Towards a feminist–queer alliance: a paradigmatic shift in the research process

Corie Hammers & Alan D. Brown III

Building on the advances made by feminist reconsiderations of methods, methodology and epistemology, this paper calls for an alliance between feminist social science and the emerging field of queer theory. By challenging traditional scientific approaches to research on sexual minority groups, a distinctly ‘queer’ approach is advocated that adopts a reflexive position on subjectivity and sexuality. While essentialist approaches privilege gay/lesbian, man/woman, and object/subject, this approach advances a framework of critical sexualities that moves social science into an arena of inclusivity and multiple identities, rather than reductionistic categorical thought. The implications are clear: a rethinking of identity categories that transcend stagnant dualisms.

Keywords: Queer; Sexualities; Methodology; Epistemology; Subjectivity

Objectivity is a term given to mean men’s subjectivity. (Adrienne Rich)

To understand the current reality(ies) and complexities of these postmodern times, the social sciences must continue to move with the changes made possible by a feminist rethinking of methods, methodologies, and epistemologies, so as to recreate and ground our understandings of how individuals make sense of their social worlds. We argue in this paper that the traditional, distinctly modern, social scientific approaches that adhere to objectivity, detachment and clear demarcations of the boundaries between researcher–researched, are inadequate to explore identity formations, such as sexualities, ethnicities, nationalities, genders and their myriad expressions that exemplify social life in these ever changing and uncertain times. To do this requires the
merging of the foundations of feminist social science and epistemology with the new ground being forged by queer theorists, since, as we argue in this paper, the prolegomena of both feminisms and queer theory hold much potential in describing understandings of self brought about by social determinants and the individual’s own construction of their reality.

The Scientific Enterprise and Postmodernity

The ideals of the Enlightenment brought forth the secularization of society with its exaltation of science and the scientific enterprise’s purported ability of uncovering the ‘Truth’. More specifically, the exaltation of science meant that ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ no longer resided with the gods. Such a world-view resulted in the development of a scientific method based on objectivity and the principles of empiricism, ingredients which would lend themselves to the acquisition of knowledge and provide the grounds for ascertaining humanity’s relentless quest for epistemological and ontological answers. In other words, ontological essence, i.e., our very being, lay squarely in the hands of science and scientific development. Included in these grand narratives of science was the belief in humanity’s continued ‘progress’ over time; such linear progress and the betterment of the human condition (and thus, society in general) was part of the Humanist Project of modernity. Although some would argue that we are continue to live in modern times, or what Giddens (1991) refers to as ‘high modernity’, our ‘condition’ is one qualitatively different from modernity both in terms of our social-structural situation and of the demands necessary for personal survival where (dis)order reigns.

History, and the observations of what scientific development and technology can bring and of what it can destroy (e.g., the World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island), makes the scientific ideal of ‘progress’ a fallacious distortion of reality. At the very least, science’s declaration of the inevitable amelioration of society via predictability, rationality and control over nature’s wiles is if anything uncertain, demanding intense questioning and anxiety – think nuclear annihilation, the very antithesis of its teleological ethos. The palpability of potential destruction and vulnerability, coupled with the myriad forces of modernization and globalization, have culminated to bring about a new era, that of postmodernity with its fragmenting effects and de-centering of epistemic privilege. Thus postmodernism is then a condition of structural and personal dislocation. In Postmodern Ethics (1993), Bauman defines postmodernity as a time

    without illusions ... The illusions in question boil down to the belief that the ‘messiness’ of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason. (32)

Such indeterminacy should not be uncomfortable; rather, postmodernism’s uncertainty might be grounds for potentiality, possibility and, as we will argue (at the risk of sounding humanist) emancipation out of rationality and objectivity – the very principles which renders invisible humanity’s complexity, variation and idiosyncrasy.
Without sounding too trite, maybe this is our opportunity to put the human condition back into the equation.

As already stated, the Enlightenment project set as its agenda the discovery of universal categories of knowledge which were themselves based on objectivity and thus, impartiality. One thing postmodernity has done is to erode this notion of ‘Truth’ in favor of multiple and equally valid knowledge claims and epistemologies, as evidenced in the assertion of symbolic interactionists and social psychologists in various guises of the now famous Thomas Theorem, ‘When people define situations as real they are real in their consequences’. In addition, feminists have demystified and made visible the contradictions inherent in scientific discourse and its ‘objectivity’, in showing the ways vested interests are part and parcel of any and all scientific endeavors. The unearthing of partiality and its inherent masculinity is illuminated by Waugh (1998) when she states that:

Feminism has in fact always contributed its own critique of the Enlightenment, arguing that the notion of a universal rational Subject is implicitly masculine, as is its understanding of history as a grand narrative of progress. By the same token, the idea that knowledge was an objective reflection of an independently existing world fell by the wayside. (177–178)

