

A FEMINIST/POSTMODERNIST METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this paper I wish to develop a feminist/postmodernist methodological approach to the question of how we know the organization. I will argue that since we are inextricably involved in the construction of what we call the organization, that the separation or division between agency and structure, the formal and the informal, or any other division is essentially arbitrary. This essential arbitrariness of the divisions which we have used to study organizations entails a different methodology, one that focuses on questions which had been either deemed irrelevant or subsumed regarding the nature of power, of knowledge, and the subject. In the development of this feminist/postmodernist methodology, I want to consider what we call knowledge, what we call experience, what we mean by the sexually specific subject, the construction of power as everywhere and nowhere, and organizations as strategies of discourse, or relations of power and knowledge expressed by sexually specific subjects in language that is inevitably political and where meaning is always retrospective.

A feminist/postmodernist approach thus demands of researchers that we move beyond description, critique or emancipation to explication and evocation: it is not fixity which I seek, but the conditions of existence which make this knowledge possible. If we understand the organization in Foucault's terms as "strategies of discourse", where power and knowledge meet, then my role as an organizational researcher is to focus on these strategies of discourse as they create and recreate asymmetrical power relations. And it is to remember, as Pringle (1990) points out, that "all discourses are produced from and themselves occupy sexually coded positions" (p. 180), or as Elizabeth Grosz (1993) puts it, that we speak from positions of sexual specificity, that neither neutral observer nor subject exist except as political creations. I am not interested in revealing or discovering reality, or in proving someone's experience is more truth revealing than someone else's. I am interested in how strategies of discourse both position us and create

us in what we term our organizations. How do we come to know what we ourselves create?

In the pursuit of this question the role of the researcher in a feminist/postmodernist study is to explore and explicate how knowledge is constructed regarding the social relations within the organization, social relations which are mediated by knowledge and power and sexual specificity, materially based, and expressed discursively. As a researcher, I have no intention of attempting generalizations, a-historical predictions or universalizations; I do not presume to undertake the positivist's or interpretivist's role of uncovering a foundational reality, whether objective or subjective. Instead reality is subject to multiple meanings, multiple readings, multiple interpretations where power, not reason, is the ultimate arbiter, where I am as positioned in relation to the dominant discourse by the links between power and knowledge and sexual specificity as those who talked to me and of whom I write. As Patti Lather (1991) reminds us, to write in the postmodern is to be evocative as opposed to didactic, to displace extended argument by "'a much messier form of bricolage [oblique collage of juxtapositions] that moves back and forth from positions that remains skeptical of each other though perhaps not always skeptical enough'", where ambiguities "proliferate rather than diminish meanings" (p. 10), where research practices need to be "viewed as much more inscriptions of legitimation than procedures that help us get closer to some 'truth' capturable via language" (p. 112).

In feminist/postmodernist practice knowledge is not discovered through the application of natural law by the detached and unbiased observer; there is no knowledge, no reality that is only hidden, a reality which we may uncover if we only know "the way to the truth". In feminist/ postmodernist practice neither rationality nor science nor epistemology itself are accorded a position of privilege. Nothing is transcendent, nothing can stand outside relations of power, not the observer, not knowledge, not transcendent justificatory appeals to universality, objectivity, impartiality, not our "grand

narratives", the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of a world which we ourselves have created.

Both positivism and interpretivism, quantitative and qualitative analysis are rooted in Enlightenment epistemology: all agree that there is an absolute grounding for knowledge, whether it be objective or subjective*, all posit "the subject as an autonomous individual capable of full consciousness and endowed with a stable 'self' constituted by a set of stable characteristics such as sex, class, race, sexual orientation" (Lather, 1991, p. 5). Interpretivists have attacked the idea of the objectivity of truth or knowledge or reality, but they have not attacked the idea of the subject, the other side of the dualism. Absolutism and essentialism have remained, if no longer in the idea of objectivity, certainly in the idea of subjectivity. Modernism has exhausted itself, unable to think beyond the unifying certainty: to Patti Lather (1991), "not only positivisms, but also existentialisms, phenomenologies, critical theories: all . . . [are] rife with subject-object dualisms, teleological utopianisms, totalizing abstractions, the lust for certainty, and impositional tendencies tainted with colonialism and foundational vanguard politics" (p. 88).

