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Feminist Epistemology and the Question of Difference Reconfigured: What can Wittgenstein Tell Us about “Women”?

By Jana Cattien¹

Abstract

Feminist standpoint theory is an important tool of many a feminist activist. It provides us with the epistemological justification to take women's experiences seriously – not as an obstacle to “objectivity”, but as a form of epistemic privilege. This paper takes postmodern and intersectional critiques of feminist standpoint theory as a critical point of departure to re-examine the debate around the relevance of the signifier “women” in feminist epistemology. Its aim is two-fold: first, it seeks to shed new light on these criticisms by using the lived experiences of mixed-race women as an innovative lens through which to examine the issue of fragmentation in feminist epistemology. Specifically, it will use the unique situation of mixed-race women to explore the underlying logic of fragmentation implicit in these criticisms – both in the sense of depicting a fundamentally fragmented society structured by complex and overlapping social categories, as well as a fragmented individual forever torn between contradictory pulsations. Second, the paper then goes on to problematise this splitting of the feminist project, and attempts to sketch a politically viable strategy for feminist epistemology which counters the danger of fragmentation inherent in postmodernism and intersectional feminism without giving in to the temptation of essentialism. Notably, it will argue that the notion of “women” retains its usefulness for a feminist agenda, and can incorporate a greater attentiveness to diversity, if it is conceptualised not ontologically, but rather, as a strategic and historically specific point of departure for politics. In this context, I will propose an understanding of the notion of “women” in the sense of a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance concept” – that is, a concept whose boundaries are fluid and whose elements are linked to each other in a variety of overlapping, criss-crossing ways.

Keywords: Feminist Standpoint Theory, Mixed-Race, Wittgenstein

I, and others, started out wanting a strong tool for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions, and we end up with a kind of epistemological electroshock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced personality disorder.

(Haraway 1988, p. 578)

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Introduction

What Donna Haraway describes here is the story of feminist epistemology – the story of a critical project which blissfully started off challenging the mainstream from the margin, to then finding itself not only accused of all too readily assuming the place of the oppressors, but also having to question the very foundation of its existence. Indeed, calling attention to difference in epistemology seems to have opened up Pandora’s Box, instead of producing the coveted anchor that would guide feminists in their struggle against gender-based oppression. In what follows, I seek to explore the challenges facing a distinctively feminist epistemology by tracing the development of feminist standpoint theory from a strong deconstructive tool for “contesting public truths” to “epistemological electroshock therapy”, and suggest that there is milder treatment available for the feminist doctor. But before doing so, it is necessary to briefly turn to the patient.

Traditional² epistemology claims that objectivity is best ensured through “dispassionate, disinterested, value-free, point-of-viewless... enquiry procedures” (Harding, 1990, p.87). In other words, the ideal epistemic agent perceives the world entirely independent of all social identity categories and characteristics which are presumed to unnecessarily bias judgment. However, as feminist epistemologists have pointed out, this idea is predicated on the exclusion of those whose access to such an ideal observation point is clouded by lived experiences of marginalisation. According to Lorraine Code, “such systematic excisions of “otherness” presume the homogeneity and stability of a social order that the presumpers have grounds for assuming ... for it is they who determine the norms of enquiry and conduct” (2008, p.221). Importantly, acting on this critique of traditional epistemology puts the feminist philosopher in the position of having to defend an alternative justificatory strategy for knowledge, so that one is not left without the means of justifying one’s claims to oneself and others (Harding, 1990).

Sandra Harding identifies two main strands in feminist epistemology which attempt to fill this gap. Whilst feminist empiricism holds that “insufficient care and rigor in following existing methods and norms is the cause of sexist and androcentric results of research” (1993, p.52), feminist standpoint theory (henceforth referred to as FST) seeks to reconceptualise the notion of objectivity and the corresponding methodology advocated by traditional epistemology altogether. More precisely, so it argues, given that social stratification produces distinctive epistemic vantage points, some are in a better position than others to generate meaningful criticism about knowledge claims. In this view, then, the experiences of marginalised people are deemed to provide a more revelatory source for rethinking social hierarchies than those of dominant groups, as their critical thinking is not impaired by the desire to maintain privilege (Bubeck, 2010). Significantly, FST combines this belief in the epistemic privilege of the marginalised with the firm conviction that relations of domination in society are fundamentally gendered. Put simply, it asserts that a feminist critique of a masculinist bias in epistemology is necessary precisely because women constitute the most relevant oppressed group.

