

TOWARDS A FEMINIST-SYSTEMS THEORY – AN OVERVIEW OF METHOD, EMERGING RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.

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1 ABSTRACT

This paper provides the findings of a current study to locate the similarity and/or differences between two epistemologies: Critical Systems Thinking (CST) and cultural ecofeminism. Selected texts from authors in each field were coded and compared using the Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) Grounded Theory method. The texts revealed a multitude of similarities between the two bodies across a range of concepts including systems thinking language; challenges to positivist science, reason and instrumentalism; ethics and morality and praxis. From the initial synthesis of the data, several principles towards one feminist-systems theory of practice are emerging.

2 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a Grounded Theory (GT) study into the comparative similarities and differences between Critical Systems Theory (CST) and cultural ecofeminism¹. The study's key objective is to detail a feminist-systems theory by identifying conceptual connections between the epistemologies of systems thinking and ecofeminism and provide guidelines for Systemic Intervention practice. This conference paper presents an overview of the preliminary results.

A central concern of CST is its commitment to achieving mutual understandings and addressing issues of power and coercion in research practice. A notable contributor to the field is Gerald Midgley, and his book *Systemic Intervention: Philosophy, Methodology, and Practice* (2000), is a thorough exploration of CST philosophy, methodology and the practice of Systemic Intervention (SI). Concerns regarding the exclusion of women in systems literature were raised by Dr. Barbara Hanson in 2001 when she wrote that there are grounds to find linkages between feminism and systems science claiming that they are 'compatible, even inseparable' (Hanson, 2001, p. 546). Any occasion where female specific forms of marginalization are overlooked is a form of exclusionary practice. As gender specific or

¹ A thesis entitled: *Towards a Feminist-Systems theory for rural and remote community development and Community Operational Research Methodology* will be submitted after July 2009.

feminist research is absent in systems theory², Hanson claimed systems thinking risks being viewed as limited by its reliance upon sexist or conservative ideologies (p. 548). Ecofeminism was selected from the schools of general feminism for its interest in multiple oppressions (women and the environment) and its holistic perspective³.

The study found multiple points of commensurability between ecofeminist epistemology and CST. Four of these points; systems thinking, positivism, ethics and morality, and praxis with their associated properties, are discussed. An ethical framework of gender and environmental responsibility to work cooperatively and responsively with people towards social change is emerging.

Key terminology

Ecofeminism and CST are not unambiguous concepts, therefore some discussion of these and the terms SI, 'environment' and 'nature', is necessary at the outset.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism was coined in 1974 from the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne's work, "Le féminisme ou la mort." (Tong, 1998, p. 251) According to King, "nature is the central category of analysis. An analysis of the interrelated dominations of nature - psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and nonhuman nature - and the historic position of women in relation to those forms of domination, is the starting point of ecofeminist theory." (Ynestra King in Uhls, n.d.). Ecofeminism can be broadly distinguished as two schools of thinking. 'Nature ecofeminists' perceive that there is an essential link between woman and nature that is primarily biological and psychological. Generally, women can be closer to nature because of their positions as mothers, homemakers and carers. This view is thought to be empowering as women's unique way of knowing might save human beings and the environment from men's domination of nature (Tong, 1998, pp. 252-258).

'Cultural Ecofeminist'(s), by contrast, seek to deemphasize the nature-woman connection which they see as imposed by a socially constructed patriarchal order and degrading. Some men will continue to exploit women and nature whilst women are culturally subordinated to men, and nature is subordinated to culture. Attempts to save the planet are undermined until

² Despite ongoing literature reviews, there is a dearth of CST or SI literature that identifies or pertains to gender-specific forms of exclusion, marginalisation or oppression.

³ See definition below.

an ethic that is free from androcentric and anthropocentric distortions is adopted (Tong, 1998, pp. 265-266).

