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Women in Higher Education: *A Feminist Perspective*

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Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on Women and Higher Education

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Introduction

...our brother who has been educated at schools and universities. Do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

Where is the procession of educated men leading? Do women want to join that procession? If so, on what terms? Woolf's questions provide this chapter with the basic framework and organizing theme for exploring the nature of the feminist debate about higher education. The essay presents three contemporary responses to Woolf's questions in the form of three feminist perspectives. These perspectives reflect fundamental differences regarding the goals and purposes of higher education, the analysis of the problem of women's subordinate position in higher education, and recommendations for change.

While others in the first half of the 20th century sought to join the procession of educated men, Woolf raised fundamental concerns about the procession itself, the procession of men who had been educated in colleges and universities. In her estimation, the procession was leading to war. The political and social system, she believed, generated competitiveness, tyranny, possessiveness, invidious distinction, and violence (Carroll 1978). Woolf viewed educated men as part of that system, and she did not want women to become men's counterparts. In her long essay *Three Guineas*, when a man from a peace society asks a woman for help in preventing war, her response is: "We can best help you to prevent war by not repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods" (p. 143). Woolf's questions remain relevant for examining contemporary feminism vis-à-vis higher education. Are today's feminists seeking to join the procession as it is, to transform it, or to ignore it and create their own?

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Three Feminist Perspectives

Equality. Liberation. Integrity. Although it is always a precarious task to summarize anything with one word, and even more so, fluid ideas within a social movement, these words summarize the central focus of three feminist perspectives on women and higher education: liberal feminist, left feminist, and radical feminist. These feminists share a common concern about the subordinate position of women in higher education and in society, but they differ in their goals, analyses of the problem, and recommendations for change. Liberal feminists focus on equality of educational opportunity and the preparation of women for positions in public and professional careers. Left feminists focus on liberation and transformation of higher education and society. Radical feminists focus on integrity and countering the patriarchal university and society.

The three perspectives might best be considered ideal types, constructed from the complexity of reality.¹ In any construction of types, ideas naturally become simplified and distorted; the ideas of each feminist perspective or type presented here, therefore, exist more completely in an ideal form than in the reality of a single author or article. The feminist types are constituted not as descriptions with a one-to-one correspondence to reality, but as analytical aids. By accentuating certain views within the feminist movement, the presentation of the perspectives provides a means to explicate and to further understand feminist debates concerning higher education.

The three perspectives are presented below in terms of the following categories: (a) *goals of higher education*—the broad outcomes feminists seek for women and higher education in general; (b) *justification or rationale*—the reasons for which feminists think education important; (c) *analysis of the problem of women's subordinate position*—the definition of the problem and its specified cause; and (d) *recommendations for change*—the proposals for change which grow out of each perspective's goals and analysis of the problem.

In the discussion which follows, goals and justification are discussed together, as are analysis of the problem and recommendations for change.

Goals and Justification

Equality, liberation, and integrity respectively express the central goal for each of the three perspectives. The goal liberal feminists seek is equality:

We need to show high school girls that they can go to the universities on the same basis as men, that they have a chance for an intellectual life within the university of working life in private industry. . . . Women throughout society (should) have the same choice about their roles that men have. That really has to be the focus—equality [AAUW (American Association of University Women) *Journal*, November 1970].

Specifically, the goal is equality of educational *opportunity* as opposed to equality of *result or outcome*. The opportunity is to be based on ability and qualifications; for example, Fitzpatrick (1976), argues for "equal opportunity for the equally qualified" (p. vi). Liberal feminists focus on public and professional life and want to assimilate women into all the levels of higher education and societal structures occupied by men. They seek the opportunity for women to compete for positions without being blocked by sex discrimination, and see higher education as the way for women to obtain the skills and credentials necessary for career success. The justification liberal feminists give for the education of women is based heavily on arguments of social utility (for example, material productivity) and freedom of choice for individuals.

The goal left feminists seek is liberation; they want not equality *with* but liberation *from* structures they consider oppressive. Left feminists reject the idea of equality of opportunity and the goal of simply adding and assimilating women into present institutions. In their view, achieving

that goal would equalize the sex ratios at all levels but would not change the oppressive and alienating nature of the institutions. Foster (1973), for example, explains:

Thus our greatest resources for a new *Weltanschauung* are members of the minority groups and women as a cultural group. But if these groups are absorbed into the patriarchal system of education at the costs of giving up their cultural identity, their value as change-agents will be lost. For this reason, women say, "Not equality, but liberation" [p. 13].

Increasing women's participation, then, is to be seen not as an end in itself or an avenue to assimilation, but as a means to transform educational and societal institutions.

Left feminists do not spend as much time justifying education for women as liberal feminists do, and focus instead on criticizing higher education. When they do argue for educating women, the rationale is to prepare women as change agents. Also, when they focus on women (as opposed to both women and men) such discussion is frequently justified by placing it in the "larger" context of transforming class society. Some left feminists are reluctant to discuss women apart from human or social liberation.

The goals of radical feminists are to reclaim integrity and to counter the patriarchy.² Daly (1978) explains:

Radical Feminism is not reconciliation with the father. Rather it is affirming our original birth, our original source, movement, surge of living. The finding of our original integrity is re-membering our Selves [p. 39].

