Does "*practice make perfect*" apply to theory? A look at feminist theory and practice in the US battered women's movement.

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My first job after college was working as an advocate at a battered women's shelter. A major part of my job was to staff the 24-hour crisis line that the shelter operated. During my first few weeks of work I took a crisis call from a man. Unlike many of the other calls I had taken from men late in the night, this one was not asking me to tell him (in as much detail as possible) my opinions on whether masturbation sinful, or relating to me explicitly detailed descriptions of his childhood sexual abuse. This man was calling as a victim of domestic violence. He told me his wife had beaten him with a cast iron pot and threatened to kill him. He was very angry that, as a man, he had not been able to find any organization that would help him. I agreed with his outrage and his assertion that, of course, men could be victims and women could be perpetrators of domestic violence. (To think otherwise would reflect essentialism, which I had learned from my women's studies classes was very bad.) I told him I was very sorry he was having such a hard time finding help, and I referred him to an organization I knew of that provided services to (primarily gay) male victims of domestic violence.

When I relayed this story to my supervisor, she told me that the man I talked to was not a victim; he was an abuser. Men are not victims of domestic violence, she told me in a training-the-naïve-recent-college-graduate-with-no-"real"-experience tone. Men are perpetrators. She went on to tell me that if a woman is violent toward her male partner she is defending herself against his violence toward her. Her argument was that women are domestically violent only in response to being battered by men. Thus, men are always accountable for domestic violence.

I was confused and disoriented by the uncritical radical feminism the unapologetic essentialism of this response, and by the absence of agency it allowed women. My supervisor's response seemed contradictory to what I had read and thought I believed. Yet, I believed in the mission of the project – to eliminate domestic violence and empower battered women and their children - and I wanted to work in (and fit in with) the shelter. I was not sure how to negotiate the two commitments I felt, to feminism as I knew it (strongly influenced by postmodern and women-of-color feminism), and to working in the battered women's movement.

This led to an on-going struggle, through several jobs in applied feminist politics and social work with marginalized women, to see how my professional experiences and my understandings of (particularly postmodern) feminist theories could be reconciled. In other words, could I be a postmodern feminist and work on "real" feminist issues? Would postmodernism stand up to, and be useful for, application to the "real" lives of "real" people? Conversely, could a critique of postmodern feminism through the lens of applied work with marginalized women contribute to more refined and improved theory? This question about the potential usefulness of feminist theories for feminist politics/practice, and feminist politics/practice for feminist theory, is the grounding issue of my doctoral program.

This paper explores these issues by tracing the development of the contemporary battered women's movement in the US, from the time when it was intricately interwoven with feminist theory, through the critiques and challenges of feminist movements and theories in the 1980s, and to the current conundrum of postmodernism in which the distance between feminist theories and feminist politics/practice is exacerbated. The bulk

of the paper is spent in focus on that "current conundrum." Through attention to the issues of Truth, discourse, essentialism, and experience, I explore the commonalities and contradictions between postmodern feminist theories and the U.S. battered women's movement in attempt to reconcile what is reconcilable between the two, identify what is not, and suggest the value of simultaneous engagement with both. I will conclude with a concrete proposal to revitalize feminist praxis – the iterative relationship between feminist theory and feminist politics/practice that once provided the foundation of both – in the context of both the Academy and the battered women's movement.

History of the battered women's movement[1] and feminist theories

The contemporary US battered women's movement originated as one branch of 1970s second wave feminism[2], during a time when U.S. feminist theory and feminist practice/politics were closely linked. The women's movements of that time were actively involved in generating feminist theory through the process of analyzing personal experiences. They believed that such analyses could make visible, and thus alterable, the mechanisms and effects of sexism. It was through experience-based discussions, such as consciousness-raising groups, that the prevalence and severity of domestic and sexual violence in women's lives was brought to the attention of many. Violence against women, specifically rape and what was then most often called "wife abuse," became powerful and embodied examples of feminist philosophy *the personal is political.*

[1] The battered women's movement, as with many movements for social change, is an imprecise label for a diverse, yet loosely unified, group of people, actions, circumstances, and ideas that resist simple definition or categorization.
[2] Also known as the "women's liberation" movement, or the "white feminist movement."