Furthermore, Susan Hekman (1990) argues that the human sciences maintain that absolutism and essentialism in their construction of the subject as male, the object as female, replicating the male/female duality which informs Enlightenment epistemology. To Hekman, because "the separation between subject and object, knower and known are central requirements of the scientific enterprise", the Enlightenment conception of science "defines it as an inherently masculine enterprise" (p. 120). Hekman argues that women cannot be subjects for two reasons: in Enlightenment epistemology "the active, knowing subject that is essential to science has been defined as exclusively

* To Lather (1991), following Habermas, knowledge claims are generated and legitimated three ways in Enlightenment epistemology: through prediction (positivism), understanding (interpretive, naturalistic, constructivist, phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry) and emancipation (critical inquiry and action research) (p. 7).

masculine", and secondly, "women cannot effect the distance between the knower and the known that is the hallmark of the scientific method" (p. 120). Thus, she states, "women, who can only be objects, do not fit into the subject centered discourse of the human sciences . . . [which is] why the activity of women has not been conceptualized by the human sciences since their conception" (p. 92). But postmodernists challenge both the "true" knowledge of the natural sciences as well as the separate but equal stance of the humanists, that if objectivity could be absolute grounded truth, so could subjectivity. They challenge not only the privileging of the natural sciences but the privileging of rationalism; more radically, they challenge the privileging of the hierarchical dualities which inform Enlightenment epistemology. In particular, postmodernism challenges the constitution of the subject as male, the object as female which Hekman argues is inherent in the epistemology of Enlightenment thought, and therefore inherent in the methodology of the natural as well as the social or human sciences¹.

Thus, instead of the methodologies of the Enlightenment which confine women to the status of object, I draw on the intersection of feminism and postmodernism and the interruptions and disruptions which their intersection necessarily involves. Instead of the certainties of unitary truth undergirded by the humanist subject, I will focus on "'regimes of truth' [and] the deconstruction of the binary, linear logics of Western rationality . . . foregrounding ambiguity, openness, and contingency" (Lather, 1991, p.

¹To Hekman, "the contemporary researcher who studies women's social or political roles is adhering to the subject/object dichotomy that has informed the social sciences since their inception: the social scientist is the knower (subject), the object of his study is the known" (p. 94). These categories "exclude women and thus their experience becomes invisible" (p. 95). She goes on to argue that "because women cannot be subjects they also cannot be actors in the social scene. Women who cannot act cannot create a social life, they cannot constitute knowledge or reality" (p. 95). Like Flax, she maintains that the dichotomies of the Enlightenment are central to "constitution of the social sciences. The desire for an objective knowledge of the social world rooted in the knowing rational subject is the basis of the epistemology of the social sciences" (p. 96).

23) and the unsettling presence of women which traditional organizational theory attempts to evade or repress.

If I wish to foreground ambiguity, heterogeneity, the shifting strategies of discourse which are our organizations, does that mean that everything is relative, that without the certainties of the absolute it is impossible to construct a 'grand narrative', a story through which we understand the world, a story that promises us hope and justice? To both Hekman (1991) and Lather (1991) all truth/falsity oppositions are displaced by the postmodern critique, oppositions which include the oppositions of relativism/absolutism², but that does not mean that all discourses are "equally arbitrary". Lather points out that whether or not what one says is counted as knowledge is determined by power, and that to argue for neutral knowledge is to ignore the impact of power on what counts as knowledge. To her, "fears of relativism and its seeming attendant, nihilism or Nietzschean anger, seem. . . an implosion of Western white male, class-privileged arrogance—if we cannot know everything, then we can know nothing" (p. 116). The charge of relativism becomes a sophisticated way of obscuring privilege. Nor does the anti-Enlightenment critique of the postmodernists entail the abandonment of a coherent, causal account of the world with an eye to who holds power, only the abandonment of the totalitarian impulse that lies in the construction of the perfect narrative, where there is no space for doubt. To Gayatri Spivak (1987), a 'grand narrative' is a companion, not a means to an end, a final solution. By leaving a space for doubt, for those other voices that are inevitably silenced when one person speaks and not another, we resist the totalitarian impulse inherent in perfection, in closure. The totalitarian impulse resides there, not in the construction of a coherent, causal account