Radical feminists seek integrity in the sense of wholeness of self. "Re-membering our Selves" refers to the need to help women become whole and return to an original unity that existed prior to the fragmentation and dichotomization imposed by patriarchy.³ Heide (1979b), like Daly, defines integrity as "a state of being whole, entire, undiminished" (p. 29).

Radical feminists, like left feminists, reject an emphasis on equality of educational opportunity. Unlike left feminists, however, radical feminists make their primary commitment to women and feminism. They share the left feminist goal of transforming higher education and society, but differ in that their focus is patriarchy rather than both capitalism and patriarchy. In addition, their relationship to higher education is more peripheral, "on the boundary," as Daly (1978) would describe it.

Radical feminists, like left feminists, do not spend much energy justifying education for women. They focus on warning women about its intellectual, psychological, and physical dangers. (Left feminists are also concerned about the dangers of education, but their focus is the assimilation of women and the cooptation of women's potential as change agents.) When radical feminists do justify education, often the basis is the need for an education per se, rather than the need to transform society and class relations (left feminists) or to contribute to society and material productivity (liberal feminists). Radical feminist goals of countering patriarchy and reclaiming integrity can, however, also be considered justifications for education.

Analysis of the Problem/Recommendations for Change

The analysis of the problem and the recommendations for change emerge from different goals. Liberal feminists define the problem in terms of women's lack of equal educational opportunity and their unequal status. They criticize the relegation of women to lower and marginal educational ranks (such as civil service, part-time, and temporary positions) and to positions as instructors and assistant professors, rather than full professors and administrators. They also criticize the way education tracks women into stereotypic roles and careers such as teaching and nursing. The causes of the problem specified by liberal feminists are sex discrimination, sex-role socialization, and

women themselves (for example, women's unwillingness to seek high-level administrative positions).

Liberal feminist recommendations for change emphasize eliminating barriers to equality of opportunity and changing women's unequal status. The basis of the recommendations is the desire to add women to all levels and positions in higher education and society, especially those which are non-traditional, that is, male-dominated and stereotyped as masculine. Central to obtaining such equality is the elimination of sex discrimination through the establishment of legal protection and fair procedures. Churgin's (1978) comments represents such a view:

Women have most to gain in the construction of a truly meritocratic order, for in the final analysis, it is not compensatory measures that will guarantee them a permanent place under the academic sun but a change in procedures that solidifies equal opportunities as the immutable standard [p. 221].

To counter sex-biased socialization, liberal feminists recommend that counseling be provided to encourage women to think about nontraditional career areas as well as how to combine family and career responsibilities.

Left feminists do not share the liberal feminist definition of the problem. Since they reject the idea of equality in a system they consider inhumane and oppressive, they also reject a definition of the problem as lack of equal educational opportunity. Rather, they see the problem as exploitation, alienation, and oppression of all women and men at the university, including civil service staff. The university is perceived as an institution that trains people for oppressive roles: for positions of dominance and subordination in society, for maintenance of the ideological system, and for alienating slots in technical and ideological structures (Mitchell 1973; Shor 1973; Smith 1975, 1979). As part of the training for oppressive roles, women are relegated to lower levels and subordinate positions. "Ideology" here means the "forms of thought"—images, ideas, and symbols—which order and control people's experiences, consciousness, and behavior (Smith 1975, pp. 354, 356) or, similarly, "a set of ideas that help mystify reality" (Eisenstein 1981, p. 10). Education mystifies people, creates a "bifurcation of consciousness," a split between people's experience of their everyday world and the "forms of thought" available to explain it (Smith 1974, 1979).

Left feminists attribute the causes of the problem to capitalist/corporate/bureaucratic society, its institutionalized roles of dominance and subordination, and the patriarchy. They explain women's position in higher education in terms of the needs of both capitalism and patriarchy. Their main focus, however, tends to be on capitalism and bureaucratic/corporate structures, rather than on patriarchy and capitalism equally. Left feminists, for example, criticize the close relationship between male supremacy and the "academic establishment," but they define male supremacy in terms of material reality and the material rewards men receive. The same is true for the term "patriarchy."⁴

Left feminist recommendations for change focus on educating women to be change agents and to transform society. They do not wish to educate women only for success in obtaining career positions and consider such positions oppressive and reinforcing of roles of dominance and subordination. Their views are, of course, at odds with liberal feminists, who want to help women move into such positions. Left feminists do not, however, object to women obtaining these positions if the positions are viewed as a means to an end—social change—rather than an end in itself.

For radical feminists, analysis of the problem centers on dichotomies and fragmentation and on androcentrism and masculine subjectivity (Daly 1978; Heide 1979b; Rich 1975). Pervasive in radical feminist discussion is criticism of the numerous splittings and fragmentations—of world view, knowledge and disciplines, and self—that are said to originate in patriarchy. (Refer back to their goal of integrity.) Because the university is a patriarchal institution it is androcentric (male-centered) and grounded in masculine subjectivity. As a result, women are invisible and their experiences throughout history are omitted.

