



## Challenges For Feminists in Creating Inclu- sive Research Frameworks

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I'd like to start by telling you what I hope to do here today.

Rather than attempt to give you a comprehensive overview of research being conducted that addresses abused immigrant women, a task for which I am patently unqualified, I want to discuss some of the challenges of designing research that will serve the interests of immigrant women who experience abuse. I also want to clarify that in this paper I am speaking most directly to mainstream feminists. I know that many in this room do not identify as such, but I hope that this discussion will also hold some interest for you. I have identified these challenges through my own experience in designing participatory action research projects, through listening to both women and men from

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immigrant communities and through ongoing dialogue with a number of colleagues, from both community and academic settings. It is a measure of my privilege that I have had access to the ideas and reflections of such a range of thoughtful and experienced people.

Research can advance understanding of the causes of violence and promote innovation and excellence in prevention and intervention efforts. While research produces information and tools that assist in the daily work to end violence against women, it is also an important resource for political leaders, journalists, scholars, and public interest organizations. As such research helps to shape public policy.

If as feminist researchers we agree that women who are on the receiving end of our interventions and whose lives are being influenced by public policy deserve to have some influence in shaping these interventions and policies; then we have a responsibility to design and conduct research that permits the inclusion of a broader group of women. Each woman brings the experience of being part of several communities. The insight and consciousness she provides through sharing her experiences of these communities will offer policy makers the opportunity to understand our lived experiences in a truer fashion.

Speaking from my perspective as a white woman and a former worker from a sexual assault centre now working in an academic setting, I see that we face multiple challenges in conducting more inclusive research. The first one I want to discuss is coming up with an inclusive definition of violence. Violence is explained and understood in diverse ways. Most commonly, violence is thought of in terms of physical actions that result in tangible harm to another or to others. As feminists, we have been in the forefront of recognizing that violence can also be sexual or verbal or emotional or financial or psychological. For years we have been explaining that these types of abuse are devastating experiences, even when there are no physical injuries. Valid as these conceptualizations of violence are, they overlook the structural aspects of the problem. Racism, heterosexism, poverty, ageism and ableism are also forms of violence. Like physical, sexual and psychological violence, they serve to undermine the recipient's sense of self. They are violent in as much as they reflect an abuse of a power relationship.

In the Violence Against Women movement we have often defined violence as having power and control over someone. We have not however, consistently described the dynamics that lead to one person having control over another.

Control is gained by a process of de-personalizing people who are categorized as different or as having less value. Personal traits and aspects of social identity such as gender, race, sexual orientation or class, become



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tools for identifying difference. This presupposes that there is an identity that can be considered the norm. Western patriarchal values place the white, able-bodied, not yet elderly, affluent male at the centre of society, granting him greater access to power and privilege. The closer we come to fitting this description of the dominant group, the better our access to resources and the greater our potential to influence marginalized or less powerful groups.

A definition of violence begins with the recognition of the hierarchical nature of Canadian society. In essence, this definition highlights the power imbalances that lead to violence and is predicated on the conceptualization of violence as spanning a continuum of attitudes, beliefs and actions. Thus, violence is:

...the construction of difference and otherness; it entails inferiorizing or devaluing the "Other." Violence is further understood as the mechanism by which individuals or groups vie for, and/or sustain, a position of power in hierarchical structures defined by patriarchal values. (Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, Meeting, Winnipeg, 2001)

To understand how the resulting inequality is structurally embedded it is important to consider ways in which less powerful groups are required to interact with the dominant group. This shaping of the social arena occurs in such a way that less powerful groups are not only induced to cooperate with acts which may be harmful to themselves individually and collectively, but they also internalize inferiorized valuations of themselves and their communities. This is the most subtle form of violence in society. It is also seamlessly woven into social and institutional structures, and thus less likely to be penalized save in those situations where it explicitly results in harm.

It is my belief that in spite of good intentions, feminists in general, and I specifically, have contributed to fur-

ther embedding structural inequalities in our work to end violence against women. Every time we fail to fully recognize and acknowledge the complex set of power relations that play out in the lives of abused women, every time we assume that we understand the problems facing abused women without developing mutual relationships that allow them to influence our thinking as much as we influence theirs, we contribute to an unhealthy dynamic of power and control by defining someone else's reality for them.

We can begin to face this challenge to stop replicating the very dynamics of power and control that we want to eliminate by deconstructing feminist ideology. When responsibly understood, the guiding insight of deconstruction is that every structure - be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious - that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out.

These exclusive structures can become repressive - and that repression comes with consequences. What is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction, no matter how secure it seems.

Feminism is an ideology, a structure that has organized our thinking. Currently it is being unsettled, challenged, deconstructed by the values and perspectives of diverse cultural communities, whose thinking has been excluded from mainstream feminism. We can see this as a threat or we can see it as an opportunity to learn and grow and stretch our horizons.

Too often our foundational values are invisible to us. We assume that our perceptions are universal truths. As we enter more fully into dialogue with women and men from diverse cultural backgrounds it is increasingly difficult to rest comfortably on our assumptions. One of the most salient points of

digression between mainstream feminism and people from diverse cultural communities is the role and the importance of the family and the community in a woman's life. Mainstream feminism is founded upon a philosophy of individualism. This has shaped the interventions that we provide and has led us to focus on the woman rather than on the family. Aboriginal people have been telling us for years that it is a model that doesn't work for them and other diverse cultural communities are telling us the same thing.