²To Lather, relativism presumes "a foundational structure, an Archimedean standpoint outside of flux and human interest. . . . Relativism is an issue if a foundational structure is ignored. . . . If there is a foundation, there is something to be relative to, but if there is not foundation, there is no structure against which other positions can be objectively judged" (p. 114).

of the world which we construct to help us make sense of the meaning we attach to our experiences.

In the feminist/postmodernist methodological approach, experience, like knowledge, is not something that can be discovered, not something that a person, by "getting in touch with", provides an invariable source of knowledge. Experience, like reality, is not fixed; the presence of the unconscious undermines the idea that experience can be unmediated, and thus the subject cannot be "the coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of reality" (Weedon, 1987, p. 8). Our knowledge of the world is not our experience of the world revealed through transparent language. The meaning we attach to our experience is mediated; we attach meaning to our experiences, meaning that is expressed discursively and is thus a site of power and knowledge. As Elizabeth Weed (1989) has noted in another context, what arose from the feminist consciousness raising of the late 1960s and early 1970s is that our desires, our thoughts may be constructed elsewhere; they are not ours alone.

If the meaning we attach to our experiences is mediated by power, then my task is not to uncover invariable experience, to prove that this knowledge of this experience and guaranteed as authentic by this subject, and unmediated by power, is knowledge more pure than other knowledge. My task is not to uncover whose knowledge is more pure, whose subjectivity is more authentic, whose experience is more likely to illuminate a reality that can only appear the brighter the light. It is not whose knowledge, whose experience can be relied on to produce the truth of the situation. We are constructed as sexually specific subjects who are interpellated within a symbolic code which itself is constructed by relations of power and knowledge and embedded materially, in what we do. My task is to focus on how relations of domination and subordination are constructed between the men and the women who work in the organization, and how are those relations of power and knowledge understood by the organizational members. What meaning, expressed as strategies of discourse, do they attach to these relations? Like

Foucault, but going beyond Foucault, I argue that there is no knowledge of the organization, no meaning that can be attached to what the organization is, which can stand outside of relations of power and knowledge expressed by sexually specific subjects.

Thus the main question in this feminist/postmodernist methodological approach is how to explicate these relations of domination and subordination, these relations of ruling, to use Dorothy Smith's term, without silencing those people who spoke to me, without silencing their voices. I can no more transcribe their voices without the insertion of myself than they can speak in a transparent language that does nothing other than reveal their perfectly authentic reality. In using language, we each attach our own meaning. That act is political. I cannot, any more than the people who spoke to me, stand outside those relations of sexual specificity, power, and knowledge which construct us all. All I can offer, like Spivak, is to put all my cards on the table, to say 'there they are', to recognize that cinema vérité is still only a pretense, that the only reality is the one we create together.

How, then, do I deal with criteria, like any justification for the identification of knowledge, is itself embedded in relations of power and knowledge. How do I recognize complicity without advocating paralysis? How do I recognize that truth telling has always had a political agenda, and not be silenced by the inexorable weight of politics? I take the position that all criteria reflect time and place and political position, and as such, must be subjected to the same skepticism, the same doubt that is accorded any other possibly transcendental position. As Linda Nicholson (1990) has written, there are no criteria which can be justified outside their historical place, no criteria which can stand outside their own metanarrative. Reason, objectivity, impartiality, universality, generalizability—all are confined within Enlightenment dualities, all seek to justify, as both Dorothy Smith (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1990) have noted, a tautological argument. They all work to ensure the removal of the observer from the social context at the same time as they work to ensure the discovery of the "correct"