Throughout this study, the work of ecofeminists from the cultural school of ecofeminism has been reviewed. This is because it is considered a dangerous position to reduce women's potential and abilities to the realm of her 'caring nature'. According to Biehl nature feminism is reactionary rather than revolutionary (Biehl, 1991, in Tong, 1998). A process of 'reclaiming' the meaning of the nature-woman link is simplistic and unlikely to be achieved given centuries of debasing and negative cultural baggage (Tong, 1998, p. 273). Graduated and responsive measures to multifarious problems are required to implement lasting social change and overturn oppressive paradigms.

Critical Systems Theory (CST)

Critical Systems Thinking (CST) is described as the third wave of systems thinking (Bausch, 2003). Three central commitments are to conduct research that (1) emancipates or liberates, (2) achieves mutual understandings, and (3) addresses issues of power and coercion in research practice (Bausch, 2003, Burton, 2003, Midgley, 1996b; 2000). According to Pollack (2006) there is no consistently supported philosophical position on CST (p. 393). However, one area in which CST writers agree is on the significance of theoretical and methodological pluralism. CST is committed to pluralist action, designed (albeit in a variety of different ways) to be used in conjunction with other methodologies (Pollack, 2006, p. 393).

Systemic Intervention (SI)

Systemic Intervention (SI) is a multi-methodology, or mixed method research tool used by CSTs. SI calls for three things:

- (1) That agents reflect critically on boundaries. This is deemed vital, by Midgley (2000), as the only way that the ethical consequences of different possible actions, or ways of seeing, can be assessed;
- (2) Agents need to select appropriate theories and methods, acknowledging that each may embody differing assumptions. Thus SI entails a commitment to methodological pluralism; and
- (3) People undertaking SI should be explicit that taking action to make a sustainable improvement – an action for the better (Midgley, 2000, p. 129-130).

The language of SI enables scientists and social groups to dialogue, break down scientific distinctions between observation and intervention, and the false distinction between natural and social sciences (Midgley, 2000, p. 9-14).

‘Environment’ and ‘nature’

According to Lockett (2004) the term ‘environment’ in systems thinking refers to “that which is outside the boundary of a system... and which is able to impact on the dynamics/operation of the system.” (p. 511) Humankind is a part of the environment. Therefore, humans are a part of nature, therefore the words ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ are used synonymously. Nature is said to encompass both the human and the nonhuman worlds to avoid the juxtaposition of ‘human vs. nature,’ which misleadingly suggests that humans are not part of nature (Eckersley quoted in Lockett, 2004, p. 511).

3 METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory (GT) is a qualitative research method focused on generating theory through building inductive analysis from data (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513). Whilst it was originally developed as a method for understanding people’s perspective on an issue and has been applied through the use of interviews and focus groups it was adapted to suit the aim of the study through the use of textual data. GT has three distinguishing methods: (1) data collection, (2) Constant Comparison Analysis (CCA) including comparison of data against theorized categories, and (3) theoretical sampling and theory development (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, pp. 11-14).

This study uses the CCA to compare concepts within the disciplines. Sections of Midgley’s (2000) text were coded for the study as a sample of CST epistemology and methodology. For comparative analysis five texts were coded from the cultural ecofeminist school of feminism. The authors selected in this study are Fred Besthorne and Diane Pearson McMillan (2002); Stephanie Lahar (1996); Patrick Murphy (1996); Karen Warren and Jim Cheney (1996); and the late Val Plumwood (1996). The texts were selected based on theoretical and philosophical depth (Midgley) and because of the detail provided on ecofeminist epistemology and praxis.

Towards a Feminist-Systems Theory

Data were analysed using 3 steps: coding, CCA, and theoretical sampling. The method is ‘triangulated’ as each step maybe revisited frequently to obtain greater degrees of analytical abstraction. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the three steps.

