Listing the current preoccupations of feminist social thought, the authors raise questions and issues concerning substantive feminist research processes in the social sciences, and present their ideas about a ‘feminist fractured foundationlist’ epistemology. Arguments for the reflexivity of feminist research process; acknowledgment of the contextual specificity of feminist as of all knowledge; recognition that who a researcher is, in terms of their sex, race, class and sexuality, affects what they ‘find’ in research — these and other components of feminist epistemology emphasise the necessarily ontological basis of knowledge production.

Introduction

Feminist social science in the 1990s is very different from that of the 1970s and ‘80s (Spender, 1981; Kramarae & Spender, 1992; Stanley, 1992). There are now large groups of feminists working at all levels in the social science disciplines. Mainstream journals are considerably more sympathetic to feminist material than in the 1970s and early ‘80s, while a new range of specialist academic feminist journals now stand alongside older generalist ones such as Signs, Women’s Studies International Forum and Feminist Review. There is wider recognition of the limitations, as well as the strengths, of feminist as of all other systems of thought. Also structuralist approaches — particularly functionalism, marxism and conjunctions between the two — are no longer in the vanguard, and feminist versions of postmodernism, deconstructionism and post-structuralism confidently stalk the intellectual landscape.

The ideas once at the forefront of feminist social theory were concerned with women’s ‘double vision’ of reality, the complexity of human consciousness, the rejection of Cartesian binary or dichotomous categories as supposed descriptions of social life, criticisms of abstract deductivist ‘grand theory’ approaches, and insistence of the reflexivity of research and other intellectual processes (eg. Daniels, 1975). However, the perceived importance of these sociologically-influenced ways of thinking has been overtaken by theoretical and epistemological developments elsewhere, although we think these themes remain fundamental and should be of abiding feminist concern. The current preoccupations of feminist social thought include¹:

1. debates concerning a ‘feminist method’ and the emergence of ideas concerning a distinct feminist epistemology;
2. the related development of a feminist ontology, and its theorising of body, mind and emotions;
3. ideas concerning the fracturing of the category ‘Women’, and thus deconstructionist influences on feminist theory;
4. related debates concerning essentialist versus constructionist positions regarding the binaries ‘Women’/’Men’;

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promotion of the concept of 'difference' around race/ethnicity, sexuality and other sites of experiential difference between women, and the deconstructionist notion of 'differance' as a signifier of discordancies and controversies;

(6) discussions concerning the 'epistemological privilege of the oppressed' and, relatedly, whether distinct black and lesbian feminist epistemologies exist.

All these debates raise epistemological questions, and most of them also raise questions and issues concerning substantive feminist research processes in the social sciences. In what follows we discuss these aspects of contemporary feminist social thought in relation to our earlier concern with feminist research (Stanley & Wise, 1979, 1983a, 1983b, 1990, 1993; Stanley, 1990a, 1990b; Wise & Stanley, 1987), particularly our ideas about a 'feminist fractured foundationalist' epistemology.

The conventional form that both quantitative and qualitative approaches take situates 'the researcher' as detached, omnipotent: an expert on a different critical plane from those they study. There is a contradiction here for feminist social science, one often ignored or argued away. On the one hand, feminist social science proclaims its egalitarian impulse, but on the other, it implies a traditional and elitist notion of 'us', the theorising researching elite (feminists), and 'them', the experiencing researched (women). While there may be no alternative to academic feminism being located within some kind of knowledge hierarchy if it is to continue existing within academia, at the very least feminist social scientists must acknowledge the ethical and political issues involved in what we do, how we do it, and the claims we make for it. The way the category 'Women' is understood in feminist social science still tends to produce over-generalisations which gloss a multitude of different experiences of sexism and oppression. Neither sexuality, nor 'race'/ethnicity, nor age, nor disability, nor the relationship between first world and third world (so-called) countries, are yet taken seriously at the level of epistemology.

Our alternative has been to argue, not for a sociology of gender, nor a sociology of women, but instead the remaking of the discipline in feminist terms. This encompasses a distinct epistemological position which:

(1) locates the feminist researcher on the same critical plane as those she researches;

(2) sees these 'researched' as including the category 'Men' and men's behaviours, not just the category 'Women' or experiences specific to women;

(3) positions feminist research as proceeding from the organisational and intellectual location of the feminist researcher, as the person who makes sense of 'the world' and produces generalised knowledge-claims on the basis of this;

(4) treats 'knowledge' as situated, indexical and competing knowledges, as versions, as small slices of reality confronting each other in an epistemological frame which systematically adjudicates between them;

(5) analyses 'structure', the structured and repetitive regularities and inequalities in social life, especially how structures are defined as 'facts' external to and constraining upon people;

(6) recognises that although the statement 'women are oppressed' is true at one level, it masks not only differences between women but also the ways in which differently located women can gain and exercise power and authority and including in relation to men;

(7) it thus necessitates prising apart the category 'Men' and women's experiences of different men in different times, places and circumstances;

(8) it therefore recognises the specificity of material differences between differently located
Feminist Epistemology and Ontology

groups of women and rejects using research to colonise such difference within an unchanged feminist social science: it takes seriously the resultant epistemological differences between women's knowledges, and so changes its organisation, assumptions, ways of working;

(9) throughout it presents a social constructionist and non-essentialist notion of 'the self, whether female or male, homosexual or heterosexual;

(10) and although traditional foundationalist views of 'reality' as single and unseamed', 'out there' and unproblematically available for experts, scientists, to discover the truth about are rejected, nonetheless it accepts that there is a social reality, one which members of society construct as having objective existence above and beyond competing constructions and interpretations of it;

(11) and it recognises that social life is in good part composed of discussions, debates and controversies concerning precisely what this objective reality consists of.

These are key elements in our epistemological approach, which we term a 'feminist fractured foundationalism' (Stanley & Wise, 1990, pp.41-2), thereby emphasising that ontological relativism marches hand-in-hand with everyday foundationalist claims and practices — an everyday foundationalism which is both highly sophisticated and astoundingly successful in resolving differences between versions, between competing reality claims. Our approach recognises this complexity of everyday theorising and the correspondingly complex relationship between ontology and epistemology that it encapsulates. These ideas concerning feminist fractured foundationalism act as a benchmark against which we discuss key currents within contemporary feminist social thought in the rest of this article.

'Feminist Method' and Feminist Epistemology

Is there a distinct feminist method, in the sense of a technique of data collection that is specific and unique to feminist social science? Very few feminists (primarily Reinhartz 1979, 1983) have actually argued this position. Debates between proponents and critics are extensively reviewed in Stanley & Wise (1990), which concludes that critics have mistakenly interpreted feminist discussion of 'methodology' in this way, and that proponents are actually seeking a feminist intervention at the level of epistemology concerned with re-making 'knowledge' in feminist terms.

