How should an understanding of gender shape our approach to the production of knowledge?

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How should an understanding of gender shape our approach to the production of knowledge?

By Alice Roberts Dunn[1]

Abstract

For feminists, the question of what it means to take a feminist approach to the knowledge production process itself is of paramount importance. Drawing on postcolonial and intersectional thought and embedded in a discussion of the realities of the academic research process, this paper questions how an understanding of gender should shape such an approach. Ultimately, it argues the importance of moving beyond self-reflexivity alone and towards an understanding of research as a process of representation.

Starting from the intuition that feminist normative theorising should be grounded in women's experiences, I first consider how the starting point and end point of feminist theory are intrinsically linked and always embedded within the contextual realities of academic research. Using feminist approaches to development as a springboard, I then examine how an intersectional understanding of gender should shape the feminist production of knowledge. I then argue for the importance of self-reflexivity for feminists seeking to ground their work in women's conditions and experiences, while also challenging the ways in which it can lead to a reinforcing of existing unjust structures of power. Finally, drawing on Spivak's exploration of the concept of representation and Alcoff's analysis of the problems of speaking for others, I show that the concept of representation offers an alternative path for the feminist production of knowledge.

Keywords: intersectionality, postcolonialism, production of knowledge, reflexivity, development, representation

Introduction

A hallmark of feminist political theory, despite its incredible diversity, is a focus on gender. Reflecting feminism's roots as an activist and not an academic movement, it also has at its core a desire to achieve "women's substantive equality" (Schwartzmann 2006: 165). What 'women' – or 'gender' – means is certainly not a settled question for feminist political theorists. There exists, therefore, no single 'understanding of gender' that ought to shape our approach to the production of knowledge, but rather, a multitude of understandings. This essay will focus in particular on the question of whether an understanding of gender in this context means that "women's particular experiences and the ways in which they address their conditions… [should] represent the ineluctable starting point of (feminist) normative theorising[2]" (Nuti 2016: 291). Drawing on both

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[2] Taken as synonymous with "feminist political theory".

intersectionality and postcolonial understandings of gender it will question what it means to speak for and construct representations of others, and how this should be navigated in the knowledge production process in the context of academic feminist political theory research. In order to illuminate this debate, this essay will draw on the example of feminist approaches to development, considering the two influential feminist approaches "Women in Development" (WID) and "Gender and Development" (GAD) as a springboard to discussing wider questions of feminist methodology. After considering what the goal (or endpoint) of feminist political theory ought to be, it will argue that women's actual conditions *and* experiences should form the starting point of the production of knowledge, as a prelude to examining gendered structures of power through the use of gender as a category of analysis; properly utilised, these two approaches are complementary rather than contradictory. It will also argue that an intersectional approach to who is a 'woman', and what experiences 'count', is necessary. By considering feminist approaches to development in the light of postcolonial theory, it will also highlight the importance of a critical view of one's[3] own position as a researcher in representing the experiences of the women at whose experiences the research begins, the absence of which can lead to incorrect assertions of universality or to a failure to critically examine structures of power that intersect with gender. Drawing particularly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's exploration of the concept of representation (1988), and Linda Alcoff's analysis of and recommendations on *The Problem of Speaking for Others* (1991) this essay will argue that, as well as self-reflexivity, a critical eye to the representation of the subjects of one's research in the production of knowledge is key.

Women's experiences and feminist goals

Before it is possible to consider how an understanding of gender should shape one's approach to the production of knowledge, it is necessary to spend some time considering the goal, or endpoint, of this process in the context of feminist political theory. The question of how the production of knowledge *should* be shaped is a normative one, and therefore requires a sense of what such an approach ought to be working towards. When considering the production of knowledge in the context of the university, there are of course particular material pressures that will inevitably have a large influence. As a student, competition between classmates, pressure to achieve high grades, and the arduous process of securing funding will all form the ultimate goal of research conducted, however unsatisfactory this reality might be to a developing feminist scholar. Even once a PhD has been completed, for the scholar who chooses to stay in a university setting, the pressures of ensuring job security in a 'publish or perish' culture (McGrail, Rickard and Jones 2006) pervade the research process. These material pressures will inescapably form, in some sense, the goal of research, for students and postdoctoral scholars alike. Indeed, it cannot go unspoken that this essay itself would not exist if not for these multiple pressures. Examining the implications of this in depth falls beyond the scope of this essay, but they are too important not to note.

