselves as feminist need to reexamine not only our relationship with those who participate in our research, but also our relationship with the ideologies we ourselves embrace, and the social, cultural and historical contexts which have helped to make us who we are.

Both the strength and the challenge of feminist standpoint theory is that it rests on the concept of situated knowledge; individuals perceive the world the way in which they do because of their location within it (Haraway 1991). Therefore, if I as a feminist woman want to understand the worldview of non-feminist women, I must try to imagine myself in the location of such women, all the while knowing that "it is *not possible to see or know from two quite different sites at once*"(Cain 1986:261). Feminist standpoint theorists, Harding explains,

> use the "naturally occurring" relations of class, gender, race or imperialism in the world
> around us to observe how different "locations" in such relations tend to generate
> distinctive accounts of nature and social relations… daily life activities… can provide
> illuminating possibilities for observing and explaining systemic relations between "what
> one does" and "what one can know" (1997:384).

But most standpoint theorists, including Harding, reject what they perceive as relativism, arguing instead that "some … discursive accounts provide richer resources than others for understanding natural and social worlds… they are epistemically privileged" (Harding 1997:388). Debates between feminist standpoint theorists remain lively, [7] and there is no consensus regarding what 'the central project of standpoint theorists' (Hekman 1997: 399) is or should be. Some theorists argue that by allowing for a multiplicity of feminist standpoints, one avoids "the danger of essentialism" (Hekman 1997: 354). Others are concerned that decontextualizing standpoint theory …[i.e. focusing on questions of truth rather than power] depoliticizes [its] potentially radical content' (Hill Collins 1997:375). The justification for 'privileging some knowledges over others' (Hartsock 1997: 372-373) remains the most controversial aspect of standpoint theory; as

Hartsock acknowledges, the criteria for so doing are "ethical and political rather than purely 'epistemological'" (1997: 373). Harding characterizes the relativism/essentialism dilemma in the following way:

> If "our" one true story of a world that is out there and available for the telling is not *the* true story, then the modernist paranoia begins: "We" are going to have to admit the legitimacy of everyone's story and world – some of which will probably conflict with our favored ones. Lost is the analysis of how knowledge projects are designed for local situations, including diverse interests in gaining and exercising power (Harding 1997:387).

The tension between truth and power remains unresolved.

Claims of epistemological privilege made by standpoint theorists are shared by feminist scholars more generally, who make the case for their superior grasp of knowledge on the following grounds:

> It is we who have the time, resources, and skills to conduct methodological work, to make sense of experience and locate individuals in historic and social contexts... it is an illusion to think that, in anything short of a participatory research project, participants can have anything approaching 'equal' knowledge to the researcher (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994:37).

In her work with non-feminist female scientists, Millen (1997) explains her own solution

to the implicit problem of false consciousness: "To privilege my account anywhere but in

the writing of my research would have been practically difficult and politically

ambiguous" (Paragraph 5.11). Millen's argument, dually grounded on practical and

political considerations, is that the interview setting itself is an inappropriate venue for

attempts at consciousness raising. In as much as politics are a question of power,

political considerations of the relationship between researcher and researched and

between knowledge and power - the very issues which make her hesitant to privilege her

account in the interview - should continue to prevail even after a face-to-face encounter

has ended. Millen suspends the overt expression of feminist commitment until after she

has gathered her data. Does this release her from the responsibility to represent her

participants' experiences as they see them, or, on the contrary, does this enhance that

responsibility? The strategy which Millen employs may well minimize the practical

problems she must confront, but it introduces other ethical issues. While her respondents

might be more generous with their outpourings if they do not see her as an adversary, if

she is to challenge their interpretations of their lives, is she not obligated to do so in a

fashion which would allow her participants the opportunity to respond?

This privileging of the researcher's account is made more problematic in the context of a more

general political critique. Gorelick correctly points out that the

> vast majority of researchers are predominantly white and privileged... researchers
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> bring social location, culture, motivations, limitations, ignorances, skills,

education resocialization in dominant institutions, and outside perspective that

may be useful as well as troublesome (1991: 469).