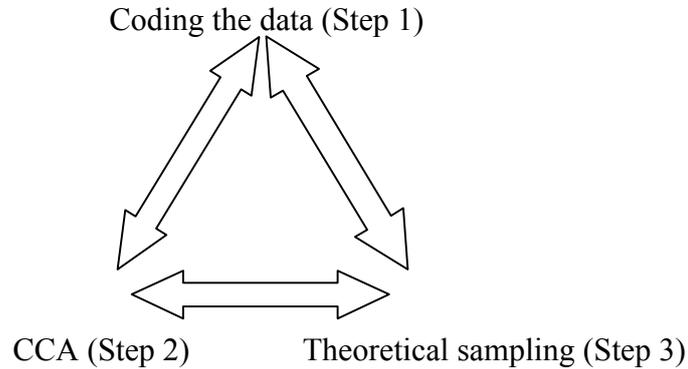


Figure 1: the triangulated relationship between steps 1 - 3

Step one involves coding. Holton (2007) describes coding as involving a process of fracturing the data, then conceptualizing the underlying patterns of sets of empirical indicators into a theory that explains what is happening in the data. With Glaser’s dictum “All is data” (pp. 266-268), open coding of extant words from the texts, as well as memos and comments, were recorded and entered in a purposefully designed spreadsheet (Figure 2). The main idea, topic or subject of a sentence is noted thus ‘fracturing’ the texts into words representing concepts, which enables the emergence of core concepts. Reoccurring core concepts can be recognised and prominent ones become category titles (step two). The remaining data is reorganized under each category to ‘flesh out’ the emerging theory under each categorical title. The core category then becomes the focus of further elective data collection and coding efforts. The final step is theoretical sampling or literature review. Relevant material from both fields of CST and general feminism is drawn upon to synthesise the findings and outline an emergent theory.

Page no.	Parag no.	Line no.	Codes	Concepts	Notes/memos
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Figure 2: Headers of purposefully designed spreadsheet for coding texts.

4 EMERGENT CATEGORIES AND THEIR PROPERTIES

Steps one and two revealed four core categories: Systems Thinking, Positivism, Ethics and Morality, and Praxis. As this work is preliminary, step three is not included in this analysis. In this section, an overview is provided of each category, its sub-categories and properties. Table 1 provides a summary of each category, sub-category with and a single summary statement.

Table 1: Summary of results of steps one and two.

Categories	Sub-categories	Descriptors
Systems Thinking (ST)	Discourse	Language of systems thinking is common to both epistemologies but reference to explicit female oppression is minimal.
Positivism	Reason and Instrumentalism	Reason and instrumentalism have been damaging to women and the environment in its application. Both are challenged by critical systems thinkers and ecofeminist thinkers.
Ethics and morality	Interwoven oppressions	Dual oppressive conditions operate simultaneously, such as sexism, heterosexism, racism, ethnocentrism and naturism - social exclusion in methodological practice needs to be reconceptualised.
	Challenging the subject object dualism (SOD)	Challenging and moving beyond the subject object dualism is the urgent agenda of both epistemologies in theory and practice.
Praxis	The Role of the observation/observed	Observers are not independent of context and legitimate method/ologies can include previously marginalized voices and new perspectives as data.
	The role of intuitive thinking	Intuition is a legitimate mode of experience/expression that can be developed as a resource in systemic intervention practice.
	The role of methodology towards social change	'Grassroot' approaches are emergent, contextually relevant and locally responsive to ensure change is sustainable and desirable.

Towards a Feminist-Systems Theory

	Pluralism	Pluralist theory and methodology, a commitment of critical systems thinking, presents opportunities for disparate ideas (including within feminism) to work towards an agreed goal.
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Core Category 1: Systems Thinking

The language of systems thinking, including its jargon and semantics features are common in both Midgley's text and a number of the ecofeminists texts⁴. By contrast feminist discourse around concepts or issues relating to women's oppression is not present in the CST literature examined.