Nevertheless, feminist political theory is unlikely to have been chosen as a field because of the promise of great power or unlimited funds. Instead, feminism "offers an analysis that is not "neutral" or "abstract," but that instead aims for a particular social ideal, women's substantive equality" (Schwartzmann 2006: 165). In keeping with feminism's activist roots, the ultimate goal

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[3] While the question refers to "our" approach to the production of knowledge, "one" is used as a pronoun throughout the essay. This is a deliberate choice which does not implicate the reader or others in the problematic approaches discussed, in recognition of the diverse range of backgrounds in and approaches to feminist political theory.

of academic feminist political theory is to achieve – in some sense – equality for women, or the liberation of women from oppressive structures of gender, race, dis/ability, sexuality, and other such dimensions. Exactly what this means, or how this should be carried out, is the subject of intense debate within the movement which this essay unfortunately lacks the space to consider in depth, but in lieu of such a discussion it will take 'gender equality' as the general goal of feminist political theory. In this sense, the starting point of feminist normative theory is the same as the endpoint; a desire to work towards gender equality ultimately informs the production of knowledge: what questions are being asked, why, and how research is going to be carried out.

Having considered the ultimate goal and foundational starting point of the production of knowledge in feminist normative theorising, we can begin to consider what research with this goal in mind should look like in practice. Returning to the central debate of the essay, we will now consider whether women's actual conditions, and/or women's experiences, should form the starting point of the production of knowledge 'in the field', and how an understanding of gender should shape our approach to the production of knowledge. Returning to the quote that begins this essay, Nuti argues that:

> "[A] methodological premise of feminist normative theorising is that theory should be grounded in women's actual conditions. Women's particular experiences and the ways in which they address their conditions are not simply an important source of knowledge; they represent the ineluctable starting point of (feminist) normative theorising." (2016: 291).

For Nuti, such an approach is necessary because starting from women's idealised circumstances and 'working back' "is likely to neglect the actual experience of many women, and miss whether and how the dimensions of gender inequality it has abstracted from affect the position of women" (2016: 292). Such an approach shares some similarities with "standpoint feminism", which aims to "[locate], in a material and political disadvantage or form of oppression, a distinctive insight about how a hierarchical social structure works" (Harding 2004: 31). As well as echoing the utility of the specific standpoint of the *researcher* (Hartsock 1983), such an approach begins with the experiences of other women, incorporating both those women's unique insights and particular view of the world (or standpoint), and the researcher's.

A distinction must at this point be drawn between women's *actual conditions* and women's *experiences*. While women's actual conditions could be ascertained by the researcher without reference to the subjectivity of the women whose conditions they are – though this approach would be very much limiting – to speak of women's experiences makes central the way the women involved have interpreted and felt those conditions to have impacted their lives. Taking women's actual conditions as the starting point of the production of knowledge in this sense is essential because it highlights the problems in the lives of women – the gap between their current lives and a life of substantive gender equality – and therefore guides feminist normative theorising for which this goal is intrinsically linked (Nuti 2016). Women's experiences are critical because they highlight how those conditions are actually understood, enabling the researcher to focus her attention on those areas which her work could prove most useful in changing.