The relationship between knowledge and power is one which has received much attention (Foucault 1981) and has a certain poignancy in the present deliberation, as questions of power invariably frame any research enterprise (Bhavnani 1990; Spivak 1993). Bhavnani (1990) argues that "an analysis of power should be a part of all research, even if such an analysis is not the primary focus of the research" (p.151) Only when the power of the researcher is made visible do questions regarding the researcher's own subjectivity arise. But feminist researchers hide behind the shield of their transparent power -behaving in ways which are common to other people in positions of power - if and when they insist on their privilege to reframe the stories they hear, knowing full well that the interpretations they offer will go unchallenged by those whose lives they describe.

Cain poses the question: who is entitled to be research subjects, and who must be objects (1986:262)? Being a 'subject of research', Cain clarifies, involves "formulating the problem to be investigated and participating with the researcher as the 'problem' is reformulated in the course of the research ... [and] participating in the ongoing process of theorisation" (pp. 262-263). Cain elaborates on the principles of inclusion and exclusion in research design and implementation:

some people one investigates are entitled to formulate how they will be theorised

together with the researcher, to constitute themselves including their thoughts as

objects in a theory, whereas other people and their opinions must be constituted as

objects-in-theory by the researcher alone. Those people entitled to be subjects in

this sense are *those whose standpoint the researcher shares*, both as a matter of

choice and sympathy and also objectively (p. 263).

The question remains, however: who is allowed to be on the inside? Is a lack of shared standpoint really sufficient justification for the objectification of some women? Can we really only build into our research those voices with which we are in unison?

Henwood and Pigeon (1995) argue that it is "not possible to simply hold up a mirror to participants' views. Data are always interpreted and made meaningful through theory." (p.15) While some feminist methodologists believe that "it is improper for 'interpretation and analysis to remain the prerogative of the investigator'" (Hilary Graham cited in Reinharz 1992: 30) others like Millen hold this differentiation between data gathering and data analysis as critical to their ability to reconcile differences between themselves and their respondents. Henwood and Pidgeon postulate that "any intellectual analysis entails some degree of abstraction away from the purely phenomenological" (1995:15). But as feminist scholars, how can we reconcile our analytic proclivities with our reluctance to objectify those who agree to participate in our research? Relying on the construct of false consciousness to explain the lack of feminist consciousness in others - and claiming for oneself a more fully informed, and therefore superior knowledge - does not resolve problems we have identified as being symptomatic of masculinist models of research.

Agreeing to Agree

A second strategy for resolving questions of difference between researcher and researched is the adoption of a relativist stance, which seeks to establish a commonality between two apparently divergent positions. Here, research is regarded as "a sort of dialogue or contrapuntal duet" (Gorelick 1991:469). Two articles which embody this approach are Katherine Borland's "'That's

Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research" (1991) and Rachelle Saltzman's "Folklore, Feminism, and the Folk: Whose Lore Is It" (1987). The articles share certain structural components: 1) they are written by feminist scholars; 2) they report life history work with old women who the researchers obviously admire and respect, and who they, the researchers, identify as feminist; 3) the researchers show drafts of their articles to their respective participants; 4) the participants, with varying degrees of explicitness, reject the framework of feminism which is used to make sense of their lives; 5) there is a dialogue between researcher and researched during which the label of feminism is negotiated; and 6) ultimately, both researchers persist in their use of the label of 'feminist' to describe the women they have interviewed.

Saltzman's article is less explicit in its treatment of this matter, whereas it is the heart of Borland's work. Saltzman's article is particularly interesting for me to read, as Rose, whose life it describes, is someone with whom I too have conducted life history work. (I will return to a discussion of in my presentation of case study materials later.) Saltzman describes Rose, who was eighty-three at the time, as someone who " had been an outspoken feminist since her early teens...Clearly I had made quite a find!" (p.549). It means something personally to Saltzman that Rose, the feisty old woman, has been a feminist from her early days. But Rose's reaction to reading an earlier version of the article Saltzman now writes is the following: "I suppose some of the conclusions... were more feminist than I personally am. The objections I have to all feminists is this..." (p. 554) and from here she describes a host of problems all of which for her are associated with feminism and feminists. The label which she does spontaneously introduce is that of women's liberation, a term which appears to identify a distinct cultural package from that which is offered her. (According to Pilcher (1998: 111) the term "women's liberation" gradually became replaced by the term "feminism" as a result of the schisms between radicals and liberals

in the women's movement more than twenty-five years ago.) Rose turns this conversation with

her interviewer to the principles of communism, which she describes as her "real aim in life" (p.

554). Her feelings about feminism seem to stem directly from this core identity of herself.