Radical feminists cite other effects of patriarchy. At the university, women experience rape in various forms—intellectual, psychological, physical. Education performs the function of

"mindbinding," comparable to Chinese foot-binding, and mystifies women about their experience of the world (Daly 1978; Heide 1979b). The structure of the university is a patriarchal hierarchy in which women's positions are structured in relation to men just as they are in the patriarchal family. In addition, for some radical feminists the invisibility of lesbians and "compulsory heterosexuality" is integral to the definition of the problem, and women's studies and feminist scholarship are not exempt from this criticism (Frye 1980, Rich 1980).

Radical feminists differ from left feminists in their analysis of the cause of the problem. Although both discuss patriarchy and mystification processes, the context differs. For a left feminist, the origins of these processes are economic and material, based on needs of a capitalist and bureaucratic society. For a radical feminist, the origins are biological and psychological, based on needs of men.

Radical feminist recommendations for change emphasize reclaiming women's integrity and countering the patriarchy. Specific recommendations include transcending dichotomies and fragmentations, "naming" the lies of patriarchy, creating anew women's selves and places to exist; and remaining "on the boundary" of patriarchy (Daly 1978). Radical feminists also want to change the university's patriarchal hierarchy as well as create a "female counter-force" to patriarchy through a woman-centered university (Rich 1975). Inclusion of lesbian experience and analysis of compulsory heterosexuality are also integral to some recommendations (Frye 1980b; Rich 1980).

Curriculum and Pedagogy. The three perspectives have different views on curriculum and pedagogy. Liberal feminists give these little attention, compared to the attention they give educational access and career success. When they do discuss curriculum, they criticize the omission of women, sex-role-stereotyping, the lack of role models of successful women, and sex bias in classroom interaction (for example, not calling on women students). Their recommendations for change address those criticisms.

Left feminist analyses include the sex-biased concerns of liberal feminists, but focus on the ways curriculum and pedagogy support capitalist society and reinforce roles of dominance and subordination. "Banking education," a core concept of Freire's pedagogy (1970, 1974), is used as the basis for much of their discussion (Schram 1975, 1976; Hague 1978). In this model, which is said to characterize all education, the teacher is considered the source of knowledge and truth to whom students must go for answers, just as customers go to a bank for money. In addition, the teacher-student relationship is authoritarian and alienating and provides training for such roles in society.

Left feminist recommendations emphasize developing curriculum and pedagogy to counter banking education, training students to be change agents, and providing an education that is emancipatory and liberating. This "dialogic" model (again based on Freire's work) allows more interactive and less authoritarian processes between student and teacher. It advocates inclusion of student experience as content and as the basis for problem-solving and seeks to motivate and help students acquire the skills to take action in transforming their lives, institutions, and society.

While liberal feminists discuss the importance of role models of successful career women, left feminists do not discuss role models per se. Implicit in their writings, however, is the need for models of liberators, strugglers for social justice, and women engaged in collective (as opposed to individual) action.

Radical feminist recommendations differ from those of liberal feminists in going beyond discussion of sex bias in curriculum, and from those of left feminists in giving primacy to issues related to women and the patriarchy. They discuss curriculum and pedagogy in relation to the problems cited earlier (androcentrism, mindbinding, and intellectual rape) as well as the invisibility of women's experience, the silence and passivity of women students, and the enforcement of heterosexuality. In addressing those problems, radical feminist recommendations center on making women's experience visible, taking women students seriously, pointing out patriarchal lies and distortions, facilitating an interactive learning process, and including lesbian experience and an analysis of institutionalized heterosexuality.

In addition, radical feminists recommend the inclusion of women's experience and intuition as knowledge and content in the classroom. The value radical feminists place on experience and intuition differentiates them from left feminists, who do not mention intuition and who give student experience a role but caution that it must not be given a "privileged epistemological status" (Eishtain 1978). If this chapter had not been limited to feminists who write about higher education, the difference between left feminists and radical feminists regarding experience and, especially, intuition would probably have been even more pronounced, for radical feminists such as Gearhart (1979) value women's intuition and psychic powers as modes of learning.

Like left feminists, radical feminists do not discuss role models per se, yet implicit in their works is discussion of the need for models of independent women, lesbians, women bonding with each other, and women as survivors.

Knowledge and Scholarship. The greatest difference on knowledge and scholarship is between liberal feminists and the other two perspectives. Liberal feminists seek to add women as subject matter to research studies, probe why women's educational and career aspirations are so low, increase women's participation and productivity as researchers, and document discrimination (Carnegie Commission 1973, Astin 1978; Churgin 1978; Gappa and Uehling 1979). Left feminists and radical feminists share some of those concerns but place their central emphases elsewhere. Both criticize the presumed political neutrality and objectivity of the university's research (Gordon 1975; Smith 1975; Rich 1977; Heide 1979b). They challenge the university's belief that it is a neutral and disinterested observer, as well as its social science norm which assumes subject and object can be separated. But they differ in the *origins* they identify for the university's lack of neutrality and objectivity. Left feminists attribute it to the researcher's class membership and ideological and bureaucratic positions. Since men are dominant in these positions, their perspectives and interests prevail without the fact that they do so being apparent. As Smith (1975) points out, "The perspective of men is not apparent as such for it has become institutionalized as the 'field' or the 'discipline'" (p. 367). Radical feminists, on the other hand, see the lack of neutrality and objectivity stemming more directly from men themselves and from the patriarchal position of the researcher. Radical feminists do not emphasize economic class or bureaucratic position, although some share such concerns with left feminists. Others, however, think economics is irrelevant.

