ETHICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENSIONS IN APPLYING A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE TO FEMINIST RESEARCH

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We examine tensions that arise in applying postmodernism to feminist research. First, we consider epistemological tensions generated in the process of deconstructing existing knowledge and constructing new knowledge that benefits women. Second, we examine six ethical issues that reflect the tensions in feminist practice as we attempt to justify the dialectic between knowledge and power. In keeping with a postmodernist perspective, we pose these six issues as questions: Is feminist postmodernism "postfeminist"? Does postmodernist language mystify feminist practice and goals? Are qualitative methods more feminist than quantitative ones? Must feminists have a liberatory purpose in their research? Is the personal too personal? Whose aims are served, feminists or their collaborators? We conclude that by adopting a postmodern feminist perspective, we can embrace the struggle between knowledge and practice rather than privilege one over the other.

Social science research invariably raises dilemmas that challenge scholars philosophically and ethically. This is particularly true in feminist research,

which by definition is driven by a political agenda. Tension, paradox, and contradiction infuse our work as feminist scientists and activists. In this paper, our goal is to examine critically the tension between our theoretical stance regarding the construction of knowledge and our practical stance as feminists working for social change. The tension between the idealism of scholarship and the pragmatism of political change creates ethical issues. Part of the problem is that feminist researchers must make choices among methodologies with compromised histories. Traditional science has been used to exploit women's labor and mystify women's experience, so feminists must seek methods that more accurately and comprehensively reveal women's lives. Feminists are in dialectical tension with a system that they are part of as scholars yet are excluded from in other ways because they are women.

Feminist researchers use methodologies similar to those of everyone else (Harding, 1987; Peplau & Conrad, 1989). Feminists interview people, observe people, and examine documents and artifacts. Yet, certain practices are unique to feminist research: "defining women's experiences as suitable problems and sources of answers; designing research *for* women; and locating both researcher and researched on the same critical plane" (Coyner, 1988–1989, p. 291). Feminist research involves many of the same practices as do other types of inquiry; but by placing women in the center of vision, doing research that benefits women, and clarifying the actual steps in the research process, feminists engage the academic and scientific systems they criticize by asking new questions. In turn, asking new questions raises new ethical concerns. Questions about feminist solidarity and difference are at the center of these concerns.

In this paper, we confront several dilemmas in feminist research and practice. First, we examine the epistemological debate about the nature of knowledge claims and about the methods used to generate knowledge that is enlivening multidisciplinary feminist scholarship. Second, we explore six ethical dilemmas that we, and other feminist practitioners, have confronted. We also examine relationships between feminists as collaborators and informants and within the broader systems of gender hierarchy and power in which feminists live and work.

By raising these six dilemmas as ethical concerns, we join other feminists (e.g., Bordo, 1990; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Nicholson, 1990) in experimenting with the application of a postmodern theoretical stance to the practical goals of feminism. We address the problems and possibilities generated through the linkage of the new theoretical concerns raised by postmodernism with historic analyses of women's oppression raised by feminist activists. Postmodernism, by offering the tool of interpretive insights and a method of critique, can be employed by feminists to deconstruct existing knowledge (Bordo, 1990). But feminists, because of their political agenda, must be careful not to simply reconstruct oppressive views of reality; thus, feminist practice has an important caution to offer

postmodernism (Bordo, 1990; Pierce, 1991). We raise the following six questions and attempt to clarify some of the tensions that are at stake within each one.

1. Is feminist postmodernism "postfeminist"?
2. Does postmodernist language mystify feminist practice and goals?
3. Are qualitative methods more feminist than quantitative ones?
4. Must feminists have a liberatory purpose in their research?
5. Is the personal too personal?
6. Whose aims are served: feminists or their collaborators?

EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENSIONS

Feminists are called on to stand for principles that are congruent with their theories and practices. The ethical standards that guide feminist practice arise from assumptions about the nature of truth. Such assumptions, which characterize certain ways of thinking and knowing, represent an epistemology. There are many ways of knowing; likewise, there are many feminist epistemologies. In citing the explosion of feminist claims of truth, Hawkesworth (1989), like Harding (1987), identified three major types of feminist epistemology: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism.

Feminist Empiricism

Feminist empiricism, based on positivism, accepts the mainstream scientific practices of systematic experimentation, observation, and recording. The observer's subjectivity is controlled allegedly by neutral procedures. This empiricism posits the existence of a reality independent of the human knower that is waiting to be revealed through logical inquiry and empirical research (Hawkesworth, 1989).