Yet for many a critical feminist, this move is both insufficient and deeply problematic. Whilst some denounce its neglect of issues of intersectionality and emphasise differences between women on the grounds of racial, ethnic and class stratification, others take its deconstructive logic a large step further by denying the existence of a unified self prior to epistemic agency altogether

² I am aware that what I describe here as “traditional” epistemology may be somewhat of a straw-man/woman, and I acknowledge the influence of historicist or phenomenological approaches to personhood on epistemology prior to the emergence of deconstructive or postmodern feminism. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this essay; this arguably simplistic description of “traditional” epistemology serves just as an entry point to my argument and should not be pertinent to its core.

(Witt, 1995). However, taking these criticisms seriously amounts to allowing the indefinite fragmentation of legitimate epistemological standpoints, and thereby entraps the feminist theorist in the familiar dilemma of universality versus particularity. In order to fully do justice to differences between women while remaining faithful to its commitment to political inclusion of the disadvantaged, FST would seemingly have to advocate for epistemic strategies that exclusively draw from the insights of the most marginalised *individual*, thus entirely forfeiting its claims to the promotion of the interests of women *qua* women (Bubeck, 2000). What is more, abandoning the notion of a coherent subject renders the idea of a clearly demarcated and unambiguous standpoint wholly unintelligible in the first place.

This, in brief, is how the standard argument in feminist epistemology goes. Although it is certainly an important point of departure for any meaningful discussion of the challenges faced by FST, which will be given due attention in section one, section two is specifically dedicated to shedding new light on these criticisms by using the lived experiences of mixed-race women as an innovative lens through which to examine the issue of fragmentation in feminist epistemology. Given my White-Asian parentage, this choice is not merely motivated by the recognition of the particular difficulties mixed-race women face in claiming one single, distinctive epistemological standpoint, but also by the fact that the resulting analysis can benefit from my own personal experiences. In other words, I believe that a consideration of mixed-race women's perspectives is both particularly revelatory with respect to the shortcomings of FST, as well as evidence of my commitment to a critical feminist epistemology which "insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter" (Harding, 1987, p.9) in order to ensure that "the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests" (ibid).

Due to the overarching need for a viable theory of knowledge acquisition, "for a decision procedure articulable to feminists – to ourselves, to each other – to guide choices in theory, research, and politics" (Harding, 1990, p.89), the final section attempts to sketch a politically viable strategy for feminist epistemology which counters the danger of fragmentation inherent in postmodernism and intersectional feminism, without giving in to the temptation of essentialism. Specifically, it will argue that the notion of "women" retains its usefulness for a feminist agenda, and can incorporate a greater attentiveness to diversity if it is conceptualised not ontologically, but, rather, as a strategic and historically specific point of departure for politics. Furthermore, it will propose an understanding of the notion of "women" in the sense of a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance concept"—that is, a concept whose boundaries are fluid and whose elements are linked to each other in a variety of overlapping, criss-crossing ways.

One: Feminist Standpoint Theory and its Critics

In order to meaningfully address the issue of fragmentation faced by a feminist epistemology that seeks to be attentive to difference, a brief discussion of FST and its treatment of marginality as epistemic privilege cannot be avoided. In this section, I will focus on how standpoint theory has been formulated by radical feminists in order to defend the interests of women *qua* women, and discuss the main criticisms levied against it by intersectional and postmodern feminists.

Proponents of FST defend the claim that the articulation of women's experiences constitutes the most radical threat to the dominant patriarchal system (Harding, 1990). Catharine

A. MacKinnon, in particular, calls attention to the ways in which the ideal of objectivity has been instrumentalised in traditional epistemology to assert the male point of view as the norm:

If the sexes are unequal, and perspective participates in situation, there is no ungendered reality or ungendered perspective. And they are connected. In this context, objectivity – the nonsituated, universal standpoint, whether claimed or aspired to – is a denial of the existence or potency of sex inequality that tacitly participates in constructing reality from the dominant point of view

(1987, p.136).