Left feminists and radical feminists share other criticisms of knowledge and scholarship. Both discuss the problem of methodological and conceptual tools, which disallow women's experience as valid data and prevent women from being able to perceive and name their own experiences. Left feminists, however, discuss "bifurcation of consciousness" (Smith 1974, 1979), and radical feminists discuss "methodolatry" (Daly 1973, 1978). Both also criticize treatment of women as objects of research, increased specialization and fragmentation of the disciplines, and artificial dichotomies. Radical feminists emphasize the dichotomies and splittings of world views and knowledge. Left feminists focus more often on the split between the public and private realms of life. Again, radical feminists and left feminists differ in their perception of the causes of these problems. Also, radical feminists view heterosexual bias as a scholarship problem, whereas left feminists hardly ever mention it.

Left feminists and radical feminists make a number of similar recommendations: for example, acknowledging the limits to achieving neutrality and objectivity, developing a method of conducting research that places women at the center, and using an interdisciplinary perspective that redresses fragmented and dichotomous views. In addition, both emphasize the need for women to become subjects (meaning agents or originators) of inquiry, rather than to remain objectives of inquiry. But they also have important differences along lines previously outlined. In addition, radical feminists differ from left feminists in emphasizing the need for women scholars to do the following: reclaim integrity of self, recognize that knowledge is indivisible and knowing is interconnected, include intuition as a process of knowing, acknowledge the importance of women working with women, and analyze institutionalized heterosexuality.

The purposes of research differ. Most liberal feminists do not propose an activist role for scholarship; the university's norms of political neutrality and epistemological objectivity are generally accepted. Some liberal feminists, however, are concerned about the need to document discrimination and barriers to equal opportunity (e.g., Sadker and Sadker 1980). Left feminists and radical feminists have a more activist perspective and consider their primary allegiance to be to the community, not to the university, disciplines, or professions. The left feminist goal is liberation; they want "studies toward a future of freedom," studies of how women have fought and have overcome male oppression (Foster 1973; DuBois 1980). They want research directed toward personal and societal change and toward enabling women to participate in a "common world" of women and men (Smith 1978, p. 282). For radical feminists, the purposes of research are integrity and countering the patriarchy. They want studies to reclaim women's experience and integrity or wholeness and to assist in building a "common world" of women (Rich 1977, p. xviii). Radical feminists also emphasize the need to research women's experiences and their interactions with each other. They believe the left feminist emphasis on studying how women overcome male oppression continues men's studies and devalues women's strengths.⁵

Women's Studies. Women's studies as curriculum and scholarship is viewed and valued differently by each perspective. Liberal feminists give women's studies little attention compared to their concerns about equal educational opportunity and career success. They discuss it as compensatory and remedial, and necessary as a transitional measure until women are integrated as subject matter in the disciplines. Some liberal feminists view it as a potential danger in contributing to divisiveness between women and men (e.g., Rose 1975).

Left feminists hold a range of views but generally consider women's studies compensatory and remedial, yet important. Women's studies is seen to play important roles in changing consciousness; in radicalizing students, faculty, and administrators; and in asking new questions. In addition, women's studies is interdisciplinary and, as such, counteracts the fragmentation and specialization of disciplines and produces "new social understandings" (Gordon 1975, p. 563). Left feminists, however, do fear that women's studies will become an end in itself and dilute a needed emphasis on organizing civil service staff and changing the institution as a whole (Koloday 1978, p. 24). Left feminists also object to the definition of women's studies as revolutionary and want the term "revolutionary" restricted to mass movements that occur outside universities and in which scholars can participate by uniting with these larger groups (Gordon 1975).

Radical feminists consider women's studies critically important, revolutionary, and central to achieving their goals. In addition, since women's experiences do not fit traditional disciplinary perspectives, women's studies requires an interdisciplinary perspective and approach and a reconceptualization of disciplines. Although left feminists also discuss women's studies in terms of an interdisciplinary approach, they differ from radical feminists in frequently placing their discussion in the context of producing "new social understandings" and understanding male experience better. For radical feminists, understanding women's experience per se is itself sufficient justification.

Radical feminists do express some fears. They worry lest women's studies become an illusion of power and they are concerned that students might receive messages that women's studies is faddish and that any knowledge worth knowing is men's studies. Radical feminists do not, however, share the liberal feminist concern over women's studies' potential to divide women and men. In fact, some would applaud such division as a necessary step in the process for women to reclaim self.

This concludes the description of three contemporary feminist perspectives. In addition, since the higher education literature does not tap the full range of feminist movement perspectives and since perspectives continually develop and change, I will briefly mention other perspectives that may be emerging. One is a lesbian feminist perspective that would present the goals, analysis of the problem, and recommendations for change in higher education within the context of a primary

focus on lesbianism and institutionalized heterosexuality. Examples of works reflecting such a perspective are Frye's (1980a, 1980b) articles on the heterosexual bias of women's studies programs and Cavin's (1979) article on "lesbian origins sex ratio theory."

A psychoanalytic perspective could develop, based on the works of Dinnerstein (1977) and Chodorow (1978, 1980). These authors have not applied their ideas to higher education, but Grumet (1979) provides a linkage in her discussion of the different epistemologies of females and males and how these differences relate to learning and research in higher education. The psychoanalytic perspective has a number of problems (see West 1970; Bart 1981; Lorber et al. 1981), including a heterosexist bias, but is worth considering as another explanation for different epistemological approaches to the disciplines and scholarship.