Feminist empiricism differs from traditional empiricism in arguing that social inquiry, the questions asked and the interpretations made, has been androcentric, resulting in partial and distorted explanations and understandings (Harding, 1987). One corrective that feminist empiricism proposes is an acceptance and acknowledgment of the context in which the research is carried out and an awareness of how characteristics of the researcher may bias the research process.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

A second epistemological position, feminist standpoint theory, is a phenomenological approach rooted in Marx's view that social being determines consciousness (Hawkesworth, 1989). This approach claims that

class, race, and gender structure a person's understanding of reality. More oppressed individuals have the potential for a more complete and less distorted understanding of reality because of their disadvantaged position (Nielsen, 1990). To survive, less powerful groups must be attuned to the culture of the dominant group. By living out their lives in both the dominant culture and their own culture, the disadvantaged come to have a type of double vision—a more comprehensive understanding of reality (Westkott, 1979). Women as a group are seen as being less advantaged relative to men and, therefore, are capable of a less distorted view of the world. A feminist standpoint, however, is not something that a woman merely has by virtue of her gender; it is something she develops and achieves through intellectual and political struggles against gender inequality (Harding, 1987) or racial inequality (Collins, 1989).

Standpoint theorists tend to valorize women's activities, values, and characteristics without critical analysis. Uncritical acceptance of women's ways of knowing, being, or doing may naturalize behavior that is actually the consequence of centuries of oppression (Hawkesworth, 1990). For example, role-taking perspectives in sociology and social psychology argue that lower status people are more accurate at role taking than are people with higher status. Thus, role taking and empathy may be more characteristic of the social structure than of personality (Thomas, Franks, & Calonico, 1972) or gender (Dressel & Clark, 1990; Tronto, 1987).

Feminist Postmodernism

The third position, feminist postmodernism, takes standpoint theory to its logical conclusion by questioning the existence of some unitary human consciousness (Hawkesworth, 1989). Postmodern feminists are skeptical about claims of a single truth or reality. A commitment to plurality and the tolerance of difference is important to this approach. Feminist postmodernists reject the notion of one privileged standpoint and challenge the belief that women's experiences and identities are determined only by gender. Other axes of experience that are just as important are class, race, age, sexual orientation, and family status. Subsuming all women into a general category obscures differences in behavior, desire, and experience and ignores existing inequalities among women (Scott, 1990).

Postmodernism is "deconstructive," challenging and exposing existing beliefs and concepts that are accepted as natural or absolute (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Scott, 1990). Everything, including constructions of truth, knowledge, power, and gender relations that are often taken for granted and used to legitimate social arrangements, is called into question and analyzed (Bordo, 1990; Flax, 1987; Tong, 1989). The feminist project of deconstructing the family, for example, has challenged the prevailing view of the family as a monolithic entity (Boss & Thorne, 1989; Ferree,

1990; Glenn, 1987; Thorne, 1982). Deconstructing the family is a process of decomposing concepts, such as family harmony and role structures, that are accepted as truth or as an unchanging reality. Separation of the family into constituent parts exposes the underlying structures (Glenn, 1987). The family in decomposed relief places women in the center of analysis so that their experiences can be examined separately. The breakdown of assumptions about individuals and families suggests alternative ideas about how women construct their experiences. These reconstructions and woman-centered representations go beyond simply modifying existing male-centered concepts (Glenn, 1987).

Postmodernism is also "constructive" in that it perceives knowledge, truth, power, and gender relations as created through process (Flax, 1987; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Through interaction with others and the social world, individuals create their own evershifting realities.

Challenges and Possibilities of Feminist Postmodernism

A postmodern deconstructive approach is particularly useful in the feminist project of reevaluating and altering existing gender relations (Flax, 1987; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Viewing gender as a social construction allows sources of power and domination in the lives of women with different histories to be identified. Yet, like Bordo (1990), Fraser and Nicholson (1990), Hawkesworth (1989), Offen (1990), Pierce (1991), and others, we are concerned about the risks of relativism inherent in postmodernism. Postmodernism seems to derail at the point at which most feminists engage. Feminists embrace the solidarity of women's experience as oppressed and devalued people; feminists work together for political change and personal empowerment. Although it is important to acknowledge a variety of perspectives, when feminists reach the point of taking action, some particular view of reality must be endorsed to guide policy and practice (Nielsen, 1990).