Discourse

The ecofeminist authors in this study regularly used systems thinking language to describe their epistemic interest in the environment and exploration of society's interaction with it. Commonly used words include borders, spatiotemporal dimensions, boundary conditions, design, patterns, complexity and emergence (Lahar, 1996, Warren and Cheney, 1996, Murphy, 1996) For example, Besthorne and Pearson McMillan (2002) argue that humans have 'lost their integrated wholeness' and require a 'systems thinking ontology of interconnectedness', where humans are a small part of the whole and not the pinnacle of nature (Besthorne and Pearson McMillan, 2002, pp. 222-226). Plumwood (1996) includes 'biotic web of life' and 'holism' to locate human's place with non-human nature. She calls for a rejection of separately and independently existing parts (p. 164). Ecofeminism is anti-reductionist and it uses systems thinking language to establish arguments for paradigm change. By contrast, Midgley (2000) is written in a non-gender specific language, but explicit reference to the distinguishing features of women's oppression is absent. The analysis did not reveal concepts around 'feminism', 'women's issues' or 'gender' common in the ecofeminist texts. Therefore, a discussion around the suitability of SI to deal with issues where female oppression is present was not uncovered in Midgley (2000)⁵.

⁴ Discourse is one property of several including 'context', and 'boundary analysis' that bring the core category to prominence.

⁵ A key research objective of this study is to: Enhance practitioners' awareness of issues of gender, oppression, and other issues that concern feminists. Female specific forms of marginalization include prejudice and devaluation, discriminatory practices, sexual mistreatment and inequality across a vast number of social contexts. Midgley's (2000) discussions of social exclusion (chapter 1) do not include women's exclusion from the mainstream, an act of exclusionary practice itself.

Core Category 2: Positivism

Positivism emerged as a central analytical concept primarily because of the strong epistemological stance taken by Midgley (2000) and the ecofeminist authors against traditional or conventional notions of science and research. Positivism promotes reductionism (based on a mechanistic and atomistic world view), and subject object dualism (SOD) (based on strategies that promote objectification from the researched subjects by an independent and detached observer). The term 'Positivism' was used to represent associated concepts or terminologies including: 'rationalism', 'Western thinking', 'conventional science', 'materialism', 'modernity' and 'observational science'.

Reason and Instrumentalism

Scientific reasoning originated with Descartes' separation of the mind and body (Devlin, 1996). The mind is identified as an abstract entity that resides in the physical brain and is something that can be explained using mathematics. The only knowledge worth pursuing according to Descartes, was that which could be expressed by eternal, context-free, and precise rules that captured general patterns in nature. 'Dualism' is therefore the name given to this fundamental separation of mind from body (Devlin, 1996). The SOD and Descartes' 'rational man' is criticized by several ecofeminists who claim that human emotion has been assigned to an 'inferior' realm and aligned with that realm are 'irrational beings' including Indigenous people, the intellectually/physically impaired, most women, and nature. By contrast, qualities that are valued, such as dominance, competition, materialism and techno-scientific exploitation are aligned with masculine aptitudes and ambitions (Lahar, 1996; Plumwood, 1996; Warren & Cheney; 1996). So too 'reason' has been historically construed along masculine lines defining the nature of the sexes. Plumwood (1996) was highly critical of rationalist-derived conceptions of the separation of reason and emotion⁶. Reasoning therefore justifies 'instrumentalism', an attitude whereby humans' interaction with other people, species, and ecosystems is based upon the value of the person/object harnessed in the service of meeting some pre-defined end (Midgley, 2000, p. 109; Plumwood, 1996). To Midgley (2000), Besthorne and Pearson McMillan (2002) and Plumwood (1996), instrumentalism is very damaging to the environment and women. Ecofeminists for example,

⁶ Plumwood (1996) said that possession of reason is "What is taken to be authentically and characteristically human, defining of the human, as well as the ideal for which humans should strive [and] is not to be found in what is shared with the natural and animal (e.g., the body, sexuality, reproduction, emotionality, the senses, agency) but in what is thought to separate and distinguish them - especially reason and its offshoots." (p. 162)

criticize the economic theory of intrinsic value where the commodification of natural and human resources into "isolated and extractable units" is made possible because of the collective filters and structural reinforcements that operate to view people, beings and things as objects (Lahar, 1996; Plumwood, 1996). Midgley (2000) is critical of 'instrumental rationality' that is dominant in Western capitalism (p. 109).

