In Search of a Theoretical Lens: An Exploration of Feminist Social Research Theories

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Abstract
My PhD study aims to explore the ways in which female deputy headteachers, as potential aspirants to headship, make sense of and perceive the secondary headteacher role. It focuses on the ways in which individual deputies encounter, comprehend and ascribe meaning to the social world in which they live and work. Feminist theories and approaches to social research have influenced the thinking behind this project. This paper aims to report on the process of selecting a suitable theoretical lens for my work. It explores a range of feminist research philosophies and considers their implications for researchers. It is anticipated that the thinking behind this discussion may be relevant to other student researchers who are in the process of thinking through their own theoretical perspective.

Keywords: Feminism; Feminist Theory; Feminist Research; Research Philosophy
Introduction

My PhD project aims to explore the career histories and professional aspirations of female deputy headteachers working in English secondary schools. Its rationale focuses on the persistent under-representation of women in secondary headship. From the outset of this project, I have adopted a “feminist” stance. Yet, given that there is no single unifying feminist theory or perspective (Brisolara, 2014), defining what I mean by this term has proved essential yet challenging. After presenting a brief overview of my project, this paper attempts to explain what I mean by a ‘feminist perspective’ in the context of this study. It then moves on to present an in-depth discussion of three philosophical approaches to social research. This discussion aims to illustrate the diversity inherent in “feminist” approaches to research, as well as the challenges and opportunities that varying feminist theoretical contributions afford researchers. This paper concludes by selecting a research philosophy that is congruent with the aims and purposes of my particular study.

Background to the Study

Recent school workforce data indicates that although women make up over half of all classroom teachers in English secondary schools, they are under-represented in secondary headship positions (DfE, 2014). Scholars working in other European and Western countries have identified similar trends (Drudy, 2008). This gendered disparity arguably reflects a wider social phenomenon in which men are still ‘much more likely to achieve leadership status than women’ (Coleman, 2007, p. 384). Working alongside their headteacher colleagues, deputy headteachers assume a key leadership role in the secondary schools in which they work (Kwan, 2011). Harris, Muijs and Crawford (2003, p. 9) write:
One key assumption about the deputy headteacher is that they aspire to headship and that their current role is an important stage in their development as a potential headteacher.

Based on this assumption, one may expect the proportion of men and women currently holding deputy headships in secondary schools to be similar to the one at secondary headship level. The table below shows the number of full-time deputy headteachers and headteachers working in publicly funded secondary schools in England by gender. It suggests that there is less of a gender gap at deputy headship level. There are several potential explanations for this discrepancy. Some female deputy headteachers may be actively choosing not to pursue headship. These women may feel content in their current role, and as such perceive themselves to be “career deputies” whose current role is a ‘terminal, rather than a transitory career position’ (Harvey, 1994, p. 17). Some women, on the other hand, may be being put off applying for vacant headteacher posts, or be experiencing some form of barrier to attaining them.

Table 1: Full-time equivalent number of regular qualified and unqualified deputy headteachers and headteachers in LA maintained secondary schools and secondary academies in England by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPUTY HEADTEACHERS</th>
<th>HEADTEACHERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>2,400</td>
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Source: School Workforce Census (2014)
Deputy headteachers ‘make up the potential pool’ of headteacher candidates (Lee, Kwan & Walker, 2009, p. 187). It is the experiences and perceptions of this professional group that can illuminate the stories behind the statistics above. Yet this professional group has received little academic attention (Kwan, 2011). Writing in 1997, Ribbens observed:

Headteachers are interesting; deputy headteachers, it seems, are not. The former have routinely, and over many years, attracted the attention of biographers, dramatists, novelists and stage and screen directors; the latter have been, virtually, ignored (p. 295).

I would argue that this is still the case today. My research focuses solely on these ‘forgotten leaders’ (Cranston, Tromans & Reugebrink, 2004, p. 225). It seeks to explore the ways in which female deputy headteachers, as potential aspirants to headship, make sense of and perceive the headteacher role. Focusing on the subjective perceptions of individual deputies, the ways in which they encounter and ascribe meaning to the social world in which they live and work, it aims to establish whether or not participants aspire towards secondary headship, and examines the reasons behind their career aspirations.

