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## Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity

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*Published in:*  
Graduate Journal of Social Science

2007

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Liinason, M., & van der Tuin, I. (2007). Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 4(No. 2), 1-10.

*Total number of authors:*  
2

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## **Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity -**

### *Editorial*

This special issue of *GJSS* is devoted to feminist interdisciplinarity, articulating alternatives to common conceptualisations of interdisciplinarity on the one hand and feminist scholarship on the other. It deals with the ways in which interdisciplinarity and feminist scholarship strengthen each other through a series of epistemological and methodological reflections, documented by Sabine Hark, Hanna Ojala and Hanna-Mari Ikonen, Mia Liinason and further exemplary analyses by Björn Pernrud, Sabine Grenz, Kerstin Alnebratt. Meeting the needs of the *GJSS*, the methodological implications of the former and the methodological choices made in the latter articles are concentrated upon so as to further interdisciplinary research methodology on the one hand, and, in the case of this special issue, feminist scholarship on the other. As implied in the title ‘Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity,’ the articles in this issue also reflect upon the political implications of feminist knowledge production, and its relations to action and social change.

As special issue editors, we have found it important to address the issue of *feminist* interdisciplinarity both in itself and within the context of the *GJSS*. As PhD students in institutions (resp. Gender studies at Lund University, Sweden and at Utrecht University, the Netherlands) where interdisciplinary gender studies is fundamental, we are often confronted with different kinds of ‘how’ questions: how to design a research in an interdisciplinary manner, how to relate to disciplinary feminist research methods, how to relate to mainstream interdisciplinarity, how to set up a research project in such a way that the societal impact is maximized. We have wanted to contribute to the answering of these questions both for our colleagues and fellow PhD students in interdisciplinary gender studies and for a broader public of scholars interested in

interdisciplinary research methodology. We believe that an issue on feminist interdisciplinarity can bring these two publics together, and as such our work is an instantiation of practising feminist interdisciplinarity.

In women's and gender studies, interdisciplinarity has been a fundamental key for a long time. It can be said to be the result of the basic idea for feminist scholarship explained by feminist academics in the early 1970s: the idea of feminist work in the academy as a critical project, questioning mainstream knowledge as biased. Women's studies were thus not explained as complementary to mainstream, existing scholarship, but as a *corrective* project, and feminist academics in the 1970s argued for the need to *integrate* women's studies into every other discipline. Starting from the question of women's identity, the integration of women's studies in the academy did not amalgamate around "an abstract body of knowledge ... but around the concrete body of (a) woman, in relation to which bodies of knowledge were explored, constructed, and interrogated", as phrased by Gabriele Griffin (2006: 69). Through initiatives of academic grassroots-movements inspired by the women's liberation movement, women's studies started to develop in the European arena in the early 1970s. At this point in time within women's studies, the different liberation movements, the public debate on scholarship and democracy, governmental policies and the work by academic feminists came to mutually influence each other. Depending on the various historical and political developments in different national contexts, the further development of women's studies came to vary a great deal between the European countries. In the Northern parts of Europe, in countries like the U.K, Sweden, and the Netherlands, women's studies modules and undergraduate courses were developed into programs during the 1980s and 1990s when feminist scholars could gradually establish departments of their own. In the Mediterranean or Eastern parts of Europe, there has been another development, partly due to the intellectual traditions, structures of higher education, and a feminist critical positioning vis-à-vis the institution as such in countries like Italy, for instance (Griffin & Braidotti 2002: 5).