Starting the production of knowledge from women's actual conditions and experiences, in the context of feminist normative theorising, is an essential method for guiding the attention of feminist political theorists. There are, however, a number of considerations with such an approach that examining different understandings of gender can illuminate, namely: how should the

researcher decide who the women are, and what aspects of their conditions or experiences should she pay attention to? How does the researcher herself play into the knowledge production process? And what ramifications arise from representing women's experiences, particularly in the context of unequal global power relations? To consider how these problems might influence an approach to feminist normative theorising which begins from women's experiences, we will now examine the example of feminist approaches to development in the context of "Women in Development", as contrasted with the later "Gender and Development" approach.

Contrasting "Women in Development" and "Gender and Development"
The birth of sustained western feminist interventions in development can be marked by the publication of Ester Boserup's seminal work *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (1970). With this work, Boserup drew attention to the failure of contemporary development programmes in Africa to include women in their allocation of resources to farmers, despite the fact that women constituted the majority of farmers in these areas. Boserup's work also marked the beginning of what would become known as the "Women in Development" (WID) movement, which "struggled to make women's labor and expertise visible to the architects of development programs, so as to extend the benefits of modernization to women as well as to men" (Chowdhury 2016: 141). The problem, as identified by WID, was that women were being excluded from development – both in practical terms relating to the allocation of resources, and (as Boserup demonstrated) in terms of the research being carried out on development as a practice. As a response to this exclusion, WID scholars both critiqued existing scholarship in the field of development, which was systematically excluding women, and conducted their own research which centred on women, rather than men (Boserup 1970, Tinker and Cohen 1985).

One of the key sites of tension between WID and the later approach, "Gender and Development" (GAD), was the contention that WID problematised women themselves, rather than the structures that influence and constrain their lives. While WID did broadly take as its starting point women's actual living conditions – reacting against the contemporary dominant approach which caused them to be "Rendered economically invisible" (Tinker and Cohen 1985: 83), a lack of examination of the broader structures of gender relations which influence the lives of women in the Global South, as well as the treatment of people in the area of study as an 'Other', are drawbacks in the WID approach which GAD sought to highlight (and to rectify). Where WID had "left "development" itself largely unproblematized" (Chowdhury 2016: 144), GAD sought both to question the goals and practices of development itself and to shift the focus of critique away from women and towards structures.

Many of the problems of the WID approach also reflect the critical difference between women's *experiences* and women's *actual conditions*. Where taking women's experiences as a starting point requires the researcher to give space to the way women encounter and work around the position in which they find themselves, WID tended to ignore this subjectivity in favour of privileging the researcher's own assessment of those conditions, and how women might thus be incorporated into (primarily economic) development efforts. The lack of structural approach is a characteristic difference between *Women* in Development and the later *Gender* and Development, with 'gender' instead of 'women' standing in for a more structural analysis. This development highlights a potential issue with starting from women's actual conditions and experiences – that it might lead to a lack of examination of the structural way in which gender, and other dimensions of inequality, operate in women's lives.

Taking an intersectional approach

The inevitable question that follows from a decision to begin the production of knowledge from the place of women's experiences, and the necessary next step of considering gendered structures of power, is: Who are (the) women here? While considering how one might neatly categorise "women" or "gender" – if indeed it is possible to do so at all – falls beyond the scope of this short essay, it is nonetheless critical to discuss how women ought *not* to be categorised in order to examine what "an understanding of gender" should mean in the context of the production of knowledge.

