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How do we do it?

Methodologies, methods and subject foci in Gender Studies student's degree projects

Abstract

This article stresses the issue of methodology in an interdisciplinary field of research and education. The focus is on students and how they handle the situation with teachers coming from a number of traditional disciplines. These teachers bring a variation of research foci, methods and skills. For the students this could result in a wide range of possibilities to approach research from different angles. Yet, problems emerge when they are supposed to carry out their own projects. The article is based on my Master's thesis. The research interest was on what students in Gender Studies actually do in their degree projects on what is called 'advanced level I'. A query was how they related to feminist methodologies, which methods and theories they used and what research problems they were interested in. In the projects examined most of the students seem to be familiar with, and use feminist theory. While the same could not be said about the methodology. This article points to a serious lack of methodological awareness, both in a more theoretical sense, but also as practical skills. The students do not seem to articulate very well what they actually do. The article suggests a practically oriented, ongoing discussion on methods in Gender Studies, especially in undergraduate education. Such a discussion should be grounded on methodological and epistemological theories with emphasis on research skills and methods.

Key words: interdisciplinarity, methodologies, methods, practical skills, Master's theses, Gender Studies

Introduction

This article is written from a student's perspective. It is based on my own MA essay, which focuses on how students use methods and theories when writing essays at undergraduate level in Gender Studies in Sweden. I will argue that there is a significant difference between the acute theoretical awareness in students' essays and, what I term, their uncertainty regarding methods and methodological issues. For us, in the first generation of PhD students in Gender

Studies¹, this situation can be problematic. This raises questions about what kind of a subject Gender Studies actually is. What are our unique skills, trained as we are in such an inter- and multidisciplinary field?

Firstly, I will give a short introduction to my own experience at the University of Göteborg, the methodology that I have used, and how my project was designed. This will be followed by a quick overview of curricula on methods in undergraduate courses at Gender Studies departments in Sweden. Following this, I will focus on the essays in question, looking at them from different angles, thematically arranged according to my research questions. Finally, I will raise issues relating to the legitimacy and relevance of the general field of Women's Studies. I will conclude with some reflections concerning what can be done to strengthen the field by helping the students to navigate through the deep ocean of methods, methodology and theory in Gender Studies

A heritage that caused me trouble

My interest in research methods in Gender Studies arose during my own undergraduate studies in the subject. I was surprised by and sceptical of our methods courses. The literature and the lectures were more about methodology and epistemology than about methods and skills. In other words, we read more about how different methods could be understood and conceptualised rather than their practical application. For me, and other students with an earlier background in courses in other disciplines, this was not that much of a problem. We had previous experiences that we could rely on. For those of us who took Gender Studies as their first subject at the university the situation was more confusing.

¹ Since 1990, it has been possible to take a PhD-degree in interdisciplinary Gender Studies at Tema Genus in Linköping. The PhD students have, however, different disciplinary backgrounds, some of which may have undergraduate training in gender Studies "on its own". The first university in Sweden to provide PhD training in Gender Studies as a "discipline", i.e. at a department running undergraduate education, was Örebro in 2002. Today they have two PhD students in Gender Studies, even if both have an undergraduate background in political science. (22 Feb. 2007 <www.oru.se/templates/oruExtIntroPageLevel2.aspx?id=6953>) In Göteborg, PhD training in Gender Studies has been available since 2004. Today the department has five PhD students, of which all but one have an undergraduate degree in Gender Studies. (22 Feb. 2007 <www.hum.gu.se/institutioner/genusvetenskap>) Since 2006, the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Lund also has a PhD programme based on undergraduate training in Gender Studies. At the moment there are three PhD-students in Lund. (22 Feb. 2007 <www.genus.lu.se/>) (See also Liinason & Holm, 2006 and Lykke, 2004.) Some of the Women's and Gender Studies centres/departments at other universities/university colleges also strive for PhD education, however, at a time when the higher education policy in Sweden now works towards a higher concentration on resources to fewer institutions.

When the time came for our essay at advanced level I, we knew a lot about feminist criticism from traditional disciplines, we knew a lot about epistemology and, to a lesser degree, about research ethics. But our training in particular methods were more rudimentary. We had read some texts about interview and interpretative techniques, as well as having had an introduction to discourse analysis. However, our skills and experiences in using these methods were very limited.