Smith (1972), in her critique of sociology’s androcentric bias and its proclamation to be ‘objective’ and value-free, reveals such contradictions in the following statement: ‘The first difficulty is how sociology is thought – its methods, conceptual schemes and theories – has been based and built up within, the male social universe (85–86). Thus, asserts Smith, it ‘therefore takes for granted and subsumes without examining the conditions of its existence’ (90). More to the point, sociology’s claim to examine society, that is, to stand outside society as an ‘objective observer’ is nonetheless both to deny its own ‘value-system’ that has itself been shaped by a masculinist ideology, e.g., the exaltation of universalism, transcendence, rationality and reason, and to reaffirm these same biased and androcentric ideals. An alternative approach, according to Smith, to even begin thinking sociologically, would be the investigation of the social world starting from one’s own direct experience. This ‘situating’ of oneself, that is, the acknowledgement and awareness of one’s own biases would not only re-organize the researcher (subject)–researched (object) relationship to be one that is non-hierarchical, equitable and respectful, but make as central direct, material experience and reality. Herein lies the significance of material reality wherein subjectivity, affectivity, multiplicity, the particular and the local take hold. To know anything at all is to know it from within, on the inside.

Analogous to Smith’s argument that science has its own ‘value system’, Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), critiques scientific universals since science, being itself merely a form of discourse, can only claim a ‘truth’ within its own internal organization. To extend this truth to any overarching and external reality outside itself is therefore impossible – the ability to generalize is lost. Thus, ‘rationalism fails because it cannot ground its own rational procedures and requires another kind of discourse … in order to achieve a sense of grounding’ (Waugh 1998, 184–185).
Although postmodernism rejects *in toto* all 'objective' knowledge and universal principles, many theorists nonetheless see science as a valuable and potentially insightful tool. That is, science has the ability to uncover heretofore subjugated knowledges and give 'voice' to those previously excluded from the research process. More to the point, science can reveal the significance of subjectivity, the complexity and the numerous differences of the human condition. Herein lies the argument of this paper: for reasons that will be made clear in this paper, feminism in combination with queer theory reflects our postmodern condition, both with its exaltation of difference and fragmentation and its ability to simultaneously reveal our humanness and interconnectedness; elements essential for any serious attempt at societal change and the reversal of annihilatory trends. Localized knowledge(s) means in essence the rejection of metanarratives and absolutes in favor of the local, contextualized and particular. As Seidman (1994) succinctly asserts:

>a postmodern science involves an orientation 'towards conceptual innovation, disrupting unifying conceptual schemes, and proliferating paradigms, research programs, and conceptual strategies … The value of postmodern science consists in making people more aware and tolerant of differences, ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict. (1994, 207)

Thus, postmodern science becomes a ‘vision of permanent revolution’ (207) since it also entails the continuous questioning and deconstruction of all knowledge.

**Feminism and Science: Are they Reconcilable?**

As the feminist critique has made clear, science has been a male science predicated on masculine values, ideologies and an 'abstract masculinity'. This domination of the abstract *vis-à-vis* material reality is expressed by Hartsock (1987) when she states that:

>This experience of two worlds, one abstract and deeply unattainable, the other useless and demeaning, if concrete and necessary, lies at the heart of a series of dualisms – abstract/concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, ideal/real, stasis/change. And the dualisms are overlaid by gender: only the first of each pair is associated with the male. (169)

Thus, subjectivity (e.g., feelings, affectivity, the 'irrational' – the very things associated with the feminine) is antithetical to the research process and inhibits the construction of knowledge/scientific development. Not surprisingly and already alluded to earlier, men (white heterosexual men in particular) have dominated and controlled not only science but the research process itself. One result has been the use of only male subjects such that the 'male experience' has been (until quite recently) the standard or norm, which in turn has been used to represent the other half of humanity, i.e., women. One such example noted upon extensively has been the use of the male (and overwhelmingly white at that) as sole subject within the medical establishment, wherein epidemiological studies examining various illnesses, their etiologies and affects have focused almost all their attention on disease in relation to men. Tavris, in *the Mismeasure of Women* (1992), refers to such bias when she informs us that the
National Institutes of Health, a US government entity in charge of medical research and policy, continued to exclude women from most medical studies concerning disease and treatments and had ‘devoted only 13 percent of its research funds to research on women’ (98). Harding (1987) refers to this use of the ‘male experience’ as universal and representative of all as science (here she is referring specifically to sociology) assuming a ‘single society’. Harding, citing Jessie Bernard (1973), concurs and states that ‘it is obvious that what we have formerly known as the study of society is only the male study of male society’ (30).

