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Who's the expert?

On knowledge seeking as praxis: a methodological approach

Abstract

To establish a knowledge seeking that sheds light upon manifoldness without simplifying plurality or further exposing implicit power hegemonies, feminist scholars need to distinguish between forms of rationalist knowledge and knowledge as praxis, calling attention to the fact that scholars need to address how issues of habits, norms, customs and ideas are related to the production of knowledge. Through analyses of an epistemological ranking-list and a methodological check list, I investigate ways of managing plurality and power in contemporary feminist scholarly work and argue that the ambition to avoid power asymmetries in feminist scholarship is a problematic point of departure. By drawing on the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, I propose a methodology based on the idea of knowledge as praxis, treating knowledge production as action, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world, intrinsically interwoven with culture, politics and power.

Key words: praxis; methodology; intersectionality; plurality; power; Sara Ahmed; Chantal Mouffe

Introduction

In June 2006, I attended a lecture by the American philosopher and feminist scholar Naomi Scheman, who was travelling through Europe making inquiries on why people trust, or do not trust, research. "In epistemology", she said, "there is too much focus on truth. But truth, in the way it gets talked about, is on the other side of the horizon. It doesn't tell us how we are going to get it. We are talking too little of how we are going to practice".

After all those years of feminist theorization on the negative consequences of mainstream epistemology, I found it odd to discover that the ideologies of rationality are still prevailing in feminist intellectual work. It made me think of the introduction of intersectionality in Sweden, which exposed a fear of pluralism in feminist research that shared commonalities with the ideologies of rationality in mainstream epistemology. Later, I found Scheman's statement confirmed while reading a handbook in feminist methodology. Here, I

noticed how the feminist wish to produce "ethically approved" research engendered instrumental guidelines for feminist scholars, treating power as something controllable and distinguishable from the relation to the scholar and the investigation itself. It became clear to me that it is indeed time to change the focus of our inquiries. In this article, I wish to propose a methodology based on the idea of knowledge as praxis, treating knowledge production as doing, as an activity, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

I pursue the following three areas of investigation in this article: firstly, I investigate feminist scholars' difficulties on handling plurality in research, through the example of one feminist debate around the introduction of intersectionality in the early 2000s in Sweden. Secondly, through the analysis of a sequence from a feminist methodological handbook I investigate how feminist scholars manage power in research. Thirdly, by drawing on the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, I investigate the implications for feminist research of knowledge production as praxis. Here, I present knowledge as performed within a specific and historically defined context, with an emphasis on the connectedness between knowledge production and our constant inclusion in the world. Prior to this, I give a short note on terminology.

Cultures, politics and power

In this article, I make use of the two concepts culture and politics. Seeing that both are changeable and richly varied, I need to explain my usage of them. Anthropologist William H Sewell has made a distinction between 'culture' as an abstract analytical category and 'culture' as a "concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices" (1999: 39). It seems to me, however, that the distinction would be made more clear if 'culture' in the first respect was denominated 'the cultural'. With this understanding, I will hence describe 'the cultural', drawing on Sewell's distinction, as an analytical concept/category, raising from our complex practical lives. Furthermore I understand 'culture', in a concrete sense, where expressions of opinion take place, from which it follows that 'culture' is pluralizable and contradictory (cf. Sewell 1999: 52). I thus understand the notion of 'culture' as the inscription in stories, rituals, customs, objects and practices of the meanings, located at a specific time and place. Practices

of cultures are moreover concentrated around powerful institutions, constituted by organizations, states, religions, business corporations and so on.

Recently, French philosopher Chantal Mouffe published a book in which she problematizes the epoch of the "post-political Zeitgeist". Here, she produces a critical framework in which she distinguishes between 'politics' and 'the political' that will further inform my discussion on politics:

> By 'the political', I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe 2005: 9)

Hence, the practical dimensions of 'politics' take place at an ontic level, i.e. at the level of current practices and beliefs. I understand 'politics' in this dimension as ideological differences, expressed through social practices, actions. 'The political', in turn, is a theoretically defined category at an ontological level.