Another perspective on higher education may emerge among black feminists. Whether or not they will develop a perspective which would present goals, analysis, and recommendations within the context of a primary focus on blacks and institutionalized racism is difficult to determine. At present, Harris (1974) writes from a liberal feminist perspective, and Russell (1975, 1977), from a left feminist one.

Last, French feminists' thinking has recently become available in this country. Their work has been presented at the Barnard College Conference on "The Scholar and the Feminist" (see West 1979) and at the Second Sex Anniversary Conference in New York in 1979 (see Douglas 1970; Wittig 1979); *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* by Marks and deCourtivron was published in 1980; it was reviewed by Bartkowski (1981) and Burke (1981); and a French feminist journal, *Questions Féministes (Feminist Issues)*, is being distributed in this country and has been publicized by the American Council on Education's Project on the Status and Education of Women. While these works were not available for inclusion in this essay, reviews in feminist journals indicate that their theories and concepts may well have important contributions to feminist theory.

Assessment of the Three Perspectives

The three feminist perspectives on women and higher education have been described but generally have not been assessed, although a degree of assessment is always embedded within description. While an in-depth, critical evaluation is beyond the purposes of this chapter, a limited assessment will be made based on criteria which include the following: (a) the complexity with which the position of women in higher education is described and analyzed; (b) the comprehensiveness with which all women in higher education are considered, including civil service staff; (c) the valuation of women's experiences and perspectives; and (d) a concern about social inequality.

Liberal Feminists

Liberal feminists have a number of important strengths. One is the extensive sociological and statistical descriptions of the current position of women in higher education and of the specific ways sex discrimination and sex-biased socialization processes are perpetuated. Books by the Carnegie Commission (1973), Rossi and Calderwood (1973), and Furniss and Graham (1974) are prime examples of such work. Second, their mainstream framework of equality of opportunity makes their arguments for change the most easily understandable and acceptable of the three perspectives. In addition, the arguments based on social utility and freedom of choice are relatively noncontroversial, and the emphasis on individual merit and competence fits higher education's espoused selection criteria. Third, their affirmative action recommendations outline clear and precise procedures for facilitating women's inclusion as students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. The combination, then, of all of the above is a powerful force toward increasing women's participation in higher education.

The liberal feminist perspective has a number of limitations, however. Perhaps the greatest is that liberal feminists seek to increase women's participation in higher education and society but, in general, do not fundamentally challenge the values and structures in which they seek integration. For example, the emphasis is equality of opportunity rather than social equality; and the outcome from such an emphasis, assuming it would be effective, would be a general equalization of the distribution of the sexes from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy. Basic social inequality would, however, remain; it would just be distributed differently. Bowen's (1977) general discussion of the limits of equal opportunity applies here:

equality of opportunity in the sense of non-discrimination in the competition for places on the totem pole will not reduce inequality of social position. It will only rearrange the relative positions of individuals and classes [p. 333].

The liberal feminist perspective does not challenge social inequality per se but asks that it not be based on factors such as sex or race.⁶

Second is the limited analysis of the causes of the problem. "Discrimination" implies generally acceptable standards and structures which are not available to all. A related weakness is the tendency toward "blaming the victim," that is, emphasizing that women are the cause of their problems (for example, women's lack of confidence, career commitment, and preparation for higher education). Such an orientation also includes a tendency to discount women's achievements and values. The consequence of focusing on women themselves as the problem, rather than patriarchal structures and values, is that the burden for change is placed on women rather than on the patriarchy.⁷ I do not mean to imply that these foci are either-or choices, only that it makes a difference if one is emphasized over the other. Third, liberal feminists focus on educated and professional (or career) women. Some attention is given to women of color, but working-class women, lesbian students and employees, and civil service staff are rarely included.⁸ Last, liberal feminists do not indicate any awareness of perspectives other than their own. They rarely cite left feminists and radical feminists in their writings, and their own assumptions appear to be taken as the way the world has been and is.⁹ This narrowness of vision limits the range of alternative criticisms and directions open to them and to higher education in general, since their perspective is predominant in mainstream higher education literature.

Left Feminists

It is not surprising that left feminists have strengths that differ from liberal feminists and counter some of their limitations. They question higher education's structures and values, and point out the inadequacies of an equal educational opportunity approach, which may change the distribution of women and men from top to bottom in higher education and in society but preserve basic inequality. Second, in specifying the causes of women's subordinate position in higher education, they go beyond an analysis of discrimination and socialization and focus on the relationship between educational structures/ideology/curriculum and societal structures/ideology, especially economic ones. Their analysis includes attention to the ways the content and process of education reinforce roles of dominance and submission. They also present specific strategies for both students and faculty to use in countering these practices.