‘Aged’ and ‘Redundant’?

Given that the rationale for my research focuses on the persistent under-representation of women at secondary headship level, feminist research philosophies appear to offer a useful theoretical lens through which to view this project. Yet, when embarking upon the project, I was forced to question whether feminist theory and practice is still relevant in today’s society. The Equal Pay Act (1970) as well as The Sex Discrimination Act 1975), both sought to ensure that overt and public displays of sexism and gender-related discrimination no longer exist in the workplace (Thornton & Bricheno, 2009). In the light of legal equality, Banyard (2010, p. 1) states
that many ‘believe that feminism has achieved its aims’. The battle for equality between women and men is believed to be over. McRobbie (2009, p. 11), argues that we now live in a society defined by a neo-liberalist discourse in which freedom, equality and empowerment for women and men is constructed as consumerism and the right to choose; feminism, she argues, has been ‘cast into the shadows’ where it is made to seem “aged” and “redundant”. Believing that we live in a post-feminist age, women are reported to be shunning the “feminist” label. Interviews conducted by Hanman (2006) revealed that women in the UK workplace dislike the image of feminism and believe that publically aligning themselves with feminist principles would be harmful to their career prospects (cited in Coleman 2007, pp. 384-385). Overall, it seems that, for some at least, ‘feminism has had its day’ (Banyard, 2010, p. 1).

Whilst searching for a suitable theoretical lens for my study, I began to question the arguments above. The Global Gender Gap Report (2014) tracks gendered disparities in individual countries over time. The report, produced by the World Economic Forum, ranks each country in four main areas: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. Based on gender gaps in each of these categories, the UK was rated 26th out of 142 countries. This ranking indicates that there is a lot more work to do in the pursuit of gender equality. Cochrane (2013, p. 73) argues that this task is currently being undertaken by ‘fourth wave feminists,’ a group of women and men who would no doubt argue that feminism is alive and well in today’s society. She states:

This wave is technological, and rooted in a wider political shift, a growing sense of dismay at established political institutions and corporations, a serious and deepening concern with a broad swathe of inequalities (Cochrane, 2013, p. 73).
“The Everyday Sexism Project” and the “No More Page Three” campaign are cited to illustrate this wave of action. The social inequalities targeted by these campaigns as well as those in our own field of education, such as the persistent under-representation of women in secondary headship, suggest that there are still gender issues in our society that are worthy of critical analysis. Although gender is only one of many distinct yet interrelated factors to consider when assessing inequality in our society, its presence, performances and norms are ‘pervasive both throughout time and across national borders’ (Coleman, 2007, p. 383). It is for this reason that “feminist” research philosophies, those concerned with exposing sexist distortions in existing social science epistemologies and methodologies, have influenced the way I have thought about my PhD project so far.

**Defining ‘Feminism’**

Feminism is not a singular, unified movement (Brisolara, 2014). Consequently, the range of knowledge positions that can be termed “feminist” originate from a variety of diverse experiences, value judgements and social positions. Yet, in the context of my work, I define a “feminist perspective” as one that challenges and critiques ‘traditional concepts and structures that have marginalised women’ with the aim of empowerment and social transformation (Patai, 1991, p. 138). I perceive critical and feminist paradigms for research to be alike in that they seek to question and challenge traditional ideas about the nature of knowledge and its production in our society. Yet feminist research philosophies centre on the interrelationship that exists between knowledge production and gender (Ramazanoglu, 2002). They focus on the ways in which traditional and dominant ways of knowing marginalise women’s voices and limit opportunities for equal participation in our society. Feminist theory and practice therefore centre on the belief that all human beings are of equal worth (Freedman, 2002). Research conducted via a feminist perspective seeks to challenge actions, ideologies and social structures that oppress women by
documenting their ‘lives, experiences and concerns, illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women’s subjugated knowledge’ (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). Feminist research therefore offers its readers a perspective through which to critique ideas and practices which create inequitable access in our society; those that limit the opportunities and choices of both men and women. Feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist poststructuralism are largely considered to be the three main forms of feminist research philosophy (Ramazanoglu, 2002; Harding, 2004). In order to critically assess the challenges and opportunities that these theoretical contributions afford feminist researchers, each is explored below.