In this view, then, only women's perspective can open up epistemic space to radically reorganise the gendered relations of domination in society. Consequently, according to Nancy Hartsock, "the female experience not only inverts that of the male, but forms a basis on which to expose abstract masculinity as both partial and fundamentally perverse" (1987, p.171).

That this account of FST, as presented above, has been accused of essentialism and unacceptable generalisation over the diverse range of women's experiences is hardly surprising. More interesting for the purposes of this essay is whether criticisms of FST can be productively mobilised to envision a feminist epistemology that goes beyond the men-women dichotomy, to capture complex social stratification across gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., as well as the fragmented and contradictory nature of human subjectivity. Witt's (1995) identification of two distinctive arguments against essentialism – namely the exclusion/intersectional argument and the power/postmodern argument – provides a useful framework here.

The Exclusion/Intersectional Argument

The exclusion argument is put forward by intersectional feminists who denounce the marginalisation of other social categories, most notably race and class, in feminist theory. Given my particular interest in the perspective of mixed-race women, I shall focus here on the work of critical race scholars. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, offers some crucial insights into the ways in which a distinctive Black feminist epistemology may challenge FST's reliance on a collective *women's* knowledge:

As members of a subordinate group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women's survival.

(2008, p.275f)

Similarly, bell hooks characterises the marginal position occupied by Black women as "a central location for the production of a counterhegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (1996, p.52). Thus, if different groups of women employ different epistemologies in their struggle – with Black women's knowledge, for instance, consisting of "knowing how" and "knowing what it is like" rather than the traditional "knowing that" (Dalmiya and Alcoff, 1993) – then a unified feminist standpoint may be neither desirable nor

feasible. Instead, different marginalised groups of women produce different analyses of systems of oppression, each of which is firmly situated within their particular perspective.

The Power/Postmodern Argument

The power/postmodern argument reaches a similar conclusion, but through an entirely different route. Judith Butler (1995), most notably, contests the claim that there is a stable subject which exists prior to and independent of epistemically relevant experiences of marginalisation. Specifically, she argues that “it is simply not a strong enough claim to say that the “I” is situated”, but that “the “I”, this “I”, is *constituted* by these positions, and these positions are not merely theoretical products but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements” (p.42, emphasis original). In other words, it is not sufficient to simply conceive of the notion of difference in epistemology as an innovative way of redistributing epistemic privileges among independently existing agents; rather, it is through difference that these agents are produced in the first place.

Moreover, the power/postmodern argument calls attention to the ways in which power relations do not merely create antagonisms between different social groups, but also act productively upon individuals themselves, thereby rendering them fundamentally invested in the maintenance of the oppressive system (Flax, 1990; Bar On, 1993). By positing a purely antagonistic model of social relations, FST crucially overlooks the fact that the marginalised themselves participate in the production of knowledge that serves to sustain the position of dominant groups, which in turn significantly impacts on their subjectivity.

To conclude, we can draw two important insights from this critical discussion of FST from an intersectional and postmodern feminist perspective respectively. First, gender may not be the most relevant social factor in any given situation, but rather coexists and interacts with, for instance, racialised experiences of marginalisation in a multitude of ways. Second, the self does not constitute a stable, unified position, and is thus not easily assigned a clearly demarcated epistemological standpoint that unambiguously locates it within an antagonistically organised social hierarchy. As the following sections will show, the underlying logic of fragmentation implicit in these criticisms – both in the sense of depicting a fundamentally fragmented society structured by complex and overlapping social categories, as well as a fragmented individual forever torn between contradictory pulsations – seriously endangers the political viability of a feminist project that is attentive to difference. The experiences of mixed-race women will provide fruitful grounds for such a discussion.