In response to this androcentric bias, scholars from across various disciplines have come together in an attempt to identify feminist research projects that mitigate against these androcentric and logocentric processes. Despite the fact that feminists disagree both theoretically and substantively on what a feminist research method is or looks like, there are nonetheless three identifiable that emerge in a review of the current literature: feminist empiricists, pro-active researchers and integrationists. Feminist empiricists assert that feminism and science are not incompatible and mutually exclusive, and argue instead ‘that sexism and androcentrism are social biases correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry’ (Harding 1986, 24) – such a science has come to be referred to as a ‘successor science’. Pro-active researchers assert that there must be a distinct feminist method wherein ‘subjugated knowledges’ are resurrected and acknowledged as legitimate ways of seeing and knowing, while integrationists seek to integrate the best of the traditional and new approaches. Although all three approaches have contributed to the critique of mainstream science and the resurrection of marginalized knowledges, we want only to discuss pro-active researchers as we believe such an epistemological and methodological orientation is most beneficial in postmodernity, since it contains both queer and feminist elements; thus it serves as a bridge in the fashioning of a feminist–queer alliance.

**Pro-Active Researchers**

These researchers are from the very beginning suspect of the scientific method and thus, advocate a distinct feminine approach. Such a distinct methodology calls for challenging inequality and empowering women and other marginalized groups. As Haraway (1988) makes clear: “Subjugated” standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world [but by no means are these accounts immune to critical enquiry]’ (589). One such way in which to redress the exclusion of ‘the Other’ and ‘give voice’ to those who have been silenced and shut out is of course, not only the inclusion of marginalized groups but also the fostering of conditions that would allow these groups to ‘speak’. Here, what comes to mind are qualitative methods such as the interview process where researcher/researched are mindful and ever vigilant about the power dynamics and ‘distortion of interpretation’ that might emerge. The feminist mantra ‘the personal is the political’ captures this moment of speaking out and reveals the ways in which direct, lived experience is inherently political and the ways that social structural determinants shape one’s reality.
Stanley (1993) also points out that it is equally important that feminist researchers bring their own experience into the research process. Thus, no longer would we consume ourselves with thinking in a research–theory dialectic (e.g., ‘doing’ research either inductively or deductively). Rather, the researcher’s own experience and practice forms the basis of theory and is therefore inextricably interwoven into all research projects – here we see a new relationship, i.e., theory–research–experience, bearing in mind the conflation and integration of all three aspects so that dis-order and non-linearity are part and parcel of the research paradigm. It is important to keep in mind the commonality we find among feminists with their emphasis that knowledge stems in part (if not entirely) from experience, i.e., material reality – a conviction that emerges throughout this discussion. It is also here that arguments that feminist methods are not scientific and thus discredited are taken to task with the affirmation that subjectivity within the research process is inevitable, necessary and important to the knowledge building process. In other words, the idea of bringing the researcher ‘in’ to the research process involves bringing ‘in’ as well the emotions, tensions and flows that the research process entails (the human element). As Luttrell (2000) argues, ‘good enough’ methods are those where reflexivity involves ‘sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world …’ (516). Sociologists refer to this process where engagement, involvement and subjective analysis are key ingredients for understanding as engaging in verstehen. Ferrell (1998) applies the concept of verstehen to the understanding of crime and delinquency. According to Ferrell, a criminologist, the true understanding of a criminal event and its etiology resides not in traditional, objective methods, but is found when criminologists/researchers get as close as possible to the event itself – ‘perhaps even inside the interaction if they are to catch the constructed reality of crime’ (28). Thus, true understanding comes from knowing, being and acting from an ‘insider’s’ point of view.

Such an approach would therefore uncover alternative subjectivities as made evident by Braidotti (2002), when she suggests that what emerges within an individual subject are multiple subject-positions which are ‘contested, multi-layered and internally contradictory’ (13). In addition, Braidotti, citing Sassen (1994) asserts that such subject-positions 'are hybrid and in-between social categories for whom traditional descriptions in terms of sociological categories … are grossly inadequate (13). Such a deconstructive approach is therefore necessary to account for individual and social idiosyncrasies as noted by Stanley (1993) when she states that ‘the social world, including in its gendered aspects, is complex, and equally complex means of investigating and knowing it are required which reject dichotomized or binary ways of knowing’ (206). Here universal and totalizing ‘view from nowhere’, what Haraway defines as one of many ‘god-tricks’, is no longer anchored to secure ground. It is also important to add here that subjectivity is not an individual, isolated and non-social process, as made clear by Braidotti when she asserts that it is ‘important not to confuse this process of subjectivity with individuality or particularity: subjectivity is a socially mediated process’ (7). Going back to what Dorothy Smith argues, one is always already situated in the social world, thus the social and the individual are in a dialectical relationship that involves continuous re-negotiation.
Feminist Epistemologies