An epistemology is a framework or theory for specifying the constitution and generation of knowledge about the social world; that is, it concerns how to understand the nature of 'reality'. A given epistemological framework specifies not only what 'knowledge' is and how to recognise it, but who are 'knowers' and by what means someone becomes one, and also the means by which competing knowledge-claims are adjudicated and some rejected in favour of another/others (Harding, 1987:1-14, 181-90). The question of epistemology, then, is crucial, precisely fundamental, for feminism, for it is around the constitution of a feminist epistemology that feminism can most directly and far-reaching challenge non-feminist frameworks and ways of working (Cain, 1990; Sherwin, 1989).

The two dominant co-existent feminist epistemologies are identified by Sandra Harding (1987; see also Zita 1998) as 'successor science' in their assumptions and operations. Both the earlier 'feminist empiricism' and the later 'feminist standpoint' approaches are, we think, grounded in the Cartesian assumption that a single and unseamed social as well as physical reality exists 'out there', and that particular kinds of persons (trained, experts, scientists) have a greater degree of access to knowledge of this. Feminist empiricism at basis aligns itself with other forms of empiricism — the feminist (social) scientist joins her male scientific peers; while the feminist
standpoint approach (Winnant, 1987) both shares and departs from traditional foundationalism by insisting that, while the feminist (social) scientist has a privileged access to real social reality, this is because the oppressed have epistemological privilege and can see people and events as they really are. However, a new feminist epistemology of feminist postmodernism, apparently rejecting foundationalism in all its forms, is being constituted. This feminist postmodernist epistemology (e.g., Weedon, 1987; Lather, 1991) rejects all ‘grand narratives’, including feminist grand theory explanations of women’s condition and oppression. It also dismisses any notion of a representational, effectively one-to-one, relationship between reality and textually-based (written, verbal, visual) accounts of it. Postmodernist theory claims to be the originator of these epistemological claims. However, most of them were actually argued in the 1960s critiques of positivism in the social sciences, in the 1930s work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Collingwood, and indeed earlier still in strands of late 19th century sociology influenced by German philosophy, as well as in feminist work influenced by interactionist ideas. Thus these ideas are actually the common property of a number of divergent intellectual traditions.

Marking out the attributes of different although related feminist epistemologies, such as feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint, and feminist postmodernism, is useful as long as it is recognised that this produces a model, and is thus necessarily a simplified account of only a few of the epistemological possibilities that exist. Also feminists who are allocated to one of these positions typically encompass in their work elements of all three — and also of feminist epistemologies that are silenced in Sandra Harding’s (1987), Alison Jaggar’s (1983) and other socialist feminist accounts of epistemology, such as radical feminism and black and lesbian feminism. Sandra Harding’s (1991) Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? does discuss the contribution of black feminism to feminist epistemology and also the existence of a lesbian standpoint, but these positions are subordinated to the framework and assumptions of the ‘standpoint’ approach outlined in Harding’s earlier writings, while we see both as actually distinct epistemologies which raise fundamental questions about the constitution and utility of the ‘standpoint’ categorisation.

It is useful to adopt five broad principles in discussing feminist epistemology. Firstly, there is a spectrum of feminist epistemological positions discussed abstractly, although in practice these shade into each other in people’s work. Secondly, these different positions argue for sometimes conflicting ideas about the bases of knowledge, who generates it and under what conditions. Thirdly, people often combine elements of a number of these positions in their work, and this suggests not only the human ability to work within contradictions, but also that often people think through the bases of what they do and still work with ‘contradictory’ elements because this is what social reality is like. Fourthly, there is no a priori right or correct feminist epistemology: each can be seen as plausible and sensible, given the particular political projects and purposes of those who hold it. Fifthly, recognising this does not mean that anyone has to agree with other people’s positions, but it does suggest the need for mutual respect between different feminisms and the concomitant need for diversity rather than the hegemony of one form of feminism over all others.

The feminist critique of knowledges (Caine, Grosz and Lepervanche, 1988) has moved away from simple accusations of ‘bias’, to develop a critique of the influence of Cartesian ideas. Cartesian approaches to knowledge assume its unproblematic generalisability of knowledge from its context of production (conventionally called a ‘context of discovery’\(^2\)) to a variety of contexts of use. These also relatedly see knowledge as existing independently (because ‘out there’ in social reality and merely ‘discovered’ by a knowledge-producer) of the person/s who produced it. That is, their ‘science’ claims are founded not only on notions of the generalisability and transferability of
knowledge, but also its non-contamination by influences drawn from either the context of its 'discovery'/production or the social location and characteristics of those who produce it.

Cartesian approaches concomitantly deny their grounding in ontology, in the being, experiences and understandings of knowledge-producers. However, the feminist critique of knowledges argues for a materialistic, but not a marxist, theory of knowledge, one irrevocably rooted in women's concrete and diverse practical and everyday experiences of oppressions; and it insists that these analytic knowledges are reflexive, indexical and local: they are epistemologically tied to their context of production, and are ontologically-grounded. This is what was earlier referred to as the feminist fractured foundationalist epistemology. This approach proposes that there is nothing separate from social life and experience, nor which exists outside of it. Thus the relationship between feminist epistemology and feminist ontology here is one which positions ontology as the foundation: being or ontology is the seat of experience and thus of theory and knowledge. Nothing other than 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988, 1991) is possible: there is no way of moving 'outside' of experientially-derived understandings/theories, whether derived from so-called first-, second- or third-hand theorisations of the social world; and nothing exists other than social life, people's places within it, and their understandings of all this.

Relatedly, an ontologically-based theory of feminist intellectual knowledge, and a feminist ontologically-based theory of emotionality, are crucially implicated in the development of a distinct feminist epistemology. 'The body' and its physical but also its intellectual, mindful, experiences is a cultural text: its meaning and experience are irrevocably inscribed within a cultural (and thus political) frame, although its materiality exists in complex relation with this. Moreover, within traditional epistemologies, emotions are perceived as disruptive and subversive of knowledge as a wild zone unamenable to reason and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control (Bordo, 1986). In contrast, the feminist fractured foundationalist epistemology rejects such Cartesian binary ways of polarising reason and emotion (as does Jaggar, 1989). Instead it positions ontology, including emotionality, as the product of culture and thus as amenable to 'rational' analysis as any other culturally inscribed behavioural form. More than this, feminist fractured foundationalism refuses to disparage emotion as a second class (or worse) source of knowledge by treating it as an obfuscating layer between social reality and reasoned understanding. Instead it banishes the myth of the dispassionate and unemotional 'scientific observer', by locating an experiencing feeling subject at the centre of all intellectual endeavour.