Two: Mixed-Race Women and Fragmentation

Before setting out to examine mixed-race women’s experiences in relation to the viability of FST, it is necessary to highlight the ways in which their position may provide a unique foundation to address issues of accounting for difference in feminist epistemology. In the subsequent discussion, I shall follow Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe in employing the term mixed-race/mixed-heritage “to describe individuals who according to popular folk concepts of “race” and by known birth parentage embody two or more world views or in genealogical terms, descent groups” (2001, p.46). As a result, “these individuals may have physical characteristics that reflect some sort of “intermediate” status vis-à-vis their birth parents” and “more than likely, at some stage, they will have to reconcile multiple cultural influences” (ibid). It is precisely this

intermediate status – their position at the intersection of different cultures whose contradictory influences have to be constantly renegotiated – which renders the experiences of mixed-race women particularly valuable in shedding light on the fragmentation that may result from a commitment to difference in feminist epistemology.

In this context, two aspects in particular merit close attention. First, the lived experiences of mixed-race subjects demonstrate that intersectional feminism falls into the essentialist trap by falsely insisting on the homogeneity of racial identity. Rigorously following the logic of intersectionality, by contrast, would mean allowing race as a social category to be undercut by further differences, thereby leading to an indefinite proliferation of theoretically meaningful standpoints. Second, the practice of “passing” as white available to some people of mixed-heritage vividly illustrates the instability of racial identity, as well as the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which individuals are implicated in racialised power relations. Put differently, if subjective experiences of marginalisation do not align with the social recognition of this marginalisation, the mixed race subject may never come to occupy a clear epistemic standpoint, but, rather, infinitely oscillates between localities of resistance, repression and co-optation. In this way, mixed race individuals provide real-world examples of the fragmented subjectivities celebrated by postmodern feminists. In the following, I shall elaborate each of these aspects in turn in order show how both the exclusion/intersectional and the power/postmodern critique of FST pursue their logic of difference at the risk of overloading the feminist project with more fragmentation than is politically viable.

Intersectional Feminism and Essentialisation

Let us first turn to the assumption of a homogenous racial identity implicit in the work of some intersectional feminists. Consider, for instance, Collins’ justification of the claim that Black feminist epistemology is fundamentally relational:

This belief in connectedness and the use of dialogue as one of its criteria for methodological adequacy has African roots. Whereas women typically remain subordinated to men within traditional African societies, these same societies have at the same time embraced holistic worldviews that seek harmony.

(2008, p.279)

In her attempt to defend the claim of a distinctive Black feminist epistemology, Collins problematically resorts to essentialising and homogenising strategies. More precisely, in order to construct a collective identity for African-American women in the US on the basis of shared cultural roots, she broadly generalises over the diverse practices and customs in “African” societies. As Bat-Ami Bar On rightly points out, valorising the experiences of socially marginalised groups easily verges on problematic essentialisation “because rather than working from a conception of practices as heterogeneous, it includes some while excluding others, presupposing that there are practices that in one way or another are more authentically expressive of something about the oppressed group” (1993, p.92). In a similar yet distinctive fashion, Butler asserts that “subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view” (1995, p.47).

Ironically, then, in its attempt to diversify the range of epistemologically valuable standpoints, intersectional feminism inevitably produces certain ideal subjectivities that speak to some more than to others. In order not to replicate the essentialising mistake of FST, however, intersectional feminists would have to allow the indefinite proliferation of standpoints – the undercutting of a singular Black feminist epistemology by a Black lesbian feminist epistemology, and so on.

Mixed-race women might in particular occupy an uncomfortable position in any movement which draws its legitimation from a presumed homogeneity of racial identity. Women of mixed Black-White heritage, for instance, may feel that their partial whiteness prevents full identification with a Black feminist standpoint, both on the grounds of an awareness of greater privilege, possibly resulting from lighter skin colour, as well as their unique experiences which may not easily be subsumed under a generic Black women's movement (Ifekwunigwe, 2000). As Jinthana Haritaworn's (2009) empirical study with mixed-race individuals of Thai and non-Thai parentage further shows, mixed-race people face a distinctive form of biological racism which is particular to their situation of racial ambiguity: they are often viewed as an assortment of different racialized body parts – a body constantly available for “dissections” performed by an external observer who readily volunteers his or her (dis)approving label; the mixed-race individual is thus quickly branded either as a “good mix” or a “bad mix”.