In the radical feminism of the time, battering was conceived of as a manifestation of patriarchy and an expression of domination of husbands over wives. Battering was based on men's need to dominate women and was supported by patriarchy/sexism in society (gender gap in wages, laws protecting men from prosecution, social and religious custom, etc.) (Schecter, 1982). Both individual men and society at large were theorized as to blame for battering.

Different branches of feminist movements mobilized and theorized about violence against women in different, although not necessarily fundamentally contradictory ways. (See Sandoval, 1991.) For example, liberal feminists often focused on engagement with the state, directing their energies to legal tactics such as the right to restraining orders,[3] while radical feminist focused on setting up safe women-only spaces such as battered women's shelters. The lines between these different parts of the movements are very blurry. They often work together and employ similar strategies of community education, public awareness, and civil and criminal recourse. These strategies, tactics, and activities of different branches of the battered women's movement were all closely tied to the feminist theories of the time.

Several turns in both movement and academic feminist theory in the early 1980s distanced it from the feminist theory of the battered women's movement. Most notably, the "sex wars[4]" happened. The sex wars challenged the feminist theory of the battered women's movement in two major ways. First, theories of violence against women (such as that of Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, & Diane D. H. Russell) came under fire

[3] These are also known as orders for protection and personal protection orders.
[4] The sex wars are often simplisticly (and as far as I can tell vaguely accurately) as a fight between feminists over pornography with a not-too-subtle-subtext of either condemning the dangers of sexuality or celebrating the pleasures of it. Particularly important theorists here are Catharine MacKinnon (anti-porn) and Gayle Rubin (sex positive).

for the lack of agency they allowed women, their focus on the danger over the pleasure of sexuality, and their essentialistic understandings of men and women. Secondly, lesbian women critiqued the heterosexism and homophobia in the women's movements. This resulted in broader awareness of lesbian relationships – including the reality of violence within them.

The issues that arose during the sex wars continue to be a struggle for the battered women's movement both practically (are we letting batterer into our shelters?) and theoretically (is conceptualizing women as victims of rape/battering disempowering? Are women active forces in their own lives? Is it always men who are perpetrators and women who are victims; can women physically abuse/assault men?). Additionally, the political fall out from the sex wars has arguably prevented further theorizing the frequent experience of male-perpetrated violence in the lives of women.[5]

While still reeling from the internal struggles over the sex wars, feminist theory encountered critique from two additional powerful forces in the mid to late 1980s; women of color and postmodernism (Alcoff, 1988). The critiques provided by these two forces overlapped in some important ways. Both women of color and postmodernism have been highly critical of how knowledge is produced and what comes to be accepted as truth.

Perhaps most importantly, both postmodernists and women of color have critiqued the idea of 'woman' as a category, arguing that the differences between those constituted as women are so big that it does not make sense to group them together as one category (Scott, 1988). Women of color tended to make that argument along lines of differences of race, class, sexuality, etc. Embedded in the arguments from women of color was a critique

[5] The power of postmodernism, as I will argue later, also contributes to the lack of contemporary feminist theorizing on violence against women.

of the hegemonic influence of white women in feminism and the denial of other important social identity categories in the operation of power and oppression.

Postmodernism took the 'troubling the category of gender' a step further and questioned the concept of gender itself. Postmodernism deconstructs the male/female binary, questioning the assumptions and calling to attention the performance/behavior/work that goes into constructing bodies as male or female (Butler, 1990). This deconstructing of the male/female binary has been challenging for a feminist politics that has based its analysis on the exploitation/oppression of women through the forces of society and the force of individual men.

Fragile ties between theory and practice

The once strong feminist movement had been weakened by the struggles of the sex wars and critiques from women of color.[6] While both those involved in the sex wars and women of color tended to retain a theoretical and political commitment to the link between feminist theory and feminist practice/politics, postmodernists critiqued the very ability to be political. In part because of postmodernism's rise to power and prestige within academia, the presumed link between feminist theory and feminist practice/politics that had partially defined second wave feminism became less automatic.