A Feminist Ontology

An 'ontology' is a theory of 'reality' or being; and within Cartesian systems of thought 'being' is seen to encompass the body and the mind, with body associated with women and mind with men, and also the rational aspects of mind seen as male and the irrational emotional aspects associated with women. Feminist ontology is concerned with theorising being, and with rejecting Cartesian binary ways of understanding the relationship between the body, the mind and emotions. The 'masculinist' ontology associated with Cartesian dualisms and foundationalism (Bordo, 1986, 1989) sees reality as characterised by two opposing principles, those of masculinity and femininity (or rather maleness and femaleness) and their working out through science and nature, reason and emotion, objectivity and subjectivity, and so on; the very grounds of reality are presupposed in binary and gendered terms (Tuana, 1983, 1986; Purdy, 1986). And these opposing principles are seen both as symbiotically related and necessary to each other and as existing in relations of super- and subordination, with the feminine supportive of the masculine (Ruth 1987). Reality is 'naturally' thus both stratified and heterosexual in its ordering within Cartesian thought systems.
Feminist fractured foundationalism challenges the binary fundamentals of Cartesian ontology, for it recognises differentiation but sees this as neither oppositional nor dualistic, and is also appreciative of, rather than antagonistic to, difference. Such a feminist ontology is not concerned merely to affirm and revalue those characteristics which masculinist Cartesian ontology associates with the feminine — its task is the more challenging and radical one of disputing the binary basis of Cartesian systems of thought altogether.

People experience their ‘selves’ neither as complete social constructions, nor as essential and ‘uncultured’ sites of unchanging difference. Rather, ‘the self is the production of interaction and social construction and is irrevocably social and cultural in its basis. However, although dynamic in its constitution, ordinarily the ‘self is experienced as in stasis — ‘this is me’ — at any one point in time: nevertheless, looking back people can construe 'other' and rather different selves — ‘I was that’ — that once were them. ‘The self is positioned here in terms of ‘mind’, a composite of thoughts, understandings and emotions that exists in complex relationship to ‘the body’. The supposed ‘mind/body dualism’ conditions, although it does not pre-determine, how people think of ‘our selves’. However, this dualism is one people multiply traverse: at one time they may define themselves in terms of physicality, of looks, of the body and its face; and at other times distance themselves from their bodies, seeing their selves more in terms of intellectuality or emotions or spirit. In other words, such dualisms operate at a categorical level: as such they considerably oversimplify the theorising that people engage in, in going about the business of understanding social life and their places within it.

Feminist ontology, then, rejects binary and oppositional notions of ‘the self and its relationship to ‘the body' and 'mind' and 'emotions'; it also rejects a notion of 'self and Other' that the self supposedly defines itself against and in opposition to (Butler, 1989, 1990; Whitbeck, 1989). Here ‘the Other’ is seen as a threat to the integrity of self, for, without an Other, self would not, could not in this ontology, exist. The feminist approach to the construction of self, in contrast, sees ‘self as relationally and interactionally composed, its construction being historically, culturally and contextually specific and also subtly changing in different interactional circumstances. Thus an alternative feminist way of understanding the dualisms of masculinist ontology — of self and other, individual and collectivity — is to treat these not as oppositions but cooperative endeavours for constructing selves — both selves — through collective relational systems of action and interaction.

Feminist fractured foundationalism positions the emotions as a legitimate source of knowledge, as minded and rational responses to given situations, unlike Cartesian ideas, which position emotions as the antithesis of reason and thus as incapable of producing ‘real’ or ‘true’ knowledge (Hochschild, 1975). Emotions, the product of the mind, can be separated, at least at the level of theoretical discussion, from feelings, rooted in the responses of the body: cold and pain are feelings, love and envy are emotions. But of course in practice separating them is by no means so simple (Jaggar, 1989). The cultural specificity of feelings immediately alerts us to the fact that ‘the body' and its ‘feelings’ are constructions located within particular historical and cultural circumstances and can differ considerably over time and between different cultural groups, as for instance comparative work on illness symptoms demonstrates. And also people talk about — and experience — feelings and emotions in very similar ways: for instance, ‘pain’ exists as an emotion as well as a feeling, for physical pain is typically experienced as also emotionally distressing. Emotions and feelings, then, cannot be readily assigned across a supposed mind/body divide, yet another indicator of fundamental flaws in Cartesian ontology when looked at from a feminist viewpoint.
'The body' can be conceptualised in universal and essentialist terms, as a biologically constituted and determined organism which has innate, essentially derived, differences in terms of sex — the position of classical Cartesian ontology. Alternatively, within feminist ontology 'the body' is rather seen in terms of *embodiment*, a cultural process by which the physical body becomes a site of culturally ascribed and disputed meanings, experiences, feelings (see especially *Hypatia*, 1991; also Gatens, 1988). Here 'the body' is positioned within culturally specific — and sometimes competing — discourses of meaning, authority and control; thus 'the body' is rather to be conceptualised as a *becoming*, its meaning is never fixed to a particular type of person, but rather these different meanings have to be achieved and re-achieved in order to be seen as constituting a particular type of person. Certainly the body is continually invoked in terms of closure, fixture; but this is also continually undercut by knowledge of the processes of physical change, ageing, illness and death. 'The body' is thus both signified — the product of language and a set of institutions that define, classify, assign, order and control; and also one of the key signifiers in western culture — 'the body' is actually different *bodies* around which different readings, significations and judgements can be made.

It has become *de rigeur* for feminists making claims to theoretical sophistication to eschew any invocation of 'the body' as anything other than discursively, textually and thus linguistically created and to insist that the body has no 'real' physical or material importance outside of this. Certainly bodies seemingly have 'their' own rhythms and responses over which 'we' often feel we have little or no control: the experience of acute or terminal illness being a case in point. Nevertheless, people can understand such experiences and dislocations only through socially constructed frameworks of understanding. It is not that the experience is mediated by such frameworks: it is rather *constituted by means of* them. Thus rather than travelling the 'strict' constructionist route, we argue for the necessity of 'taking the body seriously' at a conceptual level. Consequently, is it possible to think about 'the body', not merely as a linguistic creation, but as having a physical, material and consequential reality, without slipping into essentialism?