This rings very familiar with my own personal experience of family members, relatives and acquaintances frequently (and more or less benevolently) treating my body as a “mix-and-match” training ground for racialising experiments. So, certainly, there are many respects in which I am more than just a “woman” from an epistemological point of view, and in which I would benefit from an intersectional approach to feminist epistemology. But where precisely is this intersection located in my case? How can I, a “racially ambiguous” researcher, ever gain access to the authenticity that an “Asian” feminist epistemology would be so desperately in need of in order to defend the validity of intersectionality as an epistemological principle?

The Postmodern Condition of Mixed-Race Individuals

Perhaps more interestingly, mixed-race people also call into question the stability and coherence of racial identity as an ontological category. This strongly resonates with postmodern contestations of the prediscursive self as a foundation of feminist politics (Butler, 1995; Haraway, 1988). In her work on individuals of mixed-heritage who “pass” as white, Sara Ahmed eloquently summarises the common assertion that “the subject who passes, or the passing of subjects through each other, has increasingly become a point of entry for an approach to identification which emphasizes the phantasies, ruptures and breakages which prevent identity from being assured as the ontological given of the subject” (1999, p.89). In other words, by embodying the fluidity of “race” in their everyday practices, mixed-race subjects introduce elements of instability, incoherence and contradiction into the process of subjectification. In order to illustrate why such forms of subjectivity may preclude the clear and unambiguous epistemological standpoints required by standpoint theory, two aspects are particularly relevant.

To begin with, let us recall the main logic that standpoint theory employs in order to establish a link between marginalisation and undistorted access to reality:

if there are antagonistic relations of oppression and exploitation between two social groups, the oppressors benefit from, and have an interest in, belief systems

which distort reality, since such distortions will help the oppressive system to maintain itself; the oppressed, by contrast, have an interest in revealing social relations for the oppressive relations they are and in struggling against them.
(Bubeck, 2010, p.187)

Arguably, mixed-race individuals who “pass” as White call into question the presumption that a person’s subjective identification as a member of an oppressed group necessarily aligns with the treatment that they receive. Whilst their phenotype may allow unrestricted access to all the privileges that whiteness confers, the awareness of their racial “ambiguity” simultaneously burdens them with a constant “danger of being seen” (Ahmed, 1999, p.94), of being identified as the exotic outsider. Contrary to the logic of standpoint theory, mixed-race people may then be unable to convert experiences of marginalisation and of difference into epistemic privilege. In my case, for instance, my ability to “pass” as white in certain contexts does not erase the vulnerability associated with any position of racial ambiguity; however, this sense of precariousness may not be as easily translatable into epistemic privilege as initially envisaged by feminist standpoint theory. Quite the contrary: as a “white passing individual” I benefit from white supremacy and am thus likely not to have a privileged epistemic vantage point with regard to racialized structures of oppression – despite my being “oppressed” by these structures in some ways.

As Ahmed further argues, people of mixed-race do not merely subvert the system of racialised oppression by exposing its instability, but may also involuntarily contribute to its stabilisation: “Indeed, hybridization, if read as the failure or loss of a proper or authentic identity could then, paradoxically, become a means by which a purified notion of identity is upheld as the origin of truth, value and security (the fate of the hybrid makes clear what “we” could lose)” (1999, p.97f). The ambiguous position occupied by individuals of mixed-heritage is then instrumentalised to justify existing mechanisms of racial categorisation.

This is also evident from the work of Frank Furedi (2001) who shows how stigmatisation of racial mixing served as a means to stabilise the social distance between different races in the US. In the case studies provided to us by Haritaworn (2009), the reification and validation of racial categories takes place via the mechanism of “dissection” that is used to organise the different body parts of mixed-race individuals into intelligible racial categories.

