
Se(x)ation, sensation or research? Interrogating the research gaze

Mary Hames

Head: Gender Equity Unit, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535

This article takes a critical look at the research methodologies regarding gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS in South Africa over the last two decades. Gender has become the operative term in these research projects and there has been a conflation or collapse of gender with the feminist perspectives analysis. The immediate question is whether the studies on gender and masculinities have de-politicized feminist research and methodologies or whether it has enhanced the work of feminists. This is undoubtedly a loaded argument that has been on the minds of feminists and those who claim to support feminist theory and praxis.

It is instructive to look at the history of feminist research and reflect on its origins and purpose. I am arguing that the inclusive term 'gender' has more often than not compromised the political impact that the original feminist research practice promoted. Many contemporary gender activists and researchers may argue that this is an essentialist viewpoint. However, I side with Spivak when she states that essentialism can be an important political tool especially when our society remains so inherently unequal and inequitable.

South African feminists and other activists, not the government, have been responsible for the inclusion of women in the equality clause of the 1996 Constitution. This was a widely acclaimed victory and since then consistent activism has been responsible for creating a very progressive women sensitive legal framework as well as making provision for opportunities and mechanisms to claim their constitutional rights. The post-apartheid legal framework and the institutionalised gender machinery positioned 'all' women within the neoliberal and post-modern paradigm without adequately addressing the heterogeneity of their lived and life experiences. These progressive laws and the enabling gender mechanisms often placed South African women well beyond the legal imperatives that exist in many western countries. Nevertheless, these provisions constantly remain out of the reach of the majority of black women in the country. Developments and intense debates with regard to polygyny, culture and dubious practices such as virginity testing are indications of how easily patterns of oppression and marginalization can coexist with progressive laws.

My argument in the following lies primarily in the fact that there are various ways of 'othering' in the post-apartheid era and that this is manifested in the way in which research is conducted on the 'newly created dispossessed subject'. There is an entirely new mode of patronizing and matronising that takes place in research under

the guise of a carefully coded and constructed 'feminist research' agenda. The subject becomes the 'native informer' who tells her story about violence and disease and the researcher becomes the writer, the owner and the expert of the historiographical narrative. This reflects directly on the historical as well as the current socio-economic and education disparities that continue to remain intact in our society. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman warn about the 'insidiousness of appropriation' when writing about the marginalized (1993: xviii). So who should the speaking and writing subject be? Numerous post-colonial feminists have interrogated the notion of the 'native informant' and questioned their sometimes oppositional roles as informant and researcher (Spivak, 1995). For the South African feminist includes reflection on what the post-apartheid progressive developments entail and how the insidious conservative and patriarchal practices impact on the lives of women.

Feminist research methodologies are deeply embedded in women's experiences. It is essentially the sense making of women's experiences and realities. These lived experiences range from the most mundane to the highly intellectual. Feminist research also critically challenges the existing discriminatory and offensive paradigms. The research is intractably intertwined with social justice issues. For black feminists it is also about transcending, as Patricia Collins observes, the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality (2000:98). For black women everywhere the practice has always been to challenge the oppressive colonial perception of infantilising them and turning them into the perpetual dependent child. The struggle for self definition and to find voice in various ways has been most important. It is also about protesting against the ghettoization of black women's contribution to feminist theory (hooks: 2000: xii).

Barbara Smith writes, for instance, that '*writing*' for her '*became synonymous with power, the power to shape reality and to share this reality with others*' (2000: xii). To deny this reality is to silence the voice that Lorde talks about. Progressive research includes the ability and opportunity to write about the experiences of the self. Feminist researchers should therefore be vigilant not to speak on behalf of the other which is often the case in the academy. Or is Desiree Lewis's argument still valid that established feminist practitioners in the South African context are often white and middle-class and therefore have a vested interest in the silence of third world and black women? (1993: 538). Research is predominantly about the lives or perceptions of the 'other'. bell hooks sees this as the continuation of white supremacy when the structural form of race apartheid is gone but the expectation remains to think and operate within the dominant race paradigm of thinking, learning and writing (1989: 113).

Sexualising the gaze

Black bodies and in particular black women have increasingly become a research commodity for researchers in the post-apartheid era. Because black women in South Africa are disproportionately infected and affected by HIV and AIDS and the statistics on violence against women also reflect that they constitute the greater percentage of

victims and survivors they by extension become the subjects of intensified research on sex and sexuality. The gaze on black women's bodies hold currency for various reasons and this article addresses a few of the salient ones. Research on black bodies is not a recent phenomenon as the writings by feminists such as Collins, Marshall and others show (Collins, 2005; Marshall, 1996).

Sexualizing the gaze has always been the particular focus where research on black women is concerned. According to Collins "*African people were perceived as having a biological nature that is inherently more sexual than that of Europeans*" and as she further notes "*scientists became voyeurs extraordinaire of Black women's bodies*" (2005: 100,101). This omni-presence of black women's sexuality is also critiqued by Marshall when she writes: "*Portraying Black women as sexually denigrated has been central to the ideological justification for systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism and class oppression*" (1996: 5). My question therefore is why the continuation of the global fascination with black women's sex and sexual practices? And in whose interest is it that the research and writing are conducted? Is it for academic credibility and status? Is it to the advancement of the subject itself? Is it because it has specific donor interests at heart?