This is a problematic turn for at least three important reasons. First, a great deal of feminist theory has disengaged from issues of violence against women[7], deeming it too experiential, essentialistic, and deterministic (Mardorossian, 2002.) This silence from

[6] Other forces contributed to its declining power as well, the rise of the Christian Right, the philosophy of New Federalism, the anti-feminist backlash, as well as a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle exertions of sexism and sexist power.
[7] There are important exceptions to this statement. See in particular the work of Beth Ritchie and Andrea Smith.

feminism leaves the theorizing about violence against women open to non and anti-feminists with questionable political commitments. Secondly, feminist theory is not being challenged and refined based on feedback from applied settings such as the battered women's movement. Finally, the battered women's movement is not benefiting from insights of more recent feminist theories. Within the battered women's movement, "feminist theory" is generally understood as a combination between radical and standpoint feminist theory (See Yoshihama and Carr, 2002). This suggests the idea, supported by my professional experience, that more recent feminist theories such as those influenced by postmodernism have not been taken up in the battered women's movement.

What do I mean by postmodernism?

Postmodernism is an imprecise concept, for which no commonly accepted definition exists. Theorists, including those often closely identified with the concept, disagree about what it means, and what should be included under its rubric. While a thorough discussion of postmodernism and postmodern feminist theory is beyond the scope of this paper, I will attempt to explicate selected aspects of it that are of particular relevance for analyzing its relationship to the battered women's movement.

Deconstruction is among the most central and important principles of postmodernism. Flax (1990) writes that the purpose of postmodernism is to "distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language… and throw into radical doubt beliefs still prevalent in (especially American) culture but derived from the Enlightenment…" (p.41). Other authors have identified postmodernism's central principle as "the impossibility of an objective knowledge of

social 'reality' independent of the ways we experience, interpret or *represent* it" (Miller, 2000 p. 313) or "the demise of "meta-narratives"" (Hugman, 2003 p.1025) where "meta-narrative refers to a theory that seeks to provide a universal, over-arching explanation of the social world such as a notion of 'human nature' that applies to all people". Hugman goes on to discuss postmodernism as a theory that "reflects the loss of legitimacy in universal perspectives and asserts the flexible, floating, plural, contingent and uncertain nature of social life" (2003, p.1025). Two additional features identified as central to postmodernism are the primacy of discourse in the production of 'knowledge' (Alcoff, 1990; Lauretis, 1987; Mardorosian, 2002; Moya, 2001) and a denial of the Enlightenment belief in the inevitability of progress.

In the literature, these 'central tenets' of postmodernism are debated in a variety of arenas. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the following areas of postmodernism and postmodern feminist theory that have application to (either by being apparently compatible or apparently incompatible with) the battered women's movement. They are all largely engaged with the general concept of Deconstruction; deconstructing Truth, deconstructing Experience, and deconstructing unified or generalizable categories – the concept of essentialism.

Tensions between postmodern feminist theory and the battered women's movement

Much of the non-academic feminist rhetoric posits the battered women's movement (more broadly, activist feminist politics) and postmodernism as at odds with, if not overtly hostile to, each other. An excellent example of this is Karla Mantilla's 1999 article "Let them eat text: The real politics of postmodernism" in the feminist newspaper, *off our*

backs. In this article she argues that postmodernism, a) prevents mobilization around common political concerns as a result of its anti-essentialism, anti-meta-narrative perspectives; b) distances non-academic women from feminist theory, and makes even academic women feel stupid and alienated from feminism by its use of dense and obscure language; c) prevents the possibility of declaring *anything* wrong – including oppression, and domestic violence, and thus; d) paralyzes young feminists into inaction and/or disengagement with 'real' political issues. A more general, and frequently made, critique of postmodernism, including postmodern feminist theory, is that its avid disavowal of truth, deconstruction of identity categories and devaluing of experience prevents any kind of feminist politics. In the next section, using as a framework the aspects of postmodernism I previously identified, I will explore the contradictions and inconsistencies between the two. Later I will discuss their similarities and compatibilities.

Deconstruction

As I wrote earlier, deconstruction is among the most important elements of postmodernism. Deconstruction provided an important theoretical intervention into knowledge production during the twentieth century, allowing for the questioning of objectivity, the challenging of fundamental assumptions and underlying frameworks, and the problematizing of truth as we know it. Yet it is the deconstructive element of postmodernism that is often the most troubling to feminist practice.