The organization of women's/gender studies in departments of their own was accomplished through a *dual strategy* in the 1980s and 1990s, signified by a simultaneous integration of women's/gender studies into established disciplines and an autonomous organization of women's/gender studies as a subject field of its own. The

dual strategy was inspired by the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, and launched with the explicit concern of avoiding the risk of ghettoization (if autonomously organized) or assimilation (if integrated in the established disciplines). Thus, in several European countries of today, it is possible to pursue women's/gender research following four different levels in academia:

- a) *Gender studies*: autonomously organised as a discipline in its own right.
- b) *Gender research*: research with issues of gender at its core, research that has gender as its primary focus, integrated in other disciplines.
- c) *Gender perspective*: research that analyses and problematises issues of gender, positioning gender as a perspective along side of other equally important perspectives.
- d) *Gender aspects*: research in which gender is not particularly visible in the analyses, although still present as a dimension of the study.<sup>1</sup>

The question debated ever since the development of women's/gender studies into departments in their own right, and even more so during the latest years, is whether the successful integration in academia means that women's/gender studies is to be apprehended as a discipline like any other. In other words querying whether it will be able to keep its interdisciplinary profile throughout the everyday academic work in the department through interdisciplinary syllabi and courses, and the catering of students from different disciplines. In the Anglo-American context, a debate around the im/possibility of women's/gender studies was developed in the end of 1990s and early 2000s as part of this problematic. The often referred to starting shot of the debate is as the special issue of the journal *differences* (1997, 9:3) and especially Wendy Brown's argument *against* women's studies programs and departments in their own right, referring to the intellectual and theoretical limitations of a field based on identity. After the poststructuralist critique of the category "women", Brown argues, women's studies has lost its object, core and aim of investigation while postcolonial theory, queer theory

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<sup>1</sup> This division is developed on the basis of a distinction made by Hillevi Ganetz (2005) *Gender research applications within the field of Humanities-Social Sciences (Genusvetenskapliga projektansökningar inom humaniora-samhällsvetenskap)* Stockholm: The Swedish Research Council (p. 13). In this inquiry, Ganetz distinguishes between three kinds of gender research, i.e. a) gender research, b) gender perspective, c) gender aspect, thus not giving an account of gender studies as a subject field of its own.

and critical race theory have gone somewhere else. She finds “no there there” (82). In 2000, American scholar Robyn Wiegman took this debate further, by diagnosing the reactions to the call from various quarters for the multiplicity of identities and political fragmentation as expressions of a fear over the impact this could dispel on feminism’s healthy condition. While critical about generational models as patriarchal and heterosexist, Wiegman shows how a generational thinking in the academy is performed through a certain culture, creating specific relations of belonging and affect. As an example, she mentions the story of feminism’s move from the streets of activism into academia through which the “now-canonical scene of feminist self-intervention” is told. (811). Instead of a continuation of a historical memory as accumulative and operating through the idea of generational legacies, Wiegman argues for an interruption of this reproductive logic. She writes: “... feminism is not self-identical, which means that her temporal order is not teleological; her subjectivity is irreducible to the political emplotment of either mine or yours. ... I argue not only for the political value of feminism’s inability to remain identical to itself, but for a studied reassessment of the meaning and force of academic institutionalization itself” (808, 809). Thus, Wiegman asks for investigations of the *implications* of this successful academic institutionalization of feminist knowledge, where “women” is produced as object of study and stories of “real women” are being told.

In times where large numbers of students, and PhD-students, take their degrees in women’s/gender studies, investigations of the so-called all-embracing critical potentiality of feminist academic work – described as liberatory, transformative and transgressive – is indeed highly ranked on the agenda. In this issue of *GJSS*, Sabine Hark formulates the probing question whether the critical impulse of feminist interdisciplinarity runs the risk of being assimilated into a “new norm for transnational corporate elites”. In her piece *Magical Sign. On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* she makes an investigation of the politics of ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’. She is refreshingly suspicious of them as marks of a buzzword in present academic discourse. Hark takes as her point of departure the two-fold meaning of inter- and transdisciplinarity and exhibits how inter- and transdisciplinarity on the one hand are expressed as the emblem of critical, transformative and transgressive