Saltzman persists in her label, stating that Rose "chooses among a wide variety of strategies to

persuade others of her views on feminism and Marxism" (p.559). She then offers somewhat of a

clarification of her use of this term. Rose, she says,

> is hardly an exploited woman in need of having ... her feminist consciousness
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> raised... her views... may seem incompatible with a feminist theory that insists that
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> women are oppressed by men [for such a theory] implies that women are objects
>
> and victims, not autonomous subjects with their own methods of achieving their
>
> own goals (p. 559)

Leaving to the side the question which feminist theory, or theories, imply that women are objects

and victims – a statement which itself invites scrutiny - isn't the point here not that Rose's views

on feminism may seem to others as incompatible with feminist theory, but rather that they seem

incompatible to Rose herself, who explicitly distances herself from this label?

Borland's relationship with her participant is different from that of Saltzman, in that Bea, the

woman whose life she is recording, is her grandmother. Perhaps for this reason the

communication regarding the labeling of feminism was much more heated and direct. After

reading a draft of Borland's article, Bea writes her granddaughter a fourteen-page letter, portions

of which are included in the article as it is ultimately published:

> Not being, myself, a feminist, the "female struggle" as such never bothered me in

my life. It never occurred to me. I never thought of my position at all in this

sense.... Feminism... was of no moment to me - none at all. Privately, it has

always seemed ridiculous... So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle

for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation...

That it was never - by any wildest stretch of the imagination - the concern of the

originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete

distortion. .. The story is no longer MY story at all... it has become your story

(p.70).

Bea's rejection of being portrayed with a feminist identity is vociferous. She feels that her own story has been expropriated by someone else, and used for their purposes. The letter communicates a sense of betrayal, and Borland clearly is concerned with the issues which are raised by the incident, differences between "feminist scholar and speaking woman" (p. 73). Ultimately, the researcher and the researched meet again, to discuss a revised version of the article. While conceding that much of what Borland had written was "very true", the grandmother reiterated her rejection of the feminist label. "Nevertheless," Borland writes,

she declared that if I meant by feminist a person who believed that a woman has

the right to live her life the way she wants to regardless of what society has to say

about it, then she guessed she was a feminist (p. 74).

While Borland is to be congratulated on her candor in reporting this story - a story not only about problems of feminist methodology, but also the intimacies between a grandmother and a granddaughter - her interpretation of it, and the conclusions she draws, are not incontestable.

While she characterizes her grandmother as "accepting feminism" others could read the grandmother's qualified willingness to concede to the opinion of her granddaughter as an attempt to resolve differences and to restore relations between them. (Borland reports that this difference over feminist labeling occasioned a ten month silence between them). For Borland, "Bea's identification with feminism… [is] a testament to the new possibilities for understanding that arise when we re-envision the fieldwork exchange" (p. 74)

Borland's interpretation of the events which occurred between herself and her grandmother assumes a basic equality between the researcher and the researched; it dos not account for the different locations each has in relation to the work, and the difference in power with which each person is imbued. Borland regards the story as one where "interpretative conflict" led to discussion, and ultimately to the resolution (approaching erasure) of differences; the story can also be read as one respondent's unsuccessful attempt to resist a framing of her life in which she cannot recognize herself, and her ultimate submission to the persuasive arguments of her researcher.

A Feminist by Any Other Name…

A third strategy used to explain the lack of feminist consciousness in subjects is related to, though not identical with, the second strategy just discussed. As previously, here the researcher claims for the researched a feminist consciousness which the latter has rejected for herself. In the second strategy, research is regarded as a platform for dialogue. Here, however, no such dialogue occurs; negotiation over the meaning of the term feminist is completely absent, either because it cannot happen – eg the subject is deceased – or it simply does not, due to reasons such as research design (eg participants in large scale surveys do not, even in principle, have a platform from which to enter into dialogue – real or virtual – with the researcher.) Rather, the

researcher simply clarifies, and ultimately dismisses, the reasons why the researched might reject such a label, and then reinstates it. Reinharz articulates the problem:

> Feminist biographers cannot give subjects sole responsibility for defining their
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> lives. The biographer should 'listen' to what her subject has to say about herself
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> and then enter into a dialogue with her, asserting her own voice (1994:73).

