TAking difference into account: Gender, race and sexuality

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Feminist epistemologies. Week 8
Introduction

- How can we take into account differences between women in our approach of epistemology?

- Sexuality is already linked with gender, at least implicitly. It is less obvious to include race.

- The question of difference: the debate of equality vs difference, a false debate and a trap for feminists.
INTRODUCTION

“Fixed oppositions conceal the extent to which things presented as oppositional are, in fact, interdependent – that is, they derive their meaning from a particularly established contrast rather than some inherent or pure antithesis.”

Joan Scott, “Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses, of poststructuralist theory for feminism”, p. 286
The differences between entities [...] are shown to be based on a repression of differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself”.

Barbara Johnson, quoted by Joan Scott, “Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism”, p. 287
Introduction

“Both focusing on and ignoring difference risk recreating it. This is the dilemma of difference.”

Martha Minow, quoted by Joan Scott, “Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses, of poststructuralist theory for feminism”, p. 289
Some structuring tensions in the discussion about gender, race and sexuality

1) Who is the object of study – subject of the social process?

- Are only the Blacks raced? Are only the women gendered/sexualised?
- The dominants have the power to designate and define the dominated.
Some structuring tensions in the discussion about gender, race and sexuality

2) Who is the subject of knowledge / who is the subject of deception?

- Who *can not* know: the dominants because they are blind to the oppression they perform, or the dominated precisely because of their oppression?
Some structuring tensions in the discussion about gender, race and sexuality

- Intersectionality

- “Axes of oppression such as racism and sexism are not separate, in reality or conceptually, but they are intrinsically connected so that any racial identity, for instance, is experienced in a gendered way. Similarly, any gender identity is experienced in a particular racial way”

  Margaret Hunter, “Rethinking epistemology, methodology, and racism: or, is White sociology really dead?”, p. 127
SOME STRUCTURING TENSIONS IN THE DISCUSSION ABOUT GENDER, RACE AND SEXUALITY

“Critical intersectional epistemology”

“Scholars situated in the critical intersectional epistemology have devised a clever way out of the insider/outside debate that has plagued the social sciences for years. In their view, anyone can know about his or her own experiences, but must use caution when speaking for someone else.”

Margaret Hunter, “Rethinking epistemology, methodology, and racism: or, is White sociology really dead?”, p. 128
**The Question of Race in Feminist Knowledge**

- Mythical norm: white, male, thin, young, heterosexual and Christian

- Generalisation:
  
  White women tend to focus on the oppression of women → view oppression in terms of sex → universal sisterhood

(Lorde, 1992)
THE QUESTION OF RACE IN FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE

- race is the most serious threat among all the differences
- women of colour: “other” & “outsider”
- black women and men share the same racist oppression; white women tend to join the oppressor to share the power

(Lorde, 1992)
“You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.” (Lorde, 1992: 51)
ACQUIRE BLACK WOMEN’S STANDPOINT

- the experience of struggle against racism and sexism is one of the core themes of black women’s standpoint

- concrete experiences → distinctive consciousness ♦
  - black women’s everyday lives

- forge the individual everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined and collective standpoint: the key to their survival

  → black women can empower themselves and confront the domination and oppression

(Collins, 1990)
Challenges

- The assumption of the universal black womanhood masks the diversity among black women
  - universalization and essentialization
    - E.g.: difference of sexual preference
  - “U.S.-centrism”
    - E.g.: the imagination of Africa

(Kim, 2007)
POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEORY

- examines issues of subjectivities and scattered hegemonies
- point to the problems of ahistorical universalism and the essentialist fixing of subject’s positionality
  ➔ pay attention to the fragmented and situated forms of knowledge.
- agency, subjectivity and representation are the central questions

(Kim, 2007)
POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEORY

- They advocate for an analytical shift away from the “difference” impasse and a move beyond the binary hierarchy and across various borders to forge a dialogue among women. (Kim, 2007: 114)

- Push for a genuinely dialogic and dialectical history that can account for the formation of different selves and the construction of different epistemologies. (Chanda, 2000: 486)
CHALLENGES FOR NONWHITE/ NONWESTERN FEMINISTS

1. A contradiction between being a critical feminist and acquiring a sense of belonging to their own communities

2. A contradiction between being critical about their traditional cultures which oppress women in some ways, and the concern about how they challenge their cultures will unconsciously reinforce the superiority of western culture