The relations between culture and politics are always intersected by power. Hence my need to also explain my use of 'power'. Drawing on the writings of Dorothy E Smith, I define power as developed in interactions between ourselves and others, although often originated more or less far away from us, in governments and organisations – institutions that we both produce and are produced by (Smith 2005: 13). As a consequence the scholar can be seen to produce knowledge to a world she herself is a part of. Power, therefore, is relational and situational. A scholarly inquiry must be situated in the context of the social, the cultural and the historical. The expressions of power are polyphonic, and may be found in universal and/or more provincial hegemonies. I conceptualize the distinction between power in general and hegemonic power as a difference between power and domination. A hegemonic individual or structure dominates over people in an oppressive, discriminatory or violent kind of way.

Feminist conceptualisations of knowledge

Several years have passed – as well as a great amount of theoretical schools – since the idea of an objective research was exchanged into a scholarly work where subjective capacities

were taken into account. Within feminist research, one of the most significant alterations took place during the mid-seventies, in the accentuation of research where the scholar's everyday experiences were considered as central (Smith 2004: 28).

Feminist scholars have since then in various ways raised objections against claims on universality in research. Feminist empiricists inquired forms of knowledge in a problematising of experiences. Feminist standpoint theoreticians investigated the knowing subject, while postmodernist feminist scholars questioned subjectivity, to quote the terminology introduced by Sandra Harding in the early 90s (Harding 1991: 106). Furthermore, there has been extensive focus on the importance of taking diversity into account, not least illustrated by the row of conceptual tools that have been delivered in the field during the last decades: 'inapproppriate/d otherness' (Minh-ha 1986/87), '"world"-travelling' (Lugones 1987), 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1987), 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1994, Hill Collins 1998) and 'trans-versal feminism' (Yuval-Davis 1997). Presently, the feminist awareness of conducting research with ethical responsibility has lead to heavy claims on the very research process.

However, it is now clear that an all too far driven respect for differences may widen the gaps between different groups of people. In terms of a dissociation from the term 'reciprocity', this fact was also addressed by Rosi Braidotti as well as by Judith Butler in their respective key-note papers, at the 6th European Gender Research Conference Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context, University of Lódz, Poland, in August 2006. Although in different ways, they both emphasized the risk that an all too far driven respect may end up in a deepening of divisions, and sharpened boundaries between groups of people.

The background to this dissociation from reciprocity in recent feminist work is, to put it briefly, found in the feminist critique of mainstream epistemology, which in the 70s brought forth such notions as experiences and feelings to the agenda (cf. Smith 1987). Awakened by the feminist theoretical development during the 70s and 80s, the feminist scholar started paying attention to the limited possibilities of grasping and representing experiences and narratives. This pointed towards the location of marginalized lives as the position from where the feminist scholar ought to start the inquiry. Hilary Rose explains:

> Working from the experience of the specific oppression of women fuses the personal, the social and the biological. It is not surprising that, within the natural sciences, it has been in biology and medicine that feminists have sought to defend women's

> interests and advance feminist interpretations. To take an example: menstruation (- - -). Cartesian dualism, biological determinism, and social constructionism fade when faced with the necessity of integrating and interpreting the personal experience of bleeding, pain, and tension. (Rose 2004: 77)

The image of feminist scholars as occupied with researching the situation of women with similar experiences as themselves, was however criticized almost directly from the start as being all too universalistic. As the reflections of Uma Narayan elucidate:

> Although feminist groups … do try to extend the scope of feminist concerns to other groups (for example, by fighting for childcare, women's health issues, and equal wages issues through trade union structures), some major preoccupations of western feminism (its critique of marriage, the family, compulsory heterosexuality) presently engage the attention of mainly small groups of middle-class feminists. (Narayan 2004: 215)

I would say that the development of the feminist standpoint epistemology of the 70s until postmodernism in the 90s, generated a significant debate on a variety of relevant differences. Although feminists during the 60s and 70s had taken different social categories under consideration, such as 'class' and 'ethnicity' along side with 'gender', for instance (cf. Hemmings 2005), by the 90s the gender category was definitely dethroned and by no means automatically perceived as the most relevant category. Issues of sexuality, class and ethnicity had been brought to the centre of the discussion and Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a key concept in the book Mapping the margins. Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color 1994. Here, Crenshaw emphasized the experiences of discrimination against women of colour, but commented also on the importance of taking into account also other social categories, such as class and sexuality:

> Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My 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 1994)

Some scholars developed ideas of dialogues and narration, conceptualized as able to allow plurality and reciprocal respect between groups of people (cf. Young 1997, Benbabib 2004). Nevertheless, by means of the deep hegemonic power structures that intersect relations of ethnicity, class and gender, those "reciprocity models" for communication, met criticism for resulting in either sharpened boundaries between different groups of people, or ignorance towards oppressive structures. This is thus the point of discussion where Braidotti and Butler present reciprocity as a method that further develops power asymmetries between groups of people and a problematic ideal in feminist research.