This was the situation from my perspective, although the other students did not seem to be as obsessed as I was with the lack of training. Since then, I have realised that my interest in methods may have come from my undergraduate years at university. I was academically trained at a department of political science where the watchword for our courses on methods was *if you can't count it – it doesn't count.*²

Accordingly, my interest in methods has to do with my positivistic heritage from political science. Nevertheless, during my courses in Gender Studies the old heritage had met with resistance from feminist criticism. The issue on value neutrality was one of them. In *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Alessandra Tanesini asks "how do we tell the good bias from the bad bias." (Tanesini 1999: 86) She is one in a line of researchers who have questioned the traditional image of value neutrality in research. She does so when she compares how values are given divergent significance in the context of discovery, and in the context of justification. She argues that the deliberate use of feminist values can be a way to improve research standards. My understanding of this is that the methodological transparency demanded by traditional science needs to be followed by an epistemological transparency, and this is where feminist research can make a contribution.

For Marjorie Pryse (2001), there is an epistemic challenge to produce knowledge that does not fit the academic structure. For her, criticism becomes a *de facto* methodology in feminist research, which gives a necessary, but not a sufficient method, to develop feminist epistemology. With the help of Sneja Gunew, she raises the interesting question: "from what "position" do feminists construct "a new body of both knowledge and theory"?" (Pryse 2001: 7) The opposite, and traditional view can be found in *Metodpraktikan* (Esaiasson et al. 2003). This is a pedagogic handbook on methods written by some of my former teachers at the department of political science in Göteborg. According to the authors, the most evident examples of a deficient lack of value neutrality are to be found in "value homogenous"

² Later on, I have realised that the formulation emanates from O R Holsti. (Holme and Solvang 1997: 87)

research milieus (Esaiasson et al. 2003: 24). It is not unreasonable to assume that Gender Studies is seen as such a milieu.

In *Liberating Method – Feminism and Social Research*, Marjorie L. DeVault claims that “feminist methods” are often understood in terms of a “how-to-do”-manual. Feminist methodologists have generally resisted this “cookbook” or “how-to conception” (DeVault 1999: 21). She refers to Sandra Harding, and claims that it is not feminist researchers’ methods, but their methodology, or thoughts on methods, that are important. For the student in Gender Studies, this is a useful clue *only* if you have access to knowledge on existing methods and how they are carried through. If you have, for instance, read *Metodpraktikan* and practised some of its methods, Harding’s criticism of the concept of objectivity receives meaning and substance. Likewise, you will be able to understand discussions of feminist standpoint theories or of situated knowledge and privileged positioning. With no previous experiences of scientific methods these epistemological discussions will be difficult to relate to and hard to handle in the practical work of your project.

Purpose and planning of my project

This was my starting-point when I designed my MA essay on advanced level II³ in Gender Studies (Alnebratt 2005). My purpose was to examine what Gender Studies students actually do in their degree essays at advanced level I⁴. I was interested in their choice of subject foci and how they dealt with methodological issues in theory as well as in practice. My questions were simple:

- Which subjects are chosen?
- How can the subject topics be described?
- Which methods are used?
- In what way do the methods chosen rely on methodology discussions in Gender Studies?

³ 90-120 ECTS

⁴ 60-90 ECTS

At the time, courses at advanced level I in Gender Studies could be studied at ten universities in Sweden. Since I wanted to do an exhaustive study, I contacted these departments for copies of their essays from the last course given. Approximately, I would say that I have been able to scrutinise at least seventy percent of all essays⁵. It was not my purpose to “evaluate” the essays I studied. I did not want to discuss whether or not the methods used were relevant or how well the students succeed with their projects. My idea was to investigate the incidence of methods and subject foci to be able to discuss what Gender Studies meant to these students. To be able to answer the last question, I had to scrutinise the curricula on methodology taught in basic education in Gender Studies in Sweden.

