

Women's Studies

Mary Maynard

Introduction

Women's Studies is now established as an important field of study and research across the globe. First appearing in the United States in the second half of the 1960s, courses and degree programs rapidly emerged in other Western countries and in other parts of the world. The emergence of Women's Studies at this time was linked to the political movement and practice of feminism. Women, mainly those who were white and from the West, began more vocally to challenge the discrimination which made them unequal to men in areas such as education, employment, and domestic responsibilities. Women's Studies became linked to the educational wing of feminism in two ways. First, it was pointed out that women tended to be invisible in most academic research and teaching, where the emphasis appeared to be on important men and men's ideas and interests. Second, there was a questioning of the ways in which knowledge was conventionally obtained, with the associated criticism that the methods, concepts, and theories deployed were irrelevant to and, in fact, helped to conceal the lives and experiences of women. Women's Studies activists and scholars aimed to rectify the situation. This was to be done by providing information and analyses about the lives of women, so that they could be used to initiate social changes that would end gender inequality. Linked to this was the need to develop new ways of thinking about doing research and constructing knowledge which would be sensitive to women's circumstances and perspectives.

This chapter offers an overview of some of the major issues in the still growing area of interdisciplinary Women's Studies. It begins by looking at some of the early concerns. This is followed by a discussion of some of the key aspects of debates about "difference." The next section looks at the important, but highly contested, area of postmodernism, before turning to a consideration of masculinity and whiteness. The final section looks at Women's Studies more globally, focusing, in particular, on some interesting and important new arguments in the field of Women and Development. The chapter closes with some brief concluding remarks.

Early Key Concerns

The main issues for Women's Studies during its first 20 or so years of existence may be grouped into three broad themes. These relate to substantive, theoretical, and methodological concerns. Substantive issues refer to those aspects of existence that are important because of the ways in which they structure and frame people's lives and experiences. Initially, Women's Studies teachers and researchers took responsibility for adding women into the existing academic agenda and curricula from which they were largely absent. This meant, for example, including sections on topics such as women and education, women and paid work, women and health, and women and the media in courses, books, and research projects. However, while this early work was important, it was soon recognized that simply adding women's experiences to what was already known about men was, on its own, insufficient. It was argued that there are aspects of women's lives which are specific to them and which are missed by only focusing on a male agenda. Further, it is as necessary to consider the private dimension of life as it is to focus on the public sphere, although the latter was often treated as more significant by men. Thus, new topics, deriving particularly from women's experiences, began to be emphasized. Writers focused on a range of concerns, from domestic responsibilities, to pregnancy and childbirth, to differential use of household resources, to sexuality and heterosexism. One particular focus, which has subsequently developed a considerable body of knowledge, was that of violence towards women, which is often taken to include pornography, sex tourism, and sexual harassment, as well as domestic violence and rape. Analyses of such issues indicate the significance of men's violence in the power they hold over women. Further, the fear of such violence constrains women and limits their freedom of choice and movement. It has been shown that both the reality and the fear of violence act as a form of social control over women worldwide. It is, in part, due to the pioneering nature of Women's Studies research and writing that this matter is now part of a global agenda.

Similarly, early Women's Studies writers were critical of existing theoretical explanations of social inequalities and divisions because of their gender-blindness and failure sufficiently to emphasize women's situation. Commentators tended to identify three major feminist perspectives, each with its own historical tradition and legacy. Liberal feminism was seen as focusing on individual rights, concepts such as equality, justice and equal opportunities, and the legal and policy changes required for women to achieve parity with men. Marxist feminism was portrayed as explaining women's subordination to men in terms of capitalist exploitation. Capitalist economic relations meant not only that women were paid less than men in the workplace but that they were not paid at all for the essential work and services they provided in the household, thereby ensuring their dependence on men. In contrast, radical feminism emphasized a separate system of male domination called patriarchy. Patriarchy was defined as "the

system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 1990: 20). The concept and theory of patriarchy, it was claimed, allowed the specific nature and circumstances of women’s unequal position to be understood.

