

Feminist and genealogical approaches to issues of gender equity in education: What good will it do us now?

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Abstract

In the late 1960's, the second wave of feminism which swept across industrialised democracies in the form of the Women's Liberation Movement coincided with a shift from differentiable to equitable provision in education. Whilst not assuming a simple correspondence between these two transformations, the conditions of their emergence were similar and feminists have been at the forefront of conceptual and strategic responses to equity issues in education. Genealogy marks such transformations as junctures or discontinuities in discourse because the statements and claims that may be uttered now about gender and education, are vastly different to those that could be uttered before the shift in educational provision.

This paper explores points of resonance and tension between feminist and genealogical approaches to issues of gender equity in education. Since both are explicitly concerned with the operations and effects of power and the body in modern society, their juxtaposition is potentially productive and it opens up possibilities for certain questions to be asked about educational provision. Most notably, how does the discourse of gender equity function in the provision of education?

Introduction

This paper explores the possibilities created for certain questions to be asked by juxtaposing genealogy and feminism. Since both are explicitly concerned with the operations and effects of power and the body in modern society, this discussion is structured around these concepts highlighting points of resonance and tension between genealogy and feminism. It concludes with some suggestions about what genealogy has to offer contemporary feminist analysis in education.

Women have acknowledged, identified and responded to gender issues in education since the establishment of a colony in NSW. In the late 1960s, a second wave of feminism swept across industrialised democracies in the form of the Women's

Liberation Movement. This coincided with the shift from differential to equitable provision in education that was also visible in these places. Whilst not assuming a simple correspondence between these transformations, the conditions of their emergence were similar and feminists have been at the forefront of conceptual and strategic responses to equity issues in education.

Feminist experience in education produces and is constituted by educational discourse. Feminists have been disciplined through educational practices, feminism itself is a discipline in educational (academic) discourse, feminists have constructed educational practices, and feminists occupy multiple positions within educational discourse. Joan Scott (1992) suggests that genealogy offers a way of historicizing 'experience' without essentialising it.

...we need to attend to historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. This kind of historicizing represents a reply to the many contemporary historians who have argued that an unproblematized 'experience' is the foundation of their practice, it is a historicizing that implies critical scrutiny of all explanatory categories usually taken for granted, including the category of 'experience'.

Scott, 1992, p. 25-26

In this sense, the history of concepts such as 'educational disadvantage' and 'gender, and of subjectivities such as the 'schoolgirl' and the 'schoolboy' are the evidence by which 'experience' can be grasped and by which contemporary relationships with the past can be articulated. The discursive nature of experience posited by genealogy assumes that '[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation' (Scott, 1992, p. 37, emphasis in original). In this sense, the educated subject becomes an object of inquiry whose subject positioning is an effect of discourse. By historicizing experience in this way, assumptions and practices that exclude the consideration of difference-naturalizing it and taking it as self evident- are brought into question

Scott also points out that an approach that doesn't take experience as the origin of our explanation, but as that which we want to explain, opens up new ways for thinking about change (1992, p. 38). This is a compelling reason for exploring a juxtaposition of genealogy and feminism because feminists in education and elsewhere face the new challenge of oppositional forces packaged and marketed in the form of appropriated and rearticulated pseudo-liberal standpoints. These new oppositional forces speak of equality that actively excludes the consideration of difference. Indeed, acknowledging and accommodating difference is reconstituted as a form of 'sexism'. This is more than an expression of the limits of liberalism, which whilst demanding equality for women can just as surely be used to demand equality for men. Equal opportunity has always needed to be phrased in terms which include men (Gatens, 1992), rather these pseudo-liberal forms have turned previously robust liberal arguments upon themselves and stressed the need for new ways of thinking about change.

Moira Gatens (1992) argues for a different notion of power and the body than that used in dominant socio-political theories. She argues that such a theory must be able to address the issue of corporeal specificity in terms other than those of biological 'facts' or ideology and it must be able to consider the ways in which power differentially constitutes particular kinds of body. Gatens (1992) suggests that Foucault's alternative account of power is particularly suited to this task because 'its emphasis on the body allows one to consider how discourses and practices create ideologically appropriate subjects but also how these practices construct certain sorts of body with particular kinds of power and capacity; that is, how bodies are turned into individuals of various kinds' (p. 128). Of particular interest to this study is how educational discourses produce the educated subject-schoolgirls and schoolboys with particular kinds of power and capacity.