Core Category 3: Ethics and morality

As an analytical concept, ethics and morality featured prominently through both epistemologies. Both epistemologies acknowledge the need to challenge interwoven oppressions and the imperative of using methodological morality to move beyond the SOD.

Interwoven oppressions

The authors examined in this study all recognise that oppression is often interwoven. Interwoven or dual oppressive conditions result when oppression is coupled with other oppressions such as sexism, heterosexism, racism, or ethnocentrism (Lahar, 1996, p. 2). The distinguishing similarity between Gerald Midgley's work and ecofeminism is their recognition that the 'environment' or 'nature' is marginalized and excluded. However, ecofeminism centralises the dual oppression of nature and women. Power hierarchies can be revealed by examining the root causes of twin exploitation of the human and non-human dichotomies i.e. masculine/feminine, mind/body, public/private, nature/society. (Lahar, 1996, Warren and Cheney, 1996). According to Besthorne and Pearson McMillan ecofeminism provides a feminist/ecological dominance theory rooted in (and by) the destructive theories of patriarchy (p 224).

Midgley (2000) notes that environmental issues have linkages to broader social problems⁷. In his view, one of the most important contributions of SI in the 21st Century needs to be the reconceptualisation of social exclusion (p 14). Social exclusion and oppression are synonymous, thus his goal to take account of the dilemmas social exclusion raises and the design of methods to address it at all levels of society is a shared ecofeminist goal.

⁷ Midgley (2000) supports this view by stating "the tendency to gravitate towards the use of boundaries around human systems (individuals, groups, organisations, linguistic system, economies, societies, etc), excluding the ecosystems of which they are a part, is a function of a humanist discourse that results in the marginalisation of ecological concerns and ultimately produces environmental degradation that rebounds on human society" (p 86)

Challenging the SOD

As an ethical issue, Midgley (2000) and the ecofeminist authors regard the need to challenge and move beyond dualisms as urgent in both theory and in practice. For Warren and Cheney (1996) ecofeminist ethics advocates an inclusive, holistic based theory where dualisms are replaced by complementarity rather than oppositionality (p. 252). Research offers opportunities to move beyond dualistic thinking by encouraging better clarification of the methodological purpose of the research or inquiry and rethinking the role of the researcher to be cautious and reflective of their practice⁸ (Lahar, 1996; Midgley, 2000; Warren & Cheney, 1996). The problem for Midgley (2000) is that the SOD is so ingrained in Western thought that it is very difficult to even diagnose in some instances, let alone challenge. Yet the goal remains to root out naïve SODs to strengthen the critique of so-called value-free science so that the values flowing into research and observations can be made more visible (Midgley, 2000, pp. 42-44).

Core Category 4: Praxis

Praxis is described as "... an intervention methodology that [if] not informed by practice would be strangely contradictory..." (Midgley, 2000, p. 106). Methodological discourse is vital (Midgley, 2000, p. 111) and one of the goals of this research is to contribute to improving the academic discourse and relations across the schools of systems thinking and contemporary feminist scholarship⁹. There are several comparative similarities around research practice. These include the roles of the observer in research practice; intuitive thinking and achieving social change. Whilst some feminists approach pluralism with caution (Rooney, 1989) others welcome its theoretical application (Besthorne and Pearson McMillen, 2002, Warren and Cheney, 1996).

The role of the observation/observed

In the traditional positivist sciences, validity has been claimed to be independent of observer and context, because methods that claim to yield knowledge without distortion or intervention by the observer are used. The ecofeminists in this study join with Midgley

⁸ See core category Praxis below.