**Feminist Empiricism**

The philosophical tradition of empiricism denotes that reliable knowledge is that which can be ‘verifiable by observation and direct experience’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 9). Feminist empiricism is closely related to this scientific and positivist form of enquiry. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, feminist thinkers questioned traditional empirical research and its supposed neutrality. They argued that empirical research design and practice are informed by patriarchal norms and values. Far from being neutral and objective, traditional scientific methodologies and practices were believed to produce results which were precariously partial and contaminated with androcentric biases. Sexism was believed to be the result of ‘badly done science’ and it was assumed that it ‘can be eliminated by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific enquiry’ (Harding, 1990, p. 90). Feminist empiricists therefore claimed that in order for science to be “bias free” and produce knowledge that was more complete and robust, feminist as well as androcentric values needed to be taken into account at all stages of the research process.
In many senses, empirical modes of enquiry provide feminists ‘with valuable purchase in the dominant culture and access to the power of scientific resources’ (Hundleby, 2011, p. 41). By working within established and traditional scientific paradigms, feminist empiricists have the potential to transform scientific enquiry and root out sexist distortions from within. Yet, whilst I find the eradication of androcentric bias to be positive and its emphasis on women’s experiences in keeping with my project, I find the thinking around feminist empiricism to be paradoxical in nature. According to Intemann (2010, p. 792), ‘a bias paradox arises from the two apparently conflicting claims that feminist empiricists want to make’. On the one hand, feminist empiricists claim that bias in any form is a consequence of “bad science” and must be eliminated from the research process if it is to be neutral and objective. Yet, on the other hand, this specific research philosophy appears to be ‘arguing that the norm of scientific impartiality is wrong’ and that feminist values and therefore bias should be incorporated into the scientific process (Intemann, 2010, p. 792). Furthermore, feminist empiricism seems to be predicated on the belief that social inquiry can somehow generate complete and uncontaminated truths about a social reality that is independent of those who wish to study it. Stanley and Wise (1993, p. 192) argue that feminist research is ‘rooted in the acknowledgement that all social knowledge is generated as a part and a product of human social experience’. They recognise that researchers are human and therefore cannot detach themselves from the social world in order to conduct what they term ‘hygienic’ research (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 161). The researcher’s presence is therefore recognised along with his/her inevitable influence on the research environment, the participant, and final account of the lives of those studied. I do not believe that the research I intend to conduct can ever be free from researcher bias. Nor do I believe I can ever remove myself, or my own perceptions and experiences from the research environment. I can therefore only ever be open and reflexive about the values and interpretive frameworks I bring to my research. It is for these reasons that I find feminist empiricism to be incongruous with the project that I am proposing.
Recognising that all knowledge stems from a point of view and is therefore situated, feminist standpoint theorist, Sandra Harding (1991) proposed the concept of “strong objectivity”. This concept centres on the argument that it is by ‘acknowledging our situated location and being reflexive of our position within it that we become more objective’ (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p.173). “Strong objectivity” is therefore distinct from traditional and positivistic notions of objectivity, which tend to require a detached impartiality. Recognising that all knowledge stems from a point of view and is therefore situated, Harding argues that “strong objectivity” necessitates stronger standards of reflexivity and openness. Feminist standpoint theory, she maintains, ‘opens the way to stronger standards of both objectivity and reflexivity’ than can ever be achieved by those who adopt a feminist empiricist viewpoint (Harding, 1991, p. 163).