Early in the second wave of the women's movement, diversity in beliefs and orientations was evident, yet the thrust of the movement was to identify commonalities among feminists. Shared feminist beliefs and values centered around three main issues: a belief that women are exploited, devalued, and oppressed; a commitment to change the conditions of women; and the adoption of a perspective that is critical of intellectual traditions (i.e., androcentric scholarship) (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983).

Recent analyses deconstructed women's essential similarity and have become more informed by empirical and subjective findings arising from the use of feminist research methods. A current theme of feminist scholarship acknowledges the valid and painful criticism of feminism as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, liberal movement. New ideas about difference

are grounded in the very real differences among women (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989), informed by the confrontation between white feminists and feminists of color (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Feminists are also reclaiming and reevaluating the struggle that has divided lesbians and heterosexual women (Echols, 1989; Rich, 1986; Zimmerman, 1984). Thus, our analyses are sharpened by the increasing recognition of the earlier idea of women's oppression/subordination and by sensitivity to the diversity and differences among women in terms of relative power and disadvantage associated with class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, mothering, homosociality, occupation, and education. The differences among feminists — as well as the subordination and oppression within private relationships and the patriarchal social structure — generate and sustain problems for feminists in dealing with one another and with others who do not share a feminist perspective.

The danger of uncritically adopting feminist postmodernism is that as feminists uncover their differences, they risk sliding toward a depoliticized relativism where every viewpoint becomes equally valid and true. Taken to its postmodernist extreme, every woman's experience becomes the basis for a feminist epistemology, thereby deconstructing their experiences in the world to such an extent that feminists are in danger of erasing the solidarity that is needed in working toward women's liberation. As feminists seek to value women's unique voices and experiences, they confront the problem of the personal as the sole basis for a feminist epistemology (Hawkesworth, 1989; Zimmerman, 1984). If "reason" as a basis for knowledge claims is rejected completely because reason is associated with male forms of thinking and knowing (Grant, 1987), the feminist movement may come to a dead end as the result of solely valuing private epistemologies (Pierce, 1991).

The debate about difference has brought feminists face to face with a new controversy over which feminist epistemologies are best suited for feminist agendas. Grant (1987) advocated that feminists should be wary of the simple slide into relativism or dualism, which is appearing in feminist critiques of male theories as exclusionary of women's experience (Harding, 1987). If feminist knowledge claims are grounded in women's experience, either as individual females or as a diverse group, feminists must also evaluate the interpretation of that experience rather than jump axiomatically from experience to theory (Grant, 1987). Conversely, if feminists ignore women's solidarity as a group that shares a history of subordination and uncritically adopt postmodernism as a theoretical basis for evaluating future knowledge claims, they "delegitimate a priori the exploration of experiential continuity and structural common ground among women" (Bordo, 1990, p. 142).

In confronting these epistemological tensions, feminists face the dialectic between knowledge and power; between what is known and what is done with what is known. We agree with Hawkesworth (1989) that the

method chosen for studying certain topics must be congruent with the epistemology. Thus, we embrace the feminist postmodern project of deconstructing and reconstructing commonly assumed aspects of social life *for* women. Yet, we also attempt to go beyond feminist postmodernism by adopting a critical perspective that brings into creative tension both the knowledge feminists critique and construct and the work feminists do toward the goal of empowering women and transforming unequal social relations.

ETHICAL ISSUES

There are a number of ethical issues that are raised by any choice of epistemology. The issues discussed below reflect tensions within the dialectic between knowledge and power.

Is Feminist Postmodernism "Postfeminist"?

A chief dilemma feminist scholars confront is that a postmodern perspective, even one that includes a critique of itself, threatens to become "postfeminist." Paradoxically, as feminists seek more effective ways of addressing distortion and exploitation in their explanations of women's lived experiences, they risk undermining the work that has been accomplished by previous generations of women. In adopting postmodernism, feminists risk deconstructing the existing solidarity among women who share the experience of oppression. By rejecting not only the empiricist notion of an "unmediated truth" but also the feminist contention that there is one privileged standpoint common to all women, or at least all enlightened women, feminists are left with a relativism that can degenerate into ambiguity and distortion of women's experiences — exactly what they seek to remedy.