⁹ Other research goals and questions that arise in relation to this key objective of the study include: How can systems thinkers' capacity be enhanced to recognise patriarchal paradigms through learning and reflecting on their local knowledge and practices? How is feminist epistemology relevant to, or necessary for effective systemic intervention practice?

(2000) to challenge the notion of valid and independent science free of bias or context (Plumwood, 1996, Warren and Cheney, 1996). For CST, independent observation is regarded as impossible, research practice is legitimate when the methodology and methods chosen in a SI are viewed by the researcher, stakeholders and/or other interested parties, as appropriate to the circumstances or context of the intervention (Midgley, 2000, p. 106).

The role of intuitive thinking

When we accept that knowledge is constructed by our boundary decision making processes (Midgley, 2000) then decisions of what's in and out can allow for 'untraditional' information in a research setting. Research is enhanced and lives can be changed when we hear from unique voices from the margins. Ecofeminism, says Lahar (1996) should be aimed at transforming personal sensibilities and incorporating modes of experience/expression, that acknowledge and integrate rational, emotional, visceral, imaginative, and the intuitive (pp. 11-12). Similarly, Midgley (2000) is in no doubt of the importance of intuition to SI practice – he is even more explicit about it. He gives four reasons. Firstly, he states, the illusion of flawlessly preplanned interventions needs to be 'destroyed'. Secondly, if intuition's use is made more explicit, students of SI may be encouraged to value their own intuition as an important resource. Thirdly, reflecting on its use will improve its usefulness as a resource. Finally, mistakes should not be masked and hidden by rational justifications, rather acknowledged, reflected upon and possible alternative actions identified for learning to take place. (pp. 227-228)

The role of methodology towards social change

Ecofeminism and CST both share a methodological purpose to bring about social change from the 'grassroots'. Research is characterized as grounded, contextually relevant, locally responsive, desirable and sustainable social change can be achieved through a variety of approaches. Three examples are provided.

Ecofeminism has a defined methodological purpose to perform a 'reconstruction' function, provide social critique and a utopian vision. Lahar (1996) suggests that ecofeminism is an action-orientated philosophy that must avoid inaction. Active engagement in politics and public discussion around issues such as environmental reconstruction projects, biotechnology, legislation, environmental/social issues, civil rights, resource allocation, land/housing, and so on, will achieve social change (p. 8).

Besthorne and Pearson McMillan (2002) have a background in social work and suggest that social workers are professionally obligated to examine all oppression and to actively critique oppressive social institutions and the associated social, political and economic structures, because a struggle against any one in isolation cannot be effective. Progress towards social change can be achieved when social workers' methods recognise the interrelations and systemic forces that function to maintain all forms of injustice towards nature/human beings. An economic critique, for example would question the consumer happiness illusion and extend that to appraise ways of being within the person/nature ontology, where all oppressions are interconnected. That would help an alternative vision compatible with natural environment to emerge (p. 227).

The definition of SI is "purposeful action by an agent to create change" (Midgley, 2000, p. 129). Thus, SI can be taken to be action taken for improvement, in local contexts at temporal and local scales, to create changes that are both desirable and sustainable (pp. 130-132). For Midgley, then, converting theory into action is SI practice. SI is cooperative inquiry where the participants themselves are the researchers rather than expert led (pp. 120-121).

Pluralism

CST and ecofeminism both draw on the principle of pluralism. Besthorne and Pearson McMillan (2002) argue that ecofeminism is a pluralistic mix of diverse ideologues, from postmodern philosophy, social constructionism, Marxism, ecology, indigenous, eco-spiritual wisdoms Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, etc, eco-romantics, deep ecology, eco-activistists and eco-visionary (pp. 226–227). Warren and Cheney (1996) describe ecofeminism as pluralistic in that can simultaneously centralize "both diversity or difference... *and* commonalities" (their italics, p. 251).