Overall, the postmodern condition of mixed-race individuals is characterised by their inability to appropriate a stable and coherent racial identity, as well as their implicit involvement in the reproduction of racialised power dynamics. To use Haraway’s words, their situation vividly illustrates that “the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly” (1988, p.586). This in turn renders them unable to take up a clearly demarcated and unambiguous epistemological standpoint. Thus, as this section has shown, applying either the logic of the exclusion/intersectional or the power/postmodern argument does not merely lead to fragmentation in the sense of a proliferation of justifiable standpoints, but also to a fragmented notion of the self. The next section will explain why such fragmentation may pose challenges for a feminist politics, and indicate how this issue may be overcome without having to forego the insights provided by intersectional and postmodern feminism.

Three: Towards a Politically Viable Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

The main question that has emerged from the discussion so far is how “difference” can be accounted for by FST without giving in to the temptation of essentialisation on the one hand, and risking the danger of fragmentation of the other. Whilst the first section of this essay has examined the two main arguments against the essentialism inherent in FST, this section will examine the problems that result from the other extreme. It attempts to project ways of rescuing the notion of “women” for feminist politics whilst being responsive to issues of intersectionality and the complex nature of the self.

The Problem of Fragmentation for Feminism

In the previous section, I have shown how both the underlying logic of intersectionality and postmodernism eventually culminate in a fragmentation of the feminist struggle, albeit with different emphases. Whilst the former would have to advocate an infinite proliferation of standpoints beyond the traditional feminist one of “women”, the latter insists on a fragmented and incomplete notion of the self which renders the idea of a standpoint unaffected by oppressive systems of power wholly unintelligible. Both perspectives, however, seriously endanger the political viability of the feminist project that seeks to end *gender*-based oppression.

According to Alcoff (1988), rejecting the essentialism inherent in FST’s valorisation of a distinctive women’s standpoint should not prevent the feminist from resisting the oppressive conditions which gave rise to such a standpoint in the first place, such as forced parenting and lack of bodily autonomy. Indeed, effectively resisting the oppression of women *qua* women might at times require one to generalise with respect to the commonalities of women across different cultures and social groups, as well as to assume the existence of a stable subject with a coherent set of interests. This prompts Di Stefano to argue that a “perplexing plurality of differences” and the “postmodernist prohibition against subject-centred inquiry and theory ... undermine ... the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of [women]” (1990, p.76f).

Likewise, Kimberlé Crenshaw, one of the most prominent intersectional feminists, cautions against an unquestioned celebration of difference on the grounds that

absent contextual analysis that delivers more than a simple assertion of racial difference, conventional critiques of feminism that ground themselves in differences between women come dangerously close to reifying women into the very polar categories that have traditionally situated women of color as something other than women.

(2010, p.177)

In other words, insisting on differences between women may in fact be instrumentalised to serve anti-feminist ends by reproducing the very stereotypes that have historically served to exclude Black women from the limited protections that White women enjoyed. In Crenshaw’s account, the relevance of differences is not a given, but depends on “the political use for which claims of group commonality are made, and the flexibility and openness to difference in shaping the demands and interventions that are realized” (2010, p.181).

Interestingly, even Butler concedes that “within feminism, it seems as if there is some political necessity to speak as and for women, and I would not contest that necessity” (1995, p.49).

At the same time, however, she insists that giving in to this necessity is eternally problematic because “the minute that the category of women is invoked as describing the constituency for which feminism speaks, an internal debate invariably begins over what the descriptive content of that term will be” (ibid). Following from that, I shall now briefly sketch an attempt to overcome this dilemma.

“Family resemblance” and Identity Politics

A useful starting point to conceptualise a feminist epistemology that is simultaneously attentive to difference and politically viable is provided by Alessandra Tanesini, who notes that, “to discover that there are no facts about being a woman should not be taken as showing that there is no meaningful notion of “woman”, but only as showing that the point of having the concept is not that of describing anybody” (1996, p.212f). This thought can be traced back to Wittgenstein’s (1958) philosophical examination of language. In his account, understanding a concept does not mean to uncover its essential descriptive meaning, but rather to capture its usage and usefulness in socio-linguistic interactions. In order to support his argument, Wittgenstein employs the example of a chair that vanishes and then reappears (section 80). According to him, the fact that we would not be sure whether to call this object a chair or not demonstrates that there is no essence behind the concept “chair”, but, rather, that its very existence is inextricably bound up with its use in certain situations.