reality; they all work to remove the knower from the known. But, if all criteria represent some aspect of power, how can we, in Seyla Benhabib's (1986) terms, not simply validate the status quo by declaring all criteria suspect and therefore maintaining in power that which already is? The answer lies in Spivak's (1987) contention that since it is impossible for either any person or any theory to stand outside relations of sexual specificity and power and knowledge, the politics of decentering, of deconstruction, of remembering our own privilege and the privileges of others, and thus of the necessity to both deconstruct the margins of our own and of other's privilege and to reject closure in favor of doubt as we use metanarrative as our companion, as a place of enablement, rather than as "a declaration of war", must be applied to any criteria which we would use. The politics of deconstruction are not the politics of modernist thought, which rely on oppositional dualities to decide what is knowledge and what it is not. The deconstruction of oppositional dualities are displacements of all the violent hierarchies which structure our thoughts: truth/falsity, absolute/relative, all that which has given us certainty in a world that can never be certain. But as Patti Lather (1991) points out, to say that if we cannot know everything then we can know nothing is to miss the point. In a world of flux and indeterminacy, nothing can be understood or known as either/or; that is itself seen as a discursive strategy which seeks to legitimate itself outside of time and place.

The criteria which is implicit in feminist/postmodernist theory, rather than acting as a transcendental category, as a way of justifying truth and truth speaking and ultimately reality itself, is a form of analysis which seeks to deconstruct the centre, to deconstruct the confining dualities of Enlightenment thought, and to recognize our inevitable involvement in discourse, where power, gender and knowledge meet. The question is whose speaking voice will these criteria provide a place for, and whose speaking voice will they silence? At the same time, however, as we recognize our own inevitable involvement in discourse, feminist/postmodernist theory cannot reject, as

Spivak points out, the onto-phenomenological moment inherent in feminism/postmodernism. This moment draws on critical theory as defined by Marx in 1843 as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age", struggles and wishes which shed "light on the character and bases" of domination and subordination (Fraser, 1987, p. 31). Recognizing our own inevitable involvement in relations of power and knowledge does not mean that exploring and explicating how things work is beyond us. It is not a question of who is right, who is wrong, who is rational, who is emotional, who has a grasp of reality, who does not, but, in Dorothy Smith's term, "how things work, how our world is put together, how things happen to us as they do" (Smith, 1990, p. 34). Or, to add to Foucault, in an understanding where organizations are defined by words, how we ourselves both create and are created by words, how strategies of discourse, embedded materially, both position us and are resisted by us. This focus does not deny the self or materiality, as Foucault would have it. It does not presume that the self is wholly created within discourse, Flax's (1990) perceptive criticism of Foucault, nor ignore materiality, Dorothy Smith's criticism. Instead, and within these criticisms, it focuses on where we work as defined by words, rooted in the actualities of our daily lives there, and amenable to explication.

Like any biographer, when I present a story full of political nuances, as I do when I am talking about the construction of organizations as told to me by members of the organization, I have an obligation not to misrepresent their stories through silence. Caught on the fulcrum of always politicized meaning, knowing that between us we create politicized meaning, my obligation to them in my explication of their entering into and attaching meaning to the construction of relations of domination and subordination is respect, not exploitation. But like Edward Said (1979), writing about the Orient as nothing other than a resource for the West, how can I hear and speak for, without using them merely as a resource? How can I incorporate that respect into my writing, and not create an Orientalizing discourse, where the subject is always positioned as lesser?

How can I not be the professional stranger (cf. Jeffcutt, 1994), telling the native in the way only I can, the truth of the situation?

To Said, the first step is to recognize exteriority and its implications; the second and third are to use strategic location and strategic formation as ways of forcing to the surface exteriority, forcing us to confront our inextricable involvement in the discourses of power and knowledge. As he explains, it is the researcher who makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says" (p. 20). To continue Said's use of the pronoun, he represents the Orient both to itself and to others; he symbolizes the Orient for others, reducing it to fact (p. 20-21).