Recent studies on gender-based violence in South Africa (note the de-politisation by not calling it violence against women) follow the historical trend of constituting black women as the sexual denigrates. These studies are also ingrained in a deficit discourse and also in infantilizing women by describing them as "vulnerable" and "financially under-resourced" and therefore they are particularly susceptible to transactional sex amongst others things. This in turn feeds into the historical narratives of the 'hyper or over-sexuality' of black women.

I was recently invited by another South African university to respond to a study on students' perceptions on sex and sexuality. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on the methodology and the newly created perceptions of the readers of the articles that appeared in a popular woman's magazine and a feminist journal. This study on sexual practices and gender-based violence at a South African university showed a remarkable similarity with the colonial studies on black women and mirrored to a large extent those hyper-sexual perceptions. The fact that the mentioned studies are based on perceptions of the subject indicates what Fanon calls the 'internalisation' of the oppression (1967). When student peers within an academic setting reveal their own biases and prejudices as if they are the truth, and when academics choose to focus on these as though they shed light on the political and psychological experiences of students it reflects on the pedagogical practices of these higher education institutions. The students based their perceptions on unsubstantiated rumours and these were reflected in both the articles.

Feminist teaching and knowledge and teaching are to transform, to change, and to challenge these deep seated beliefs. Feminist research should ask what methods and

methodologies could be applied to ask the critical questions in transforming perceptions and stereotypes.

Studies on sex and sexualities and HIV and AIDS with regard to black women very often engage terms such as “sugar daddies”; “transactional sex”; “disempowered”; “women are unable to negotiate safer sex and the use of condoms”; “vulnerability” and “poor backgrounds” amongst others.

This use of deficit language connects with the interest of colonial and anthropological and medical research that dominated the colonial era. The use of a particular kind of language in the research regarding gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS often frames the subject in a particular dependent sexualized relationship and victimhood. I also argue that such research further draws on the complicities of the ‘native informer’. In academic research the student is frequently used as the interviewer of peers and one speculates about the power dynamics between the academic researcher and the student as the native informer. This invariably means that the final written narrative does not belong to the student but becomes the intellectual property of the academic. The student speaks the vernacular (especially when the main researcher(s) is monolingual) and has access to spaces and locations which are inaccessible to the other researchers. Or as Pumla Gqola notes that universities are intimately implicated in the reproduction of systems of power and that they are not the cerebral uncontaminated spaces they are professed to be (1994: 27). South African universities remain undoubtedly politicized spaces and it is therefore critically important that feminist research projects should consistently challenge the status quo and make the personal political.

However, a number of the recent studies are ostensibly de-racialised. The texts do not reflect race and on the surface there is a homogenization of the subject. However by using the geographical and socio historical locations and socio-economic descriptors it is clear that the very absence of racial classification makes the race disparities more visible. Black feminists have consistently been drawing attention to the intersection of gender, race and class and other categories of difference so that the multiple dimensions of black women’s experiences can be codified (Crenshaw, 1989). There is no shared oppression merely on the basis of gender and by avoiding the race classification inscribed on us it underscores the negation of our differential experiences. There is the paradox of the subliminal acknowledgement of our ‘otherness’ by the use of deficit lexical descriptions.

Conclusion

Feminist research challenges deep seated normative beliefs and practices. Because there is no ‘one fit all’ feminist theoretical model I find the post-colonial feminist discourse a particularly helpful tool in analyzing developments in the post-apartheid South Africa. Current research practices and methodologies are still locked into the defeatist and deficit discourse that limits the progress of social justice and human

rights. It also follows a developmental approach that increasingly frames women as victims that need to be helped.

I dare to suggest that post apartheid feminists should change the lens and the gaze through which research is done. The medical, anthropological and psychological lenses are still the prevalent methodologies that are applied to categorise and pathologise especially black people and particularly black women. A feminist research is suppose to restore dignity, ensure equity and promotes action for a better life for all.

Bibliography

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2005. *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender and the new racism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. 'Demarginalizing the intersections of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics'. University of Chicago Legal Forum Vol. 14, pp.538-54.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black skin, white masks*. Translated from the French by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
- Gunew, Sneja and Yeatman, Anna. (Eds.). 1993. *Feminism and the politics of difference*. Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Gqola, Pumla Dineo. 1994. *Language and power: a black woman's journey through three South African universities*. In Reitumetse Mabokela and Zine Magubane. (Eds.). *Hear our voices: race, gender and the status of black South African women in the academy*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, pp.25-40.
- Hammonds, Evelyne M. 1997. *Toward a genealogy of Black female sexuality: the problematic of silence*. In M. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. (Eds). *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. New York and London: Routledge, pp.170-182.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist theory: from margin to center*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking back, thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Lewis, Desiree. 1993. *Feminisms in South Africa*. In *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp.535-542.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Marshall, Anneka. 1996. *From sexual denigration to self-respect: resisting images of Black female sexuality*. In Delia Jarrett-Macauley. (Ed.). *Reconstructing womanhood, reconstructing feminism: writings on Black women*. London and New York: Routledge, pp.5-3.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. *Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses*. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Torres Lourdes. (Eds). *Third World women and the politics of feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Smith, Barbara. 2000. *The truth that never hurts: writings on race, gender, and freedom*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1995. *Can the subaltern speak?* In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. (Eds.). *The post-colonial studies reader*. London and New York: Routledge, pp.24-28.