knowledge seeking, while the same terms, on the other hand, are presented as the model for the neo-liberal discourse of Higher Education of today. After an investigation of the politics of the terms, as well as the politics of disciplinarity, she turns her attention to an investigation of the politics of interdisciplinarity within women's studies with the question "Why did interdisciplinarity turn out to be such an important feature in defining and distinguishing Women's Studies?" A question she evolves throughout the article, focusing on the intellectual sites and material conditions of knowledge seeking in women's studies. In her response to Hark, Nina Lykke takes departure from Hark's question of whether the ambition for interdisciplinarity was nothing but rhetorics, or if it has resulted in real structural changes. Giving examples from the European gender studies discourse, Lykke emphasises the importance of acknowledging the widely different ways of organizing women's/gender studies in local, national and regional contexts. She argues for the necessity of articulating alternative ways of what it means – structurally, institutionally, epistemologically and politically – to perform women's/gender studies as an inter- or postdiscipline.

During the fights 'with' and 'against' the notion of hegemonic feminism during the 1990s, the interventions from queer and postcolonial scholars were allowed to make their entry into the central debates of the field of women's/gender studies in the 1990s. The dismantling of the so embraced idea of global sisterhood came to result in deep and ongoing debates on the epistemological and methodological implications of diversity and power asymmetries. In her analysis of the ways in which feminist scholars have tried to manage plurality and power, Mia Liinason shows in this issue of *GJSS* how the intention to produce research without simplifying plurality or further expose implicit power hegemonies, have developed a will to produce 'guaranteed ethically approved' research in feminist academic work. Through a series of reflections on the general ambition in feminist academic work to avoid the methodological problems attached to the existence of power, which she investigates through an analysis of epistemological 'ranking-lists' or methodological 'check lists', she finds the ambition to avoid power asymmetries a problematic point of departure in itself. Thus, she encourages us to *shift* the focus of feminist inquiries, suggesting that the "...important task for feminist scholars is ... not to avoid power asymmetries, but to learn to handle them". Through

examples by the works of Sara Ahmed and Chantal Mouffe, she develops a methodology based on the idea of knowledge seeking as praxis, from the start imbued with norms, habits, customs and ideas, and as such intrinsically interwoven with cultures, politics and power.

In his piece, Björn Pernrud takes departure in another recent debate in women's/gender studies through his case study of the theoretical foundations of sex therapy in a feminist context. Starting from an analysis of the divergences between the two positions of "mainstream sex therapy" and "feminist sex therapy", Pernrud acknowledges the challenges formulated through the feminist intervention and simultaneously shows how the critical interferences establish a relation between mainstream and feminist sex therapy, through which they both are defined as contending positions. By way of a discussion of the feminist sex therapist's hopes for an unrepressed sexuality, he finds that those feminist hopes are positioned in a framework, none the less equally normative as the mainstream model. Thus, stressing the needs to take explicit responsibility for the politics that are practised, Pernrud devotes the remaining parts of his article to the question of how to establish a methodology capable of acknowledging the political nature of knowledge claims. Through the efforts to visualize the interactions between the "real" world and the claims for knowledge, Pernrud request models of knowing able to accommodate both knowledge and politics.

While Pernrud investigates the epistemological and theoretical foundations of feminist knowledge seeking as it has been developed in the last decade, Hanna-Mari Ikonen and Hanna Ojala work on the interdisciplinary research methodology of the feminist interview in their methodologically focused article *Creating Togetherness and Experiencing Difference in Feminist Interviews. Knowing in a post-standpoint way?* Starting from their own research project and their own specific interviewing strategies (telephone interviewing vs. in-depth and multiple face-to-face interviews) with women in Finland, Ikonen and Ojala develop an account of the interview as a space for interaction and exchange that has to be accounted for rather than a space whose legitimacy can be assumed from on the basis of an identity political framework of 'feminist standpoint epistemology.' Their discussion relates to the discussion reviewed

above about the so-called *lost object* and *lost theoretical foundation* of feminist study today. By conceptualizing a research strategy that is post-identity and post-standpoint yet not non-foundationalist, they stress the continued usefulness of the feminist interview in the (post-)postmodern era. Thus, they suggest “the idea of distinctive locations and permanent as well as temporary assemblies” as a tenable methodological position also in concrete interview research.