For some feminists, the 'parler femme' of French feminists such as Helene Cixous (1981 a, 1981 b), Julia Kristeva (1981,1982; Butler, 1988) and especially Luce Irigaray (1980, 1981,1985), provides precisely such a means. Irigaray's writing valorises women's bodies, but in ways which deconstruct the phallic organisation and ordering of sexuality and the bodies which perform it (Grosz, 1986, 1990a, 19S0b). For Irigaray, women's sexuality 'is not one', is rather a plurality based on the primacy of labial touch and pleasure. Irigaray thus positions women as sexual subjects, not as objects of male desire. She uses the idea that women are 'other' to men to articulate an oppositional stance to phallocentrism, indeed to challenge it at the level of the symbolic order through the mis/use of language, by rewriting the meaning of language and how it inscribes women's sexuality. Thus, through a 'linguistic turn' Irigaray deconstructs the binary oppositions of essentialism and constructionism, but from the side of and by means of essentialism itself. By speaking 'labia! politics' Irigaray not only speaks the unspeakable, women's sexual autonomy, but also blurs the social and constructed and the biological and essential. Favourably inclined critics see this as a political strategy which speaks to a particular historical, cultural and sexual political moment, and which uses a textual politics of essence to place 'parler femme' into discourse and thus into culture and history. The less favourably inclined accept the positive evaluation but also see her work as a refusal to recognise that life, politics and oppression are constituted by more than language alone; for them, the 'linguistic turn' of post-structuralism is not a sufficient basis for a feminist praxis.

Although Irigaray rejects much of the heritage of Lacan, she retains Lacanian ideas concerning
the development of self in relation to an Other seen in oppositional terms, while feminist ontology instead sees self in relational, collective and collaborative terms. Also although on one level Irigaray denies the synonymity of the phallus and its place in the symbolic order with the actual penis that men have, nonetheless at every point her discussion collapses the two; her denial brackets thinking through the implications of retaining Lacanian phallacious ideas at all. And in addition, construing 'parler femme' as defined by the subject-position of the speaker, and thus as available to men as well as to women — that is, as constituted primarily through linguistic form — undercuts the more radical feature of Irigaray's work, which is to wrest language back from men, not to hand them the means to speak 'as women' as well as 'as men'. Moreover, positioning material physicality as a matter of language and discourse only, as Irigaray seemingly does, is to condemn feminist social theory to the analysis of abstract categories alone. This may be seductive, but it is also redundant as a means of changing as well as understanding social life. To effect change, a feminist social theory capable of analysing everyday life, experiences, understanding and theorising is needed. Binary categories cannot be deconstructed by linguistic means alone, but rather through effecting change at the level of experience, of practice.

'Women' and Deconstructionism

Feminist deconstructionists have argued that the fractured and divergent experiences of actual women have been subsumed within the category 'Women', which is treated as an absolute, a binary category in a hierarchical relationship to 'Men', with these two defined against each other in inappropriately dichotomous terms (Hekman, 1991; Poovey, 1988; Alcoff, 1988). Analysing experience in binary terms constitutes a form of deductivism, for here theory acts in an imperialistic relationship to life, which is 'read off from the binary categories. Thus the binary categories come to constitute a grand narrative of social life, prescribing and proscribing the actual behaviours of men and women (Kittay, 1988).

Feminist deconstructionist arguments about the category 'Women' and the binary gender system propose (eg. Lather, 1991) that such binaries should be identified, then the dependent category reversed or displaced, and then a more fluid conceptual organisation should replace the binary one. This works in part by deconstructing the content of the category, in part by ironising 'essentialist' invocations of it. Feminist fractured foundationalism, in contrast, retains its foundation upon the category 'Women' and recognition of its binary relationship to the category 'Men'. Without this, a distinctively feminist philosophy and praxis would no longer exist, would be dissolved into an apparently ungendered deconstructionist position (for criticisms of this see Wolff, 1990). There are considerably more than sentimental reasons for the retention of the category; in particular, articulating 'Women' in its own right rather than as derivative of and 'other' to 'Men' is necessary for as long as women — as well as 'Women' — are in any sense unequal, exploited or oppressed in relation to men as well as to 'Men'. That is, for as long as 'gender' exists as a meaningful way to categorise aspects of social life and people's behaviours within it. Deconstructionist, like post-structuralist, approaches imply change at the level of language and texts and categories alone; but, as part of a world-wide political movement, academic feminism necessarily retains a praxis firmly concerned with more than a 'linguistic turn'.

Another reservation concerning deconstructionist ideas is that humanist arguments that women should be treated as fully part of humanity, with the same ontological constitution and the same rights and responsibilities as men, are very powerful in political terms, for rejecting such arguments is increasingly accepted, on a world-scale, as discriminatory and morally unjustifiable. Thus any approach which militates against the possibility of fully utilising these and related
humanist arguments must, realistically, be seen as gendered and masculinist in its consequence. Moreover, now and for the foreseeable future there is no such thing as 'ungender'; and any argument that feminism should become subsumed within a more general deconstructionist impulse in intellectual life must be seen as not only anti-feminist but also, whether intended or not, as promoting the interests of the category 'Men'. There are, however, other possibilities which focus on 'Women' as a category but do not deny or ignore the analytic and practical importance of the complex relationship between category and experience.

One such possibility for feminism is to analyse the category binaries of both 'Women' and 'Men' (and the related poles of binaries such as masculine and feminine, self and other, subject and object, active and passive, and mind and body) as representations which act as oughts rather than as descriptions of how women and men actually are. This is to focus upon the processes by which such representations are constructed, used or rejected, reconstructed, and to reject any notion that somehow 'behind' these lies a 'real' level of social reality (and see here the debate between Linda Gordon (1990a, 1990b) and Joan Scott (1988, 1990a, 1990b)). Another possibility is for feminism to become explicitly concerned with the multiple and continual fractures that occur between experience and categories, for there is a need to break the hierarchical relationship of super- and subordination between them, that when the two clash it is experience which is seen as wrong. Being 'a woman', someone who is in some sense part of the category 'Women', is ontologically little like the category 'descriptions' or theoretical accounts. 'A woman' is not a 'socialised' stasis but is rather composed by a series of ontological ruptures or jolts (Riley, 1987; Stanley, 1988) when we stop being 'just me' and are constrained to behave as or to be seen as 'a woman'. It is rarely possible to be 'a woman', for to be such is to become the category only, to surrender, or to be parted from, self so totally that the resentments, puzzles and jolts that typically result when category expectations meet everyday behaviour never occur.

Neither bodies nor minds are innately gendered; however, both body and mind experience and play their part in the construction of gender. A theory of mind, of human consciousness, is crucial to our feminist ontologically-based epistemology. This approach sees mind as ontologically and materially based, recognising that 'mind' and 'body' are only analytically, and not experientially, separable — and only then to the impoverishment of the analysis. Equally, it insists that 'mind' does not exist in some kind of intellectual ether, but is rather to be seen — and only to be seen — through the material products of mind, in statements about its constitution and workings, in behaviours and decisions and justifications for these, in retrospect on past behaviours, and so on. Thus this feminist theory of mind, proceeding from a materialist interactionist basis, also rejects any conceptual analytical separations between mind and emotion, for the rhetorical means through which emotions are invoked, displayed, questioned and justified are precisely those which show the mind in action, at points of comparative stasis: 'I felt and thought this, and then that'.