Intersectionality – a debate

In the recent feminist debate in Sweden, few feminist concepts have met as much attention – and fewer still have been so widely used – as intersectionality. When introduced in Sweden in 2002, the concept was presented by postcolonial scholars Diana Mulinari, Irene Molina and Paulina de los Reyes (cf. Maktens (o)lika förklädnader:kön, klass och etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige). They stressed the importance of considering every possible axis of domination, within the frames of contexualized investigations, deeply rooted in specific historical and spatially situated social processes (cf. Molina, Mulinari, de los Reyes 2002). The fact that intersectionality was introduced in Sweden by postcolonial scholars was, however, not a coincidence. Crenshaw underlined the intersections between race and gender when she introduced the concept in 1994. This made the concept particularly tuned towards postcolonial scholars. More remarkably, however, was the late awakening of Swedish Women's Studies scholars to theorise and investigate issues on discrimination of ethnic groups, i.e racism.[1] The debates in the Swedish Women's Studies discourse on discrimination during the 70s and 80s, had focused on the intersections between sex/gender and class, as the interplay between two oppressive strategies/systems: patriarchy with sex/gender, versus capitalism focusing on class (cf. Ganetz, Gunnarsson and Göransson 1986). Thus, the intersections of sex/gender and ethnicity had not been seriously taken into account by Swedish Women's/Gender Studies scholars during the 70s and 80s.

[1] The term 'racism', however, is seldom used in the Swedish gender studies discourse, because it is apprehended as all too essentialistic. The scholar using the term is suspected of supporting the ideology behind 'racism'. The common expression used instead is 'ethnicity', or 'practices of racialization'.

When introduced in Sweden, intersectionality quickly became a popular concept among feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines. Even though Crenshaw had focused strongly on applicability in her introductory writings of the key concept, and had not paid attention to the epistemological and methodological implications of the concept, her aim – political applicability – was in Sweden combined with concerns of the epistemological and methodological implications of the concept. The concern of an indefinite row of power asymmetries came thus to be the starting point of debate in the Swedish Journal for Women's Studies (Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift no. 1/2003 and 3/2004). In the first contribution to the debate, it was argued that we ought to arrange the categories internally in order for researchers to avoid the establishment of an infinite row of power asymmetries. Here, the category of gender was apprehended as a strategically important category, and as such in the right of a privileged status in the setting as a whole (2003/1: 53). In a responding article, reactions to this presentation understood the suggestion of a hierarchical division as an example of a hidden assumption of power, giving the gender category a hegemonic status (2004/3: 113).

Crenshaw's metaphoric use of cross roads was a dissociation from the principle of additive discrimination, towards the conjoining of multiple systems of subordination. The concern for an endless row of power asymmetries might thus be interpreted as a search for a "final" solution, apprehended as a backslide to the ideologies of pure rationalism. In short: a fear of pluralism in research. The concern for an endless row of power asymmetries also displays a lack of analysis of how cultures, politics and power interact. The hidden assumption of power, finally, may result in a lack of serious and deep-going reflexivity and an un-awareness of power relations in research.

Power and feminist knowledge production

Power has been acknowledged as an important issue by feminist scholars. By way of references to locally constituted knowledges, or that knowledge is produced by groups in consensus, feminist researchers made efforts to avoid the connection between the scholar and the power dimension (cf Longino 1993, Code 1993). Under the label of cognitive manifoldiness, Longino presents knowledge production as a process, where no one has an

epistemic privilege (Longino: 101). This view on knowledge production, nevertheless, is the result of a feminist ambition to avoid power relations in research. It ends with a disregard of the fact that power always permeates relations between, as well as within, groups. Secondly, it will never be able to find anyone responsible for knowledge produced in Longino's sense. Consequently in the effort of avoiding power in research, an implicit norm might be taken for granted, opening up for exercises of superiority of different kinds. Difficulties like this might paradoxically arise, when feminist scholars try out models with the explicit wish of avoiding discriminatory practises in research. In the following, I will give an example of this, introducing one sequence in the book Feminist Methodology, by Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Jane Holland.