Third, they are persistent in calling attention to the need to recognize class and race differences among women students, faculty, administrators, and staff. Working-class and Third World women and men are central concerns. Such concerns are especially important in a society largely unaware of class differences and as a counter to the idealistic views of some feminists who believe being a feminist automatically eliminates differences among women. Left feminists, therefore, function as a conscience for others regarding women of different races and classes. Fourth, they bring new

perspectives to knowledge and scholarship. They challenge the presumed objectivity of knowledge and scholarship and emphasize the ways in which one's historical, class, and political positions affect one's research. In addition, they argue for scholarship which is *for* women rather than *about* women, and they discuss ways to conduct research from an interdisciplinary and more holistic perspective.

Left feminists have limitations, which of course differ from those of liberal feminists. One is the tendency to set aside women's issues for the "larger cause" or to see women only in the service of a "larger cause." Historically, women have been asked to put their own needs last, whether in higher education, in a family, or in a social movement. This has meant, for example, that socialist revolutions from which women's freedom was expected to follow automatically have had little effect on the patriarchy of the particular country; patriarchal values and women's oppression continued unabated.

Second, in their efforts to avoid dividing working-class women and men, they risk the danger of a premature focus on human liberation. They also tend to overemphasize "organizational processes," sometimes to the seeming dismissal of the fact that people (mostly men) hold these high-level, decision-making positions. This approach can prevent self-analysis and acknowledgment of one's own androcentric perspectives and behaviors. In working for change, at least two foci need to be addressed: (a) organizational processes that tend to have a life of their own in perpetuating discrimination and oppression and (b) the role of specific people who maintain those processes by actively working to keep them or, passively, by doing nothing to change them. Third, they too quickly discount liberal feminist reforms as being worthless. This dismissal is more evident in general feminist movement literature than in feminist higher education writings, but one can assume that similar views operate in both areas. Left feminist views on reforms are changing, however, toward a recognition of their importance to the change process; see, for example, Harding (1976) and Eisenstein (1981). Fourth, their focus tends to be working-class and Third World women and men. Women administrators, career-oriented women, and lesbians are not of much concern.

Radical Feminists

Perhaps the most important strength of radical feminists is the persistence with which they call attention to the need to end the dichotomization of worldviews, knowledge and scholarship, and self and to the need to seek connections and integrity (wholeness). Their perspective (and to some extent the left feminist perspective) forms the basis for a more complex and interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and scholarship and for a fundamental paradigm shift from fragmentation and unrelatedness to interconnectedness and interdependence. In another article I have argued that such a shift is sorely needed by society and the planet.¹⁰ A second strength is the important centrality with which radical feminists focus on women. They implicitly and explicitly argue that for once women must not be set aside or in relation to someone else (a man, a child) or a cause. Women's experiences, thoughts, and problems are considered valid in their own right. Third, in pointing out the dangers of cooptation, radical feminists function as a conscience against "selling out." Daly's (1978) discussion of the token is a good example of this kind of analysis; she argues that the token's role in higher education is to perpetuate patriarchy (p. 334). The recommendation to "live on the boundaries" of patriarchy is also relevant here. Yet the practical question—just what is meant by remaining on the institutional boundaries of higher education—remains. University women's studies courses and women's centers are given as examples of boundary living. Are there other ways to "live on the boundary," and/or is the concept more useful as an admonition, a warning to maintain vigilance against the "mindbinding" dangers of the patriarchal university? Perhaps the concept is most useful for feminists in higher education as a "concrete" metaphor that serves as a reminder that feminists must be careful not to be coopted. A fourth strength is the complexity and depth with which radical feminists call attention to the integral relationship of

patriarchal education and scholarship to worldwide manifestations of patriarchy. Radical feminists especially address myth and culture, which includes not just the fine arts, but a broader definition encompassing institutions, values, language, and underlying worldviews. In doing this, they sharpen the ability to question taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs. For example, Truman (1974), a liberal feminist, discusses women and higher education and asserts that a society can live with injustice "as long as it is in some sense socially useful" (p. 57). The radical feminist asks "useful to whom?"

A fifth strength is the new thinking left feminists bring to knowledge and scholarship. They not only challenge its androcentric orientation, but also consider women's experiences and interactions with each other as worthy of study, and try to reduce the multiple fragmentations and dichotomies of knowledge through interdisciplinary perspectives and methods. In addition, they present a challenge to epistemological assumptions that assume the knower is separate from the known and that exclude experience, intuition, and imagination as ways of knowing.

A sixth strength is that they call attention to lesbians as students, faculty, and administrators and to the ways in which compulsory and institutionalized heterosexuality function as yet another means for the subordination of all women. Lesbians and compulsory heterosexuality are rarely mentioned in the other perspectives.

The limitations of the radical feminist perspective differ depending on which radical feminist work one is reading, but some generalizations can be made. First, their overreliance on the power of ideas to change patriarchy is a danger. Although it is important to "name lies" and to challenge language and thought in order to "reclaim" one's own self and to change society, other structures of society can easily continue to operate unless they are also challenged.¹¹

Secondly, some radical feminists are blind to economic and racial differences among women and fail to recognize oppression based on such differences. An example of blindness to racism is Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology*; material she criticized for its misogyny should have also been cited for its racism. Not all radical feminists evidence inattention to racial differences; Rich (1980/1981) and Heide (1979b), for example, include women of color in their work. And some radical feminists are concerned about racism in feminist and lesbian feminist writings (for example, Bulkin 1980).