Gagnier (1990) asserts that feminists can and cannot be postmodernists. They can be postmodern by embracing the heterogeneity of women's experiences in terms of the multiplicity of influences by age, class, race, religion, sexual orientation, education, and other significant experiences. At the same time, however, the oppression of women must be acknowledged (Bordo, 1990). Female solidarity is necessary to the feminist project of making the world better for women. The feminist goal of emancipation is for women as a group. Those who fear that a postmodern approach may threaten and dilute the energy, awareness, and anger at injustice that fuels such a project ask, "Are you with us or against us? Are you ally, enemy, fellow traveler, fifth column?" (Offen, 1990, p. 15).

Postmodernism need not threaten feminist goals. It is an approach that offers practical guidance for more precisely and completely identifying the needs and experiences of a wide variety of women. A more comprehensive

knowledge of the diversity of women's lives should result in a more inclusive feminist agenda rather than one extrapolated from the experiences of a privileged subgroup.

Does Postmodernist Language Mystify Feminist Practice and Goals?

A related issue concerns the complexity inherent in postmodernism. As academic theories become more complicated and the language becomes more removed from that used in common daily discourse, postmodern feminists risk increasing rather than decreasing mystification. Until recently, simple slogans such as "sisterhood is powerful" and "the personal is political" have symbolized feminist unity and politics; but postmodern language abandons simple constructions in favor of textual multiplicity. Postmodernists look and sound like they are "doing" theory, but their work as scholars is at risk of becoming irrelevant to most women's daily lives. Postmodern feminism risks becoming "feminism for academics" (Tong, 1989).

To counteract this tendency, postmodern feminists can actively work to translate their philosophical discourse. Concepts such as deconstruction and construction can be expressed in everyday language in a manner that clarifies rather than obscures their meanings. By putting concepts to use in day-to-day life, postmodern feminists can demonstrate the utility of their epistemology. For example, most feminists agree that mothers must have access to adequate childcare; however, only after deconstructing (i.e., taking apart and looking at the component pieces) the notion of "adequate childcare" is the complexity of its meaning clear. A married woman working part time who has one child undoubtedly constructs her idea of adequate childcare somewhat differently than does a single mother of three working an 8-hr night shift. Strategies for addressing commonalities, as well as differences, can be included in the policies advocated by postmodern feminists.

Are Qualitative Methods More Feminist Than Quantitative Ones?

Methods themselves are not inherently feminist (Harding, 1987). There is nothing in qualitative approaches that prevent them from being used in a sexually biased way, and there is no reason why quantitative methods and statistical analyses cannot be used to address and support feminist concerns (Peplau & Conrad, 1989).

The criteria by which the quality and usefulness of research are judged must be their effectiveness or potential for improving women's lives. Although there have been on-going debates about which methods are and

are not feminist, feminist research uses the same basic approaches to inquiry as does the dominant research paradigm (Harding, 1987; Nielsen, 1990).

A feminist postmodern epistemological approach allows feminists to be open and inclusive regarding research methods. Rather than becoming bogged down in the competing prescriptions of those who would set up qualitative and quantitative methods in an exclusive duality, postmodern feminism accepts the tension between the two methods. Each approach is likely to give only a partial view of the focus of research. To be effective and critical researchers, feminists must be compelled to match modes of inquiry and analysis with the problem at hand. A sophisticated repertoire of analytic techniques must be developed and deployed to "illuminate existing social relations, to demonstrate the deficiencies of alternative interpretations, to debunk opposing views" (Hawkesworth, 1989, p. 557).

Must Feminists Have a Liberatory Purpose in Their Research?

Mainstream empirical research, purporting to be value free, has few prescriptions regarding proper topics for research, characteristics of the researcher, or appropriate roles for "participants" in the research process. Feminism, however, because it is a political project as well as a body of theories, rejects the idea of objective, value-free research and proposes ways of increasing the validity of the results of feminist work. Among these guidelines are political priorities for research, the importance of self-disclosure, the assertion that feminist researchers should study themselves or "study up," the value of seeing "participants" as collaborators in the research process, and thoughts about the place of men in feminist research.

Because the feminist goal is to do research that is *for* women rather than *about* women, we suggest that priority be given to research that will provide information that women want and need to change the conditions of their lives. A specific goal is to neutralize the forces that exclude women, victimize women, or keep women in subordinated social roles (Harding, 1987). Research for women, rather than about women, would privilege, for example, a focus on the "feminization" of poverty over dual-career issues.