In my dissertation project it is my intention to broaden and enter more deeply into this field by scrutinising interdisciplinary Gender Studies research in Sweden during recent years. So far, my very simple questions are: “What is Gender Studies today actually about?” and “How is it done?” It is by describing, analysing and discussing the variations within the field and how multifaceted it is that we can strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of our field. However, in this limited investigation of student essays I wish to provide an image – a cross-section – of Gender Studies done at the undergraduate level.

What do the students read?

Of course the literature used in the courses is multifaceted and impossible to present in its total range. Here I just want to give a quick picture of some important and frequently used examples. In my review of the curricula that students study in the undergraduate courses on methods, it was clear that most of what was presented was on qualitative research. The students in Uppsala have the opportunity to reflect on methodological choices, while they read Ann Oakley. In an article in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, “Science, Gender and Women’s Liberation: An Argument Against Postmodernism,” (1998: 133-146) Oakley tries to capture some of the reasons for the preference of qualitative research methods in Gender Studies. According to her, the second wave feminists inherited and reacted to a

⁵ Six of the departments responded positively, which gave me an empirical material containing twenty-seven essays. I know that one of the departments that had problems with my request had only one essay finished from their last course.

science that paid no attention to women as a social group; a science characterised by logical positivism with a focus on quantification, objectivity and control. Oakley argues that the opposition between feminism and science goes far back and involves the dialectical relations between natural and social sciences. Furthermore, it involves the discussion about the status of knowledge and separate methodological traditions. She ends her brief historical exposé by saying: “Science thus acquired its modern character as a major cultural agent in transmitting ‘oppressive fictions’ about women’s bodies and minds.” (Oakley 1998: 134)

In Lund, the students also read Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook. Their book *Beyond Methodology – Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (1991), is an anthology in which some of the names on reading lists of the other departments can be found. The students in Uppsala and Göteborg also study Patricia Hill Collins. Johanna Esseveld, who contributes to the Fonow and Cook anthology, is also studied in Umeå. In Malmö, Hesse-Biber & Yasier’s *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* is used. This book, as well as *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* by Linda Nicholson (ed), used in Uppsala, Lund, Karlstad, and Sandra Harding (ed) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, used in Göteborg, are all examples of anthologies with several authors. In these books, the student will examine epistemological issues and meet stand-point theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, bell hooks, Alison Jaggar and Maria Mies, to mention a few.

Fonow and Cook devote their studies to feminist epistemology and methodology. In various examinations they show how feminist research in different disciplines often contains a critique of how the discipline in question has studied women and gender relations. Among other topics, they have scrutinised publications on sociological research during a period of nine years. They claim to have “identified several underlying assumptions in the literature on feminist methods” (Fonow and Cook 1991: 2). Some of these underlying assumptions are grouped into four points, which they argue, are significant for feminist research. These points are reflexivity, action orientation, an attention to the affective components of the research, and finally, something they call “use of the situation-at-hand” (Fonow and Cook 1991: 2).

The most frequently occurring book in method courses in Gender Studies in Sweden is *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992) by Shulamit Reinharz. It is an overview of methods used by feminist researchers and how they use them. The span is wide and goes from qualitative methods like oral history and ethnographic research to survey studies and psychological experiments. In the concluding chapter, Reinharz summarises feminist research

in ten points. She states that feminism is a perspective, not a method, and that feminist research includes an ongoing criticism of non-feminist research. The methods feminist researchers use are not different from those used by other researchers, but they are used in a perspective based on feminist theory. Furthermore, they are distinguished by an ethical view on the relation between the researcher and the research object (Reinharz 1991: 240).

The most striking insight gained by this short review is that most of the literature is rather old. In contemporary feminist theory several different approaches can be found. Post-colonial and race-inflected feminist approaches, which argue for the necessity of intersectional analyses, are important to acknowledge. Critical men's studies focussing on hegemonic masculinities and queer theoretical criticism on heteronormativity are other important perspectives. In opposition to Reinhartz' understanding of feminist research as a (*one*) perspective, it is today more adequate to see Gender Studies as a field of education and research allowing several perspectives and different approaches; perspectives and approaches combined with different research methods depending on the topics being studied. One example is the recent book *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed, which shows how old approaches and methods can be combined with newer perspectives.