Deconstruction, a hallmark of post-structuralism and postmodernism, is by definition, *not* constructive. It is always negative. It hints at a liberatory potential by demystifying the mechanisms that support the current (and historic) structures of power under which we live. Yet it falls short of such potential by failing to provide an alternative

to those often oppressive and always limiting structures. Deconstruction does not envision a better world, or a path to get there.

Deconstruction, as it stands alone, it has huge political costs. Providing a positive vision appears to be crucial to the success of political and social movements. When a political movement (take, for example, a critical movement such as the American Left) fails to provide the hope and promise that comes with a positive vision, the movement appears to inevitably fail. Over-emphasizing deconstruction in the political sphere allows the other side (most often the dominant hegemonic forces in power) to control the argument, to organize, to mobilize – to win. It has the additional consequence, as does much of postmodernism, of leaving progressive-minded people feeling paralyzed in the face of oppression, with no idea what could be done to work against it that would not either be ineffective or in some way further perpetuate injustice (Moya, 2001). As Val Cobb, echoing the sentiments of Stuart Hall (1996) wrote for *off our backs* in 1999, "So the deconstructive move in postmodernism allows for a dismantling of categories, yet seems to preclude the construction of any movement for change. Additionally, the freeplay that emerges from the deconstructive move of postmodernism threatens to conceal the very real relations of power that impact the lives of women…" (p.11).

Truth

Perhaps the most widely known aspect of postmodernism is its denial of a universal, objective Truth. As Miller (2000) wrote, and I quoted earlier, "postmodernists are generally agreed on a central principle which is anything but innocuous in its consequences… the impossibility of an objective knowledge of social 'reality'" (p.313). This denial is grounded in the critique of the production of knowledge via science and

reason, the influence of contemporary power structures in the productions and relations of knowledge, and countless other factors that convincingly deny the possibility of a single Truth outside of context (Flax, 1990; Hugman, 2003; Latting, 1995). Instead, postmodernism argues, there are multiple truths which are local, historically specific, contextual, and always partial.

Despite the persuasiveness, pervasiveness and popularity of this argument, the battered women's movement (and others) would argue, that the postmodern perspective on 'truth', despite its critique of universal knowledge-claims, is in itself a knowledge/truth-claim (Mardorossian, 2002; Moya, 2001). More importantly to the battered women's movement, it is both possible and important to objectively acknowledge the reality of the existence of domestic violence. While the meaning attributed to such violence may be local, historically specific, and discursively produced, it is universally and unambiguously true that domestic violence occurs and that it has real consequences for real people's lives.[8]

Postmodernism believes that what is taken to be knowledge is constructed through language (Butler, 1992; Lauretis, 1987; Miller, 2000; Scott, 1988). Knowledge is discursively constituted through the language that has shaped the ways in which we think and interpret our social worlds. Consequently, there is no reality – no truth – except that which is mediated by interpretation through language. In more familiar sociological language, all knowledge is socially constructed.

In contrast, the battered women's movement would argue that domestic violence is a material reality. It has real bodily consequences that have meaning apart from language. Thus, battering is not solely constituted through discourse. It is possible for events and things such as weddings, child birth, cars, bombs, antibiotics, elections, and domestic

[8] This is not to imply that domestic violence is a universal phenomenon; nor is it to imply that it is not.

violence to be both socially constructed and "grounded in a reality that is, at least in part, causally independent of human's mental constructions of it" (Moya, 2001; p.444).

Experience

Experience as a source of knowledge and a foundation for political action has been at the heart of much, especially feminist, postmodern critique. This critique has perhaps best been articulated by Joan Scott (1991) who argued, following what appears to be an Althusserian logic of ideology (1971), that experience is always mediated through, and constructed by discursive practices. Experience is both constituted by, and constitutive of, discourse. Thus, there is no experience without, or apart from, discourse. This has been an important insight, in that it allows us to understand that people's understanding of their experiences, the ways in which they make meaning from their experiences, is filtered through hegemonic discourse (Stone-Mediatore, 1998). It also warns us that experience is no less a product of hegemonic discourses than are other sources of evidence used to support 'truth' or 'knowledge', and thus no less suspect of operating in the service of power.