In addition and perhaps more importantly, feminist methods provide us with alternative epistemologies to the dominant paradigm. Though feminist epistemology and methodology work together to drive the research process, Harding asserts that epistemology is the foundation for both method (the ‘techniques’ or research practices, e.g., surveys, interviews) and methodology (the perspective or conceptual framework, e.g., functionalism). Stanley and Wise (1990) define epistemology as a ‘theory of knowledge which addresses central questions such as: who can be the “knower”, what can be known, what constitutes and validates knowledge, and what the relationship is or should be between knowing and being’ (26). Discussed below are two perspectives, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism, both of which attempt to extensively revise and redress the ‘woman question’ albeit in very divergent ways – the very ‘foundation’ of knowledge, i.e., where does it come from, is a heated debate with political epistemological ramifications. Yet, we will also find that these two camps are not mutually exclusive in that they converge and cross paths at several key intersections. One more point before we proceed: for those of you thinking such epistemologies espouse and tend toward relativism, we contend that on the contrary, such practices devote themselves to finding meaning exactly in those places that masculinist ideologies have concealed and made invisible. The opening up and validation of epistemological paradigms forces us to question what we have heretofore thought of as ‘truth’. Harding (1991) brings this home when she asserts ‘relativism appears as an intellectual possibility, and as a “problem”, only for dominating groups at the point where the hegemony (the universality) of their views is being challenged’ (10).

Feminist Standpoint

Feminist standpoint epistemology argues that every woman, a problematic category itself, has a different social position within society, which leads in turn to partial and unique understandings and knowledges. Such an approach seeks to uncover the social world ‘from the standpoint of women’, such that women’s experiences, subjectivities and thus knowledge are at the forefront of the research process. It is argued that these knowledges in turn have epistemological validity because each has ontological validity, which eventually culminates in the acquisition of truth (or truths). Stanley (1990) makes clear this feminist understanding of the world: “feminism” is not merely a “perspective”, a way of seeing; nor even this plus an epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also an ontology, or a way of being in the world’ (14).

Undoing the Cartesian dualism has been at the heart of feminist standpoint theory, for again, it starts from the lived realities and experiences of life. Any discussion of standpoint theory has to begin with what Rich (1987) so eloquently termed the ‘politics of location’. Rich’s illuminating phrase not only makes clear the significance of one’s personal position (i.e., location) within society as the place where knowledge and experience combine so as to shape one’s subjectivity and inner/outer truths, but Rich does something else: she brings the body back into the realm of visibility and ‘marks’ its
significance on theoretical and epistemological grounds. A passage from Rich (1987) illustrates this point:

Wherever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in a female body, from now on has to be addressed … When I write ‘the body’, I see nothing in particular. To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience, particularity. … (214–215)

Here we can see (and feel) how by saying ‘my body’ one is instantly connected to one’s corporeal self that inhabits and contains an array of feelings, thoughts, experiences and ideas. More importantly, ‘my body’ also ‘contains’ discourse and the language so that grandiose representations, i.e., universals and generalizations, are minimized. ‘To speak from my body, my “politics of location” is not to speak for another’, which is in direct contradistinction to hegemonic scientific standards and paradigms that tend to the universal. Braidotti (1994), although approaching such politics from a different philosophical angle, refers to this ‘politics of location’ as embodied/enfleshed materialism, where ‘Attention to the situated as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea’ (163).

Nancy Hartsock (1987) begins her ‘politics of location’ from Marxian epistemology, and argues that a feminist standpoint perspective is derived from practical activity itself, i.e., material life. Hartsock contends that due to the forces of capitalism and the ideology of ‘abstract masculinity’, material life is structured into a fundamental opposition between two different groups, i.e., women and men. In essence, social relations are governed by the economic structure of society in that males inhabit the mental world where dis-embodiment, transcendence, the abstract and the rational reign supreme, while women are consigned to the material world of manual labor based on embodiment, nature, and stasis. According to Hartsock, this sexual division of labor forms the basis of a feminist standpoint, which for Hartsock is also the privileged position from which to undermine and critique phallocratic institutions and this dualistic/binary ideology founded on bourgeois subjugations and mystifications. More specifically, Hartsock states that not only does the female experience actually invert abstract masculinity as ‘fundamentally perverse’ in its valuation of only male experience as that which is ‘active’ and productive, but reveals the illusoriness of dualistic thinking; that is, material reality defies separation of the natural from the social world. Instead, material life exemplifies and demands connection and engagement. In addition, it is also here that standpoint theory shares some common ground with postmodernism, particularly with respect to the significance of the body and its inability to be compartmentalized; that is, the manual–mental or body–mind boundaries are now on shaky grounds.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) provides further evidence of the need of a standpoint perspective, this time in calling for a distinctive Black women’s standpoint or what she terms an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Collins argues that just as positivist approaches have re-produced detached, decontextualized and unrepresentative generalizations that reflect and reinforce a male epistemology which glosses over female experience and knowledge, so too have these Eurocentric and masculinist methodologies suppressed Black women’s own values, experiences and knowledge claims. Such
sentiment is exemplified by Collins when she asserts that ‘Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation … Black women’s experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse’ (201). In addition, a feminist standpoint depends on a science and methodology that takes into account subjectivity, reflexivity and equity within the researcher–researched relationship. In sum, a feminist standpoint perspective is not only an attempt to redefine what is meant by knowledge with an insistence that experience be central to all epistemological claims, but to make visible the fallacy and myopia of universal statements.