Subject foci in the essays

What did I then find? My first reaction was that Reinhartz' conclusion that "[f]eminist research is amoeba like; it goes everywhere, in every direction" (Reinharz 1992: 243) was a good description. Everything from handicraft to the nerd, Sámi writers, and the issue of order of succession to the throne were of interest to the students. However, the answer to the question on subject foci is that the students are mainly interested in the question of gender construction and understandings of the same and that this is often scrutinised in every-day-situations. Women's life conditions, equality work and issues related more to ideology/politics are also of interest to the students. On a closer look some obvious categories occur.

The most frequent area of interest is the construction of gender in various milieus and contexts. In fifteen out of twenty-seven essays analysed, this was the main issue. In this category I include essays scrutinising midwives' views on parenthood and their

understandings of gender relations, gender constructions in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the possibilities for the butch to function as a male role model for children. All of these topics have a primary interest in analysing how masculinity, femininity and gender are constructed, reproduced and understood in different arenas.

Four essays deal with equality work in one way or other. One investigates conditions for gender equality workers in a certain organisation, another the responsibility of the management in a school, one essay deals with evaluations of equality work at university level and the last one scrutinises understandings of sexual harassment by leaders and their responsibility to prevent such harassment.

The third category can be characterised as those essays with an interest in women, their life conditions and activities. Here we recognise essays with themes like the situation for refugee women from Iran, young female handicraft workers' view on their crafts, women's psychological health problems in relation to working life and family life, and a study of the relationship between gender patterns in families and women's participating in civic society in Niassa, Mozambique.

Finally, we have four remaining essays. In two of them there is an ambition to "re-read" female authors, with a purpose to visualise their ideas and significance. Another one questions discrimination on the basis of sex in commercials as a political phenomenon. The last one, which does not automatically fit into a category, is about the debate in Sweden on the issue of female succession to the throne. It could be argued that these four essays in different ways touch political/ideological issues.

It is obvious that the students pay great attention to how gender is constructed and can be understood. In most of the essays there is a wish to deconstruct various masculinities and femininities, as well as the preconditions for specific groups. Questioning and visualising the impact of heteronormativity on phenomena in the society is another frequent theme. These themes in the essays are even more obvious when we look into the theoretical frameworks used.

Students use of methods

In relation to methods, firstly it can be stated that all of the essays examined had a qualitative approach. Interviewing is the most common way to gain information and empirical material. In addition, different kinds of textual material are examined, fiction as well as interview books, information material, protocols from the government and equality plans, to mention but a few. But what the students actually do in his or her project is one thing, what they call their methods is something else. While a piece of critical work can be termed an interview investigation, it can also be called a discourse analysis. The difference between these two methods in the essay is not always that clear. To be able to scrutinise this, deeper qualitative analysis is required. Four of the essays had no defined method at all. A closer look at them might give a clue, I thought, even to what the other students with more or less vague descriptions of methods, actually where doing. A closer analysis did indeed show a certain pattern. Let me give some quotes on methods from the essays⁶:

Ex 1. More developed, this means that I will study if and how the choices which the four analysed characters depend on or are linked to intersectional structures.

Ex 2. I used Berit Ås' "ruling techniques" to be able to understand the methods used by the opponents to the reform, when they tried to diminish the struggle for female succession to the throne, [...].

What I found was a number of essays in which the authors did not mention their methods. On a closer examination of these essays, I found a more or less obvious "perspective" based on feminist theory, which was the basic framework for the analysis. To their empirical material – texts or transcribed interviews – a framework of feminist theory was applied.

When I tried this methodical thinking in relation to the other essays, which I had already ordered in other method categories, about twenty of them can fit into this method of analysis. I am aware that "about twenty" is a vague number, but since there is a significant

⁶ With my translation

element of interpretation, it is hard to be more precise.⁷ A good example of this is an essay, in which a methodically adequate film analysis is performed, but at the same time the author underlines:

... I have tried to practice several species of readings on the material, [...] tainted by feminist critique and with one eye constantly open to practices of power.

In this essay, there is one section in which the feminist theories, which form the basic framework for the above-mentioned readings, are presented. In seven other essays a similar kind of thinking is expressed. In quite a few of the remaining essays this is *de facto* what is done, even if it is not explicitly expressed.