Postmodernism's critique/deconstruction of experience has been particularly difficult for the battered women's movement to stomach.[9] As I articulated earlier in the paper, the battered women's movement and the second wave feminism out of which it grew were (are) experienced based movements whose major claim to legitimacy is founded on the importance and analysis of personal experience. Where is *the personal is political* if personal experience is no longer "evidence?"

[9] I use this word intentionally, in attempt to describe the near visceral reaction to an 'ivory tower' argument from people identifying as feminists that effectively denies as real the experience of women subjected to domestic violence.

Essentialism

Closely related to the valorization of experience within the battered women's movement is another one of the most important contributions of postmodern feminist theory: Problematizing the concept of gender and the category of 'woman.' This is in part in reaction to the inaccurate essentializing of women happening within some branches of radical and cultural feminism, in which certain stereotypical though likely positively valued qualities and roles (warm, mothering, kind, etc) are presumed to be inherently and necessarily attached to women and/or female bodies. Many scholars, the most important of which may be Judith Butler (1990) and Joan Scott (1988) have argued that the differences among those traditionally identified as 'women' discursively produced and unfixed, rendering it nonsensical to construct them as a category or group. Simultaneously, women of color were arguing that the differences among those labeled as women are so large that it is not reasonable to assume that they do or could constitute a unified group (See, among others, The Combahee River Collective and Collins, 1986/1997). Importantly, this argument comes on the heels of a well-articulated critique of the exclusionary practices of the U.S. second wave 'women's' movement as really a movement of straight, white, middle-class, U.S. women (see related argument in Mohanty, 2003).

Many feminists, activists and otherwise, have felt threatened and/or frustrated by the argument over the relevance of the category of woman (Mantilla, 1999; Moya, 2001; O'Hartigan, 1999; Young, 1994). Such critique is seen as a theoretical and political attack as well as a challenge to deeply held personal identities and experiences. If women and gender are not relevant categories, where does that leave feminism? What is feminism, if it

is not about eliminating oppression experienced by women? This is a question that plagues feminist theory, and to a lesser extent feminist politics to this day.[10]

Not surprisingly, and not unfoundedly, the battered women's movement has consistently been accused of essentialism. The existence, and the appropriateness, of the category of women remain relatively unquestioned and unproblematized within the battered women's movement. Even further, to a large degree, not only the category of 'woman' remains intact and unproblematized, but so do certain perspectives about how 'women are' and how 'men are'.

The best example, and most compelling for this discussion, is the example with which I began this paper; the uncritical and unquestioned certainty that men are batterers and women are victims. Similarly prevalent within the battered women's movement is frustration with men who claim to be victims of female-perpetrated domestic violence. Blatant example of this can be seen in popular feminist magazines and newspapers such as *off our backs* (See O'Hartigan, 1999), and in the opinion or commentary sections of battered women's programs' newsletters (see, for example, www.cornerstonedv.org) and trade journals such as the National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention. An additional point on this topic, important to the battered women's movement, is the belief that denying categories such as male/female denies that oppression based on those categories exists and harms women (Codd, 1999; Hall, 1996; O'Hartigan, 1999).

[10] The recent, and seemingly cyclical, discussion within the University of Michigan's women's studies department over whether or not to adopt a name change, and if so, what that change should be. Should it be gender studies? If the word women is not there does it indicate a sign of depoliticization? Should it be women and gender studies? If so,why privilege women? What about gender and sexuality studies? Etc.

Consistencies between postmodern feminist theory and the battered women's movement

Essentialism

It would be difficult to argue that essentialism is not an inextricable part of the battered women's movement, and I will not attempt to do so. I will, however, attempt to frame their use of essentialism as a strategic tool for political mobilization. I believe the use of essentialism within the battered women's movement can be understood, although I have never heard or seen it articulated as such within the battered women's movement, as similar to Iris Marion Young's conceptualization of women as a social collective who can organize around contextually specific common attributes or experiences (such as waiting for a bus) even though those attributes or experiences will have different meanings and consequences for different women (1994). It also has some similarity with Gayatri Spivak's concept of situated essentialism (1997), in which she argues the appropriateness of "strategic use of a positivist essentialism in an scrupulously visible political interest" (p.358), though it does not live up to her model example in which, "The use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation, is ideally, self conscious for all mobilized…. [in which] critique of the 'fetish character' of the masterword has to be persistent all along the way, even when it seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive" (p.358).