The book Feminist Methodology, by Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Jane Holland (Sage 2005) is quite popular in gender studies courses with its focus on methodological issues. This book serves as an example of how the knowing subject in feminist research nowadays attains the authority of an expert through the usage of "ethically approved" methods and techniques in feminist knowledge production. This may, nevertheless, result in an instrumental usage of the methods displayed and a lack of awareness of why a certain method is used. In the following, I give an example of this, investigating a "feminist check-list".

The feminist check-list is an enumerated list of things a feminist scholar should have in mind during research. After the conclusion, the scholar should be able to give account of the following, according to Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2005: 138):

1. what forms of reasoning this knowledge claim depends on;
2. whether this knowledge claim is confined to a local truth game or is more general;
3. how the knowing feminist who makes this knowledge claim is constituted;
4. whom this knowing feminist speaks for, why and with what authority;
5. what evidence or other grounds exist for the claims made;
6. how this evidence/grounding is constituted and assessed;
7. how counter-evidence/grounding is acknowledged and assessed;
8. what normative framework structures this process of knowledge production;
9. what connections/disconnections are claimed between ideas, experiences and realities;
10. whether and how these connections are conceived, denied or left unclear.

Claims on self-reflexivity, reflexivity and critical awareness in the research process are highly ranked in feminist research, now further illustrated by the very existence of a check-list like this. After my second reading of the check-list, however, I found myself calling its existence into question, realizing that a check-list like this could turn a process of reflexivity into a routine decision, supposedly reflexive and critical, but in practice nothing less than a mechanical matter of routine. Moreover, the check-list does not tell anything about the reseracher's ideological views. If we are dealing with a theory, that in itself does not construct any critical points of view on the notion of the expert, on the construction of the 'rational individual', for instance, the check-list won't be able to guide me in any direction, because of its lack of understanding of power relations embedded in the production of knowledge. It would, in fact, be possible to pursue a scientific investigation within the range of a positivist paradigm and still be able to tick off the 10 points in this feminist check-list – an example that clearly illustrates the fact that the check-list is not in itself attached to any specific understanding of power. Hence, in order to produce research with a feminist responsibility, the scholar needs to explicitly formulate her ideology and values. But this is not an easy task, particularly not as the mainstream scientific norm still rejects explicit recognition of ideological or political commitments in research.

One of the reasons why feminist scholars in the early years of feminist epistemology strove to formulate questions of a responsible knowledge-seeking process, of the scholar as a co-actor in the research-process, of interpretation of research results, or of the researchers responsibility towards the objects of research, was the striving for recognition for the female researcher's authority. As Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter express, in their introductory chapter of Feminist Epistemologies:

> The history of feminist epistemology itself is the history of the clash between the feminist commitment to the struggles of women to have their understandings of the world legitimated and the commitment of traditional philosophy to various accounts of knowledge – positivist, postpositivist, and others – that have consistently undermined women's claims to know. (Alcoff and Potter 1993: 2)

However, as displayed through the example of the feminist check-list, relativistic as well as universalistic claims on 'objectivity' and 'truth' run the risk of being re-introduced in the feminist ambitions of being acknowledged as experts. The check-list stresses the importance

of giving an account of, among other things, forms of reasoning, truth, authority. But, without problematising what "evidence", "truth" or "authority" is and can be, implicit notions originating from a hegemonic paradigm may be further developed in the feminist check-list.

Knowledge production is an interactive and complex process, deeply embedded in the structures of power of the social world. Hence, neither a reflexive process, nor a check-list, can compensate for mistakes made in an investigation executed in the paradigm of, let's say, positivism. The check-list will guide me in the same direction as the implicit norm in the positivist paradigm.

The mere shaping of the check-list, finally, causes some problems as well. The ten numbered points direct my thoughts towards the positivist paradigm's hopeful lull into security. Any scholar who proudly ticks off the ten points on the list may have silenced her conscience, without being asked to give an account for the kind of consequences that the research practice and research outcome result in. The check-list does not encourage the scholar to be critical against the way relations of power affect the knowledge-seeking process.

The ambition to avoid the methodological problems attached to the existence of power asymmetries in knowledge production is problematic, indeed. If the scholar does not make the relation between her/himself and the object of investigation explicit, an unexpressed norm will be taken for granted, opening up for exercises of superiority of different kinds, as earlier mentioned. The important task for feminist scholars is thus not to avoid power asymmetries, but to learn to handle them.