When I analysed these essays and compared them to essays with a more explicit account of methods, I found a more or less obvious “perspective” pertaining to most essays. One could argue that the application of feminist theory to various empirical data is the most common method used. However, few students seem to be aware of what they actually do, at least they seem to have no language to talk about it.

It is striking how few references the students have in their methods chapters. In nine out of twenty-seven essays there are no references at all. In the rest of the essays there are some references, mostly on interview techniques or on reflections on the craft of research. A significant number of the methods chapters are more or less working descriptions – the student describes what she/he has done. This does not necessarily say anything about the quality of those essays, but it could be a sign of an uncertainty about their own methodical skill. To me it is obvious that a number of the students have no language that enabled discussions about methods. This may raise problems when it comes to the legitimacy of the work being done.

⁷ For instance, I had problems with my own essay, which was part of the material. Did I use this method? I described my method as a textual analysis, while what I actually did was to read the author Ellen Key through what I called a Key discourse. This discourse was captured by a study of recent feminist Key research.

Feminist theory and other characteristic features

One of the central “demands” in feminist methodological discourse is about the connection to feminist theory. In most of the essays scrutinised there is a theory chapter, in which earlier research and theory connected to the subject is described and discussed. Five out of twenty-seven essays have, what I call, a weak theory discussion. By weak, I mean less than three references. Of course, the number of quoted authors does not necessarily say anything about the quality. In an essay that deals with R W Connell's theory on masculinity, it may not be necessary to have many references. On the other hand, if an essay should be considered to have a strong theoretical basis it must “use” earlier research and discuss it in relation to its own subject. At least eleven essays can be considered to have such a strong theoretical basis. Hence, they have references to a number of authors and the theory chapters are extensive and well argued. This can also, to a lesser extent, be said about the remaining eleven essays.

Most of the theorists referenced in the essays are Swedish authors. Yvonne Hirdman is the most frequent reference; other frequent names are Lena Gemzöe, Maud Eduards, Maria Wendt Höjer and Anna Wahl. Something that obviously interests the students is queer theory. In seven of the essays this theoretical field is discussed, with references to Judith Butler and Tiina Rosenberg, often in combination. In two essays the students also have references to Don Kulick.

In nine essays, theories of masculinity are discussed. Swedish as well as international research is quoted. Most common is R W Connell, whose theories occur in seven essays. Swedish authors can also be mentioned such as Bo Nilsson and Tomas Johansson. Female masculinity is also discussed. In two essays there are references to Judith Halberstam.

When it comes to feminist theory, my examination gives reason to claim that students in Gender Studies are well aware of the theoretical discussions in feminist research. In the essays that I have scrutinised, there is a clearly stated gender perspective, by which I mean that the empirical material is tested or analysed with feminist theory. In contrary to what is argued in *Metodpraktikan*, the students seem to be well aware that they raise different questions. The reliance on feminist theory was one of the basic demands I found in feminist methodology curricula taught in courses in Sweden.

Other “demands” examined relate to reflexivity and action-orientation. In almost all essays the students, in one way or another, reflect on their own research position. In those essays where interviews were conducted, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee was discussed. A lot of the essays examined contain suggestions for change of policies or are based on a will to visualise gender construction in various contexts.

Gender Studies on its own⁸

In the autumn of 2005, more than eight hundred students applied to the first level course of Gender Studies at Göteborg University. The increasing numbers of applicants reflected the increased interest in the society for feminism and gender equality, but we do not know what these students expect from their studies. For some of them, this is their first meeting with the University. For others, Gender Studies is a complement or a way to deepen earlier studies. Some of them may want to become “better” feminists, while others are looking for a future as gender equality experts in the public sector. A few of them, finally, choose Gender Studies as their main subject with their mind set on research.

Institutionalisation and/or disciplination of Gender Studies are ongoing processes. Today one can take a PhD in (inter) disciplinary Gender Studies and at the same time, gender perspectives are more or less integrated into traditional disciplines. At a department of Gender Studies the senior researchers and the teachers are usually trained in other departments like literature, philosophy or sociology. This brings a plurality of views, directions and practices. What unites them is often their criticism of traditional scholarship, their feminist standpoints and/or common research interests. For students this means that they will have opportunities to approach society and research from various angles. But, as I have shown in this article, it may cause problems for them when they are supposed to work on their own projects. If method courses focus more on epistemology and methodology than on practical skills it can be problematic.