Prioritizing feminist research generates another dilemma. Research about women's activities, values, and interests has finally gained some degree of legitimacy. Work exploring women's experiences of mothering (Ruddick, 1989), housework (Berheide, 1984; Mainardi, 1972; Oakley, 1985), and sexual abuse (Bass & Davis, 1988; Gilgun, 1989; Russell, 1986) are valuable in and of themselves for revealing what has been ignored and undervalued about women's lives. These examples reveal the pioneering work of feminist deconstruction projects, where formerly invisible and

obscured experiences of women in families have been placed in the center of analysis and used to generate woman-centered understandings of families. We concur with Westkott (1979), however, that feminists must go beyond research that only describes or demystifies women's lives. We advocate research that expedites women's political struggles.

Is the Personal Too Personal?

Self-disclosure is an important and, in some ways, unique part of feminist research methods. The use of a "personal style" may be what is new about feminist research (Krieger, 1985). Harding (1987) proposes that the best feminist analysis insists the researcher place herself in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter. Evidence about the class, race, and gender of the researcher should be made as visible as that of the participants. This approach clearly challenges the objectivist empirical stance and allows a consideration of how the characteristics of the researcher may influence the research process of data collection and analysis. For example, Oakley (1981) revealed how impossible and unethical it was to maintain a false neutrality when women she interviewed shared the intimate details of their lives and asked her questions about her own experiences. Feminists are called on to reveal and clarify the nature of their research methods and themselves as researchers by reporting in detail the research process they experience, including the ways they have been changed by studying others (Du Bois, 1983).

Like other feminist researchers, we have struggled with the question of whether it is possible to include in a significant way our personal experience. How do we deal with the charge that the inclusion of the personal is merely projecting our own experience onto that of the people we are researching? As social scientists, do we study other people because we find it difficult to study ourselves? That is, whose personal experience is at the center of feminist analysis? Are we really ready to include ourselves in our constructions of "the personal is political"?

Attempts to include the personal in a significant way generate tensions within feminist practice. One tension concerns constructions of how we are changed in the process of doing research; another tension concerns our relations with those we study. If feminists privilege research that has a liberatory goal, they often study topics that confront their private experience. For example, the feminist project of deconstructing "family violence" as really wife battering brings researchers face to face not only with systems of oppression that hurt women but also with the likelihood of uncovering their own abuse histories (Yllo & Bograd, 1988). There is a culture-wide denial system about violence against women, and it takes many women a long time to confront their experiences of abuse (Kelly, 1988). Willingness to construct ourselves, as researchers, within

the frame of "women who have experienced violence," for example, violates not only the illusion of neutrality and social distance that is part of our training as social scientists but gets at the very core of private experience.

Confronting one's personal experience with the very issues under study, therefore, is an important part of a feminist research process. Feminists must develop techniques that encourage women to speak the unspoken; otherwise we, as academics, are in danger of generating pseudo feminist research methodologies that ask women to "tell me" but "not too much" (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1990). Although feminist inquiry has great potential for challenging objectivist science by including the personal, feminist scholars are divided on this subject. Feminists have been trained to be "objective" observers and may be uncomfortable with personalizing experiences. We suggest that feminist researchers experiment with new ways of incorporating the personal so that they may join those they study in a truly collaborative way.

Collaboration is a tension-filled experience. Feminist teachers, for example, confront the dilemma of how much a faculty member should reveal about her personal experiences and how much self-disclosure she should expect from students. Even as feminist teachers work to break down institutionalized hierarchical boundaries designed to protect those in power, they must struggle with the concrete inequities that exist between teachers and students in a traditional educational system. Thus, feminist postmodernism asks scholars to look at the context in which reality is constructed. Teachers, like researchers, must assess in excruciatingly self-conscious ways (Stacey, 1988) multiple perspectives in choosing how much to disclose and how much to expect of others. Teachers must consider, for example, their status in the institution, the parameters of the subject matter of their discipline, their own sense of boundaries, and their understanding of their students. Self-disclosure, like gender, race, or class, is never neutral. It occurs in a historical context.

Whose Aims Are Served: Feminists or Their Collaborators?