It is at this point that the heritage from mainstream epistemology causes deep problems for feminist scholars. Seeing that our relations to the world are complex, constituted by feelings, thoughts and emotions in a mixture, performed through narratives, speech and acts, it is difficult to maintain notions of rationalism while handling diversity in research. Instead of focusing on finding a "final solution", or making a "universal claim", the knower ought to be occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

The importance of investigating the relations we have to the world involves a reflection over, not only the relation between the subject and object of research, but also of the situatedness and contextuality of the investigation in question. This is also the reason why I in the following develop a framework of knowledge as a praxis, from the start imbued with norms, habits, customs and ideas. In this framework, I conceptualize the knowledge seeking

process as a two-way relation, in which the subject and object of research constantly influence each other.

Experiences, discourse and the "real" world

Many feminist investigations of intersectionality describe, interpret and analyse the experiences of the discriminated (cf Essed 2005). The concept of experiences is, however, not uncontested. For the purposes of this article, I give in the following only a short account of some lines of argument in the feminist debate of experiences.

In the 90s, Joan W Scott presented a fundamental critique of the discourse on experiences, questioning the trustworthiness of knowledge claims drawn out of experiences:

> It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originally point of explanation - as a foundation on which analysis is based – as a critical thrust of histories of difference. /- - - / When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence in which explanation is built. (Scott 1999: 81)

To Scott, the mere idea of experience in knowledge production causes problems. To her, the description of experience only proves what we already knew: that differences exist. Descriptions of experiences do not raise any questions or explanations of how these differences are established, how they operate or how the subject's actions are to be interpreted as a consequence of her experiences. It is, as Scott argues, in fact impossible to speak about experiences as something people "have". Rather, we ought to speak about individuals as constituted by experiences (cf. Scott 1999).

There are, indeed, lots of difficulties with inquiries based upon experiences, as for instance on the common apprehension of the empirical material as a 'natural result' of a collaboration between the subject and object of an interview. This idea, nevertheless, does only once more express the unsettled and unsettling relation to positivism in feminist inquiries of today. Thus, I agree, when Scott together with Judith Butler comprehend experience as a product created through the collaboration between the subject and object of the inquiry. From

this follows the impossibility of a direct translation of experiences into knowledges. As Scott and Butler argue, experience cannot be translated to knowledge in any immediate sense, because it is established within the frames of the discourse, and by the discourse (cf. Butler 1992, cf. Isaksson 2006). This is an important point, which I also accept. Simultaneously, however, I would like to point the focus on another dimension of the issue, which is about experience as lived experience. A bodily existence is filled with histories from the present as well as from the past, and one's body is filled with cultural possibilities, both received and reinterpreted.[2] This is the process of how we become our bodies – we are not ready-made (by the discourse), never completely finished (in the discourse). Constantly, my body receives and reinterprets cultural norms. In that way, I am in the process of becoming (cf. Butler 1987). I conceptualize our bodily becoming as a potentiality for change. Although this is modelled within and by the discourse, investigations in a strict rhetorical sense are not sufficient. As I develop in the following, we need also to take the "real" world into account, in an understanding of the "real" world as the common world we live in, where our hopes, negotiations and fights for a different future are performed.

Praxis and feminist knowledge production: a methodological approach

In the following, I will make a presentation of the concept praxis, give a brief oversight of its conceptual history and investigate the implications of praxis as a contextualized and situated activity for feminist work, exemplified by the work of the feminist philosophers Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe. I focus on knowledge production as doing and as such intrinsically interwoven with cultures and politics.

The history of the concept praxis begins with Aristotle.[3] Praxis is action. By action, I refer to practises of situated thinking, of articulation, narratives, speech and acts in

[2] Partly, this idea resembles the Marxian critique of idealism, in which he writes about the historicity of the object, apprehending objects as things that take shape through labour (Ahmed 2006: 41).

[3] For those not familiar with Ancient philosophy, it might be interesting to know that Aristotle didn't try to establish a universal, normative system of ethics. He was rather interested in how we may practice the art of living (cf Holm 1993).

conjunction. Action, as I shall display in the following, is a result from experiences of life in a common and public world.[4]

To Aristotle, theoria is the highest form of praxis, and as such occupied with finding 'episteme' – some form of solid knowledge: "what we know through episteme cannot be otherwise than it is" (Aristotle 1139b20; Book IV, Ch.3). Episteme involves showing that your claims are possible to believe in, and developed from starting points apprehended as trustworthy. The apprehension of theoretical knowledge as a practical ability is important, particularly because it clearly differentiates theoria from forms of rationalist knowledge.

> Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical; for this rules the productive intellect, as well, since every one who makes makes for an end, and that which is made is not an end in the unqualified sense (but only an end in a particular relation, and the end of a particular operation)- only that which is done is that; for good action is an end, and desire aims at this. (Aristotle, Book VI: 2 1139 b 5)

All my actions and in particular the way I handle incidents that are unpredictable or uncontrollable influence my life deeply. I myself take shape through my cognitive, bodily and affective responses to incidents and passions, owing to the two-way relation between cognition, bodies and objects. When I act, I will affect the object I am acting towards. Then the object will affect me, through its response in the shape of a transformed activity, that is returned back to me and so on. This two-way relation between the subject's and object's actions, thoughts, words and passions have furthermore been developed in contemporary feminist phenomenology. In feminist phenomenology of today, the rejection of the rationalist epistemic opposition between subject and object, has been exchanged for the emphasis on a two-way relation, in feminist phenomenology often denominated as a 'lived relationship'. Thus, when the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed presents her ideas about orientation, and the two-way relation between subject and object in the book Queer Phenomenology (2006) she is developing these threads of thought:

[4] Hannah Arendt has written about praxis as action. See for instance: Arendt, Hannah (1998) *The Human Condition*, Chicago, III, University of Chicago Press.

> Orientations involve directions towards objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them. (28)

Praxis could very well be used within a phenomenological framework. They share several elements, of which the most important are a) an attentiveness to the concrete, social world b) an acknowledgement of the corporeality of the knowing subject, and c) a rejection of the opposition between subject and object.

One implication of the mutual dependence of the subject and the object is that the scholarly investigation is not occupied with a reconstruction of the world, but with an inquiry of the relations we have to the world. This is where Ahmed puts an emphasis on the fact that our relation to the world, and thus our knowledge of the world, is derived from our position in the world.[5]

To be able to perceive and react on anything, we need to have some basic experience of it, or to have heard about it from someone we trust. Already the perception is impregnated by the agent's character. This is why it is always already too late to focus on the purpose of the activity when we ascribe someone as responsible for her actions. This is also why the agent is responsible for how the situation appears to her, for the omission of ethically important details, and for misrepresentations (Holm 1993: 187). My perception is key to my understanding of the world. Sara Ahmed writes:

> We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things. /---/ For example, say I perceive something before me. In perceiving the object as an object, I perceive the object in a certain way, as being some kind of thing. Perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object. (27)

[5] The fact that Sara Ahmed returns to phenomenology is not that surprising. It is interesting though, that Ahmed take Husserl as one important inspiration for her theoretical departure. Both feminists and other scholars have criticised Husserl for being all too essential. Ahmed, however, emphasizes a bodily awareness in his ideas about intentionality.

There is an interrelatedness between subjects, objects, space, action and orientation. When Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the body as a situation, she paid attention to the fact that the biology of the body always should be reflected through the context of the social, the cultural and the historical (cf. Beauvoir 2002, Gothlin 1991: 140, 287, 1992: 19). The apprehension of the body as a situation is central here, but the notion of the body as a situation is not enough. As also pointed out by Ahmed in the quote above: when I perceive things, objects, I perceive them "in a certain way". Indeed, my perception involves an apprehension of that object. This is what Ahmed means by orientation. My perception (of things, objects) is informed by the position I occupy, which, in turn, is related to the thing or object in question. My location towards things, though, can never again be apprehended as plane "location". My location towards an object is continuously involved in an apprehension of that object, an apprehension that depends upon the position from where I stand: "Bodies inhabit space by how they reach for objects, just as objects in turn extend what we can reach." (Ahmed 2006: 110).[6] The bodily situation is thus possible to grasp as situational orientation. Epistemologically, this means that the knowing subject her/himself is deeply interwoven in the process of knowledge production.

As earlier outlined, knowledge production is always performed within a specific and historically defined context. This implies that particular aims and certain sets of habits, norms, customs and ideas are intrinsic in the very knowledge seeking practice. Praxis is thus both a contextualized activity, and situational orientation (through the emphasis on the acknowledgment of the scholar's relation to the world). I receive and reinterpret cultural norms, which means that I am shaped by the discourse, but also by my lived experience – I am continuously shaped and reshaped by my perceptions, thoughts, passions and acts in a public and common world.