The third aspect of key early concerns relates to methods of social research. In much of the world, research is only considered to be legitimate and reliable if it is based on ideas about science and objectivity. In terms of understanding the social world and social life, this has meant an emphasis on quantitative research and methods such as questionnaires and surveys. The latter permit the generation of numerical and statistical data which can be generalized across a sample population. Women’s Studies researchers have argued, however, that such an approach is not always the most useful when investigating the lives of marginalized groups, including women. This is because they fracture experience and cannot take account of change over time. Further, since the questions to be asked are set and often coded in advance, women’s own accounts and understandings tend to be silenced. All such research can do is measure the extent, distribution, and intensity of something that has already been defined as important before the research itself has begun. This may be inappropriate when studying aspects of experience that may not be pre-known. For this reason Women’s Studies research has tended to use qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured and unstructured interviews. This enables researchers to see the world through their women participants’ eyes, yielding rich, deep, and more holistic information.

As time went on, however, concerns were expressed about aspects of this Women’s Studies agenda. Its substantive coverage, for example, tended to be overly Westernized and culturally specific. Initial theoretical formulations began to be regarded as unsatisfactory, since they could never encompass every strand of feminist thinking and were grounded in particular philosophical ideas and ways of thinking that are inimical to other cultural contexts. As a consequence, theories about women and gender relations became much more complex, with a focus on black, lesbian, and various other feminist standpoint positions (Hartsock 1998). In addition, an overemphasis on qualitative research methods is now regarded as underplaying the role of numerical information in demonstrating the extent and severity of women’s inequality and subordination. A qualitative approach may also take it for granted that participants are willing to speak, usually in English, to a stranger about most aspects of their lives, which is another ethnocentric assumption. These kinds of concern have been addressed by Women’s Studies through acknowledging the importance of “difference.”

Difference and Diversity

How to understand the significance of “difference” became one of the most pressing debates within Women’s Studies during the 1990s. The fact that there

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are many forms of gender relations, not only those of white ethnic groups, led to the increasing acknowledgment that women have diverse experiences and that commonalities have to be demonstrated rather than assumed. A significant impetus for this came from women of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions, both in the West and worldwide. It was argued, for example, that, whereas early Women's Studies work on the family had portrayed it as an oppressive institution, this underplayed its role as a bulwark against racism and the positive aspects of extended kinship relations experienced by many ethnic groups. Similarly, writers have pointed out that different groups have differing concepts of equality and justice which are not necessarily the same as those of white feminists in the West. Some Muslim women writers, for instance, have argued for recognition of complementarity rather than equality on the grounds that the latter tends to be articulated in male terms and Western women have failed to gain anything from it except unequal access to the public domain (Afshar 1998). Other issues relate to women's roles in religious, fundamentalist, and nationalist movements, their different experiences of exile, migration, and diaspora, and the gendered nature of genocide and catastrophe. However, crucial to the debate is an increased awareness of the inherent racism of analyses and practices which assume white experiences to be the norm, use these as a basis from which to generate concepts and theories, and fail to acknowledge that women from different cultures and ethnicities are themselves a differentiated group.

The diversity of women's experiences does not relate to ethnicity and cultural context alone. Also important are the ways in which disability influences women's experiences of being female and how a society's responses to disability are, themselves, gendered. Sexual orientation has also become a key focus, with heterosexism – the belief that heterosexuality is better, more normal, natural, and morally right than other forms of sexuality – challenged for the prejudice and discrimination that it enshrines. Differential access to resources, socio-economic status, or social class position are also deeply gendered and have been found to influence life chances and expectations across social groups.

Another aspect of "difference" which has been recognized more recently relates to later life and the process of ageing. In Western cultures this increasingly takes place in a context that celebrates youthfulness and its association with femininity. In contrast, older people, especially older women, tend to be denigrated and treated mainly as social problems, as a drain on scarce resources. Ageism, which may affect the very young as well as those in later life, involves negative stereotypical presumptions about competence, ability, and the need for protection and their supposed correlation with chronological age. For these reasons, age needs to be taken seriously as an aspect of difference.

The emphasis on difference and diversity, however, while an important corrective to previous homogenizing ways of understanding women's lives and positions, is not without its problems. It raises questions about the relationship between the different forms of diversity and how these should be understood and theorized in different geographical locations and cultural contexts. Some

commentators have suggested that there is too much emphasis on differences and insufficient concern with the things that women might share and the potential for unified political strategies and action. Such critics argue that by focusing on other forms of diversity, in addition to gender, the feminist project for women is dismantled. Others, though, point out that the differences between women should be celebrated rather than seen as impediments and that women should be able to set their own priorities for analysis and change, rather than having these imposed upon them.