But what does it mean to "enter into dialogue" with someone who cannot speak for herself? Their opinions cannot be changed; it is disingenuous to suggest that there can be any real exchange of views. A researcher may well wish to offer an interpretation of a deceased subject's life which differs from that which the latter would have supplied; however, she must not pretend that this framework is one which is in any sense mutually shared between the two parties.

Barbara Clements' *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* provides one example of this strategy. Clements approached Kollontai "through a feminist lens [and] she saw her as a feminist, unlike Kollontai herself" (Reinharz 1994: 730). Kollontai, a Russian revolutionary at the turn of the century, was well aware of the existence of feminism, and saw in it an undermining of the communist principles to which she dedicated her life. The "woman question" has a long and thorny history within communism, and Kollontai's political commitment can only be understood within this context. While it is true that she was concerned with women's equality - specifically suffrage, social welfare programs for women, and questions regarding the relationship between sexuality and liberation - she believed, in line with Marxist theory, that this would come about as a byproduct of the revolution. While Clements concedes that Kollontai "vehemently denied that she was a feminist" (p.ix) and indeed "publicly branded feminism

bourgeois" (p. 44) she nonetheless feels justified in claiming for Kollontai a label that the latter explicitly rejected. Far from entering into dialogue with her subject, Clements' assertion of her own voice, is at the cost of further silencing her deceased subject.

This rehabilitation of historic women within the feminist tradition (Reinharz 1994:74) is not uncommon. But for whom is this rehabilitation important? What is accomplished by redefining as feminist women who distanced themselves from that label when it was available to them in their own lives? And why aren't we living feminists more uncomfortable in expropriating their experiences, imbuing them with intention and meaning which they did not have? This tendency to remake other's experiences in our own image is precisely the point with which Bea took issue with her granddaughter. In the case of reconstructing past life histories, however, the subjects are no longer present to articulate their objections. It would be a more fruitful, and certainly more challenging task to ask ourselves why these women did not call themselves feminists, and what the identifications which they did choose for themselves meant to them. The answer lies not in the negation but in the integration of differences: "we must... be prepared to modify our theory so as to take real account of the facts... [we must] still treat the experience as real... use [our] theory to make sense of rather than to deny the experience" (Cain 1986:265). A different but not wholly unrelated question, is why we, in the 21st century, seem so determined to reappropriate the experiences of our foremothers? Why do we try to remake them in our own image? What is at risk for us in contemplating that they might have rejected (wholly or partially) feminism? While of course these questions are neither simple nor straightforward, they again point to the need for exploring researcher subjectivity and the relationship between researcher and researched.

Thus far, I have described three different strategies which feminist scholars sometimes use when encountering the lack of an explicitly feminist consciousness in women with and on whom we

conduct our research. The first strategy, the appeal to false consciousness, assumes some degree of shared language between researcher and researched. The problem from the researcher's point of view is simply that her participant neither interprets nor presents her life in a feminist framework. The second and third strategies rely upon some measure of linguistic manipulation: in both cases, the rejection of the feminist label is not accepted on the grounds of contested understandings of the term "feminism." In the second strategy, the term serves as a platform for dialogue between researcher and researched; in the third strategy, where the subject is not able to represent herself, the term is simply applied to her. Strategy one assumes some degree of shared meaning of the term feminist, and both researcher and researched agree that the latter is not a feminist (though the two parties most probably vary in the meaning and importance they ascribe to this appellation). In the first strategy, the price of asserting difference is a falsely conscious self. In strategies two and three, the researcher wishes to claim for the researched the label of 'feminist' which the latter explicitly rejects. Here, there is an assumption that despite the use of different terms – for instance, women's liberation and feminism - the meaning remains constant. Neither the second or third strategy allow the participant to claim for herself a real difference from her researcher. A woman might use different labels for herself because her intended meaning is different; the integrity of her position is compromised when it is collapsed into a framework not of her choosing. Genuine acknowledgment of difference, and all of the tension that this necessarily entails, is vital to the dynamism of feminism. Our cause is not strengthened, but rather depleted by the suffocation of tension.