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory differs from feminist empiricism in that it is concerned with the political, social and constructed nature of knowledge and reality. Originating from the 1970s and 1980s, it is a ‘feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power’ (Harding, 2004, p. 1). In many senses, it can be linked to the Marxist philosophers of the Frankfurt School in that it seeks to challenge and question hegemonic social practices with the aim of emancipation and empowerment. Feminist standpoint theory therefore ‘aims to incorporate ‘women’s ways of knowing’ that have historically been excluded from science’ (Hundleby, 1998, p. 27). There is an important difference between feminist empiricism and this particular theory. As explored above, feminist empiricism ‘seeks to account for androcentric bias, women as knowers, and more objective but politically guided inquiry while retaining as much as possible of the traditional epistemology of science’ (Harding, 1987, p. 27). Feminist standpoint theory on the other hand has an overtly political agenda in that it focuses
specifically on the standpoint of women. This theory hinges on two central ideas. The first of these is that society is founded upon unequal power relations and that this inequality acts to marginalise certain social groups. Feminist standpoint theorists claim that women are a marginalised group and this inevitably “influences their experiences, shaping and limiting what they know” (Intemann, 2010, p. 783). The knowledge claims that women make are deemed to be different from those of men as a result of their marginalised social position. The other central thesis of feminist standpoint theory is that the voices and views of marginalised people are able to give researchers a fuller picture of the social world. Wylie (2004, p. 339) states:

Those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalise and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know … some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically).

This is the belief that the views of marginalised people are somehow less distorted and partial due to their lack of social capital. This concept is explored further by Hartsock (1983) who draws on the philosophical ideas of Marx to claim female epistemic advantage. She suggests that ‘like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of phallocentric institutions and ideology’ (Hartsock, 1983, p. 284). Hartsock is not suggesting that all women perceive the social world in a way that is privileged. She is however claiming that all women have the potential to acquire epistemic privilege if they are prepared to adopt a “political consciousness”. According to Hirschmann (1998, p. 75), ‘a standpoint does not come ‘naturally’ or spontaneously to anyone. Rather, it must be achieved through ‘struggle’, wherein lies its ‘liberatory’ potential’. Feminist standpoint theory clearly has an emancipatory aim in that it seeks to empower those it deems to be oppressed. Harding (2004, p. 7) states that ‘each
oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group’s conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured’.

Feminist standpoint theory is a more appropriate research philosophy than feminist empiricism for my research purposes as it recognises the socially and politically constructed nature of our society. As my research project is concerned with women deputy headteachers and the statistical under-representation of women in educational leadership positions, a research philosophy that seeks to question the social world and explicitly challenge sites of inequality is an attractive way forward. Yet, like feminist empiricism, I find elements of feminist standpoint theory problematic. Standpoint theorists appear to use the term “women” as a unifying concept. Yet women are not one homogenous group with the same experiences, perspectives and privileges. The deputy headteachers I intend to interview will not be the same. I am interested in their individual and subjective perceptions as well as their changing selves over time. The danger of adopting a research philosophy that perceives all women and men to be unified collectives is that my research could neglect, as Hundleby (1998, p. 28) puts it, ‘the variety of women’s experiences by treating the observations and problems of Western, white, middle-class, married, heterosexual women as paradigmatic concerns for women’. There must therefore be some consideration of the “intersections” and differences between women as individuals. Recent standpoint theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) who is concerned with black feminist thought, have sought to highlight the differences that exist between women. Standpoint theory however appears to still hinge on the essentialist assumption that “men” oppress “women” (Ramazanoglu, 2002). Another idea that I find troubling is the concept of “epistemic privilege” which seems to be a central thesis of feminist standpoint theory. My research is founded upon a belief in equality of opportunity, access and voice. I therefore question whether attributing epistemic privilege to
certain groups of women would create hierarchies of power or detrimental relations between social groups that are similar to those that standpoint theorists seek to critique. Intemann (2010, p. 783) states that claiming that women as a whole have epistemic privilege has been ‘charged with reinforcing gender stereotypes and falsely assuming that all women or oppressed groups have some sort of universal shared experiences … in virtue of being oppressed’.