Productive power

Power is a contested concept within feminism (and other emancipatory discourses), as well as being a concept that gains form and prominence in Foucault's writings. Although it is not possible to identify a unified stance on power (or any number of issues) amongst feminists, a determination to explore which theoretical tack best serves contemporary women's interests is a common concern (McWilliam, 1994). Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990, p. 34) express this in the form of a now well asked question: 'How can we combine a postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism?' They argue 'that postmodern critique need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures' (1990, p.34), as long as it is explicitly historical, attuned to cultural specificity, non-universal and dispenses with the idea of a subject of history.

It would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation.

Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p.34-35

Most importantly, Fraser and Nicholson (1990) suggest that the advantage of this sort of critique is its usefulness for contemporary feminist political practice-'the practice of feminisms' (p.35). They describe such a practice as increasingly a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universal shared interest or identity, recognising that no single solution on broad ranging issues can be adequate for all.

Not all feminists share Fraser and Nicholson's optimism about the utility of postmodern-feminist critique. In the same volume, Nancy Hartsock (1990) claims that, '[f]or those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best give little guidance' (p. 159). Hartsock claims to be suspicious of the emergence of suspicions about the nature of the 'subject'. She asks, 'Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?' (p. 163).

Hartsock (1990) makes two main arguments against Foucault: firstly, that he writes from the perspective of the dominator and so understands the world from the ruling group, and; secondly, that systematically unequal relations of power ultimately

vanish from Foucault's account of power. According to Hartsock, Foucault's account of power is too focussed on how individuals experience and exercise power, thus making it very difficult to locate domination. She claims that the image of a network of power extending everywhere through capillaries emphasises equality and agency rather than systematic domination of the many by the few. Her concern is that Foucault's pluralist conception of power fails to reconnect the various dispersions he illuminates, or to account for their organisation within systems of power.

Hartsock rejects what Foucault has to offer feminists and other marginalised groups. She calls for a reviewed and restructured theory indebted to Marx (among others) that is capable of transformation-not just resistance. One of the features of this new theory would be that it constitutes women as subjects as well as objects of history. 'We need to recognize that we can be the makers of history as well as the objects of those who have made history' (Hartsock , 1990, pp. 170-171).

In a later work, Teresa Ebert (1996) reiterates some of Hartsock's concerns in calling for a new *red feminism*. She argues that '...a feminism that is founded upon poststructuralist assumptions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse...substitutes a politics of representation for radical social transformation' (p. 3). Like Hartsock, Ebert also reclaims the relevance of Marx to the feminist transformative project. She proposes a historical materialist critique that 'connects various seemingly autonomous social practices to one another and to the global economic situation, thereby producing a historical knowledge of social totality' (p. 7).

Whilst Hartsock and Ebert present strong arguments in support of their concern that an emphasis on the microphysical operations of power camouflages and displaces the macrophysical, in constructing their arguments they align themselves with other macro theories such as historical knowledge. This places them in an invidious position because women (and other groups that have been excluded from history) have problematized historical knowledge for its lack of representation and its lack of attention to the microphysical-the local and the specific.

Hartsock's and Ebert's concerns about the need to analyse systems of power remain, and are shared by other feminists, but some of these find Foucault useful on this point. For example, Moya Lloyd (1993) argues that Foucault's concept of biopower 'may serve as a template for understanding the connections between seemingly discrete instantiations of micropower' (p. 443). Foucault introduces the concept of 'biopower' as a means of conceptualising the shift away from the sovereign's exercise of power over life (through the death s/he was capable of requiring) to 'a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations...One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' (HS, p. 137 & 138, emphasis in original).

Foucault describes how, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms, namely, the disciplining of the body and the regulation of the population, or the species body (HS, p. 139). There was a rapid development of the disciplines embodied in institutions such as the army and the schools. At the same time there was "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of 'biopower'" (HS, p. 140). Institutions, such as barracks and schools, produced relations of domination and effects of hegemony through segregation and social hierarchisation.

In rejecting the idea that modern power is centralized within a single site or institution, Foucault does not reject the idea that forms of global domination exist. Rather, his methodology involves a reconceptualization of the notion of global domination...