How can this insight be mobilised for feminist politics? Alcoff’s appeal to “identity politics” indicates how this may be possible: “The idea here is that one’s identity is taken (and defined) as a political point of departure, as a motivation for action, and as a delineation of one’s politics” (1988, p.431f). Indeed, as a linguistic concept in the Wittgensteinian sense, the notion of “women” does not have to be understood in terms of its descriptive content, emerging from a distinctive essence of womanhood, as Butler implies, but rather in terms of its use as political tool for the feminist struggle. Analogous to the example of the chair mentioned above, employing the terminology of “women” only makes sense in a context of patriarchy in which women are deprived of resources, opportunities and power *qua* women. This is not to say, however, that gender is “natural, biological, ahistorical, or essential”, but rather that “gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically” (ibid, p.433).

One may object, at this point, that such modes of thought bring us back to the fundamental critique of FST earlier discussed: that it glosses over significant differences *between* women. In response to this objection, consulting a Wittgensteinian idea may once again prove useful. His assertion that concepts have to be understood via their usage and not via their essential meaning leaves open the question of how usage is possible without essential meaning. In order to illustrate how concepts are mobilised in human interactions, Wittgenstein appeals to the familiar word “games” (1958, section 66). Whilst it is undoubtedly a useful linguistic tool, it seems impossible to identify one characteristic that is common to all members – say, for instance, board-games, card-games and ball-games. Instead, we “see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (ibid). Wittgenstein describes this property of concepts with the term “family resemblance”, “for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way” (ibid, section 67). Importantly, the fact that its network-like character prevents the identification of one single factor that is common

to all does not jeopardise its applicability as a tool of communication, but, rather, reveals the flexibility that is characteristic of language use.

What if the notion of “women”, too, could be understood as such a “family resemblance concept” in order to account both for similarities *and* differences? Even though it is impossible to identify *one* factor common to all women, employing the notion of “women” may continue to be useful for feminist purposes if it is derived not from artificially constructed homogeneity, but from an understanding of the complex, overlapping *and* diverging features of a profoundly heterogeneous “patchwork family” of women. That is, feminist activism on behalf of and by “women” should continue to define its constituency in these terms only on the condition that it imagines “women” as a conflictual network of positionalities and perspectives – a network that spans across different ethnicities, races, nations, classes, genders, abilities, ages, etc., and thereby exceeds the representational possibilities of a language constructed around “essences”. Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance” can help us overcome this essentialist bias by deconstructing the link between the usage of concepts on the one hand, and their essential content on the other; interpersonal communication functions precisely because this link is forever indeterminate and subject to human play and development. If our language can build connections without being grounded in essentialist concepts, then we as feminists can do so, too.

Conclusion

To summarise, this essay began with an examination of feminist standpoint theory, and presented its rationale as well as the main criticisms levied against it – namely the exclusion/intersectional and the power/postmodern arguments. Whilst these criticisms derive their force from bringing about a greater attentiveness to difference, they also present feminists with the challenge of having to envision a politically viable struggle against gender-based oppression for a deeply fragmented and heterogeneous constituency. This has been illustrated with reference to the uneasy position of mixed-race women within intersectional feminism, as well as their markedly postmodern subjectivity.

Thus presented with the dilemma of universality versus particularity – the problem of feminist solidarity versus sociologically accurate, politically inclusive difference that prompted Haraway (1988) to diagnose feminism with a ‘self-induced personality disorder’ – I have attempted to provide an alternative to “epistemological electroshock therapy”. In order to reconcile a strong commitment to diversity with the political demands of a feminist movement that seeks to defend the interests of women *qua* women in the context of patriarchy, this essay suggests that we consider the notion of “women” as a politically useful “family resemblance concept” with overlapping and criss-crossing similarities and differences, but without essential descriptive content. Such a move would free feminist activists from the impossible task of making the entire family live under one, and only one, roof.

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