A central problem, evidenced in different ways in each of the strategies described here, is that of defining feminism. Who is to say who is a feminist and who is not? Must one call oneself a feminist in order to be one? Conversely, is calling oneself a feminist enough to constitute being one? One of the great anti-feminist coups of the last decade has been a strategizing around

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labels. Women like Camille Paglia can call themselves feminist all the while berating "hangdog dowdies and parochial prudes who call themselves feminists [who] want men to be like women" (p.5) and describing modern feminism as "sugar-coated Shirley Temple nonsense" (p.51). The effect of her misogynist vitriol is all the more potent because she is portrayed as one who criticizes from within. People adopt and reject labels for a whole host of reasons - not all of which are immediately transparent to researchers, or even to themselves. While Paglia might call herself a feminist, prompted by a political reading of the context in which the label is to be employed, others might distance themselves from it, for instance because of its exclusive association with the concerns of white middle class women (Hill Collins 1990). Labels function, amongst other things, as cultural signifiers of social location. This makes the job of the researcher even more complicated in terms of understanding the way in which participants frame their own identities.

'Productive tension in feminist research' (Chodorow 1996:42)

A creative alternative to the three strategies discussed above, is that employed by Nancy Chodorow (1989; 1996) in her research on second generation women psychoanalysts. Chodorow's account of this work is unusual in its ability to balance the authenticity of her subjects' voices, with her own commitment to feminism. She describes three stages in her attempts to resolve the epistemological and political dilemmas discussed above. First, she began her work with 'unresolved positive transference' (Chodorow 1996:23) to her research subjects: she wanted these "somewhat idealized grand old women and foremothers… to hold views like my own" (p. 23). When she realized that in fact she and her research participants did not share the same ideas about the importance of gender, she began to consider her interviewees as 'gender blind'; they were in denial, falsely conscious. Finally, suspicious of "an analysis that can dismiss women's subjectivity as false consciousness" (p. 24), Chodorow moved to a third

position:

> I came to see that my own ideas and identity, as well as those of my interview subjects,
> were rooted in our different social and cultural conditions. Differences in women's
> interpretations of a situation may be understood… historically, culturally and
> generationally… [The women she interviewed had a] different form of gender
> consciousness than I and experienced a different salience of gender as a social category
> … Gender salience became a central concept in my research (p.24).

Chodorow's analysis is built on the idea that not only is knowledge situated, but so is gender (p. 43), along with all other conceptual tools with which we make sense of the world. While recognizing the different standpoints occupied by herself and her interviewees, she does not claim for her own position an epistemological privilege. Chodorow describes the strength of this position:

> It enabled me to see how cultural and historical processes, as well as social situation,
> make certain conceptualizations and not others more probable. At the same time, this
> position also reflexively problematized and relativezed my own expectations and
> understanding (p.41).

Chodorow advocates going beyond 'conceptualizing gender in absolute terms' (p.43). Gender, she argues, is a "situated phenomenon, both in itself, as it can be more or less salient in different arenas or at different times of life, and in relation to other aspects of social and cultural categorization and identity." (p.43)   The recognition that "the salience and meaning of gender were products of one's time and place" provided Chodorow with a platform from which she

could "understand gender within the fabric of my interviewees' lives" (p.43). Thus the model that Chodorow develops is one which inherently respects the differences between herself and the women she interviews. Rather than regarding the low level of gender salience amongst her interviewees as a failure within them, she uses this difference as a tool to assist her in understanding their worldview. The challenge for her is to pose questions in a way which have historical resonance for her interviewees; only in so doing can she gain access to their thinking processes. Throughout Chodorow's work, there is never any doubt about her own commitment to feminism, but for her this commitment crucially extends to respecting the way in which women who are different from herself choose to describe their own lives.

'I was never bothered about being a woman': Notes on a Research Programme
My first experience grappling with the issues I have discussed in this article came in a series of interviews I conducted as part of a project on lifetime political commitment (Andrews 1991). Although the study included both women and men, I shall limit the discussion here to my work with the women. The topic of the research, the sustaining of socialist commitment and activism, was one with which I had much personal sympathy. This ensured that my respondents and I shared a substantial portion of our political understanding of the world. I was naively surprised, then, by the extent to which differences prevailed in our regard of feminism, something which was for me central to my politics. With one exception, the women I interviewed did not identify themselves as feminists; indeed, most actively distanced themselves from this label. It was my challenge to understand why.