When Shulamit Reinharz provides an overview of methods used by feminist researchers she states, among other things, that feminism is a perspective, not a method and that feminist research contains an ongoing criticism of non-feminist research. Methods used

⁸ The heading refers to the book *Women's Studies on its own*, ed Robyn Wiegman (2002).

by feminist researchers are not different from those used by others researchers, but they are adopted from a perspective based on feminist theories. Another difference is the view of the researcher, the object and the relation between them (Reinharz 1992: 240). According to Reinharz, feminist research was, when she wrote her book, in a time of “Feminist Culture Building, or Feminist Renaissance, and that we will be self-correcting” (Reinharz 1992: 269)

Obviously, this is not a new discussion. There is an ongoing tension regarding issues related to methods and methodology in the history of modern Gender Studies. When questions such as, “What is typical for this field?” are raised, different researchers, representing different scientific schools, give different answers. For some it is the deployed method that matters. This includes the ongoing feminist critique of traditional disciplines and could be argued to be common among researchers from interpreting traditions. For others, this being the most typical for feminist research and Gender Studies, is the object of research or, in other words, that “the subject matters”. One approach does not have to exclude the other one. Of course, theories, methodologies and methods are intrinsic to each other. The choice of method depends on material, theoretical adherence and so on. Together, material, theories used and methods affect each other and produce the end result.

Plurality in methods used is a sign for research in this field. Hence, the students at undergraduate level in Women Studies should have the opportunity for training in a number of methods. But, if undergraduate courses do not provide the students with proper training in methods they will not be able to use them. As one in the first generation of PhD-students in Gender Studies in Sweden, I think it is important to raise the question posed at the beginning of this article: What are our unique skills, trained as we are in such an inter- and multidisciplinary field?

Reflections on what can be done

For the on-going development of Gender Studies, and to be able to answer to demands and expectations from all the students, I argue for further studies and discussions on issues that emerged in my study. This is important, not least to enable us to face and challenge scepticism and sometimes even explicit criticism of our area of research.

I argue that there is a lot more to ask for when it comes to methodological awareness and methodical skills. In several of the essays examined there is a significant uncertainty relating to methods and methodological matters. In comparison to the theoretical awareness, methodological references are almost absent in most of the essays. Even references to more methodical issues rarely occur. In my opinion, after having done this study and as a PhD-student in Gender Studies, I am positive that we need further studies on what we actually do in our research projects. Perhaps, Gender Studies departments should reconsider what is taught in their method courses? What can be done to help and encourage the students to handle and use the theoretical knowledge they have gained?

It is obvious that the students are more aware of Gender Studies theory than of methods. With more methodical awareness we could be clearer and more specific about how we use these theories and strengthen the claims we make. By this I do not demand a certain set of methods – approved for Gender Studies – on the contrary! I would like to see a broader spectrum of methods used. I agree with those who say that the day Gender Studies becomes a discipline with rigid rules on methods and a closed canon it will lose much of its dynamic (Holm 2006: 19ff). But there is no contradiction in that and, on the other hand, a wish for better methodical training at undergraduate level. It is striking how the significant element of methodological literature in the courses has almost no correlation to how the students use it in their projects. Perhaps, the distance between abstract discussions and the practical craft you do when you write an essay is too far. And maybe it is in the intersection between these two that the need for student guidance is most required.

With teachers from such various backgrounds, it would not be that hard to provide the students with a veritable toolbox in methods. Just by using their own experience as researchers, the teachers could be both excellent tutors and inspirers for the students. By introducing and showing how to use different methods to scrutinize a common subject, the method courses, at an interdisciplinary department, have an opportunity to be a place for concrete and interesting discussions on what can be gained in using one method and what you lose with another. By introducing methodical training in theoretical courses, even more could be won. What I ask for is something that could be called the methods of “perspectivism”; a conceptual framework for how we use feminist theory to understand and interpret and an ongoing practical training in how to do it.

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