_Feminist Postmodernists_

Feminist postmodern epistemology rejects all universalizing claims; thus, objectivity is unattainable and undesirable. Therefore feminist postmodernists challenge both science as a whole and the assumptions upon which feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint are based. That is, the existence of ‘the truth’ is impossible because any external material reality is in and of itself socially constructed and situated. Therefore postmodernists assert that there is no such thing as ‘essence’. Rather, identity and experience are multidimensional, fragmented and in constant flux. This social constructionist stance warns against all categorical and dichotomous thought since such binaries in the end work to subjugate and oppress others (that is, it creates a ‘bifurcated consciousness’). Thus, feminist postmodernist epistemology claims that any and all ‘standpoint perspectives’ not only subjugate other knowledge(s) or other subject-positions, but reinforces the idea that subjects are themselves unitary selves thatindeed have an identity, essence or stability. In addition, standpoint epistemology and even a claim to one’s ‘politics of location’ are exclusionary and in the end, a reaffirmation of dichotomous/binary thought systems. Rather, a politics of location should be a tool not of appropriation but of engagement and deconstruction. For instance, standpoint perspectives have at times used its politics of location not to destabilize or examine its own location, but as an avenue to proclaim one’s own knowledge as superior, more ‘authentic’ or more deeply rooted as compared to others. Such a ‘location’ merely encourages the making of another hegemonic discourse as depicted by Kaplan (1994) when she asserts that:

> A politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities … We should be suspicious of any use of the term to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of intimacy. (139)

Postmodernism is, if anything, an affirmation of difference(s), with multiple identities and subject-positions a more inclusive and ‘realistic’ depiction of individuals and our postmodern condition – thus, rather than affirming identity it seeks to deconstruct it. Lastly, postmodernism at its core is critical of language and discourse, seeing its deconstruction as that which has the most potential to break us out of our enthrallment to Enlightenment ideals and masculinist ideology.
A question that arises is how are we to reconcile these epistemologies? That is, is there a middle ground or a possibility of merging the constructionist (postmodern)/essentialist (standpoint) debate with cogency and clarity. In other words, how best are we to seek and acquire knowledge? If a researcher’s job is in seeking ‘the other’s’ experience to more fully understand society, can we do this in a way which will both lead us to ‘truth(s)’ while allowing us to deconstruct it at the same time. We argue that the two are in agreement on one thing: a liberating epistemology/methodology could prove revolutionary — nothing short of a paradigmatic shift. One such attempt and the topic of this paper has been the possible creation of a feminist–queer approach in regards to the research process. Before examining this possibility we want to provide a discussion of queer theory for we believe ‘queer politics/theory’, in all of its contentiousness and novelty provides fertile grounds for explicating the shortcomings of feminist epistemology while adding to our understanding of our social world.

Queer Theory

Queer theory is closely aligned to postmodernism, but uses sexuality as its point of reference to undermine notions of identity, since notions of identity are inherently atemporal and ahistorical as noted by Cohen (1990): ‘identity evokes the “sameness” of human differentiation across time by collapsing the processes of (self)-transformation through time into an unchanging and highly idealized notion, “the same organized Body”’ (77). This same sentiment is shared by Butler (1990), echoing Foucault, when she declares all identity categories to be ‘regulatory regimes’, even if such identities are used for political and emancipatory purposes. She thus poses a challenging question: ‘Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations?’ (5). Such ambivalence towards the proclaiming and making of sexual identities is akin to Foucault’s contention that self-naming, e.g., the use of labels and identities to define oneself, works to regulate social and sexual behavior. To put it simply, once we identify as a hetero/homosexual this very identification compels us to regulate our desires, behaviors and social relations accordingly. In essence, we are pigeonholing and compartmentalizing ourselves, which counters and undermines the intention behind sexual liberation and gay rights movements. Thus, Queer theory looks towards the historical (time) and contextual (space) to deconstruct our (hetero)normative social order that we are all implicated (wittingly and unwittingly) in reaffirming. Continuous self-examination of both our inner and outer worlds is thus a major objective so as to extricate our-selves from this heteronormous condition.