**Feminist Poststructuralism**

My PhD project is concerned with female deputy headteachers’ imagined future selves, the ways in which their experiences and perceptions have influenced their professional aspirations. An appropriate social science research philosophy for this project would be one that recognises the differences between individuals, the fluidity of their experiences in the social world as well as the flux of individual subjectivities over time. Consequently I have turned to feminist poststructuralism which, at this stage in my research, I find to be the most convincing account of feminist knowledge I have encountered so far and an appropriate research philosophy moving forward.

Poststructuralist ideas suggest that our identities are subject to multiple reinterpretations. According to Weedon (1997, p. 174), feminist poststructuralists have sought to ‘deconstruct the hegemonic assumption that we are whole and coherent subjects with a unified sense of identity’. Our identities and subjectivities, gendered or otherwise, are said to be heterogeneous and contradictory works “in progress”. Consequently, ‘we simultaneously occupy numerous subject positions and identities’ at any one time (Ford, 2006, p. 80). Exploring poststructural feminism in the study of education, St Pierre (2000, p. 503) states the ‘subject is considered a construction
and identity is presumed to be created in the ongoing effects of relations and in response to society’s codes’ and conventions. She suggests that our subjectivities are socially constructed. They are therefore historically variable and dependent on context. Poststructuralist theories recognise the significant role that social and organisational contexts play in shaping subjectivities and determining the variety of subject positions available to us (Ford, 2006, p. 79). Through this lens, female deputies’ subjectivities are not only perceived to be multiple, but depend on and are bound by the school, educational climate, and home circumstances she finds herself within.

Another strength of feminist poststructuralism in the context of my work is that there is recognition of the role that social and organisational contexts play in constructing selves, the differences that exist between individuals in our society as well as the ways in which our subjectivities are multiple and in flux. A poststructuralist perspective would enable me to perceive deputy headteachers not as a homogeneous group but as individuals who have enacted multiple identities and roles throughout the course of their careers. This specific theoretical framework appears to be an attractive way forward as it offers scope for research that is liberating and emancipatory; feminist poststructuralists suggest that the rigid ‘meanings which society attaches to sex/gender can be challenged’ by focusing on the flux and fluidity of individuals in varying historical circumstances (Bryson, 1999, p. 41). This worldview offers the potential to take account of the complexity of women’s lives, experiences and choices. It also has the potential to facilitate nuanced accounts of the factors framing individuals’ life and career decisions.

Some scholars however argue that feminist poststructuralists’ ongoing deconstruction of the singular knowing subject is ‘undermining the political project of feminism, removing the possibility of feminist researchers working in the interests of ‘women’, and producing knowledge
about and for ‘women’ (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 91). This is the argument that poststructuralists’ focus on non-unitary subjectivities and difference is incompatible with the aim of investigating “women” and their lived experiences. This is an objection that I am finding very difficult to address within the context of my study. The project described in this paper focuses on “women” deputy headteachers with a view to investigating the under-representation of “women” in secondary headship. At the same time, I hope to investigate multiplicity, the nuanced differences between individuals. Fuller (2013, p. 5) argues that this tension between equality and difference creates a type of ‘intellectual sea-sickness,’ i.e. researchers ‘see gender as a complex and fluid performance that challenges the notion of embodied gender or sex but … remain interested in women’s under-representation in leadership’. Although I find this particular social research theory to be the most congruent with the aims and nature of my project, I am highly conscious of this tension. It is one that I will no doubt continue to grapple with moving forward. It seems, as Munro (1998, pp. 132-133) remarks, that the challenges of feminist poststructuralism ‘present no easy resolutions, if, in fact, there are solutions at all. The questions … are ongoing’.

Conclusion

The range of feminist research philosophies discussed in this paper highlight the diversity inherent in the term “feminism”. Through the lens of my PhD project, I have examined the challenges and opportunities that feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist poststructuralism afford researchers. Although I ended this discussion by demonstrating a preference for feminist poststructural ideas, I acknowledged that I have ongoing reservations about its suitability for my study. The thinking surrounding my theoretical viewpoint therefore remains a work in progress and will no doubt evolve over the course of my studies. It is hoped that the critical thinking behind the discussion above may be relevant to other student researchers who are in the process of thinking through their own theoretical lens.
References