This is mind seen as the construction and invocation of mind, and not as any kind of essence. This approach thus eschews any psychologists or psychoanalytic reduction of mind to 'inner' processes and states, and instead insists upon its social and so analytic availability as well as its socially constructed being. Here 'mind' becomes available for analytic scrutiny through the accounts given of its workings as typical features of social interaction in all times and circumstances. The place to proceed from in further constructing a feminist theory of mind is thus constituted by everyday accounts of mind and its relationship to the body and emotions.
Essentialism and Constructionism

‘Essentialism’ indicates a belief in the existence of fixed properties and often invokes ‘biology’ or more loosely ‘human nature’ as the supposed basis of these. It sees the subject as defined by a fixed set of attributes treated as innately physical, intellectual or emotional, and thus deriving from the essential properties of body, mind or emotions. ‘Essentialists’ are criticised for their supposed rejection of the social constructionist base of such properties or characteristics; their claimed ahistoricism in seeing such characteristics as fixed across time and different cultures; and their supposed positioning of gender in binary terms as strict divisions of attributes which contain no internal fracturing. In relation to essentialisms connected with the binary categories ‘Women’/‘Men’, essentialists are also supposed to embrace a particular ontological position in which actual women and men as well as the categories ‘Women’/‘Men’ are seen as ontologically stable, unitary, coherent and fixed (Fuss, 1989). However, a major problem with such criticisms, as Fuss notes, is that they treat ‘essentialism’ in essentialist terms as pre-dating its naming and intellectual origins at a particular time. That is, the criticisms imply the people criticised were always essentialist, even before the notion existed. However, ‘essentialism’ is actually an invention and not the discovery of something innately ‘there’. Moreover, the ideas and positions these criticisms fix upon, and ironically essentialise by treating as unitary, coherent and fixed, are more complex and certainly far less essentialist than admitted. There are a number of overlapping discourses within feminism which have essentialist features, although each of these pivots on what are actually constructionist principles (Grosz, 1990a).

One such discourse coheres around the view that there are ‘womanist’ qualities untainted by the patriarchal order, lying beneath or behind the levels of falsity and deformation. However, this supposedly radical feminist position is closely related to the earlier widely-held adherence to a ‘stages of consciousness’ view of the relationship between feminism and contrary thought-systems, and was largely a product of the influence of marxism on feminism. And as with marxist feminism, radical feminism actually turns on a strong social constructionist conviction that the self, the subject, can change from stage to stage precisely because not unitary, coherent or stable.

A second supposedly essentialist discourse within feminism turns on the notion of ‘women’s oppression’, which is taken to indicate that all women are subjugated for the same reason/s by the same means to the same extent across all cultures and history within patriarchy. Certainly feminists — and for as long as they are feminists — take the view that there is something which binds together all women. However, although the specifics of subjugation certainly differ in particular times, places and circumstances, nevertheless the result is always to position women in relationships of subordination to men. Moreover, all varieties of feminism take the view that ‘oppression’ is precisely not fixed, can be changed by changing the behaviours and attributes of actual women and men, as well as by the changing of structures and systems. Here too supposed essentialism actually rests on strong constructionism. The third possibly essentialist feminist discourse is that which perceives unity in its object of inquiry, women. Seeing ‘Women’/women as united by certain characteristics is criticised as essentialist because supposedly deriving from perceiving a fixed coherent set of properties as constituting women (Spelman, 1988). However, there is no necessity for what unites women to be physiological or psychological or anything other than that ‘women are oppressed’: that is, characteristics resulting from a particular [distribution of sexual political power at a micro- as well as at a macro-level between women and men. In addition, actual women and men do indeed exist and do in practice display certain differences from each other along (fairly) constant lines at any one point in time. But there is absolutely no need within
feminist thinking to treat either the 'behavioural' or the 'physiological'/'psychological' as having any fixed essential properties, as existing outside of cultural and thus of *socially constructed* patterns of meaning.

Moreover, at this point in time, women do share certain kinds of socially constructed attributes and are subjugated to and by men; and to be convinced that this is a legitimate object of inquiry is neither outmoded nor unsophisticated. It is and remains crucially, fundamentally, important. Nor is there anything about this conviction that necessarily indicates any measure of 'essentialism'. Additionally, whether 'essentialism' is conservative is not inscribed 'within' as a fixed property of it, but rather depends upon the who, how and where of its use. Certainly there are feminists who do adopt essentialist positions around one of these three discourses (or others), but equally so there is a good deal of conservative essentialism in the position advanced by feminist deconstructionism, in ascribing essences to others no matter how much these others protest that doing so misrepresents their ideas and political programmes.

The discourses that constitute present-day feminism are more appropriately conceptualised as divergent voices competing to name a position. Like other broad social movements, feminism has a large measure of internal fracturing, although externally it may appear otherwise by virtue of rhetorics of unity and stability advanced by particular proponents — or more usually by opponents. Constructionism, there should be no doubt about it, is fundamentally inscribed within feminism; and a defining element in all feminist theorising is its treatment of gender as socially constructed and feminism as the re-making of a changeable and non-essentialist gender order. All feminisms are by definition constructionist, but necessarily retain essentialist elements in the ways the categories 'Women'/'Men' are inscribed within them by virtue of positioning these categories, particularly that of 'Women', as fundamental to both their rhetorical style and their focus of analysis.

There is moreover no such thing as a deconstructionist position 'untainted' by essentialism. Deconstructionist ideas are predicated upon the existence of essentialism: essentialism has to be detected and criticised or a deconstructionist grouping within intellectual life would have no legitimacy or existence. And at the basis of deconstructionist theorising are essentialisms, through the general deconstructionist ploy of ascribing of definite, coherent and fixed properties to people and work labelled essentialist. Deconstructionism in practice operates as a source of would-be hegemonic control through the specification, by a particular epistemic community-in-the-making, of what it is permitted to think and, through this, what is theoretically and politically acceptable (Morris 1988). The career of deconstructionism is a troubling one, for at least some of its proponents operate as a latter-day inquisition within intellectual life; however, many intellectual and political movements go through zealot phases but are gradually re-made over time, and it is to be hoped deconstructionism will do likewise.