Towards a Queer Methodology

Just as feminist researchers have addressed and made us aware of both the androcentric and Eurocentric bias within the research process, so too have queer researchers highlighted for us the heterocentric bias within research. Not only does this heterosexism assume and perpetuate the notion that heterosexuality is ‘the standard’ and norm, but
uses within the research process itself heteronormative concepts that ultimately work to ignore and/or distort queer experience(s). Wittig (1981) refers to this phenomenon and process, i.e., the generalization of heterosexuality, as engaging in the ‘Straight Mind’ wherein all of history, culture, social reality, language and all subjective phenomena are interpreted and understood via a heterosexual lens. Steven Seidman (1997) illuminates this heterocentric bias found within the discipline of sociology:

sociology has contributed unwittingly [and wittingly] no doubt to naturalizing sex and normalizing a normative heterosexuality. Queers should critique sociology for the ways its premises, categories, and thematic perspectives are organized around normative heterosexuality. (95)

Part and parcel of this critique of ‘heterosexual hegemony’ embedded within the research process is in the understanding of a queer epistemology. Like postmodernism, Queer’s main goal is in the debunking of the very notion of stability. That is, queer focuses on the potentialities and subversions that lie behind gender ambiguity and indeterminacy, therefore calling into question and problematizing all categorical thought, e.g., ‘woman/female’, ‘man/male’, straight/gay. It is thus the task of a queer methodology to account for the construction of identity as opposed to its reification. Such an analysis of ‘construction’ can potentially provide us with the ways in which bodies ‘come into being’ via the mark of gender. An unfolding of its construction can give us the tools we need (e.g., a new and different discourse/language) to imagine other gender configurations. But first we need a new language, new vocabularies, a new framing, a new way to conduct analyses – in short, a paradigm shift brought about in part we believe with a feminist-queer epistemology.

In addition, queer claims that there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ sex or sexuality since what is natural is first and foremost produced by the social. This provocative assertion, that ‘sex’ is itself a cultural construct, is asserted by Butler (1990) in the following statements:

And what is ‘sex’ anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal … If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender. (6–7)

Queer does not ignore or view as irrelevant these categories, but simultaneously questions them and demands their contextualization and historicization. Thus, if anything, it aligns itself with non-identity since to assert and claim an identity is to reify essence and validate the sex/gender system – the very system queer theory is working to dismantle and de-naturalize. For queer theorists then, identity is both unstable and multiple. We therefore see the adoption by queer theory of a postmodern orientation – queering is, if anything, deconstructive!

In addition, queer’s focus on the social production of the ‘normal/natural’, multiplicity and sex/gender incongruity simultaneously makes evident the blatant omission of sexuality from social sciences research. As Epstein (1996) cogently asserts, ‘no facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual meanings intersect with it’ (156). Lorde (1984) expresses this sentiment when she argues that the suppression of the erotic in Western society actually works to distort reality and
dism empower women. As a result we have ‘often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information’ (278). Weston (1998) adds another important piece to this analysis. When discussing social science research and sociological concepts in particular (e.g., families, social stratification, kinship, division of labor) Weston contends that researchers and scientists have either acted as if sex and sexuality are not a part of this process or such ‘taboo topics’ are subsumed under a larger (and more important) debate (13). On the contrary, as queer theory makes clear, the concepts sociologists use to examine sexuality, and social life in general, are oriented around the ‘normative/natural’ paradigm. How can the ‘family unit’ be studied appropriately without taking into account sexuality, and heterosexuality in particular? Moreover, outright exclusion from the research process is evident as shown from surveys that use marital status and one’s relationship to it (divorced, separated, widowed, etc.) as the only option when seeking demographic information from respondents. Here again subjects’ identities are in relation to their marriage status, which once again reflects and reinforces the universality and normality of heterosexuality. To take just one example of how concepts and their meanings vary among different people/cultures are the ways that the Down Low (or DL) culture which exists among the African American male community, perceives the meaning of the word/concept ‘gay’. To those belonging to the DL, gay sex is embraced yet everything about the gay identity is rejected. These down-low men tend to be hypermasculine, young and from the inner city where they live in a ‘thug culture’ (Denizet-Lewis 2003, 30). These men in turn see the ‘gay culture’ as being white, effeminate and wholeheartedly separate and apart from anything having to do with being black in America. These DL men have in turn created their own organized subculture that includes bathhouses, parks and live-sex shows, where meeting others who are also DL is easy. Despite the fact that gay sex is a major aspect of these black men’s lives, they nonetheless live ‘straight lives’. Most actually do not even consider and define themselves as ‘gay’, and most consider themselves straight since they often carry on genuine relationships with women. These identity formations of self thus include race, class, and gender dimensions which could only be captured ‘in the process’, and with an attached, personal involvement.

Herein lies the importance of a feminist–queer approach to the social sciences: difference and the constant questioning of socially constructed concepts, which act as filters in our perception of society, has the potential to enlighten us to possibilities. In other words, to assert multiple identities and their fluidity in which humans leave themselves open to change and re-negotiation is, in the truest sense of the word, liberating. ‘Queering’ also conveys an active, energetic and self-critical stance that moves with its subject; that is, the constant movement of borders, locations and societal shifts and transitions.