To deal with exteriority, where a projected image is rendered an objective fact, a representation of the real, where power resides in this hidden transformation, Said recommends "strategic location, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the . . . material he [sic] writes about, and strategic formation, which is a way of analysing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large" (Ibid, p. 20). This is a double focus. I must ask myself, how have I been positioned in regard to the material I wish to write about? I must recognize that I myself am no more fixed as an entity constructed within the iron triangle of sex, class and race, a source of truth defined by those determinants, than were those I talked to. I must ask how have I, as well as how have those who have spoken to me, been constructed as sexually specific within a nexus of power and knowledge that has, at least partially, both positioned them and me, and both articulated and constrained what they and I have had to say. The focus is not on the speaker or the writer as truth teller but on the relations themselves as they are put into play by the speaker or the writer.

In recognizing that there is no dispassionate observer, no uninvolved subject who exists beyond either reason or desire, no transparent language nor transcribable, discoverable reality, I do not wish to suggest that nothing can be written other than a polemic. I wish to point out instead that since nothing is free from relations of power, however expressed, I wish to focus on the construction of these relations of power, to explicate how these relations of power are constructed in the organization, to focus on how things come about in the way that they do. How might I achieve that? How might I confront one of the sustained criticisms of Foucault, that his theory of power lacks an ontological presence, that power everywhere and nowhere lacks body, materiality (cf. Deveaux, 1994)?

Dorothy Smith (1990) directly confronts that by focusing on "the relations and practices that arise in and only in the actual activities of actual people", on the sensuous materiality in which we live our lives (p. 34). By focusing on what people do, by remembering that thought has "no existence other than it arises in what people do" (p. 38), we maintain our focus on sensuous materiality at the same time as we grapple with differences in power and what it means, both to the theory we are writing within and to our own involvement in it. As Smith stresses, concepts do not arise out of thin air; we are not disembodied thinkers operating solely within the realm of Hegel. Instead, "concepts . . . are available to be thought about because their character and the distinctions they make apparent are already structured in actual social relations" (p. 40). We bring down how we think about what happens, and how we think about what happens to us, from the firmament, and tie it to our lives as we live them, remembering that they are inseparable.

Smith points out that we can do this by maintaining what "people say they think" in "the actual circumstances in which it is said", and in the "actual empirical conditions of their lives". We do not separate these actual individuals from these circumstances and conditions, turning them into pieces of data, who only exist to carry the theory. We do

not "detach" these ideas spoken by these people from them, and then "arrange them to demonstrate an order among them that accounts for what is observed". Neither do we "change the ideas into a 'person', that is, set them up as distinct entities (for example, a value pattern, norm, belief system, and so forth) to which agency (or possible causal efficacy) may be attributed". We don't "redistribute them to 'reality' by attributing them to actors who can now be treated as representing the ideas" (p. 43-44)³. To Smith the first rule is to preserve the subjects, not to make them disappear by using terms like "formal organization" or "bureaucracy", not to forget that they are situated locally and historically, not to forget that they are situated in the actualities of their daily lives. Primacy belongs to the sensuous materiality of our daily lives, not to the conceptual order as if it sprang from Zeus' head. To Smith, we must remember Marx and his insistence "on returning to what people do, on seeing how social forms are produced by actual living individuals" (p. 57).

In Dorothy Smith's account, what we must do as researchers is to preserve the integrity of the social actors, not as alienated objects to be studied by dispassionate observers, but as subjects located in their own experiences, "while exploring and explicating" the power-based relations of the organization itself (1987, p. 111). As Jeffner Allen (1989) has pointed out, by focusing on discourse rather than on truth, we