I would argue that the battered women's movement's utilization of essentialism is strategic, though it has rarely has been a self-conscious utilization, and it certainly has not been persistently critiqued, especially not when "it seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive". Here is why I argue such: The imperative for critique, even when it

seems counterproductive, is extraordinarily important for academia, for theorists, even for those doing organizing and planning mobilization. It is overwhelmingly counterproductive, however, for doing the public work of the battered women's movement, as it provides no 'rally cry' for outreach and offers an easy excuse for apathy and lack of participation. In this, I am not advocating for an uncritical or unproblematized used of essentialism. Rather, I am arguing for an expanded understanding of 'strategic essentialism' that does not require problematizing, and showing the complexity and ambiguity of issues "to all who are mobilized", but only those who are involved in strategizing about the mobilization.

Further, I would call into question the grounds upon which strategic essentialism is limited to political action, and not political theorizing. In the introduction to her essay on the technologies of gender, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) writes, about the male/female difference, "to continue to post the question of gender in either of these terms, *once the critique of patriarchy has been fully outlined* keeps feminist thinking bound to the terms of Western patriarchy itself" (p.1, italics mine). I am fascinated by her use of the phrase 'once the critique of patriarchy has been fully outlined', which I believe points to one of the fundamental tensions between postmodern feminist theory and the battered women's movement. This phrase implies that previously, the presumably essentialist 'sexual difference' concept of gender was necessary to articulate the effects of patriarchy. It also implies that patriarchy has been fully critiqued, and the concept of gender that was necessary to critique and explain patriarchy is not only no longer useful, but actually now serves the interests of patriarchy.

The connection between gender-as-sexual-difference (essentialism) and the need to critique patriarchy seems important. Is there something about patriarchy that allows us

only to critique it with the concreteness that sexual difference provides? Is it that conceptualizing gender as anything other than sexual difference was impossible before fully outlining the critique of patriarchy? Or is it that without the essentialist sexual difference concept we are unable to critique patriarchy? If the later is true, or believed to be true, it is easy to see why the battered women's movement is hesitant to give up its use of essentialism – theoretically as well as politically.

On a less explicitly theoretical level, the ways in which the daily work of the battered women's movement problematizes (though without wholeheartedly rejecting) the essentialized categories of men/women are many. Perhaps most importantly, the battered women's movement recognizes that the lived realities of gender – and gender relations – are varied and complex. Consequently, domestic violence affects different women differently depending on their positionality and other life circumstances. In addition, there is a growing acknowledgement within the battered women's movement that women can be, and are, violent (R. Thelan, personal communication, April, 2001), particularly in 'power-over' situations, such as with children.

Experience

Among the most significant contributions the battered women's movement has made to knowledge is the raised awareness of violence in women's lives. Before the battered women's movement, rape and domestic violence were not socially acknowledged as problems, and they were commonly believed to be rare. By highlighting women's experiences with domestic and sexual violence, the battered women's movement challenged a previously believed Truth and created a better, less partial, and situated knowledge.

A parallel can be drawn between the battered women's movement's use of women's experiences and the work of feminist sociologists and standpoint theorists Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins. Through the 1980s sociological knowledge was produced primarily by men and focused on the sorts of experiences frequently had/encountered by men. In critique exclusionary reality, Dorothy Smith began working on what she called "*Sociology for Women"* in which women's "*Everyday experiences [were] made problematic"* (1987). Smith argued that sociology as it existed at the time had never analyzed or problematized the experiences of women, and thus sociological knowledge was lacking. Drawing on her own personal experience as a working mother whose daily life, despite the fact that she was a well-educated intellectual, was fundamentally shaped by her proximity to the daily requirements of living; cooking, cleaning, running errands, helping children with homework, etc. A sociology that did not include the analysis of those quite common experiences, she argued, was fundamentally lacking. Adding the *everyday* experiences of women to those deemed worthy of study would thus improve sociology and improve knowledge.