It was not surprising to me that women who had dedicated their lives to socialism should prioritize a commitment to Marxism over all other ideologies, including feminism. However,

what I did find puzzling was the hostility which many of these women regarded feminism – this, despite the fact that many feminists today (Borland, Saltzman, and myself amongst them) would see in their lives an embodiment of some of feminism's most basic principles. From my historically-specific perspective, feminism and socialism were not only compatible, but it was difficult to envision one without the other. Also, as a young feminist, I was unaware of the ageism which characterizes much feminist research, and the women's liberation movement more generally (Bernard and Meade 1993; Stacy 1989). While the old women I interviewed rejected feminism because of its association with bourgeois ideology, particularly during the time when they were coming to political consciousness, it is also possible that they did not see anything in its current formulation(s) with which they could identify.

The challenge with which I was presented, then, was that of reconciling my feminist identity with the non-feminist identities of my respondents, while respecting the integrity of each position. Initially I attempted to do this by employing a combination of the strategies described above; while participants didn't volunteer a gendered reading of their lives, the experiences they related revealed to me a different story.

Elizabeth, for instance, described herself to me as someone who was "not very conscious of being a woman... I'm just a human being." It was interesting for me, then, only moments later, to listen to her describe men and women's different domestic experiences.

> I think to be a good house wife you get a jolly good training really in keeping the
> needs of your family, the needs of the house, the needs of the food, and all the rest
> of it, and they're things that you've got to keep on the boil, or simmering, all the

time. Whereas a man can go into his study and shut out the outside world and get

on with whatever it is he's doing. A woman has got to keep an eye on all the other

things, and be responsible for them.

Was she really not conscious of being a woman? Did she not place herself within this very

gendered framework which she had set out for me? I think the answer is both yes and no. From

her point of view, women and men perform different functions in both the public and private

sphere, and in this materialist sense, gender is important, if not deterministic. Regardless, she

minimizes the importance of this category in her self-construct. As I listened to Elizabeth, I

knew that while she did not interpret the stories she told through the lens of feminism, I certainly

did. I wouldn't have used the term 'false consciousness,' but implicitly this is how I explained

what I heard.

I also saw feminists where women did not see this in themselves. These women were pioneers in

a variety of women's issues: suffrage, contraception, and child care to name but a few areas of

their involvements. Some of them lived with their partners before marrying them (in the first

quarter of the twentieth century) and one, though married, refused to wear what she called "the

band of slavery" - a wedding ring. And yet they did not think of themselves as feminists. It was

essential for me to understand why not.

When feminist scholars are faced with different interpretations of the same phenomena, our

academic training teaches us to ask which explanation is correct, more complex, or more

adequate. Acknowledgment of difference immediately leads to hierarchical constructions, as one

perspective subsumes another. The ultimate challenge for me was to resist this synthesis of

difference, articulating a coherence of viewpoints where in fact there was none. My experience

was very similar to that of Chodorow, described above: the process by which I came to understand why my respondents so adamantly refused the label of feminist was the same process which led me to more fully understand the labels which they did use to describe themselves.

A woman born in the late 20th century with a comparable political outlook to the women I interviewed would probably call herself a feminist; however, the fact is my respondents did belong to a particular cohort, and their rejection of this label for themselves - even though it was available to them in their lifetimes - is revealing. For the women I interviewed, Marxism formed the cornerstone of their beliefs about the world and their position in it. According to traditional Marxism "That men as a group oppress women as a group is false, for working class men have no more real power than women" (Jaggar 1983: 66). Most versions of feminism are regarded as versions of ruling-class ideology; accordingly, bourgeois women are more likely to be feminists than working-class women" (p.66). Classical Marxism argues that women should "ally with working class men in struggling for their common, long-term interest in the defeat of capitalism" (p.66). This traditional Marxist stance on "the woman question" is the key to understanding my respondents' reactions to the label of feminism: thus, an insistence on imposing it upon them would implicate them in a position which was adversarial to their most cherished beliefs.