Third, like left feminists, radical feminists too easily dismiss liberal feminist reforms. Fourth, "living on the boundary" can be necessary for survival and integrity but can encourage a ghetto mentality in which living with and interacting with a women's community becomes so comforting that little is done to change institutions. Both Brooke (1980) and Daly (1978, p. xv; 1979b) recognize such dangers.

A fifth limitation of many radical feminist views, Heide and Rich being exceptions, is the lack of concern paid to working-class and Third World women and, for some radical feminists, even non-lesbian women.

Sixth, the emphasis by some radical feminists on women's innate superiority may become a two-edged sword. Although radical feminists use such an argument to improve women's lives, others may use the argument to support policies that maintain women in a subordinate position.

Additional Comments

Like the proverbial story of the elephant in which each observer sees only a part,¹² each perspective presents only a partial and inadequate view, but together they contribute to a comprehensive picture of the situation of women in higher education. Combined, they present multiple analyses on the causes of women's subordinate position; discuss the lives and concerns of all women; contribute to development of a range of alternatives and goals for changes in higher education; and challenge, redefine, and present new views on knowledge and scholarship.

A comment needs to be made about liberal feminism, since this perspective has been presented as the most conservative of the three. One should note that it is a radical perspective, compared to

the full range of views on women held by people in higher education and society in general. The goals of liberal feminists could not be achieved without making important changes in many areas of higher education. Further, what has not been addressed is the question whether or not the addition of women to higher education and other societal structures by itself might fundamentally change those structures. What Yates (1975) said of the liberal feminist perspective in her study also applies to the liberal feminist view on higher education: "How much it is radical will depend on whether it is true that women *are* different from men and will do things differently, even in this case, despite espousal of values similar to men."

It is distressing that one must read widely in order to become aware of all three perspectives. Mainstream education journals generally cover only the perspectives of liberal feminists, yet even their views and concerns are not much represented. Also distressing is the extent to which feminists in each perspective rely almost entirely on works by feminists from their own perspective. This is most true for the liberal feminist, since feminists in the other two perspectives do cite liberal feminist works, if only to reject their ideas and analyses. Communication and interaction are needed across and within all perspectives. That statement is, of course, based on an assumption that such dialogue will produce a better understanding of the problems women face, new synthesis among the perspectives (see, for example, Kelly 1979), and new insights regarding the scope of the values and issues involved. This work is intended to facilitate such dialogue.

Implications for Higher Education

While a number of implications for higher education are probably apparent, I will highlight two.

Political Legitimation of Higher Education

All three perspectives are consistent with the trend toward the "political legitimation" of higher education described by Brubacher in *On the Philosophy of Higher Education* (1977). Reviewing the history of higher education, he identifies two legitimations: an "epistemological" justification, which considers knowledge an end in itself, and a "political" justification, which considers knowledge a resource or a means to an end, and emphasizes its significance to "the body politic" (p. 13). Trow (1970) makes a similar distinction about the functions of higher education, classifying them as "autonomous" vs. "popular" (cited in Clecak 1977, p. 412). "Autonomous" includes transmission of high culture, pure research, and development of intellectual elites; "popular" includes service to larger social institutions, and education of everyone to her or his limits.

Brubacher (1977) describes how the two legitimations have changed over time. The political was dominant in the early period of higher education but was superseded in the 19th century by the epistemological, when the research emphasis of German universities influenced American higher education. In the 20th century the political again became dominant as higher education took on public service functions (pp. 15-25). He concludes:

In spite of the attractive logic of a value-free epistemology for higher education modeled on that of the German research university, history seems clearly to favor the political legitimation of the higher learning [p. 25].

Although the nature of the political legitimation for higher education differs in each perspective, all three feminist perspectives would effect a further increase in the political legitimation of higher education. Each assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, a close relationship between higher education and society. Liberal feminists do not explicitly state a close relationship between higher education and the world outside: their general stance is that they are concerned with the development of individual talent and are not part of a political movement, from which, they believe, a university must remain neutral and separate (see, Truman 1974). Liberal feminist do, however, see

higher education in the role of educating women for careers and for mobility to top positions in its own institutions and in society, and more-activist liberal feminists see research as a resource in documenting discrimination.¹³

In contrast, left feminists have an activist stance and explicitly state a close relationship between higher education and society. They want higher education to be involved in the liberation of individuals and institutions from oppressive beliefs and practices of capitalist/bureaucratic/patriarchal society. They criticize liberal feminists for their relationship to society not because of the relationship itself, but because they consider it the wrong relationship—career success for individuals rather than social transformation of society. They also criticize liberal feminists for considering their position to be a neutral one; left feminists consider education for careers in society's institutions to be political, not neutral. The left feminist goal is to change society, not to add women who might then contribute to maintaining society's oppressive features.

Like left feminists, radical feminists see an activist and political role for themselves and want higher education to be involved in countering patriarchy within its own institutions and in society. They also share the left feminist criticism of liberal feminists who consider education of women for career positions an end to itself. Radical feminists, however, maintain a closer relationship to women and the feminist movement. For example, in criticizing liberal feminists, they place more emphasis on the patriarchal nature of the positions liberal feminists seek, whereas left feminists emphasize the corporate/capitalist/bureaucratic nature of the positions. In addition, they emphasize the need to create new spaces and institutions for women and the need to counter patriarchal institutions.