Women's Studies and Postmodernism

In recent years, Women's Studies, along with other subjects and disciplines, has been profoundly influenced by the increasing interest in culture, discourse analysis, and postmodernism. Indeed, the development of cultural studies and Women's Studies has been closely interrelated. While the concept of "postmodernism" is a highly contested one, over which there is little agreement, it is still possible to highlight its main elements and characteristics, particularly in terms of how they have impinged on Women's Studies. The first thing to note is the ways in which culture has been elevated to a major analytic category, arguably replacing ideas about the material world as a key concern. Changes in Western cultural forms, it has been suggested, have led to these becoming increasingly fragmented and highly varied. The plethora of designs, styles, goods for consumption, and ways of living which are now available offer opportunities to break away from previous limited and constricting forms of being. This has implications, in particular, for the construction of identities and subjectivities. For women, this is said to be a positive development because of the potentially wide range of possibilities that are opened up. Postmodern theory questions static portrayals of how the self is socially constructed, emphasizing the role of discourse as well as more organizational structures. The broadening cultural base provides the context for this process. The old certainties about self, rooted in community and class, have been circumvented.

A second, and related, aspect of postmodern thinking concerns ideas about knowledge and its construction. Western theories have generally been formulated in terms of meta-narratives, grandiose frameworks of ideas, such as those of Marx, which attempt to provide generalized and generalizable accounts and explanations. Postmodernism, however, dismisses such a search for truth and all-encompassing knowledge. Instead, knowledge is local, specific, and fragmented. Some Women's Studies writers regard such arguments as important because of the ways in which they accord with ideas about difference. They legitimate and explain the movement of Women's Studies theory away from the initial three perspectives. They are championed for the prominence given to the role of discourse in knowledge construction and to the relative uncertainty of the knowledge that is produced.

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Postmodern ideas such as these have had a major influence on some core concerns within Women's Studies. There has been much discussion, for example, about the meaning of gender and whether, and how, it might be distinguished from sex. Conventional arguments used to define sex as the anatomical and physiological differences which distinguish biological females from biological males, with gender referring to the social construction of femininity and masculinity. Others have argued that such a formulation is problematic because it perpetuates the opposition of nature and culture which permeates Western thought. In contrast, postmodern thinkers concentrate on how the categories "woman" and "man" are culturally constructed through discourse. Butler, for instance, argues (1990) that gender is not inherently linked to physiology and anatomical bodies and that there is no reason to believe that there are only two genders. This is a binary opposition based on a heterosexist world-view. For Butler, gender has no pre-given essential existence and femininity only exists to the extent that it continues to be performed. Because performing gender brings gender itself into being, Butler regards the latter as being much less stable than is usually accepted. However, she has been criticized for portraying "women" as a construct with no existence or unity prior to construction through discourse.

By focusing on the ambiguities of gender, Butler is intent on signaling the possibilities of new and non-hierarchical relationships. Gender bending, disrupting conventional sexual and gender binary divisions, is regarded as a way of problematizing both the norm of heterosexuality and the tendency unproblematically to oppose it to homosexuality. These debates are also being informed by queer theory and by forms of gender transgression. This involves playing with gender, especially through the parodying of camp, butch, femme, and drag. It can also involve transsexuality, shifting the boundaries of gender and sexuality with the physical aid of anatomical surgery. However, questions have been raised about how really useful such subversion is as a political strategy and whether transgression is necessarily transformative.

Postmodern work has had a considerable impact on Western Women's Studies in terms both of its content and its forms of thinking, although the nature of this influence has been hotly debated. Some writers are completely dismissive, regarding it as academic pretentiousness or nothing more than a cultural product of late Western patriarchy. Others consider a postmodern position to be the only way forward, with those, such as Brooks (1997), seeing its links with postcolonial thought leading to the dawn of "postfeminism" and the wholesale destabilization of existing theory. Some Women's Studies practitioners, however, have attempted to follow a more tempered stance. They acknowledge that postmodern ideas are useful in thinking about new areas of work, such as that which questions the naturalness of the body, examines the role of autobiographies, or attempts to reconceptualize power. However, they are also wary of "strong" postmodernism, which they see as only fleetingly relating to anything of substance and where meaning seems completely relativistic.

