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## **Review of Theories of Women's Studies**

Deborah Rosenfelt

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## BOOKS NEW AND RECOMMENDED

### by Deborah Rosenfelt

*Theories of Women's Studies*, edited by Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli-Klein. Women's Studies: University of California, Berkeley, 1980.

Women's studies has been a significant presence on college campuses for over a decade now—time enough to have generated an important body of research, several hundred programs, thousands of individual courses, and many efforts at self-definition. This collection of five papers, most of them presented at the National Women's Studies Association's first annual convention in Lawrence, Kansas in 1979, extends definition to a new level of complexity and sophistication. The writers agree on certain assumptions: that women's studies is education for social change, intimately linked to the women's movement; that its goal of improving the status of women is perfectly legitimate, since no academic discipline is neutral and value-free; and, as Gloria Bowles says in her introduction, that "Women's Studies, by putting women at the center of inquiry, is a truly new and necessary approach to knowledge." While these assumptions are by now generally accepted by those in women's studies, they are not commonplace in the university community as a whole.

The collection is distinguished by its detailed exploration of the relationship of women's studies to the structure of knowledge and the methodologies for acquiring it. The authors attempt to set women's studies in context, examining its relationship to the evolution of other academic disciplines and to other critical theories of higher education.

By asking, "Is Women's Studies an Academic Discipline?" Gloria Bowles addresses critics who question the independent status of Women's Studies as a program or department in the university. Bowles, recounting the history of other academic disciplines, notes that the "traditional" disciplines as they now exist and the departmental structures that embody them are the result of "great shifts in the development of knowledge, great waves of revolution and reaction." Women's studies can take both comfort and caution from this history: comfort, because historical precedent legitimizes the often-embattled introduction into the academy of new methodologies and bodies of knowledge; caution, because the university has so consistently conservatized them. Bowles wants women's studies to retain its social responsibility and its usefulness.

Moreover, by encouraging the crossing of disciplinary lines in the quest for the whole truth, women's studies theorists join other contemporary critics in condemning the compartmentalization of knowledge and the narrow specialization that has come to characterize academic careers. Bowles, then, does not want women's studies to become "just" another academic discipline.

Sandra Coyner's essay, "Women's Studies as an Academic Discipline: Why and How to Do It," makes the converse argument that women's studies should be an academic discipline, though as yet it is not one. Coyner adapts Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) to define what she means by a discipline. She argues that disciplines are defined neither by subject matter nor by methodology alone, but by the interactions between a particular community of scholars and its shared paradigms—simplistically, models explaining important data by demonstrating solutions to problems. Women's studies, according to Coyner, is in the process of developing its own paradigms, and will eventually provide a framework for organizing knowledge, with its own internal structure and approaches, its own departmental autonomy, its own spectrum and ranking of appropriate methodologies—which will inevitably involve adaptations of logic, statistics, textual examination, and observation, the fundamental methodologies of all disciplines. The most controversial essay in the collection, Coyner's piece argues that in fact women's studies' emphasis on interdisciplinarity—that is, taking methods and models from various disciplines and adding them to one another—has not necessarily been helpful to its growth. The governmental structures of women's studies have thereby been denied needed autonomy; and women's studies research has tended to remain bound by traditional disciplines rather than freed to fuse or transcend them.

Bari Watkins's "Feminism: A Last Chance for the Humanities" offers a vision not necessarily inconsistent with Coyner's but emphasizing the diffusion of feminist courses and perspectives throughout the university rather than the disciplinary integrity of women's studies itself. Watkins provides examples to show that feminist scholarship not only adds information about women to existing knowledge but challenges the adequacy of widely accepted models and paradigms in research and theory, requiring their transformation and reconstruction in

order to provide satisfactory explanations of women's experience. Thus, she reasons, feminist studies can revitalize the liberal arts by "exposing the power of cultural prescriptions and mystifications in everyday life," becoming part of a more general reconceptualization of the university's role in society.

Renate Duelli-Klein's essay, "How to Do What We Want to Do: Thoughts about Feminist Methodology," implicitly takes issue with Coyner's view that methodologies in women's studies will remain essentially the same as those in other social sciences and humanities. She argues that research in women's studies must be *for* women, not just *on* women, and provides a sustained example of "intersubjective," action-oriented research as a counter to the ostensibly objective, "context-stripping" research of the traditional social sciences. Duelli-Klein agrees that women's studies must become an academic discipline in its own right, and suggests that developing and teaching feminist methodology will be an essential project of the discipline.

Taly Rutenberg writes in "Learning Women's Studies" about her experiences as a women's studies major at UC Berkeley. While her essay does not advance women's studies theory, it is good to know that, from a student's point of view, women's studies is accomplishing some of its initial goals—the integration of academic and political knowledge, of intellect and emotion—and that it has been useful in helping students "formulate and engage in work which is innovative and personally relevant as well as useful to the community."

This anthology, which concludes with an annotated bibliography on theories of women's studies, is especially useful for women's studies practitioners thoughtful about new directions for the future. The editors are now soliciting manuscripts for *Theories of Women's Studies II*; we look forward to its publication.

Deborah Rosenfelt, Coordinator of the Women's Studies Program at San Francisco State University, is the editor of *Female Studies VII: Going Strong—Programs and Courses*, and *Female Studies X: Student Work*.

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