Indeed, even though the critical potential of women’s/gender studies is praised in all quarters of feminist academic work, the discussions of how this critical potentiality are understood are conspicuous by its nature. To produce uncomfortable knowledge might be one way to carry this critical potentiality into effect. In the research notes section to this issue of the *GJSS*, Sabine Grenz presents her research project on German women writing about the end of the Second World War as an attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator. Grenz describes her intentions to make the present German cultural memory of national socialism in its gendered structure visible. Through a description of the composite method she uses in the research project – a combination of historical research and sociological and cultural analyses – she evolves in this piece her ideas around methodology, as exemplified by two analyses of excerpts from her source material, German women’s diaries written in 1945. The second research note comes from Kerstin Alnebratt who discusses the use of (interdisciplinary) research methodology by the authors of Master’s essays in women’s/gender studies in Sweden. She claims that the *lack* of words for what they actually do springs from a serious lack of methodological awareness, in a theoretical sense, as well as in practical skills. Through an awareness of the connections between methodologies, epistemologies and methods, she asks for a more practically oriented, ongoing discussion on methods in gender studies. The latter should be grounded on methodological and epistemological theories – a request that is not uncontested in women’s/gender studies, as evidenced by the ongoing debates in the field over the dual organization, the process of disciplinization and the interdisciplinary character of the field, as earlier mentioned.

The issue closes with three book/ journal reviews of state of the art reflections on feminist interdisciplinarity, produced in a U.S context. First of all, Romaine Zuidema



gives an introduction of the topics in the special feminist methodology issue “New Feminist approaches to Social Science Methodologies” of the journal *Signs* (2005, vol. 30, no. 4), asking whether research itself can contribute to producing a liberatory, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group. Secondly, Jennifer Lynn Musto presents the collection *Women’s Studies on Its Own: A next Wave Reader in Institutional Change* as an anthology offering various views on the academic feminist project vis-à-vis institutions in the U.S. Thirdly, Kajsa Widegren discuss Jane Roland Martin’s book *Coming of Age in Academe – Rekindling Women’s Hopes and Reforming the Academy*, in a reflection over the implications of a perspective where women’s lives and social conditions are seen as the point of departure for women’s studies as a discipline. As editors we have opted for a selection of reviews of books on the topic in question so as to make the issue not only an intervention in the debate, but also so as to connect to current-day scholarship on feminist interdisciplinarity.

In conclusion: The wide range of the articles in this issue reflects the theme of the issue in itself, not only as to content, but also as to epistemologies, methodologies and methods used. In an attempt to release feminist knowledge production both from the “traditional” frames of academic knowledge production and from a repetition of past feminist positions in feminist academic work, this issue seeks to address the need of a transfer from dichotomizations such as disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity, empirical/theoretical as well as quantitative/qualitative, to a thematic mode of working (cf Esseveld & Davies 1989). By doing this, we would like to suggest, the theoretical, epistemological and ontological questions are being placed on the forefront, in an understanding of feminist academic knowledge production as an investigation of the intersections between the subjective, the theoretical and the political. In the context of this special issue, ‘the political’ and ‘the scholarly’ refer to the *European* political and scholarly domains. With this issue, we have attempted to develop thoughts on feminist interdisciplinarity from within the realm of European women’s/gender studies so as to complement the debate as it has taken place in the Anglo-American world.

## Acknowledgements

The idea for this issue was born in the context of WeAVE – the European gender studies network for students, postgraduate students, PhDs, post-doc researchers, and junior teachers (see [www.weave-network.eu](http://www.weave-network.eu)). The editors want to thank the core members of WeAVE for allowing us to represent them here as special issue editors. We also want to give our warmest acknowledgments to the team of anonymous referees and the editorial team of the *GJSS* for their great job making this special issue of *GJSS* possible. Finally, we want to send our most deep thanks to Lund university and Athena - the Advanced Thematic Network of Women's Studies in Europe (see [www.athena3.org](http://www.athena3.org)) of which WeAVE is part, for making this issue financially possible.

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