**Difference and 'Differance'**

The debate on difference encompasses both *difference* as the multiple fragmentations and differences existing between women, between men, as well as between women and men; and also *differance* in the Derridarian sense (Grosz, 1990a). 'Differance' (an invented word) is the gap between objects of perception and the meanings these have as symbols or representations; and its theoretical importance in deconstructionism reveals another of its essentialist features, for it implies there are 'real' social objects beyond their socially constructed meanings.
A crucial formulation of 'differance' lies in Derrida's question 'what is woman?' (oddly echoing Freud's 'what do women want?') and his answer that 'woman' has the particular ontological quality of 'undecidability'. However, if 'differance' indeed stands for the 'switch points of meaning', the social junctures which reveal the moving discord of different voices and forces which invoke essentialist claims, then there is surely no need either to pose or to answer such a question, and certainly not to answer it by essentialising 'woman'. Far more preferable, and more consonant with the deconstructionist project, is the long-standing feminist insistence that 'Women' is a becoming: 'Women' is Other to 'Men'/men, and the category's 'O' of Otherness is precisely a cipher to be filled by those seeking, for varied and often competing purposes, to impose meanings on it, some of which are essentialist and others of which are not. This does not mean that it is an 'empty space' in the sense used by Monique Wittig (1980a, 1980b, 1992) in her deconstruction of 'the lesbian' as a socio-political category. It is rather — like 'the lesbian' — over-filled, with most of its naming being imposed and enforced on category-members.

Essentialism is named and defined in opposition to 'differance', around the rejection of any stable sets of properties which systematically differentiate between types of persons. It actually leads to a thoroughgoing individualism of a kind rarely seen in modern intellectual life, for its logic insists not only upon 'differance', competing constructions of meaning, but also upon the complete fragmentation of experience between people conventionally seen as sharing the 'same' social structural attributes, such as gender, class, sexuality and race/ethnicity. It denies such unities of experience. However, focussing on 'race' (although the same arguments apply elsewhere), there is no reason why the concept needs to be assigned any essentialist meaning. That is, 'race' should be seen as a political category which both reflects and helps construct the discourses of oppression (Rich, 1980); and there is consequently no reason to travel the deconstructionist road in rejecting 'race' (and gender and so on) as an allowable category. There is, however, every reason to recognise that, for instance, broad shared differences in skin colour — those known as black, brown, yellow, white — are categories with immensely consequential political and social implications which need to be attended to, both intellectually and politically, rather than argued away. Similarly, feminists should continue to insist that the categories 'Women'/Men' remain central to a feminist ethic as well as epistemology, for these socio-political constructions are fundamental to the systematic assignment of positions of super- and subordination to their composing binaries and the underlying evaluation of the relative social, moral, economic worth of these.

A feminist analysis of difference needs to encompass more than 'race'. Feminist theorising of women's experience needs to embrace difference in a thorough-going way, taking on board the multiple fragmentations of the experiences of oppression by 'Women'/women of different ages, sexualities, classes, ethnicities, political persuasions, interests and competences, religions and beliefs, education or its lack, country and continent, health or illness, able-bodiedness or disability, feminism or its lack (Dill, 1983; Rothenberg, 1990). It also needs to accept that difference is fundamental to feminism, which must necessarily revolve around fragmentations and differences of thought and practice (Sawicki, 1986; Muraro, 1987), although to date it has largely denied or ignored this by attempts to define 'Theory' as the preserve of a specialist group with a claimed hegemonic position over contrary feminist voices.

Epistemologies of the Oppressed

The ontologies of the oppressed rest on forbidden emotions and thoughts — such as loves which
are supposed not to dare to speak their name but do; and white masks of apparent acquiescence on
actually rebellious black faces. That is, fundamental here are actual or suspected subversions, as
subversion is named and categorised within dominant ideological practices. But the ontologies of
the oppressed are not merely negatively inscribed as Other, a counterpoint to dominant group
ontologies and experiences. Central to the political projects of oppressed groups is the
construction of an everyday life, a mundane reality often hidden from oppressors, and with it an
ontological system for explaining and thus also defining and constructing the very being of
members of such groups. But of course there are internal ontological fragmentations and
differences, and also points of ‘differance’. In relation to black and lesbian feminist epistemolo-
gies, and recognising the complex overlaps between category-members of these ‘different’
groups, these fracture-points include the profound differences of a black womanist in comparison
with a black feminist epistemology, and the differences between a lesbian feminist in comparison
with a lesbian epistemology. But there is also an important commonality between the constitution
of the two categories. To be a woman in ‘the black community’ and/or ‘the gay community’ is to be
Other, a stranger within these supposedly generic outsider communities. To be a feminist within
them is to be doubly Other, doubly a stranger — an outcast of outcasts. And to be a black lesbian
feminist is to be positioned on the periphery of these ontologies rather than being seen as the
possessor of a being, an ontology, unique in its own terms: not deviant from others but its own self
and being.

A black feminist epistemology is described by Patrica Hill Collins (1990) as having four defining
attributes: it uses concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and is predicated upon an
assumption of the ontological basis of knowledge; it uses dialogic means of assessing
knowledge-claims; it has an ethic of caring as the basis of relationships between people; and it
positions an ethic of accountability as central to this epistemic community. There are, however,
black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde (1982, 1984, 1985), bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1989),
Michelle Cliff (1980), Barbara Christian (1985, 1988) and Sondra O’ Neale (1986), who have
described features which are specific to a black feminist ontology which are then constructed as
an epistemological position. Given our conviction of the symbiotic relationship between
epistemology and ontology, this latter approach is particularly pertinent.

Black liberationists as well as black feminists have used a ‘mask’ metaphor to describe the
experience of being constrained to dissemble, to hide feelings and thoughts that may or may not
be ‘there’, but which were/are feared to be so by white oppressors. For black feminists, especially
black lesbian feminists, a ‘mask’ can characterise social relationships not only when among
whites, but also when among other black people: ‘home’, the ‘black community’, is another place
where dissembling may be necessary. Difference, the awareness of the multiplicity and complexity
of experience, is then a fundamental characteristic of black feminist ontology, as is ‘passing’ in
ways other than appearing as white: appearing as a non-deviant black woman rather than as a
feminist, for example.

A black feminist ontology also encompasses a sharp awareness of the ways that black women are
sexualised — are treated as ‘the body’ incarnate. White heterosexual men’s colonisation of black
women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity in the service of slavery has been discussed by black
feminists. However, it is equally important to note that white gay men have constructed images,
representations and actualities around black men's bodies and sexualities in highly comparable
ways, while black heterosexual men are often co-competitors with white for black women's bodies,
and black lesbian feminists have often protested against white lesbian sexual preditoriness
towards them. These complex processes of sexualisation have come to be treated by outsiders as the defining representation of black women, but to which their actual experience of the social world bears a diverse and complex relationship (Trinh, 1989).