There is great diversity amongst feminists/isms that can lead to contradictions that otherwise may not appear to those working within a single school of thought¹⁰. Rather than feminism being separated into parts or levels, CST's concept of pluralism can be used to recognise that multiple feminist political ideologies can be employed simultaneously whilst accepting that tensions and paradoxes occur. The application of pluralism embraces an ethic of valuing

¹⁰ Fragmentation in feminist philosophy and politics, resulting from debates and issues pursued to a 'what kind of feminist?' question (Hanson, 2001, p. 549), can be transcended by methodological pluralism.

commonality, difference and diversity. However, some feminists (e.g. Ellen Rooney) issue a warning about pluralism's potential to be misused. Rooney, in Murphy (2006), describes pluralism as "... an academic form of critical discourse that seeks to recuperate all other critics into a circle of unchanging chitchat." She claims that pluralism was effective in preventing argument and differentiation of ideas particularly in media and popular culture (p. 229). The pluralism concept as reconceived by Midgley (2000), that requires a vigilant critical reflection by participants and practitioners to obtain a comprehensive understanding of situations or issues, may help safeguard the process against irrelevancy.

5 CONCLUSION - TOWARDS A FEMINIST-SYSTEMS THEORY

From the analysis it is clear that the two epistemologies share some mutual goals: to operate beyond a positivist framework; to challenge the 'ontological divide' between 'man' and nature; and to achieve lasting social changes through the application of theory in practice. It is also apparent that both epistemologies have things to offer one another. More explicit attention to the specific circumstances where sexual oppression maybe present could enhance SI practice within CST, while theoretical and methodological pluralism presents opportunities for feminists to set aside epistemological differences within feminism itself.

An emerging feminist-systems framework could incorporate the following principles:

- Gender sensitivity;
- Values voices from the margins;
- The environment is incorporated within research;
- Pluralistic methodology; and
- Undertake research towards social change.

Gender sensitivity is vital as when writers overlook what is distinctive about women's experience in studies. It can be implicitly assumed that the experiences of women are unimportant and or parallel those of men (Forrest, 1993, p. 4). Non-gender specific language can, according to Plumwood (2002), conceal oppression when the underlying paradigmatic influences are not addressed.

Towards a Feminist-Systems Theory

A feminist-systems theory *values voices from the margins*. Practitioners can seek to hear from and gain insight from the perspective of others which might include the non-human realm. If methodological purpose is to bring about social change from the ‘grassroots’ through grounded, contextually relevant, locally responsive, then practice would be open to accepting data from previously ‘unconventional’ sources, giving sources the appropriate interpretation and weighting.

Based on the framework, *the environment can no longer be regarded as ‘outside’ the realm of theoretical research*. The impact upon the environment, and including ecosystem-centric perspectives (Luckett, 2004, p. 514) need to be acknowledged in research. Then the interwoven and intrinsically connected oppressive states might be addressed.

Pluralism requires researchers *select appropriate method/ologies* to enable tailored and responsive methods to address multifarious problems. To deal adequately with multiply diverse people and contexts, it requires a commitment to communication and critical reflection. Pluralism is not a superficial approach to methodology (Midgley, 1996a, p. 32).

A feminist-systems theory *would be active in the promotion and achievement of plurally desirable and sustainable social changes*. In a manner that is responsive, grounded and embedded in local context research practice and its outcomes ought to avoid instances of decontextualised and inappropriate change coming down ‘from above’ or led by outside ‘experts’.

These initial principles developed from the emergence of the four core categories and their accompanying properties. The development of a feminist-systems theory is the subject of ongoing study. Step three of the triangulated GT methodology involves engaging in the relevant literature to review, embellish and refine the emerging theory and guidelines for its use. This conference paper is a small response to Gerald Midgley’s invitation to join in a dynamic research agenda into SI. As SI theory and practice grows and learns, a feminist-systems theory might make a small but valuable contribution to its practice.

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