Making collaborators of those who are the "subjects" of feminist research creates new tensions, however. Although the goal of equalizing the power balance and empowering women through the research process is positively motivated, the realization of this objective is as problematic as the other tensions we have described. For example, Acker et al. (1983) tried to reduce the distance between themselves and the women they studied by sharing their written material with the women. This sharing, however, was done selectively and there was admitted reluctance to share information with those they felt might be upset by their interpretations. In situations like these, are researchers exploiting the power inherent in their

privileged position or reneging on their promise to collaborate? Stacey (1988) says feminist ethnographers must confront the reality that they do not have adequate "feminist" principles to fall back on when inevitable struggles with difference arise during fieldwork. Feminists must deconstruct their myths about unity and alliance with those they study. Feminist postmodernism cautions that our representations are partial truths and descriptions. We are limited in fully representing another's experience; therefore, it may be necessary to include those studied in the conceptual process. Another alternative would be to present a variety of interpretations of the findings. In this way, the researcher's perspective would become another voice addressing the topic of the research.

The reflexivity of the relationship between researcher and participant compels us to join Harding (1987) in proposing that as feminists we should study ourselves or those above us in power. The writings of lesbians and women of color have sensitized feminists to the fact that women, too, are capable of domination and exploitation. Women can act as agents of domination using their privileged statuses of being white, educated, and heterosexual to exercise power, both benevolently and coercively, over those less privileged (Hooks, 1990). Women of color question the motives of white/Anglo women researching their lives and theorizing about them (Lugones & Spelman, 1983) in much the same way that white women have questioned the motives of men studying women. Why are feminists not studying their own lives and problems? Lugones and Spelman (1983) suggest that white/Anglo women should stay out of the way of women of color and forego the use of the power that goes with privilege, including the power to intrude into their communities and lives to research them. Instead, white women should use their advantage to provide time and space so that less privileged women can speak.

The skepticism with which women of color regard being investigated by white/Anglo women is disturbingly similar to the reactions white feminists have to men doing feminist research. What is their motivation? Whose interests are served by the inquiry? Men clearly can do research that will benefit women, address inequities, and promote the empowerment of women. Men doing feminist research should be held to the same standards as women; their research should be for rather than about women, and they should study themselves or study up. Harding (1987) points out that men, because of their privileged status, may have access to settings and information that women may not. Men could do research on male violence against women, why fathers abandon their children, and sexual harassment, for example, and struggle with women to bring about change in these areas. As more men become interested in women's studies, we anticipate an on-going tension between those who see that men could be women's allies in doing feminist research and those who believe that feminist research should be *by* women as well for women.

CONCLUSION

Postmodern feminism invites criticism and poses questions that strike at the bedrock of accepted feminist discourse. However, the postmodern stance has also been characterized as "one of the most exciting developments in contemporary feminist thought" (Tong, 1989, p. 233). Our experiment with a feminist postmodern perspective reveals one of its advantages: It is flexible enough to accept and build upon the tension and ambiguity generated by the ethical dilemmas it creates. We are challenged to expand our repertoire of research strategies so that feminist methods of analysis result in the greatest validity and the least distortion of research topics. We are also challenged by the reflexivity between researcher and those who share their lives with us. Feminist postmodernism allows us to conceive of group alliances not as identities but rather as affinities or coalitions that are characterized by fluidity — the ability to mobilize and disperse as necessary (Gagnier, 1990, p. 23). As a result, on some feminist projects, women and supportive men may work together. On others, women of color and white/Anglo women may work together. On yet others, each group may work separately. Rather than relying on simple dualities that pit all men against all women or simplistic theories that homogenize all women's experiences, feminist postmodernism challenges us to create alliances that allow us to work together to construct a new understanding of gender relations, class relations, and race relations that will empower each of us.

Feminist practice is grounded in clear politics with the definitive aim of working with those we study to improve all our lives. Feminist practitioners are called on to be activists. Feminist politics provide an explicit structure that frames our research questions and moderates our interactions with other women. Without an explicit political structure, the danger of veiled agendas is great (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989, p. 22). The common element, in spite of or because of our differences, must be sharing and revealing our partial views of self. Feminist scholars, like ourselves and those for whom we write, demystify our work as privileged members of the academic community when we can see ourselves as part of the community we study. Self-disclosure is a practice for supporting collaborative relationships, diminishing competition, and creating a climate among women where it is safe to share our stories. We are the ones who must create our own safe havens. We are the ones who must learn to push past our differences and the systems that oppress us all toward a community where subordination is replaced with empowerment.

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