A drawback that might be present in feminist normative theorising, highlighted by the WID approach, is a conception of women that is essentialist or lacks intersectionality. Particularly present in many feminist theories of development and compounded by imperialist attitudes towards women in the Global South, this conceptual homogeneity is an unavoidable result of leaving other vectors of oppression unchallenged or unanalysed, and envisions women as white, wealthy, cis/het, able-bodied (and, outside of the development context, resident in the Global North). In other words, to claim to focus on gender alone (even if this were to be possible) means in actuality to focus only on women for whom gender is their sole vector of oppression, and not the vast majority of women for whom gender is one intersecting such vector (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins and Bilge 2016). Chandra Mohanty draws attention to the problems of such a homogenising approach in the context of feminist approaches to development with the example of women in Egypt, describing how "The interests of urban, middle-class Egyptian housewives… could surely not be seen as being the same as those of their uneducated, poor maids" (1988: 72). Such a misrepresentation in this case is based on the use of "women" as a "stable category of analysis [which] assumes an ahistorical, universal unity among women based on a generalized notion of their subordination" (ibid.): in the WID approach, "social relations and multiple, complex identities, which lie at the basis of persisting inequalities, are seldom taken into account" (Bastia 2014: 237). Without an intersectional consideration, "women" becomes as it was in WID approaches a "prediscursive and deterministic" category (Chowdhury 2016: 160), wherein women in development contexts are conceived of as a sort of homogenous and problematised 'Other' (Mohanty 1991), without explicit consideration of the different structures that could be constraining their choices (Tinker and Cohen 1985).

As Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights, "[a] focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw 1989: 140). Crenshaw's account is situated in the exclusion of black women in the United States from both the feminist and anti-racist movements, and "[her] focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed." (Crenshaw 1991: 1245). Accounting for multiple grounds of identity both in feminist approaches to development and feminist normative theorising more broadly is therefore crucial because "it is only by understanding the *contradictions* inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised" (Mohanty 1988: 74). In other words, substantive gender equality can only be achieved for women who experience other vectors of oppression by also analysing and tackling those other vectors in feminist political theory, through structural focus. As such, when considering whose conditions and experiences should form the starting point of the production of knowledge, it is critical to consider both multiply-burdened women and to recognise those experiences which arise from such intersections as experiences which must inform the questions that are being asked and the structures considered.

Failing to take an intersectional approach to the conception of "women" when starting from women's experiences and women's actual conditions forms a crucial mistake in the production of knowledge in feminist political theory. If one is working from and towards the goal of 'substantive gender equality', it is essential that the understanding of gender and of "women" that influences this process is an intersectional one.

Speech and self-reflexivity

We have considered how one ought (not) to conceptualise women when beginning one's research from women's experiences, particularly in the context of feminist normative theory of development. But an understanding of gender must also entail an understanding of both what it means to consider women as a group *at all*, and to be incorporating (other) women's experiences into one's research. This requirement is once again particularly acute in the context of feminist development scholarship: given that feminist development scholars mostly take as their focus of knowledge production women in the Global South, it is inescapable that "working in development... positions us within a 'development discourse', where the North's superiority over the South is taken for granted, and Western-style development is the norm" (Kapoor 2004: 629). The impact of this dynamic is a significant risk of silencing the women whose actual conditions have been taken as the grounds of the research, and whose experiences are forming the starting point of the production of knowledge.

Spivak notes the need for self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher, arguing that feminists must go further than to decentre Western notions of womanhood but should also "learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*" (1981: 157). Not only does this mean it is necessary to take an intersectional approach to the production of knowledge, but it also requires a critical analysis not only of one's *own* position as a woman in relation to the subject of one's research, but also of one's conception of the women whose experiences are being taken as a starting point of the production of knowledge: "not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?" (Spivak 1981: 179). A critical consideration of one's own positionality is necessary because it can highlight incorrect assertions of universality or gender essentialism, which might seem to be natural or intrinsic to the researcher but in fact is an artefact of her specific geographical, social, and temporal location – she is not "seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1988: 581). It also requires the researcher to consider her place in the global structures of power that disadvantage women in the Global South, and to guard against potential complicity in those structures. Alternatively, where she shares them with the women whose experiences form the starting point of the production of knowledge, a researcher's own experiences can prove beneficial in helping to illuminate both the questions that should be asked in her work, and the structures which she should be analysing – both gendered and otherwise.