Yet, if claiming an identity, giving a ‘voice’ to that which has been silenced, and resurrecting one’s subjugated knowledge as feminism (and feminist standpoint in particular) purports to do is to the queer theorist counterproductive and in the end deleterious to society then how do we proceed? Is it possible to merge feminist and queer principles so as to create a new approach to social science research?
Towards a Feminist–Queer Methodology

Fuss (1989) asserts that ‘place can never be entirely displaced’. In other words, Fuss is taking to task the anti-essentialist/deconstructionist position that there is no such thing as essence, since in the end they depend on some ‘thing’ (i.e., essence) to make their case. One can see this with queer theory – their desire to dismantle identity depends on the identification of ‘queer’. Fuss also argues that our very language is comprised of categories and taxonomies, making the ability to evade dichotomous thought impossible. Fuss illustrates her position using Wittig’s (1981), herself a ‘strong’ materialist/deconstructionist, critique of the category ‘woman’ as an attempt to emancipate the female from the patriarchal imaginary. Wittig contends that the ‘woman’ category is undermined once ‘lesbian’ enters the picture. That is, ‘lesbian’ dismantles the category woman because woman is defined and seen in relation to man. Woman is dependent upon and in need of man to exist – if one is not man they are woman, and this ‘man-made woman’ assumes a female essence that is universal. On the other hand, ‘lesbian’ denotes a woman without man; thus, in this sense a lesbian is not a woman. Herein lies Wittig’s rationale as to why the category ‘lesbian’ disorients and upsets the concept of ‘woman’ (and compulsory heterosexuality). But, within her argument she uses and reifies the category ‘lesbian’, and gives this word the same monolithic representativeness as does ‘woman’. Braidotti (2002), in her critique of Wittig, asserts that while Wittig’s ultimate aim is the empowerment of women her argument nonetheless ‘universalizes the lesbian into a new model of normativity. This leaves no room for alternative definitions of lesbianism’ (35). For instance, do all lesbians live lives without men? What about those who identify as lesbian, but occasionally have sex with men? To what degree does a woman have to be without man to be a lesbian? These ‘queer/deconstructive’ questions are an attempt to point out the difficulty an anti-essentialist position assumes in its attempt to evade all categorical thought. For as this case illuminates, it seems inevitable that some kind of essence is necessary in order to orient and ground the debate, and of course, to allow one’s voice to be heard. Fuss (1989) contends that if anything, what Wittig ought to be talking about is not an identification as lesbian, but rather ‘lesbian cultures, not “the lesbian body” … but lesbian bodies, not lesbian sexuality but lesbian sexualities … [for] Lesbian is itself an unstable, changing, and historically specific category …’ (43).

What is more, how can Wittig truly believe that identifying as ‘lesbian/not-woman’ can actually evoke not only material change, but a personal transformation as well. Wittig gives this word ‘lesbian’ quite powerful (if not magical) abilities through the very act of self-naming, the very act of identity construction that she abhors. Such an act proposes that change can be chalked up to volition and choice, which Braidotti refers to as ‘willful denial’. Indeed, as optimistic as this may sound it not only ignores real social conditions ‘out there’, but does not deal adequately with the role of subjectivity, the deep and multilayered aspects of the self – those aspects of self that We argue a feminist–queer methodology can unveil or at the very least make more visible. Thus an ‘emancipatory’ label that reifies another category, becomes in this case an apolitical strategy that is detached and disconnected from the real individual lives it proclaims to
free. Mohanty (1992) argues that in the seduction of ‘identity politics’/self-naming (letting the words due the work for you) there is an automatic conflation of identity with experience and politics: ‘The politics of being “woman” or “lesbian” are deduced from the experience of being woman or lesbian … [and] the experience of being female [and lesbians] transforms us into feminists through osmosis’ (77). In other words, the act of identification and self-naming becomes an unexamined catchall that leaves experience and individual political (non)affiliations out of the equation. In the end, a de-politization of self takes over, that weakens individual praxis and thus, personal and societal transformation.

Thus, we can instead use essentialism ‘as an approach which evaluates the motivations behind the deployment of essentialism (32), a process Fuss refers to as ‘strategic essentialism’. We argue that such an approach would call for a reflexive methodology in that the relationship between researcher and researched would demand a constant questioning of power, hierarchy and subjectivity (thus, subjectivity would be a legitimate and central part of the research process). In turn, the subject position from which one speaks would be given value and validity. Here we return to some fundamental principles of feminism in conjunction with an intensified awareness of essence and its simultaneous questioning and de-construction. Further, I believe such principles are a good ‘fit’ for our postmodern era, where identity, purpose and connection are constantly being (re)assessed. In essence, our ‘fear of the void’ can be avoided within this introspective process where human connection and understanding are sought.