The women who participated in my study all shared a political orientation which was itself located in a specific historical context. As such, they felt the need not to prioritize but to choose between Marxism and feminism. However, as Jane Pilcher's excellent study (1998) explores, there are also strong cohort effects in play in women's beliefs regarding the nature and significance of feminism, regardless of their politics. (Interestingly, only one out of the nineteen women in Pilcher's oldest cohort – born about 1914 – had even heard of the term of the term feminism and could supply a recognizable description of it. This contrasts with the women in my

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study; through their long and continued engagement with left-wing politics in Britain, it would have been virtually impossible for them not to have encountered the term, and indeed to have developed an opinion about it.) It is interesting that given the enormous importance of the women's movement in the past century, there has been very little research into women's responses to feminism and to the organized women's movement (Pilcher 1998:108-109). Pilcher identified the passages in which her participants spoke of feminism as being characterized by either hostile or sympathetic vocabularies. One of the two forms of hostile vocabularies which Pilcher identifies, "feminism as extremism," is described in the following way:

> [There were] general references to feminism "going too far" or "being over the top"… feminism was said to use unnecessary or inappropriate tactics or methods which alienated the public and reduced support for the women's movement. Feminism was also said to be extreme in being "against men" and as being "sexist" towards them (p.115)

This form of hostile vocabulary accurately characterizes many of the references to feminism and feminists made by respondents in my own study. Where feminism was not explicitly constructed as being too extreme, it was alluded to as somewhat misguided, having misidentified men, and not the system, as the enemy. Rose, the same woman who is the subject of Saltzman's life history discussed above, explains her position in the following way:

> it's the system that's wrong, it's made the men like that. Now we've got to alter that, once you alter the system and ideology then you don't need to have separate women's things. ... All these categories categorizing people - I've always been against it... We're human beings...

For Rose, class politics are clearly the organizing principle of her worldview. She is a fighter for women's rights, yes, but she is clear that the root of the problem is capitalism, not men. The rigorous construction of the world along a singular axis of power leads Rose, and others, to be disparaging of other women if and when she perceives them to be draining the life blood from what she perceives as the real battle.

> I've a theory. I've watched all my life that women, if they do all the encouraging in most cases, mind you I'm a woman's woman... [but] I've seen a woman take a man away from a woman that they've been friendly with... I feel that our own sex are much to blame for a awful lot that happens to them in my opinion.... Women don't care a damn about their sisters if they've got their eye on a man. You might not think that so, but I've seen it so much.

What exactly is the theory to which Rose refers here? That feminism can only go so far? Rose is not willing to commit herself absolutely to an anti-woman stance; the function of the word 'if' in the statement 'if they do all the encouraging in most cases' effectively softens the strength of the allegation she is making. Rose is somewhat conflicted in what she is saying, and her injection of "I'm a woman's woman" - a seeming nonsequitor in the midst of a fragmented thought - is evidence of some degree of discomfort. Her last sentence here is intriguing. Does she say that I might not think it is so, because she accurately anticipates that I will recoil at some of the things she is saying? She is reading me all the while I am reading her, and this persists throughout the course of our interviews.

In an interview with another participant, Kate, the conversation turns to the reported rapes at the American military base at Molesworth. Kate is exasperated.

They were made such a lot of. Yes, I thought it was quite, I don't know quite how

far they were genuinely issues. It's very difficult because the women become very

emotional... This is very cynical of me... I know some of the very best activists are

strong feminists, and it's very important that we have them... but I do think they

ought not to take over. And some of them go so very very far afield, that, well, I

don't think being a woman ever really bothered me. Think of all those nurses who

went to Spain...

Kate is upset about the bad press that the peace camp at Molesworth receives as a result of the

allegations. She feels that the cause for peace, to which she has dedicated the whole of her long

life, is being compromised because of the complaints of women. It is not clear if she doubts

whether the rapes actually happened (were they "genuine issues"?) or rather if it is their

significance which is being questioned. Ultimately, it is the emotionality of the women which

becomes the problem. Kate contrasts herself with the women activists at Molesworth,

minimizing the importance of her gender identity. Being a woman never bothered her (or any of

the other women who, like herself, went to Spain during the Civil War); why, then, should it be

so important now?

For women of this age and politics, gender is divisive. Kate explains her views on sexual

politics:

I don't feel particularly drawn to the feminist movement - perhaps I ought not to

say this- but I feel that the feminists are putting a great deal of energy - this is the

rather way out ones - they put a tremendous amount of energy into being women

first, you know, when we really need all our strength to get together and get social

improvements through the movement. I mean a mass movement, a political

movement, rather than groups which are separate. I think the women's groups

should be... very strong pressure groups, but they... shouldn't exclude men.

Feminists, at least the "rather way out ones," have simply "gone too far" in Pilcher's words. This

passage reveals not only an anti-feminist politics, but also a hesitancy, particularly evident in the

hyphenated segments, to voice this politics. As in the case with Rose, I feel that Kate does not

want to offend me, and this is at least partially responsible for the qualified nature of her

statement. Her main criticism is that the feminist movement is a diversion from a more

important and wider social movement, which includes women and men.