An acknowledgement of one's own positionality (either explicitly in whatever research piece one is writing, or implicitly as an unwritten part of the production of knowledge) is therefore useful but, as Spivak notes, not enough alone: "Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the *international* division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogenous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self" (1988: 288). It is simply not sufficient to consider one's own position if one then constructs the subject of one's research out of all those spaces that remain unfilled. Further, limiting the consideration of one's positionality in the production of knowledge

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to a 'disclaimer' outlining the researcher's position "leaves for the listeners [or readers] all the real work that needs to be done" (Alcoff 1991: 25), specifically in working out the potential gaps or incorrect assertions in the research. Far from engaging with the voice of the marginalised listener, such an act merely transfers to them the academic labour that the feminist political theorist themselves should be doing, only reinforcing the oppressive global power structures that – in seeking the goal of intersectionally-envisioned substantive gender equality – feminist political theorists should be working to undermine.

The response of some scholars in feminist political theory to these problems is to decide to only speak for themselves: as Trebilcot explains, "an account I give reports only my understanding of the world" (1988: 3-4). In this way, such theorists seek to avoid appearing to 'speak for' others, and so inadvertently silencing them. The idea that speaking only for one's self is how an understanding of gender (particularly an understanding that it is fundamentally heterogenous) ought to characterise one's approach to producing knowledge, rests on the assumption that to only speak for oneself is a sort of default or neutral act. This assumption is incorrect in two senses.

Firstly, speech in the academic or university context is usually a relational and a productive act: there is a speaker or a writer and, the researcher hopes, one or more listeners or readers. What one says has an impact on the person listening in a very real sense, as "We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also." (Alcoff 1991: 21). Alcoff illustrates this point with the example of a group of sexual abuse survivors recounting their experiences, arguing that a survivor characterising her abuse as "sex play", true though it may be to her own understanding of what happened to her, might "profoundly harm" (ibid.) someone for whom this resonates more with their abuser's characterisation of how he envisions the abuse. So even speaking for oneself can be harmful, in the sense that it is not only representative but creative, with the potential to both reinscribe unequal power relations and to exclude other women and their experiences. As Alcoff powerfully argues – "the declaration that I "speak only for myself" has the sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others; it cannot literally erase those effects" (1991: 20).

Secondly, claiming to speak only for one's self can be problematic because it constitutes a political act, just as it seeks to avoid being one. On this basis, Spivak explicitly criticises using postcolonial theory to excuse a failure to engage with postcolonial contexts at all – to say ""O.K, sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the blacks." That's the kind of breast-beating that is left behind at the threshold and then business goes on as usual." (Spivak 1990:121, in Kapoor 2008: 45). Alcoff provides a useful anecdote which illuminates this problem:

> At a recent symposium at my university, a prestigious theorist was invited to give a lecture on the political problems of postmodernism. Those of us in the audience, including many white women and people of oppressed nationalities and races, waited in eager anticipation for what he has to contribute to this important discussion. To our disappointment, he introduced his lecture by explaining that he could not cover the assigned topic, because as a white male he did not feel that he could speak for the feminist and postcolonial perspectives that have launched the critical interrogation of postmodernism's politics. He went on to give us a lecture on architecture. (Alcoff 1991: 5-6)

In this case, the effect of the failure of the theorist to speak, on the basis that he could not speak for others, "was that he offered no contribution to an important issue and all of us there lost an opportunity to discuss and explore it" (Alcoff 1991: 27). Thus, failing to speak can foreclose debate and discussion of critical issues. It can have much more harmful consequences outside the academic setting too, contributing to the concealment of injustice, violence, and exploitative structures of power where those issues as a consequence become unmentioned. If a scholar has a privileged position in terms of generating and sharing knowledge – if she is likely to be listened to – a failure to speak up becomes a silencing act that ultimately reinforces an unequal and unjust status quo.