Writing during the same time period of the mid 1980s, Patricia Hill Collins developed a theoretical perspective which she called Black feminist theory and/or the Black feminist standpoint (1986/1998). Using a framework influenced by the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, Collins argued that the subordinate position(s) held by Black women in the US located in them in a position in have greater access to truth and knowledge than others. By virtue of the existing power structures and their accompanying material realities, Black women are required to have knowledge from both the insider and outsider perspective. In order to survive in the world, Black women must have knowledge

of dominant society. Yet because they are always marginal to that society they have a critical distance which allows access to a better, less partial, understanding of dominant society than those located central to it. Further, and similar to Smith, Collins argues that putting black women's experiences in the center of analysis improves knowledge. By analyzing the experiences of black women, a better and more accurate truth can be achieved. This also and perhaps more importantly, would increase the humanity granted to Black women and further the greater causes of social justice.

Theorizing women's experience as relevant and valuable in the process of (sociological) knowledge production has been incredibly important and productive. Although both Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins have moved away from a hard line or strong standpoint position (Patricia Hill Collins theorizes that not only Black women can be Black Feminists, and Dorothy Smith's recent work is focusing on a Sociology for Everybody), their work remains influential in bringing to the center of analysis experiences previously marginalized or invisible. Certainly standpoint theories, as the postmodern critiques of experiences have shown, have their limitations. But they provided an important theoretical intervention, a corrective, to dominant modes of knowledge production.

Truth

Postmodernism does not argue for the denouncement of all truth. It argues that there is no universal truth. It argues that all truth is necessarily local, historically specific, contextual, and constructed through discursive practices that serve the interests of power. But it does not argue that there is no truth. Consequently, there is much compatibility between truth as it is understood by postmodernism and as it is understood by the battered

women's movement. Additionally, both actually make similar arguments about the role of discourse in shaping 'truth'.

As I have repeatedly referred, the contemporary US battered women's movement grew out of the second-wave feminist perspective that the personal is political. The public recognition of the problem of battering emerged out second-wave women's consciousness raising activities and through theorizing women's personal experiences within a larger context of structural forces of oppression such as sexism and patriarchy (O'Toole & Schiffman, 1997; Schecter, 1982). Prior to the emergence of the battered women's movement, battering had not been publicly recognized or acknowledged as a systemic problem. Gloria Steinem is quoted as saying ""The word for battering was 'life', as in 'That's life.'" To the extent that the problem was remarked upon at all, it was in the context of a problem between two particular people and the discrete interactions between them. The violence was seen as a "symptom of a disturbed, individual relationship" (www.menstoppingviolence.org/articles/measuringsuccess.html) and not contextualized within a larger framework of gender-based oppression. Additionally, domestic violence was recognized within the law enforcement and criminal justice systems to be a crime of lesser severity than stranger assault, both statutorily and through discretion of police, prosecutors and judges (Dobash & Dobash, 1997; O'Toole & Schiffman, 1997; Schecter, 1982).

What was considered the 'truth' about domestic violence was constructed, and constrained by the discursive practices of contemporary power structures (Dobash & Dobash, 1997; Dolan, 2003; www.menstoppingviolence.org/articles/measuringsuccess.html & www.pcadv.org/history.html; accessed April 27, 2005). Domestic violence was not a problem until the battered women's movement made it one. Or rather, the 'truth' that

domestic violence exists, is common, and is a problem was constructed through the activist efforts of the battered women's movement. The postmodern premise that truth as we know it is constructed and shaped by power is consistent with the battered women's movement's understanding of how the 'truth' about domestic violence comes into being.

Re-constructing the 'truth' of domestic violence has been one of the primary activities of the battered women's movement. Discursive practices utilized by the battered women's movement have been varied, and include professional community education, public speaking, letter to the editor writing, lobbying for legislative change, and media campaigns to change representations of battered women and domestic violence in movies, television and music, as well as interpersonal activities such as conversation with friends and family, peer education, and self-help (consciousness raising groups, support groups, etc.) groups. Through these activities, the battered women's movement has changed conventional wisdom about domestic violence.