As feminists, we are faced with the responsibility of continually seeking to identify and name the acts of exclusion which maintain our ideology. This is not an act of altruism that will benefit others; it is the only way to ensure that feminism will continue to be a relevant force in shaping the world.

This does not mean that we must forsake the principles which have shaped our thinking and guided our actions: equality and justice. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the unavoidable limitations and inherent contradictions in the ideas and norms that inform our practice, and to do so in a way that keeps them open to constant questioning and continual revision. There can be no ethical action without critical reflection.

How do we meet the challenge of conducting research that is inclusive and that gives space for that critical reflection? We begin, I think by using a framework that allows us to examine the complex power relations that are the context for all of our lives. An intersectional analysis, sometimes referred to as an integrated feminist analysis can help us to build such research frameworks.

Before I begin to talk about an intersectional analysis, I will take a moment to explain the concept of an intersection. Intersections are the socio-political, ideological, cultural, and intellectual spaces within which marginalized people create communities. They are spaces that marginalized people occupy in relation to members of the dominant group, who occupy the center.

Intersections are characterized by structures of domination. These structures of domination can be based on race, class, sexual orientation, disability, gender and/or other differences that can be used to assign less value to an individual or a group of people. Those living within intersections have varied experiences marked by varying forms of oppression, discrimination and subordination. Each individual experiences these structures of domination differently because the structures create distinct relations of power that can result in various forms of oppression and privilege for different individuals, depending on the context. Multiple marginalities can help us better understand the various ways that individuals and groups of people can be marginalized. But the intersection is different from the concept of multiple marginalities because it offers the potential for marginalized groups to simultaneously experience oppression and privilege depending on the context

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The multiple structures of domination are often challenged by resistance

from those living within the intersections. The margins can be oppressive spaces, but they also have a potential to be liberating. Whether or not they are chosen spaces, they can provide strength and valuable insight. They are spaces where challenges to the dominant ways of being, understanding and acting are born.

And so what is an intersectional analysis? An intersectional analysis recognizes and takes into account the multiple and interconnecting impacts of policies and practices on different groups because of their race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, religion, culture, refugee or immigrant status, or other status.

An intersectional analysis moves away from the use of a one dimensional gender lens to bring awareness of the multiple ways that power can be denied or awarded to individuals and groups. Each individual belongs to many groups and communities. This framework recognizes that our life experiences occur in multiple and compounding spheres.

An intersectional analysis begins with an individual's experiences and as

such is not identity based. It moves away from examining identity to look at the structural impact of an individual's experience. It requires that we look at patterns and dynamics of oppression in seeking to understand and interpret situations and experiences. An intersectional analysis seeks to expose the rationales used to exploit differences, and to oppress individuals and groups based on these differences. It acknowledges the central role of relationships in creating and structuring our world.

In summary, an intersectional analysis:

- Defines identity in relation to power imbalances,
- Views the structure of power relations (social hierarchy) as the backdrop of identities,
- Gives the power to define one's experience and identity to the individual that has had the experience,
- Recognizes that the experience has to be understood and analyzed in collaboration with the individuals, researcher and other participants
- Recognizes the links between the global and local economies and social hierarchies and their impacts on all of our lives
- Explicitly names power and privilege
- Research using an intersectional analysis is a conceptual approach/framework that has an explicit value base and a political motivation. In acknowledging the essential role of relationships in creating dynamics of oppression and of equality, it is work that seeks to transform or reconstruct

current power relations. It engages us in the process of dialogue. Ultimately it is a transformational tool that helps us to deepen our understanding of self through deepening our understanding of others. It is not our differences that cause violence and oppression, but rather how these differences are interpreted and acted upon.

While an intersectional analysis encourages us to connect with a wider range of women and allows us to use our research to influence policy without reducing women's experiences to one dimensional problems or single issues, it also presents challenges. The way people define their experience may not fit into our research categories and the way that we develop our research may be challenged for bias at every level of the research process. On the other hand government, organizations and we ourselves may construct our identity in ways that compartmentalize our experience in order to belong. As researchers, we may encounter resistance in ourselves as we are asked to reshape our understanding of the world and asked to examine our privilege.

The length of time it takes to do this sort of research and the funding needed to carry it out are practical problems that must be addressed. Finally the lack of writing and theory to support an intersectional analysis calls upon us to break new ground in our work and sometimes to learn, as I

have, by making mistakes.

The purpose of using an intersectional analysis is to explore and question "normative" systems. Feminism, as an established system of thought, must also be subjected to an intersectional analysis. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a grave danger. The alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief - one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not understand. In a complex world, wisdom does know what we don't know so that we can keep the future open.

One of our greatest challenges is to recognize the importance of preserving differences and respecting others without forging an identity politics that divides the world between oppositions. We must be wary of ideologies that divide the world into diametrical opposites: right or left, good or evil, us or them. If we conduct research that separates and polarizes us based on our differences, this way of thinking will influence the way we live and interact in our communities. That would be problematic because the greatest hope for justice and equality lies in the quiet gestures that serve to forge connections among individuals across their differences.

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2—These thoughts on deconstruction have been adapted from, *What Derrida Really Meant*, New York Times, October 14, 2004, by Mark C. Taylor

3— This discussion on Intersectionality has been adapted from, *The Final Summary Report of a Roundtable on Integrated Feminist Analysis* sponsored by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in February 19-20, 2004