Representation, development, and postcolonial theory

Given the problems of speaking and the potential to silence those whose experiences and actual conditions form the foundation of one's research, it is essential to consider how one can take those experiences and conditions as a starting point without engaging in such silencing. It is an active engagement with the problems of *representation* which provides the key (Alcoff 1991), in other words, "to ask who represents, and what baggage positions us in this us/them manner" (Kapoor 2008: 43). In her seminal work "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), Spivak uses the example of *sati, "*the practice, [previously] prevalent predominantly among high caste Hindus, of the immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husband" (Mani 1986: WS32), to illustrate that representation is not a neutral act, but demands self-reflexivity from the researcher or representative – including and beyond the situatedness of their knowledge to what impact their speech has. The claim of the British Government in this case to *really* know the Hindu widow "end[s] up silencing her, [and] also erases the role the British play in staging her representation" (Kapoor 2008: 42). Drawing on Marx, Spivak considers the multiple meanings of the word *representation*, which in the English language has many meanings ascribed to it. In German, however the word *representation* can be translated variously as *vertreten* and as *dartelling.* The former "implies a total understanding of the subject being "represented." It is almost as if the representative has the total "agency" of the subject—a complete "filling in." (Maggio 2007: 422). In contrast, *dartelling* carries different connotations, of "constituting" (ibid.) or "re-presenting" (Spivak 1988: 70) – reflecting Pitkin's conception of political representation in a democratic context as a type of "making present again" (Pitkin 1967: 8). In a sense, the latter form of representation constitutes a form of embodiment of the represented 'Other'. By conflating the two ideas of representation, the subaltern is silenced, "they are both being "stood in for" and "embodied" by others in the dominant discourse" (Maggio 2007: 422) and no space is left by the researcher for the subaltern to present themselves.

Using women's actual conditions and experiences as the starting point for the production of knowledge entails the researcher constructing herself a representation of those experiences, which leaves its imprints somewhere in the knowledge produced – either explicitly, or implicitly. Spivak does not consider that feminist scholars should reject the production of knowledge altogether on this basis, arguing instead that we ought to "become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it." (1990: 11). Constructing representations carries a responsibility not to speak *over* the women whose experiences are forming the starting point for the process of the production of knowledge. The knowledge produced will inevitably in some sense re-present those experiences and conditions, so a researcher must be sure to utilise a privileged position to amplify the voices and

concerns of the women with whom she engages and represent faithfully, rather than constructing representations that do not reflect women's experiences (as they see them). In this sense, the researcher re-presents the actual conditions and experiences of women, but does not seek to embody them, standing *with* rather than standing in *for*. The more unequal the power dynamic between the researcher and the women whose experiences she is taking as a starting point, the more attention must be paid to the representation produced, so as to challenge rather than reinforce that inequality. What is essential is that the researcher is mindful about "where the speech goes and what it does there" (Alcoff 1991: 26), ensuring that the knowledge she produces creates space for and amplifies women's voices and experiences. She must also ensure the research is in some sense working towards the ultimate goal of feminist political theory – substantive gender equality – highlighting and challenging the structures which constrain the lives and choices of those whose experiences she is utilising.

Conclusion

By beginning with a comparison of WID and GAD, this essay has considered the potential benefits and pitfalls of taking the actual conditions and experiences of women as a starting point for the production of knowledge in the context of feminist political theory. For an understanding of gender to shape the production of knowledge by simply starting the process from women's actual conditions, without questioning what that means, is not enough. But having a conception of women's experiences which reflects the huge diversity within that category and centres women's experiences of the intersection between gender and other dimensions of oppression, facilitates better feminist normative theorising. Also necessary is a critical consideration of the researcher's own positionality and how it might affect both her representation of those experiences she takes as her starting point and being aware not to construct those women as 'Other' (Mohanty 1991). By also incorporating a postcolonial approach, the research should be shaped through the pursuit of representation as re-presentation rather than embodiment. An understanding of gender along these lines should be what shapes the production of knowledge in feminist normative theorising.

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