In other words, genealogy demands consideration of the means by which 'dispersed, heteromorphous, localised procedures of power are adapted, reinforced, and transformed by these global strategies'

Lloyd, 1993, p. 443

Although a Foucauldian feminism (arguably) requires the relinquishment of universal metanarratives such as the systematic privileging of men over women contained within the notion of patriarchy, what is suggested in its place still makes it possible to theorise patriarchy - not as a single unified, all-embracing theory that is the product of a single authorial (individual or collective) intent, but as a particular historical configuration of power relations, without common origin; 'the accidental coalescence of a multiplicity of sometimes mutually reinforcing and sometimes contradictory tactics' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 444).

A Foucauldian reconceptualisation of power also suggests a change in emphasis of feminist strategies since, if power is multiply constituted it must be resisted in 'a plurality of discourses, practices, tactics and techniques that collectively, and contrarily, constitute women' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 445), but such a suggestion might be rightly dismissed by feminists whose political interventions are characteristically robust and responsive to diverse representations of power. The real contribution of a reconceptualisation of power as multiply constituted is its insistence that patriarchy 'is always already fractured, unstable, impaired, and thence open to subversion' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 445).

Gross (1986) suggests that, 'today feminist theory is involved in both an *anti-sexist* project, which involves challenging and deconstructing phallogocentric discourses; and in a positive project of constructing and developing alternative models, methods, procedures, discourses etc' (p.195, emphasis in original). A major contribution to the anti-sexist project has come from feminists who have attempted to invert and subvert divisions such as bodily/rational, natural/cultural and feminine/hierarchical. That the former is the least valued term, associated with women and linked to the private sphere, has been the focus of a considerable amount of feminist theorising (see for example Jay, 1981). Even so, these dualistic and hierarchical divisions have proven to be particularly resilient to feminist interventions (Gatens, 1988, p.68). In pursuit of the positive project of constructing and developing alternative models, Gatens (1988, p.66-70) suggests that a conceptualisation of difference which is neither dichotomised nor polarised (such as that offered by Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault or Deleuze), may enable problems to be posed in quite different theoretical terms.

Genealogy disturbs the way power has been conceptualised 'traditionally' by feminists and creates opportunities to reconsider how the effects of power may be resisted and produced through tactics, manoeuvres and transgressions that do not necessarily require strength or numbers-we are able to 'win and lose battles without having an absolute war' (Bailey, 1993, p. 107). Genealogy reminds us that whilst power may be experienced as a force, it is difficult to take power by force because just as we think we have located its source it slips from our grasp, mutates into other forms and eludes containment. However, this does not mean it is inviolable, on the

contrary, its already fractured and unstable form make it vulnerable and more readily subverted.

Historically contingent bodies

Foucault (*HS & UP*) rejects the notion that bodies have fixed characteristics such as sex and sexuality. Like truth, these characteristics are too fixed and too much like an essence for his liking. Instead, he suggests that socio-political structures be explored to examine how they 'construct particular kinds of bodies with particular kinds of needs and desires' (Gatens, 1988, p.62). But he does not reject the notion of truth, of sex or of sexuality altogether, for such a universal claim would undermine his anti-universal argument. Instead, Foucault suggests that bodies are so thoroughly constructed by knowledge about human sex and sexuality that it is not possible to separate sexual identities from the cultural construction of bodies. 'Bodies are affected, altered, tattooed by historical circumstance - and they are indistinguishable from these effects, alterations, tattoos' (Bailey, 1993, p.108).

Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) suggest that one of Foucault's major achievements is 'his ability to isolate and conceptualize the way in which the body has become an essential component for the operation of power relations in modern society' (p. 112). Fundamental to this conceptualisation is the notion that the 'disciplines', or methods which make possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body and assure the constant subjection of its forces by imposing on them a relation of docility-utility (*DP*, p.181). According to Foucault (1975), the methods used to achieve docile bodies have varied through the ages and include forms such as slavery which sought docility through the violent and forceful approbation of bodies, monastic asceticism which sought docility by increasing the control of each individual over his or her own body, vassalage which sought docility through a 'highly coded, but distant relation of submission' (*DP*, p. 181) and sovereignty which brutally enforced the power of the sovereign to take life.

However, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'the disciplines became general formulas of domination' (*DP*, p.181). The power of the sovereign to *take* life was supplanted by a power *over* life through the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life. "Hence, there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of 'biopower'" (*HS*, p. 262)

In this sense, the body that is subjected to disciplinary forces is not a blank waiting to be imprinted, it is already totally imprinted by history. It 'manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires failings, and errors' (*NGH*, p.83). The singularity of the body is at once an episode with its own temporal specificity and also an episode within a series of subjugations-relationships of domination. These relationships operate through the disciplines and through their meticulous procedures that impose rights and obligations. They establish marks of power and engrave memories within the body (*NGH*, p.85).

Foucault's reconceptualisation of the body has significant implications for feminists, since it demands that women's diverse identities and differential experiences, rather than an idealised form of female subjectivity, inform attempts to resist the effects of power. Genealogy's posture of subversion towards fixed meaning claims resonates with attempts by many feminists to develop an understanding of difference and a

strategic feminism representative of women's diversity (hooks, 1984, Spelman, 1988, Riley, 1988). However, some feminists are concerned that Foucault's stance might undermine strategies that rely upon a coherent and unitary notion of woman in order to understand and undermine the effects of power on women's bodies (Sopher, 1993; Ransom, 1993)

Kathy Ferguson (1991, p. 1) describes this as a tension within current feminist theory between rejecting a male ordering of the world (in order to critique gendered asymmetries of power and valorise that which is feminine or associated with females) and the deconstruction of gender (in order to loosen the hold of gender on life and meaning). Ferguson suggests that the deconstructive project 'renders gender more fragile, more tenuous, less salient as both an explanatory and an evaluative category' (1991, p. 322). Nevertheless she pursues the political and epistemological opportunities made available by exploring these sources of tension.

In a study that juxtaposes feminism and deconstruction, Diane Elam (1994, p. 81-88) explores these sources of tension by utilising Derrida's (1988) concern which distinguishes a politics of undecidability from the notion of indeterminacy. Elam argues that it is possible to precisely determine or describe female subjectivity in limited and frequently fleeting situations, but such occurrences do not permit female subjectivity to be fully determined or described.

[T]he politics of undecidability (among multiple determinations) must be understood from the standpoint of indeterminacy, of political *possibilities*...By acknowledging the undecidable, deconstruction and feminism allow us to imagine other political spaces - spaces of political otherness

Elam, 1994, p. 84, emphasis in original

Whilst Elam acknowledges that some feminists are concerned that the politics of undecidability results in a form of paralysing relativism, she insists that it is not about refusing to make a decision but rather refusing to ground decisions in universal laws: 'we have to *make* a decision, each time, in each case' (1994, p.87). Bailey (1993) makes a similar point in her argument for a strategic essentialism.

Tying feminism to an essential female identity makes the differences between women a source of conflict rather than a source of strength. But these cautions are tempered by the specific context of masculinist power, and the possible need to invoke a strategic essentialism for immediate feminist gains. By 'strategic essentialism' I mean a fictional essence deployed within very specific institutional settings where the terms of debate are already circumscribed; the effort to change the terms of debate should not be abdicated.

Bailey, 1993, p. 118-119

Bailey's notion of fictional essence seems to lack the material quality of Elam's (Derrida's) determinations-however fleeting. Some feminists (including this one) are reluctant to let go of embodied experience altogether, but another point to be made is that the type of radical and nuanced reconceptualisations of the body demonstrated by Elam and Bailey, represents of one postmodernism's most valuable contributions to feminism-an opening up of theoretical and strategic possibilities. It should also be recalled, as Bordo (1993) insists, that feminists identified the body as a focal point of

struggle over the shape of power 'long before it entered into its recent marriage with poststructuralist thought' (p. 185). Bordo suggests that these earlier contributions by feminists are frequently not recognised because 'their driving concern was *exposing* oppression, not elaborating the *ideas* most adequate to exposing that oppression' (p. 184, emphasis in original).

Having reclaimed feminism's role in the development of political re-conceptualisations of the body, Bordo (1993, p. 193-194) distinguishes between an initial wave of Foucauldian-influenced feminism that seized on concepts such as 'discipline', 'docility', 'normalisation' and 'biopower', and a second, more postmodern wave that emphasises 'intervention', 'contestation', and 'subversion'. Bordo states that she finds the second wave's emphasis and celebration of resistance to be highly problematic, nevertheless she argues that both perspectives 'are essential to a fully adequate theoretical understanding of power and the body' (1993, p. 194).