Black feminists frequently emphasise the colonising role of much of ‘feminist theory’ — actually theory of white (heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied) feminist experience — in replicating the dynamics of exclusion on grounds of race. Barbara Christian (1985, 1988), for example, has noted the white feminist preoccupation with totalising generalisations and the related assumption that what she calls ‘the race for theory’ will also preoccupy black feminists. Similarly bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1989) has emphasised the epistemologically-achieved marginalisation of black feminists within an implicitly white but rhetorically open and generic ‘feminism’. These processes are part and parcel of more subtle variants of racism, but racism nonetheless (Ramazonoglu, 1986).

A lesbian feminist epistemology is similarly complexly constituted (Allen, 1990). For lesbian feminists, the wearing of masks takes the form of passing, a term adapted from black experience to indicate, not black people passing as white (neither a matter of choice nor even a possibility for the vast majority of black people), but lesbian women (or gay men) passing as heterosexual. Passing here is a choice and a possibility available for all lesbians, a choice even the most thoroughly ‘out’ of lesbian women are often constrained to make, for there is the presumption of heterosexuality in all times, places and circumstances unless and until its falsity is made apparent. Passing, being in ‘the closet’, has powerful metaphorical importance as well as providing an analytic gloss for elements of lesbian women’s experience. ‘The closet’ represents powerlessness — enforced silence; it also represents power — deliberately keeping secrets from people, secrets shared with like-minds but denied to others (Sedgwick, 1991).

‘The closet’ is an emblem of silence but one which resounds, for it speaks of disavowal and denial but also of the claiming and making of an identity at least in part separate from its naming by ‘oppressors’. It is also a sign of knowledge, shared knowledge of the signs and symbols which reveal ‘the lesbian beneath’ the clothes, looks, demeanour and behaviour of the passing woman; and as such it has both an ontological basis (it takes one to know one), and epistemological implications (to know others as oneself is known). The ontology of the lesbian turns upon ‘the closet’ known and seen from within; and the relations of the closet turn on the liminality of shifts between guises; between the implicit and explicit, the hidden and open, the shamed and proud, and — crucially — on its liminality with its supposed binary, ‘coming out’. These ontological shifts carry epistemological baggage: how and when to know not only which is which of these binaries (for telling them apart is not always as transparent as it might seem), but also when the explicit, open and proud will be safe or at least safe enough. And it also includes knowledge of how to tell apart what is lesbian and what is heterosexual, and what are the behaviours, emotions and persons that link these supposed binaries, for all is continuum and almost nothing composes the extremities of these categories.

‘Hetero-sexualisation’ is a major way that many heterosexual men respond to knowledge of a woman’s lesbianism. Conceptualising heterosexuality as a means of controlling deviant women who threaten some men’s sense of themselves and their power is no abstract theoretical notion. It is rather the common experience of women known to be lesbian; and knowledge of the likelihood and prevention of its occurrence forms an important part of the ontological basis of being a lesbian. Knowing and differentiating between ‘types of men’, and the circumstances that lesbian women find themselves in with men, has as many complexities as the Inuit relationship to snow, and as much importance.
Marilyn Frye’s (1983; Card, 1986) view of a lesbian feminist epistemology remains an evocative and powerful one. On the stage of life men play all the major parts and remain centre-stage and under the limelight. However, their performances depend upon the backstage activities of women, in directing them and lighting them well, and their audience is each other and the women. But there is another audience, of lesbian seers who watch the women and not the men; for them the play is the women, all the light is concentrated upon them. The performing men fear the lesbian seer, their particular terror the possibility that her watching will encourage the women to see themselves as she does, to remove their gaze from the men and become concerned with and focused upon their own activities. Of course this should not be taken as a literal account, but it does symbolically characterise how many lesbian feminists feel about their relationship to ‘Women’ and ‘Men’ and the implications of this for the ontology of all concerned.

Ontology, epistemology and ethics are different terms for the same phenomena and are, in our view, substitutable for each other. Thus although we have focussed on the ontological specificities of black feminism and lesbian feminism, we have stressed that these have epistemological consequentiality, such that the one is mutually subsumed within the other: a perfect union. And each of these specificities has clear ethical dimensions and consequentiality for the social relationships of those involved — that is, everyone (Hoagland, 1988a, 1988b).

Do feminists have epistemological privilege (Narayan, 1988)? That is, do oppressed people by virtue of their knowledge of both oppressors’ views of reality and that of their own subjugated group, have access to an a priori truer knowledge of reality? Feminist theorists such as Nancy Hartsock (1987), Alison Jaggar (1983) and Sandra Harding (1986, 1987) assume they do, and take the position that a feminist epistemology is a privileged one. However, while these ontologies/epistemologies certainly provide a different interpretation of people and events and thus ‘reality’, we cannot accept that the existence of difference, of multiplicity, means that there must be a hierarchical relationship between these differences. Superficially, assuming the epistemological privilege of the oppressed is both attractive and plausible. It is attractive because for once it positions the oppressed as superior; and plausible because the theoretical and epistemological writings of black people, black feminists, lesbians and lesbian feminists, as well as those about the generic ‘Women’, stress the ‘double vision’ of the particular oppressed group. However, it is precisely this commonality that points up the fallaciousness of the assumption: what happens when such epistemologies are lined up and judged against each other, rather than against that of an oppressor group? How then are these ‘a priori’ claims to superior knowledge to be adjudicated? Should comparative suffering be measured, judging the ontological situations of members of these groups against each other and finding the one which involves the greatest degree of suffering to be superordinate among the epistemologies of the oppressed? And just how should degrees of suffering be adjudicated? Some feminists already do this, surrendering any notion that ‘Women’ might be right in favour of other oppressed groups because of their perception of the relative degrees of oppression of members of these groups. However, measuring suffering is much like calculating the number of angels on a pinhead, although considerably more ethically and politically objectionable.

There are no foundational grounds for judging the a priori superiority of the epistemologies of the oppressed, nor of any one group of the oppressed, other than by comparing and judging the ontological bases of these epistemologies; and such a comparison and judgement is, as we have noted, ethically objectionable. There are, however, acceptable moral and political grounds for finding one of these preferable, a rather different claim than that which is concerned with staking
claim to a ‘truer, more real reality’. For us, the grounds of preference are *ontological*: that is, that it better fits with a proponent’s experience of living or being or understanding. Knowledge, as we have argued, is situated, specific and local to the conditions of its production and thus to the social location and being of its producers.