Diversity, understanding and power

Understanding is conceptualized in a similar way. It is never finished, or fixed, but constantly shaped and created through inquiries and argumentations. Aristotle writes: "For understanding

[6] "By objects", writes Ahmed, "we could include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, even worlds" (2006: 126).

is neither about things that exist forever and are unchangeable, nor about any and every one of the things that come into being, but about things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation" (Aristotle, Book VI: 10).

In the hope of a transformation, and in the hope of a democratic and progressive sexual and gender politics, Judith Butler addressed the necessity of heterogeneity among feminists at her key-note speech at the 6th European Gender Research Conference Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context, University of Lódz, Poland, August 2006. In the form of a criticism of the wide spread tendency in our various local and translocal communities to reach consensus, this is furthermore an issue elaborated by Chantal Mouffe. With a deep rejection of pure rationalism, Chantal Mouffe criticizes all kinds of consensus as forms of exclusion and presents her ideas about diversity as crucial and the existence of power as inevitable. At stake here, is a distancing from various kinds of compromising models:

> We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The idea that power could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality are illusions, which can endanger democratic institutions. (Mouffe 2000: 27)

Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' is introduced as a way of constructing "them" not as an enemy, but as somebody whose right to express herself we defend. It is possible to construct a legitimate enemy as an adversary. Hence, while antagonism is the struggle between enemies, agonism is described as the struggle between adversaries (Mouffe 2000: 15, 17). That is to say, we need to multiply the institutions, discourses and forms of life that create the democratic values in order to constitute democratic individuals, and hence, research. We need to interfere more, not less:

> This question, pace the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion, since this would imply the eradication of the political. Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them". The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established. (Mouffe 2000: 25)

In dissociation from pure rationality, Mouffe puts a focus on practices instead of argumentation. Her disapproval of all forms of consensus is based on the belief that consensus is excluding every other opinion than the hegemonic. The promises that ajar in this critique of a rational consensus, are the promises of a critical engagement, of new encounters and of the possibility of change.

Praxis, finally, is the exercise of certain habits, namely the "good" ones ('hexeis'). A "good" hexis is a habit involving contextually sensitive and adequate judgements (hexis is furthermore developed by Bourdieu in the particular understanding of 'bodily habitus'). The training in "good" hexeis", then, is an exercise of the capacities that characterize a person in possession of practical wisdom (i.e. 'fronesis'). That is to say, a person that is able to perceive, interpret, judge, choose action and act "morally good" in every concrete "ethical" situation, which furthermore presents a dimension of accountability in knowledge production (cf. Holm 1993).

The concern of an infinite row of power asymmetries was one of the difficulties observed in the discussion on intersectionality earlier in this article. One suggestion proposed to the problem with this infinite row, however, was to give the category 'gender' a privileged status in the concept as a whole. I described this as a relapse into pure rationality's search for a final rational solution, as a fear of pluralism in research. When Mouffe put a focus on the deep disadvantages with an aspiration for consensus, this is one of the problems she bears in mind: "… taking pluralism seriously requires that we give up the dream of a rational consensus, which entails the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life." (Mouffe 2000: 12). The fact that the category of gender was suggested as the first category in the hierarchy was not any unfortunate coincidence. It was only an explicit expression of the fact that the gender category already was in possession of a hegemonic status in the Swedish gender studies discourse, in the beginning of 2000s.

As familiar, mainstream epistemology has been criticized by feminist scholars for being eurocentric, androcentric and partial. Feminist epistemologies have investigated the process of knowing, and brought to its core bodily as well as experience-modelled dimensions of the 'knowing subject' (cf. Code 1993, Hankinson Nelson 1993). Simultaneously, and as I had Naomi Scheman point out in the beginning of this article, there has been an all too strong

focus on the possibilities/impossibilities of truth and a will to control the dimension of power in research.

As constitutive of the social, power could never be eliminated (Mouffe 2000:14). This is why practises of feminist knowledge production should not be occupied with efforts to avoid power in research – although the hopes for a better world may easily displace the aims of the inquiry. By means of the deep hegemonic structures of power that intersect relations of ethnicity, class and gender, there is a wide-spread ambition to identify a model for communication which takes experiences and diversity into account. Here is where knowledge as praxis may provide another angle for feminist research, conceptualized as a situated, critical practise of activity and articulation, occupied with investigating the relations we have to the world.

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