An example of Bordo's first wave is Sandra Lee Bartky's (1988) examination of those disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognisably feminine. She suggests that dieting is one discipline imposed upon a body subject to the 'tyranny of slenderness' (p. 65). She describes some of the practices aimed at producing bodies of a certain size and general configuration. The 'disciplinary project of bodily perfection' (p. 66) demands meticulous and self regulated 'technologies of femininity' (p. 71). These technologies are practised by women against a background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency (p. 71) and before the perpetual gaze of a 'panoptical male connoisseur' (p. 72).

However, Bartky (1988) is concerned that Foucault treats the body in his genealogies as if it were one. She suggests that, 'even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault's critique of power, his analysis as a whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory'. Bartky also argues that in focussing on specific institutions, such as prisons, Foucault's analyses tend 'to overlook the extent to which discipline can be institutionally unbound as well as institutionally bound' (p.75). The anonymity and widespread dispersion of disciplinary power 'creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural...The absence of formally identifiable disciplinarians and of a public schedule of sanctions only disguises the extent to which the imperative to be 'feminine' serves the interest of domination' (pp. 75-76).

In an example of Bordo's second wave of Foucauldian-influenced feminism, Judith Butler analyses the category 'sex' utilising Foucault's concept of the 'regulatory ideal'.

...'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce-demarcate, circulate, differentiate-the bodies it controls. Thus, 'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of its norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for materialization, opened up by this process that mark

one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.

Butler, 1993, pp. 1-2

Butler's analysis of 'sex' provides a model that demonstrates how Foucauldian concepts may be applied to an analysis of the 'schoolgirl' and the 'schoolboy'. Like 'sex', these too are regulatory ideals whose materialisation is compelled through certain highly regulated educational practices. These practices continually reiterate the gendered norms of educated bodies. Since the shift from differential to equitable provision in education, they have forcibly materialised new identities such as educationally disadvantaged subjects, and new knowledge about gender and education.

A genealogical approach brings these new identities and new forms of knowledge into question by tracing their discursive formation. It asks what relationships of power produce and reiterate these formations? That norms must be forcibly reiterated offers great hope and strategic possibilities to those who attempt to destabilise and challenge regulatory ideals. Whilst acknowledging that feminism(s) have proud and robust traditions, fiercely independent and rightly sceptical of theories produced by privileged males, there are elements of Foucault's genealogical method that some feminists are finding theoretically useful. Whilst there has been a cautious but growing exchange between genealogy and feminism in education, it would appear that some of the points of resonance and tension identified in the paper are certainly worth exploring further.

Genealogists maintain a determined incredulity towards what discourse purports to be. Unlike the 'interpretivist [who] concentrates on the liberatory potential of language to discover, or at least open the way towards, some unities of understanding, ... the genealogist stresses the tendency of discourse to constitute that which it then claims to have discovered' (Ferguson, 1991. p. 330). In relation to discourses of equitable provision, what they claim to have discovered is 'evidence' of inequity which has been compelled to materialise in the form of 'the educationally disadvantaged subject'. With time this subject has transformed, reinforcing its contingent nature and that it has been created and imposed by discourse not by the nature of things (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 107). Genealogically speaking, the shift from differential to equitable provision was not about eliminating inequity, rather, it was about modifying and improving regulatory practices that discipline the body and regulate the population.

Summary

Power is a contested site of meaning among feminists. This is one of feminism's strengths—a robust and determined pursuit of power in all its forms. Arising out of this, some feminists are critical of Foucault's approach to power on a number of grounds, such as a perceived failure to analyse systems of power because of an emphasis on the microphysics of power. Despite these concerns, Foucault's analysis of power presents possibilities as well as challenges. His conceptualisation of biopower has particular relevance to the study of institutions such as schools and his identification of power's localised and multiple forms reveals its vulnerability, its already fractured and unstable form.

The body is also a contested site within feminism, not the least because of a recognition of women's multiple subjectivities. This is a point of strong resonance between some feminists and Foucault. But, the strategic and evaluative loss of a unitary notion of woman is equally a point of strong tension. Even so, girls and boys bodies are so thoroughly saturated with meaning in educational discourses that Foucault's approach is useful because it provides a way of understanding how they are disciplined and subjugated.

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