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

This discussion of recent debates in feminist social theory has argued for the ontological basis of knowledge and thus the valid existence of varieties of feminist epistemology, perceiving a symbiotic relationship between ontology, epistemology and ethics. Arguments for the reflexivity of feminist research processes; acknowledgement of the contextual specificity of feminist as of all other knowledge; recognition that who a researcher is, in terms of their sex, race, class and sexuality, affects what they ‘find’ in research is as true for feminist as any other researchers: these and other components of feminist epistemology emphasise the *necessarily* ontological basis of knowledge-production. This is one of the most profoundly radical of feminist statements, for it mounts a fundamental challenge to the basic precepts of Cartesian epistemology. This is partly because it denies that the *binaries* of reason and emotion and subjectivity and objectivity are binaries at all, instead insisting that these are different names for the *same sets of activities enacted by persons deemed to be different on grounds of gender* (and ‘race’, and sexuality, and class, and so on). It is also because it emphasises that ‘scientists’ necessarily produce context- and person-dependent, and thus ‘subjective’, knowledge; and it thereby refuses to accept the supposed subject/object divide that science enshrines. A feminism grounded in Cartesian presuppositions will produce no revolution in intellectual life but merely admit feminist experts into the hierarchies of scientism, while the feminist fractured foundationalism we have advanced will at least make a whole-hearted attempt at epistemological revolution.

The recent debates within feminist social theory addressed here are, in their fundamentals, largely those we earlier identified with the ‘sociology of knowledge’ concerns of feminism in the 1970s. We think many of these debates are to be seen as old feminist wine in new deconstructionist bottles — the same ideas and issues but expressed in a more mystificatory and abstract way. It is difficult, for example, not to conclude that deconstruction of the presumed unitary and essentialist nature of the category ‘Women’ has proved attractive to erstwhile structuralists within feminism, now at last coming to terms with the kinds of issues that interactionists have always addressed, but doing so in ways which preserve Theory’ as the prerogative of an elite. In a similar way, the kind of feminism we align ourselves with has always rejected Cartesian scientistic ideas and assumptions, has always eschewed ‘grand narrative’ approaches to feminist topics of inquiry, has always accepted the fragmentary and complex nature of reality. Is there, then, anything new that these debates add beyond an abstract and often forbidding theoretical language through which to express them? Our view is that no new ideas or approaches are contributed by them, but that they have significantly shifted epistemological concerns and debates from the margins to centre stage. This is of signal importance for academic feminism, for it opens up the possibility of far greater change in academic life than has been achieved thus far. This is not, however, to suggest this has happened in an unproblematic way. There are three important related issues here.

Firstly, the role ascribed to ‘positivism’ in earlier feminist writings on the research process — as an orthodoxy which prescribed ‘scientific’ research behaviour — has been taken over by foundationalism. The relationship between positivism and foundationalism, while close, is not one of complete overlap: most if not all varieties of positivism are concerned with quantification, while a
foundationalist epistemology characterises the large majority of qualitative as well as quantitative research. ‘Foundationalism’ is now used predominantly as a buzzword indicating simplicity and naivety: it has been essentialised in the same way that ‘essentialism’ has. However, in our earlier work (Stanley & Wise, 1983a, 1983b) we were careful not only to note the existence of varieties of positivisms, but also the fact that positivism did not correspond to a quantitative/qualitative divide; and here (and in Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993) we have been careful to note not only the existence of foundationalisms but also the fact that foundationalist and anti-foundationalist impulses may co-exist in the same epistemological position. The description of the epistemological position developed in this discussion as a feminist fractured foundationalism indicates our refusal to essentialise foundationalism and to erect it into a binary categorical relationship with anti-foundationalism.

Secondly, the feminist debates discussed have been conducted in increasingly specialised language derived in part from feminist re-workings of philosophy and in part from the conjunction of postmodernism, deconstructionism and post-structuralism. Readers may feel partially or completely alienated from the ideas because of the often mystificatory way they are written about — after all, there is little or nothing in the debates we have reviewed here that could not be written about in more ordinary and accessible terms. Moreover, at basis these ideas are not specialist ones, but rather ones people grapple with all the time using everyday language and conceptual terms. However, it has become increasingly the case that unless this specialist language is used, then ideas are not taken seriously as a contribution to feminist social theory. Like Audre Lorde (1984), we feel that you cannot ‘use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house’ — and key amongst ‘the master’s tools’ is the mystification of ‘science’, so that not only do many people feel alienated from it, but they also fail to recognise their own behaviours as actually ‘researching’ and ‘theorising’. However, academic feminism has become professionalised and it has become necessary to participate in its language-games in order to be taken seriously as a member of its epistemic community.

Thirdly, the spread of this new theoretical meta-language into feminist debates brings with it not only the greater visibility of feminist philosophy, but also the proposal that feminist philosophy can provide foundational underpinnings to the existence and activities of a range of ‘on the ground’ feminisms (eg. Sawicki, 1986). Although not necessarily a widely-shared ambition, such claims nonetheless contain the possibility of the creation of a new academic feminist elite and its attendant hierarchies of knowledges and languages. However, the egalitarian impulse of feminism suggests instead opening up, as a preliminary to dismantling, such hierarchies, not the construction of new ones. Moreover, no such foundational role is possible, for social life is such that no one feminist (or any other) grounding for knowledge can or should exist, as this article has argued. Relatedly, there are dangers in a fetishistic attachment to such a specialised ‘language’ and its accompanying language-games in spite of its practical, ‘in life’, lack of utility. That is, feminist praxis should be the goal — an enhanced political engagement, rather than a preoccupation with textuality and intertextuality for its own sake. And a part of such a praxis is a feminist political engagement within academic life itself: we are here in order to change it.

In changing academic life, academic feminism must carve out a truly feminist approach to theorising who produces knowledge, under what circumstances and in what ways, and by what means counterveiling knowledge-claims are dealt with. Moreover, in doing this, it must do its utmost to ensure that this feminist epistemology, ontology and ethic becomes accepted as the epistemology that underpins all knowledge-production and no matter by whom produced. If
academic feminism is to have a radical and permanent impact on academia, then it must make its intervention at the most fundamental and centrally important level of academic life: that which is concerned with theorising the nature of ‘knowledge’ itself. Our feminist fractured foundationalist epistemology operates in such terms. Academic feminism must ensure, at long last, that knowledge has a human face and a feeling heart.

NOTES

1. A longer version of this article, which also deals with more current feminist debates than here, is to be found in Stanley & Wise, 1983.

2. We prefer to refer to this use of the terminology of production rather than ‘discovery’: knowledge about either the social or the ‘natural’ world does not exist independent of its construction and interpretation by human inquirers; there is nothing about social life to be ‘discovered’, only knowledges to be produced through the labour processes of particular epistemic communities.

3. Many feminists are equally concerned with spirit as part of ontology, and with providing the analytic grounds to a feminist ethic so positioned. We are aware of this work but have not included it here.

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