Other Recent Issues

As may be seen so far, the topics and areas covered by Women's Studies have become increasingly varied and are frequently both innovative and at the cutting edge of knowledge. There are two further areas, in particular, which deserve brief consideration.

The first of these is the problematizing of men and of masculinity. It may seem strange to suggest that this is a Women's Studies issue when a major reason for Women's Studies initial development as a subject was the criticism that knowledge and research had previously been almost exclusively male-defined and focused. However, this focus had been on men in a purely genderless sense. There was little direct concern with the social construction of men, being male, or having male characteristics and behavior. For these reasons, the critical study of men and of masculinities is currently a major area of growth, despite some concerns that it detracts from the many projects concerning women that still need to be undertaken. Such work is largely conducted by men who are sympathetic to Women's Studies and who support a feminist approach. However, one recent feminist exception, indicative of the potential benefits to come, is Westwood's research (2000) on masculinity and the diamond trade in India. Focusing on the relationship between masculinity and ethnicity, Westwood displays both the dynamics that led to the trade's success and the processes that may lead to its destruction. She demonstrates how the former has been grounded in both gender relations and in gendered discourses.

The second area of recent debate concerns problematizing the nature of whiteness. Whiteness studies are an expanding area in the US, although their position elsewhere in the world is more precarious. Such work has been made possible by, and largely developed from, black feminists' writing on racism and anti-racism. This has emphasized the difficulties which arise when "race" and gender are still treated as separate categories, leading to black women's continual marginalization in feminist and anti-racist work (Carby 1999; Essed 1996; Twine and Blee 2001). Crenshaw, for instance, develops the concept "intersectionality" to underline how the experiences of women of color are often produced by interlinked patterns of racism and sexism (1995). She argues that these experiences cannot be explained by employing traditional notions of race and gender, but that the ways in which they intersect lead to experiences of a qualitatively different kind from those of white women. By tracing the categories to their intersections, Crenshaw intends "to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable" (1995: 378).

However, it has increasingly been argued that a similar approach should be extended to whiteness and that there needs to be an analysis of white racialization in relation to gender and anti-racist discussions (Fine et al. 1997). There are a number of reasons why whiteness is seen as an important subject to study. First is the need to counter taken-for-granted assumptions that white people do not

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have an ethnicity or that such an ethnicity is unproblematically shared. It is argued, for instance, that not to explore what it means ethnically to be white is racist because this “otherizes” those who *are* seen to have an ethnicity, treats them as deviant from some unspecified norm and fails to make visible the privileges associated with being white in racist societies. Second, the meanings and understandings about what is involved in being a white woman and the nature of white femininity have been historically constructed in the context of a colonial and imperialist past. This needs to be analyzed and critiqued if it is properly to be understood and challenged. The third reason for studying whiteness relates to the development of Women’s Studies and feminism within racist societies. It is argued that it is only by exploring how whiteness is invisibly embodied within the organization and content of Women’s Studies that the tendency to reify Western values and perceptions can be contested. For Women’s Studies properly to be inclusive, it is not sufficient simply to compare experiences across cultures. It is also necessary to modify ideas and concepts in relation to understanding cultural difference. Despite concerns that studying whiteness runs the risk of prioritizing white women, as was the case in Women’s Studies before issues of ethnic diversity were recognized, protagonists insist that this is an important topic for debate. It is only by understanding how white women (and men) use power that they will be able to recognize their own privilege and take responsibility for the consequences of how it is exercised (McIntosh 1997).

Global Women

Women’s Studies has received various forms of support around the world. In the US, for instance, the Ford Foundation has funded women’s research centers; the Canadian, Norwegian, and Dutch governments have created professorships in Women’s Studies; and the Swedish research council for social sciences and the humanities has instigated Women’s Studies fellowships (Walby 2001). Elsewhere, the British Council has helped to support the establishment of Women’s Studies programs in India, Jordan, Morocco, and Vietnam. In Japan and Morocco there is increasing concern about levels of violence against women, and in India and Vietnam attention is being paid to the difficulties experienced by older women.