The construction of the 'truth' about domestic violence is not the only place where the perspectives of the battered women's movement are consistent with postmodernism's understanding of truth. Also consistent with postmodern perspectives on 'truth' is the battered women's movement's distrust of professional knowledge. For years, battered women seeking assistance from mental health professionals were labeled with mental illnesses such as self-defeating personality disorder, and told their 'dissatisfaction' with their lives was due to internal weaknesses such as low self-esteem and co-dependency. Similar experiences were, and still are, common. Some clergy members have told battered women that it was their responsibility to God to make their marriages succeed, despite the violence they experienced at the hands of their husbands. Some social workers have

blamed mothers for 'failing to protect' their children from violence at the hands of their husbands and boyfriends. Some judges have granted custody of children to batterers who are seen to be more emotionally stable and strong than battered women (O'Toole & Schiffman, 1997; Schecter, 1982; www.mcbw.org).

Finally, the battered women's movement acknowledges that battered women's senses of reality are profoundly shaped by batterers. Through actions of physical violence, emotional abuse, and various other exertions of power and control, batterers shape the reality to which battered women have access. This occurs through what Westlund (1999) calls the 'premodern' power of the batterers. Drawing upon Foucault's discussion of modern and premodern power, Westlund argues that batterers take on a role similar to that of the premodern sovereign power who exerts his will through corporal discipline of the body. Further, she argues that the power of the batterer is more omnipotent than that of the premodern sovereign power who rarely if ever had access to the kind of surveillance that a contemporary batterer has.

As this brief discussion of the role of truth with the battered women's movement has shown, there are many ways in which postmodern perspective on truth and discourse are being utilized, however unconsciously and implicitly, within battered women's movement.

Deconstruction

The process of deconstruction offers useful insights to feminist political projects. Deconstruction demystifies power, showing the mechanisms behind its effects and the assumptions upon which it feeds. Deconstruction shows explicitly how things are constructed – granting the possibility that they could exist otherwise. It leads to a less

false, though still local and partial and contextual, understanding of our world, our social structures, and our selves. The insights gained through this process can be extraordinarily useful in planning strategies for political action.

But deconstruction is not enough. Remaining in this place of deconstruction, of negative focus, serves the interests of power. It is easy to deconstruct and pull apart, to see the holes and the flaws in every action and institution. It is *constructing* that is hard. Yet, it is constructing that is necessary to advance liberatory and feminist political goals

Proposal for Praxis

Through my examinations of the points of similarity and of difference between postmodern feminist theory and the battered women's movement, it is obvious to me that both could benefit from further engagement with each other. I believe the battered women's movement, and other sites of applied feminist politics, could be made stronger through thoughtful interaction with postmodern and other contemporary feminist theorists. Similarly, I believe feminist theory could benefit from the refinement and reiteration made possible by intentional and considered interaction with the battered women's movement. What feminist theory and feminist practice/politics appear to be lacking at this particular moment is praxis; the on-going evaluation and reworking of the application of theory and practice to theory.

To address this lack, I propose an "intervention" involving those who are the among the most likely to be walking (or working) in the worlds of both feminist theory and feminist practice: recent graduates of University women's studies programs. Specifically, I propose that the women's studies department at the University of Michigan institute an

annual "talk-back" session between professors in the women's studies department and/or who are engaged in feminist theory and recent graduates of the program (majors, concentrators, minors, honors students, etc.) who are working in applied feminist settings such as within the battered women's movement. In these "talk back" sessions the recent graduates would talk with feminist scholars about their thoughts on feminist theories given their experiences in the "real world" of applied feminist work. The explicit goal of these sessions would be to provide a new space for praxis and feminist theory generation. Students would also be encouraged to attend these "talk back" sessions, perhaps they could occur during a senior seminar or capstone class, with the hopes that these conversations would inform their class discussions and encourage thinking about career development within feminist work.

In the tradition of second wave feminism, I believe that thoughtful analysis of our experiences, beliefs, and ideas can lead to both better theory and better political practice. It is possible that I am wrong about this, but it is also possible that I am right. The possibility remains to be explored.

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world

Adrienne Rich (1978)

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