Feminist essentialists, who are often aligned with research that works to empower marginalized groups (that is, it is action-oriented with social change as its fundamental goal), see identity-based issues as that which will rectify and resurrect previously unknown and ignored marginalized knowledges. Duran (2001), in examining feminist epistemology, adheres to this point of view when discussing essentialism by asserting that ‘although essentialism is kaleidoscopic in its array-points us in a direction that is helpful and that, perhaps most important, ultimately furthers the goals of empowerment and enfranchisement’ (256). Furthermore, Duran states that on the other hand, postmodernism’s focus on discourse and rhetoric is ultimately disempowering and unhelpful in altering ‘the plain facts of everyday misery and oppression for most of the human beings on Earth’ (256). In other words, to not investigate a minority group’s position and location within society will do nothing to mitigate and alleviate societal injustices, gender inequality and the phallocratic system, i.e., male domination.

Yet, it is true that feminist postmodernists and queer theorists do find as significant the social construction of knowledge and inevitably the formation of identity. Such constructions of self depend on rhetoric, discourse and above all, language. While Duran sees this tactic of challenging language as opposed to material reality as in the end self-defeating and ineffective, postmodern/queer theorists argue instead that inequality begins in language. In other words, the symbolic realm of representation and signification is the basis, the hegemonic paradigm, that creates and reinforces societal inequality(ies); thus the need for, at the very least, its alteration and at best, its eradication. Chanter (1998) argues, in reference to the valuable insights of Butler’s deconstruction of the sex/gender system, that ‘The point is to disrupt the binarism of thought
– both at the level of the bifurcation into sex and gender, and at the level of masculine and feminine’ (267). To reiterate, identity becomes for postmodernists and queer theorists, not a liberating affirmation of who one is, but rather is viewed as part of the regulatory structures that are imposed on all members of society.

We argue that it is also here, at this juncture, where feminism and queer theory find common ground – language originates in a masculinist/heterosexist (or conversely, homophobic) and binary world where heteronormativity and phallogocentrism plays out its violence. The Cartesian dualism, where one side of the binary framework, i.e., ‘the feminine/homo side’ is perceived as lack, negation and inferiority, therefore upholds and reinforces the status quo. Haraway (1991) gives us useful insights into what a feminist–queer epistemology might look like by calling for a doctrine of ‘embodied objectivity’ that entails critical feminist science projects wherein ‘feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges’ (188). For Haraway, ‘being situated’ or positioned means a grounding of knowledge, the very antithesis of transcendence which is an illusion or in her words, a ‘deadly fantasy’. Positioning also requires responsibility and accountability within any scientific discipline, for to ‘ground’ the process or construction of knowledge is to acknowledge the context (as opposed to claiming its universality), while witnessing the Subject’s movement, what Braidotti refers to as her/his ‘becoming’. Such a conceptual framework also reveals a critical departure from mainstream scientific currency and forges a critical ‘alliance’ called for in this paper between feminism and queer epistemologies in showing the illusoriness of the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy; a contention feminists have long been declaring. Such a re-framing also acknowledges the life-process; that is, subjects are always in a state of flux, change and the re-drawing of boundaries. In essence, subjects become ‘agents’, actors of their own script.

Conclusion

Such an approach relies on conversation, connection and an open-ended forum where ‘objects’ of inquiry become the Subjects of their world and ‘where the agency of the people studied itself transforms the entire project of producing social theory’ (Haraway 198). No longer would we use heternormative, androcentric and ethnocentric concepts to describe and explain experiences of ‘the Other’. Typically and as already mentioned, it is a common occurrence to find heteronormative concepts to describe non-heterosexual relationships and behavior – a phenomenon I refer to as ‘heteromorphism’. We argue that there are qualitative differences in homosexual lifestyles/patterns of behavior/sexuality vis-à-vis their heterosexual counterparts for myriad political, cultural and social reasons that are left out of the analytical matrix.

By advocating a ‘middle ground’ or what Stanley and Wise refer to as ‘fractured foundationalism’, a feminist–queer alliance and its corresponding methodology will not be reduced to mere ‘identity politics’ simply because self-naming and the construction of identities/subjectivities will also involve the simultaneous unraveling and revealing via the research process of how that individual came to be where she/he is at that moment. More specifically, experience and location are front and center in these
micro-narratives so that universalism is replaced with the particular and embodied accounts of reality. We argue that indeed it is possible particularly when we think of what a feminist research method encompasses: a reflexive and critical stance, praxis, experience and the use of participatory methods. By both acknowledging and deconstructing social and sexual identity we as researchers acquire a more complete understanding of our world, ourselves and those around us. We are better equipped to see how identity is constructed and thus, how it can be de-constructed. We argue that both aims are ‘essentially’ feminist and queer and equally valuable to the research process.

References