³In her explanation, Smith (1990) draws on a description of a methodological approach in sociology which does precisely what she maintains we must not do if we wish neither to create a tautology nor subvert the subject: "Zetterberg is telling us how to take something that people actually said and make it over so that it can be treated as an attribute of an 'aggregate'. The process of getting from the original individuals who described, judged and prescribed to the end product of 'social beliefs', 'social valuations' and 'social norms' goes something like this: 1. Individuals are asked questions, presumably in an interview. 2. Their answers are then detached from the original practical determination in the interview situations and from the part the sociologist played in making them. They become data. Note that the questions are not data. The data (the recorded responses) are coded to yield 'descriptions', 'evaluations', and 'prescriptions' 3 [Statistically manipulate] the data to find the 'central tendencies' . . . 4. The original individuals are now changed into the sociologist's aggregate. Their beliefs, their values, and their norms are now attributed to this 'personage' as 'social beliefs', 'social values', and 'social norms'. It is then perfectly within the bounds of ordinary sociological thinking that social beliefs, norms and values be treated as causing behavior . . . ". (p. 45)

rid ourselves of every form of subject/object split, including that split between what is termed the researcher, and the subject who is objectified by the researcher. By recognizing my own inextricable involvement in this political process of creating meaning, I hope not to free myself, that is, to achieve transcendence, nor to presume that through self-reflection I can disengage myself from the will to power as I pursue knowing, but to recognize that I exist, as Dorothy Smith points out, on the same plane as those who agreed to talk to me, all inextricably involved in the discourses which shape us as they shape our understanding of the world.

However, to Smith, research into what she terms "social relations as actual practices . . . does not involve substituting the analysis, the perspectives and views of subjects, for the investigation by the [researcher]" (1987, p. 161). The description of the social context does not remain at the level of the "language and concepts naturally employed in that context" (Mumby, 1988, p. 146) by the social actors⁴. Instead of assuming the guise of the professional stranger in order to reveal the truth of the organization to the natives, I will focus on the creation and recreation of relations of domination and subordination through strategies of discourse. As members of the organization we come to know the organization as we participate in the creation and recreation of the organization through narrative. When we speak to each other we are

⁴Mumby explicitly focuses on organizational narrative in his analysis of the methodological approach best suited to the critical examination of the organization as ideology. To Mumby narrative as a "particular discursive practice is not simply a neutral purveyor of information; rather, the act of storytelling is a political act that has consequences for the reproduction of organizational reality" (p. xv). It is "one of the principle [sic] symbolic structures that shapes reality for organizational members" (p. 15). However, to Mumby the usual approach to the study of organizational narrative is "descriptive". The research, which focuses on the discovery of the "shared systems of symbols and meaning . . . constituted and revealed in workers' routine communicative life" (p. 16), is based on the premise that "symbol systems [are] the most visible manifestations of organizational structure—they reflect the unconscious, taken-for-granted rule system that enables an organization to function coherently" (p. 15), a functionalist approach disavowed by Mumby (p. 16) as well as by myself. In the crisis of representation which is postmodernism, an ambivalence and "uncertainty about what constitutes social reality" (Lather, p. 1991, p. 90) is at odds with any strategy like narrative realism that seeks to uncover the real.

involved in this creation of the organization—when we repeat our memories of these conversations we are repeating how we have come to know these organizations. These conversations—initially with our colleagues, and later with the researcher—are our own way of putting into words what it is we know about the organization, our way of attaching meaning to our experiences, meaning which is but a temporary retrospective fixing, in Derrida's words. In this, our subjectivity, our experiences and our meanings which we attach to our experiences, meanings which we call knowledge of the organization, are all mediated by power and gender. Our words are neither the transparent nor the murky reflection of a reality, that if we could just achieve the proper distance we would be able to understand and reflect accurately. Our words, as we recreate our understanding of our involvement in that organization, are our understanding, our meaning. There is no reality that is better understood by others by virtue of their place. Each person makes that journey into the unknown in terms of her or his frame of reference, and that understanding is shaped by her or his involvement in the organization, mediated by power and gender. What people say, how they assign meaning to their understanding of the organization, is intimately and ultimately political, just as it is materially embedded and shaped by sexual specificity, and it is that process which feminist/postmodernist practice illuminates.

