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## **Being Young Feminists: Discussions and (dis)contents**

The contributors to this special feature are a group of young feminist PhD students undertaking critical research in various disciplines. While our work has some distinctive differences, we are united in our commitment to producing critical, and notably, feminist work. As a group we have come together by meeting at conferences and workshops, and some of us are current or former colleagues. We formed out of necessity and shared interests. For many of us, the type of work we are conducting is atypical of research within our 'malestream' departments, so it was important and refreshing to interact with like-minded students in an informal and supportive setting. Over the past two years, we have undertaken collaborative work, including a conference workshop at the Psychology of Women Section (POWS) Annual Conference in 2006. Additionally, our group continues to provide a forum for discussing our PhD research, which is the focus of our individual contributions to this special feature.

A recurrent theme in our discussions relates to tensions and challenges we face as young feminist academics. Many young women who identify as feminists experience this positioning as requiring constant reflection and negotiation across work and social settings. One of the central issues in this process is the decision to reveal or conceal one's feminism (for instance to colleagues who might be unaware of our work, but also in our private lives) and the consequences of such decision-making. Depending on the context, 'coming out' as a feminist might result in responses such as admiration, but also hostility, suspicion, or even ridicule. These reactions require both intellectual and emotional negotiation on the part of the feminist (a reminder that the 'personal' really is

‘political’), which might be difficult especially in the early stages of one’s engagement with feminist theory and research.

Regrettably, such negative responses seem to have become especially common and intensified in recent years. In the current historical context feminism is often constructed as irrelevant as it is suggested that social and material conditions have improved for most women (Modleski 1991; Aronson 2003). This so-called ‘Post-feminism’ began as a critique that partly came from within feminisms’ own ranks (Roiphe 1993/1994; Denfeld 1995), but was quickly adopted by anti-feminist circles who celebrated the fact that feminism was allegedly now redundant. As Susan Douglas (2002) has said, what post-feminism really refers to is ‘a time when complete gender equality has been achieved’ (p.1), to which she added: ‘That hasn’t happened, of course, but we (especially young women) are supposed to think it has’ (Douglass 1999).

Furthermore, in public discourse, and under the influence of ‘post-feminism’, it is often implied that ‘real’ feminists are women who reject heteronormative expectations in relation to their sexuality and physical appearance. This may cause those young women who choose to identify as feminists to question their involvement in heterosexual relationships and grooming practices, serving to further complicate their ability to embrace a feminist identity. On the other hand, with the advent of post-structural feminisms, certain taken-for-granted understandings of what it means to be a ‘good’ feminist have been questioned (Nicholson 1990; Ahmed 1998). Although by no means tension-free, this arguably offers a wider field of possibilities in which one can position oneself as a feminist.

In this special issue, we, as young feminists who live and work in an (allegedly) post-feminist as well as post-modern culture, aim to explore our own positions within these debates, and discuss what it means to us to be feminists. In presenting our work as a group, we aim to examine our research individually and as a whole, reflecting on how we have developed, and continue to develop both politically and academically.

Each contribution represents postgraduate research at various stages and is reflective of a wide variety of interests and topics. Nevertheless, the papers presented in this special feature are all connected through our shared commitment to political consciousness and ethical responsibility. This, we would argue, is what makes us, and our work, 'feminist'.

As contended by Grace Paley (1982):

'Feminism means political consciousness. It means that you see the relationship between the life of woman and the political life and power around her. From there, you can take any route you want' (quoted in Segal, 2000, p. 31).

In relation to the practice of research, political consciousness can mean applying reflexivity as a methodological tool, as a way of producing ethical research which has the capacity to benefit both women and men in their real world contexts. In the featured papers we discuss reflexivity in terms of thinking of how we position ourselves (in relation to our participants), how our participants position us, and how participants (and we) are positioned in the context of wider social structures.

For instance, Lisa Marzano discusses some of the tensions and conflicts of identifying as a feminist during her research with, and to some extent, *for*, male prisoners, including perpetrators of gendered violence. In her paper she argues that feminism can – and

should – also be about seeing ‘the relationship between the life of *man* and the political life and power around *him*’.

Maria Papadima’s paper discusses some difficulties faced by the feminist researcher who embarks on a study of child sexual abuse, employing psychoanalytic theoretical tools in doing so. Her PhD work could be seen as less ‘traditionally’ feminist – not in the subject matter, but in the particular angle that is taken to research this.

Psychoanalytic concepts have largely been excluded from feminist work on sexual violence, and this paper reflectively explores some of the tensions and uncertainties of entering this contested field of work. In particular, what is discussed is the possible tension between a committed feminist identity, and a Freudian standpoint.

In arguing for the application of *embodied* reflexivity, Lilliana Del Busso’s paper explores some of the difficulties in adequately embodying feminist politics in interactions with research participants. By using examples from interviews with participants, the paper illustrates some of the ways in which physical bodies are inscribed with power and can produce unexpected and complex power dynamics that are in need of reflexive attention. In particular, the author reflects on her experience of being positioned by participants in ways that are not consistent with her feminist identity.

In the context of research on South Asian women’s experiences of marriage, Anamika Majumdar suggests that it is important to reflect on the wider social and political settings in which South Asian women are often stereotyped negatively. In researching

South Asian women, it is important not to maintain binary distinctions of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ women. Anamika discusses how her own research using Life History interviews focussed on close relationships and places where women have lived has helped to draw out subtleties in the multiple contexts occupied by women.

Black and ethnic minority feminisms have influenced Nena Foster’s work, providing a lens for reflection. In her paper, she discusses two issues of reflexivity. Firstly, how black feminist inspired research is giving a voice to the (traditionally) voiceless without simply reifying HIV and AIDS statistics. Secondly, she explores the tensions raised by oppressive representations and discourses that are fostered by HIV statistics and epidemiology, that shape the way black women living with HIV are talked about and talk about themselves.

Finally, Eike Adams also considers how women are positioned in institutional practices and discourses, using an example of her PhD research for which she interviewed young women on their experiences of infertility after breast cancer, and analysed those interviews using a Foucauldian inspired form of discourse analysis. In particular, she discusses how a discourse of the ‘expert patient’ (aiming to ‘empower’) stands in stark contrast to medical breast cancer practices which continue to infantilise women.

### *(In)conclusions*

The papers presented in this special feature discuss some of the tensions and difficulties that, as feminists and young female researchers, shape our academic, political and personal consciousnesses. In spite - and/or perhaps *because* - of these challenges and

conflicts, feminist theories and methodologies have been an invaluable and empowering source of inspiration, both in negotiating our feminist identities (and people's often negative reactions to them), and with regards to our reflexive research practice, and our commitment to producing ethical and politically conscious knowledges.

In this context, our PhD group has served, and continues to function, as a space for discussing and strengthening our feminist convictions, identities and (dis)contents. It has allowed us to explore new ideas and (re-)constructions of these identities in a safe environment, where we can share and reflect on our feminist doubts, beliefs and dilemmas. This process, which is still very much in progress, has been both challenging and rewarding; at times perplexing, but always enjoyable. Above all, our group discussions - some of which are reflected in the following contributions - have helped us enormously in 'coming out' as young feminists in an increasingly hostile wider (academic and social) world.

*Last but not least: Some thank yous.*

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