Rose's views on a separate women's agenda mirror those of Kate.

I don't need to be in a woman's group because I recognise that the real enemy [is]

the ruling class... once you've got the understanding of what's wrong and why

women have been subjugated to men for such a long period... then it should be as

much propaganda with the men, not against the men. We can't live without each

other.

For women like Kate and Rose, the political world is not divided along a gendered axis. Indeed,

this split is perceived by them as something of a red herring. Although both of these women have

been outstanding champions of rights for women and other oppressed groups for the better part

of the 20th century - and indeed one can well see how Saltzman, as a feminist, could identify with

Rose's experiences - it is important for us to understand why this appellation for these women

obscures more than it illuminates.

Chodorow's work highlights the importance of context for consciousness. The sentiments expressed by Kate and Rose can only be understood as historically and culturally situated. The challenge which confronted me as both feminist and scholar was how to formulate questions which, for my interviewees, made sense. Like Chodorow, my experience of interviewing these women made me realize "how much my own perceptual and analytic categories had been shaped by my coming of age in the women's movement and my immersion in feminist theory" (Chodorow 1997:43). In other words, understanding the thoughts of these 'others' was predicated upon reexamining my own location in the historical process. Only then was I free to explore the relationship between myself and the women who participated in my research.

Conclusion

Kitzinger and Wilkinson state that feminist researchers have developed little theory which might "enable us to make better sense of what we are doing when we analyse women's accounts of their experience" (1997:573). This article is intended as a contribution to such an effort. In summarizing the strategies which some feminist researchers have employed when documenting the lives of women who do not call themselves feminist, I have tried to illustrate two problems: 1) there is a tendency amongst some feminist researchers to homogenize difference, "winning over" research participants to their perspective, "explaining away" difference rather than thinking through the challenges which it poses; 2) when difference is acknowledged, there is a tendency - not uncommon in academic circles generally - to polarize positions on a continuum of more and less enlightened. A more positive alternative to these options, represented by the work of Nancy Chodorow, regards the salience of gender in women's lives as historically, culturally, and generationally situated. My own life history work with old women is offered as an example of

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one feminist researcher's journey to discovering the importance – political and methodological – of constructing gender and gender consciousness as "situated phenomenon" (Chodorow 1997:43). If we as feminist researchers can understand how and why women regard gender in the way in which they do, if we can acknowledge and work with the contradictions within and between all women, we will be strengthened as scholars and as feminists.

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Endnotes

[1] This research has been made possible through a Research Fellowship with The Leverhulme Trust, for the project "Gender and Aging: Cohort Effects on the Salience of Gender."

[2] Here, 'feminist methodology' is meant to indicate a cluster of varying research strategies which characterize feminist research. In using the singular form of the term, my intention is to highlight a commonality, but not homogenaeity, across such strategies.

[3] "Gender consciousness" and "feminist consciousness" are used here in accordance with Rinehart's (1992) discussion of these terms. Gender consciousness, she argues, is the" recognition that one's relation to the political world is shaped in important ways by the physical fact of one's sex" (p.14), and feminist consciousness is simply a more powerful manifestation of this recognition.

[4] See Andrews (1999), Friedan (1993), Healey (1994) and Kuhn (1991) for a discussion of the politics of the label 'old.'

[5] Again, my use of the singular form of this term is intended to identify a cluster of theories which share a common set of concerns. As in the case of "feminist methodology", there is no one theory of "feminist standpoint."

[6] In this article, italics are only used in quotations if that is how they appear in the original text.

[7] The practical, as opposed to theoretical, problems associated with "multiple standpoints on standpoint theory" (Harding1997:389) are epitomized by the acrimonious exchange between some standpoint theorists. For instance, Dorothy Smith characterizes Susan Hekman's interpretation of her work as "systematically out to lunch" and comments "I realize that this is a bit tricky to grasp, but Hekman's (prince-pleasing) glass slipper will not fit the feet of this ugly sister" (Smith 1997:392-393). I am reminded here of Kitzinger and Wilkinson's comment: "It is a matter

of concern to us that feminists often do not make a very good job of criticizing other feminists" and call on us to

develop "a feminist ethics of criticism" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1997:572).