One field of inquiry which broadens understanding of the nature of women’s lives in various parts of the world is the “women and development” literature. Although not particularly well integrated with Women’s Studies material in the West, this is a major scholarly and practical intervention whose impact is enormous. Attention has been drawn to recent developments in the women and development field and suggestions made for a new paradigm in Development Studies. Chua et al. (2000) argue that the focus on women and development has moved through three broad phases. The original women in development (WID) approach used an equity framework, which pointed to the invisibility of women in the development process and argued that they should be treated on equal

terms with men. It was a response to earlier models which treated women and children as welfare recipients and not as agents contributing to economic development. This was followed, in the late 1970s, by women and development (WAD), another way of thinking about the same issues but one that was informed theoretically by Marxist feminism and made the self-organization of women a key aspect of its analysis and practice. It emphasized, in particular, how the first world keeps the third world in a relation of dependency through its development strategies. This was eventually superseded by the “gender and development” (GAD) perspective. GAD is not just about integrating women into development planning. It also aims to use such initiatives as a tool for challenging unequal gender relations and for empowering women.

While sympathetic to these approaches, however, Chua et al. argue that they overemphasize economic and structural factors at the expense of the cultural. They follow the work of Nussbaum in offering what they term a “women, culture, and development” (WCD) paradigm, linking insights from Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies and Critical Development Studies (see Nussbaum and Glover 1995). The idea is to create a new interdisciplinary way of understanding gender and the third world “by taking into account the ways in which practices and discourses of gender, culture and the South come together in the everyday lives of women and the Third World” (Chua et al. 2000: 824). They seek to explore the experiences, identities, practices, and representations of third world women, in culturally specific ways, particularly focusing on matters of agency. In this WCD model, they not only carry Women’s Studies insights into our understanding of women and the development process, they also offer an integrated perspective which has potential for Women’s Studies more generally.

There are, however, other ways in which women are being encompassed more globally. The first is through the work of scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, whose writings have done much to expose the parochialism of Euro-American feminisms, as well as the male-dominated narratives of the third world (1991a, 1991b, 1997). Mohanty examines the engagement of third world women with feminism in the context of decolonization, national liberation struggles, state regulation, multinational capitalism, and related discursive practices. She consistently calls for the rethinking of feminist theories and practices within an increasingly complex transnational and international framework.

A second approach is the focus on women’s rights as human rights. Nussbaum (2000) has drawn attention to a United Nations report which indicates that no country treats its women as well as its men. However, because gender inequality is highly correlated with poverty, developing countries have particularly pressing problems, with gender issues related to literacy, income, health, nutrition, male violence, rape, and abuse very much to the fore. Women lack the fundamentals for leading human lives because they are women. Further, traditional human rights frameworks tend to be modeled on male needs and may not be appropriate to meet those of women (Peters and Wolper 1995). Feminists, therefore, argue that it is impossible to separate the struggle for human rights from that for

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women's rights. Nor is it sufficient simply to extend existing human rights mechanisms to women. Rather, gender-based abuses must be treated as human rights abuses. Such an awareness must also be used to challenge and transform conventional understandings of human rights.

Conclusion

It may be seen that Women's Studies is now a key area of teaching, research, and publishing, with gender acknowledged as being of central analytical and practical concern. In some countries, such as the UK, its integration into other subject areas, such as sociology, history, and literary analysis, has meant that it has become less dependent on specialized centers or courses for its existence. In other parts of the world such centers are crucial to maintaining a high profile and presence for Women's Studies. Since the 1970s, Women's Studies has demonstrated how both policy-making and intellectual work are impoverished if insufficient attention is paid to women. As the contents of this chapter show, the subject is continually being reshaped in terms of both substance and parameters. One crucial aspect of this continues to be the debate about difference, particularly through an engagement with ethnicity, racism, and cultural diversity.

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A Companion to **Gender Studies**

Edited by

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David Theo Goldberg, and
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and Audrey Kobayashi

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

4 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to gender studies / edited by Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg, and
Audrey Kobayashi.

p. cm. — (Blackwell companions in cultural studies ; 8)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-22109-3 (alk. paper)

1. Sex role—Research. 2. Gender identity—Research. 3. Men's studies—Research.
4. Women's studies—Research. I. Essed, Philomena, 1955– II. Goldberg, David Theo.
- III. Kobayashi, Audrey Lynn, 1951– IV. Series.

HQ1075.C656 2005
305.3'072—dc22

2004006865

ISBN-13: 978-0-631-22109-8 (alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Ehrhardt
by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy,
and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free
practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met
acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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