Both left feminists and radical feminists believe universities should work on problems that need solving in the community and should be a resource for the community and the feminist movement. Universities should also learn from the community. They differ, however, in the communities which are their reference group. Left feminists focus more on Third World and working-class women and, frequently, men also. Radical feminists focus more on women in general, including lesbians.

The three perspectives, then, extend the trend toward political legitimization of higher education. But they go beyond the political legitimization as discussed by Brubacher to include both a critical evaluation function and a social change one.

Knowledge and Scholarship

The three perspectives have important implications for knowledge and scholarship and present challenges to their most basic assumptions and beliefs. First, all three perspectives present a convincing case that the university represents mankind, not humankind. The feminist perspectives present compelling arguments that the university is indeed, as Heide (1979b) defines it, a "semi-versity," not a university. The university is grounded in androcentrism and masculine subjectivity. Women's thoughts, interests, and experiences are generally excluded, and the predominant subject matter for scholars and students is men's thoughts, interests, and achievements. Further, this androcentrism is institutionalized; as was pointed out earlier, the men's perspectives are not apparent, for these have been "institutionalized as the 'field' or the 'discipline'" (Smith 1975, p. 367). Moreover, scholarship not only generally excludes women and assumes the study of man represents women, but also participates in justifying women's subordination and oppression. The presentation by the three perspectives, then, provides an answer to the question "Now that you have women's studies, when will we have men's studies?" The focus for the university's curriculum, knowledge, and scholarship is men's studies, the study of men. The university's claims to neutrality and objectivity are, therefore, undermined.

Second, an even greater challenge confronts its ontological and epistemological assumptions. Radical feminists and some left feminists argue that scholarship must recognize the centrality of the

human being in all knowing and the unity or interconnectedness of reality and of all knowing. In this view, the human being is not separate from the world nor is the observer separate from the observed. Noteworthy is the striking similarity of such views to the worldviews underlying modern physics (Perreault 1980). In addition, left feminists and radical feminists argue for inclusion of intuition and imagination in this process.

Third, the perspectives themselves demonstrate the necessity for scholars to be conscious of the basic assumptions that form the context for their own work. Comparison of the three perspectives confirm a statement by Elshtain (1978) that facts "move within theories and may be assimilated within a number of competing explanatory frameworks" (p. 312). Facts do not exist independently, but are viewed quite differently depending on the particular theory or framework within which they are embedded. For example, feminists in all three perspectives agree that women as employees are concentrated in the lower ranks and that women as students are concentrated in relatively few fields. But they differ significantly on the context (definition of the problem, analysis, recommendations for change) within which they place these facts. Liberal feminists interpret the facts in terms of discrimination and sex bias; left feminists in terms of exploitation, capitalism, and patriarchy; and radical feminists in terms of androcentrism and patriarchy. These differences highlight the importance of recognizing that descriptions of a problem are not neutral. As Jaggar and Struhl (1978) observe in their discussion of feminist frameworks in general:

even apparently straightforward *descriptions* of a social situation also make presuppositions. These are presuppositions regarding the choice of categories or concepts which will be the most useful in bringing out those features of the situation which deserve emphasis. For example, to say that women suffer from job discrimination is to presuppose (among other things) that certain procedures for assigning jobs are appropriate and that others are inappropriate; to say that women are exploited is (usually) to presuppose some version of Marxian economic theory; to say that women are oppressed is to presuppose a certain view of justice and equality. Many philosophers argue that all descriptions of reality are, in this way, "theory-laden" [p. x.]

These observations are applicable to all scholarship, of course, not just to feminist scholarship. Scholars need to be sensitive to the differing contexts and the explicit and implicit assumptions and values within which research and scholarship are grounded, including their own work.

Notes

1. Representative writings analyzed for the three feminist perspectives included those of the following feminists: *Liberal Feminists*: Carnegie Commission (1973), Rossi and Calderwood (1973), Truman (1974), Astin and Hirsch (1978), Churgin (1978), Gordon and Kerr (1978), and Gappa and Uehling (1979). *Left Feminists*: Foster (1973), Webb (1973), Gordon (1975), Schram (1975, 1976), Smith (1975), Elshtain (1978), Hague (1978) and Dubois (1980). *Radical Feminists*: Daly (1973, 1978), Rich (1975, 1980), Heide (1979a, b), and Smith-Rosenberg (1980).

Radical feminists writing on higher education were difficult to find. Therefore, Daly, Heide, and Rich, but especially Daly were relied on fairly heavily for presentation of the radical feminist view.

2. As will become clear, the term "patriarchy" is used differently by feminists from the three perspectives. When the term is not used in the context of one of the three, however, its definition will be as follows: a worldview which assumes females inferior and males superior; the multiple ways in which that worldview is institutionalized; and the characteristic ways of viewing and relating to the world, most frequently associated with stereotypic masculinity, e.g. rational, agentic, inexpressive.
3. Daly's use of integrity is similar to Raymond's (1975), who discusses integrity as an integral whole, not in the sense of addition of parts but "an original unity from which no part may be taken" (p. 64). This integrity "is an 'original' state of being before the 'fall' of patriarchy, an original state that does not reside in a static historical past . . . but which resides rather in the intuitive wanderings of a mythohistorical past which has

the potentiality of generating for all of us a future vision of becoming, beyond a gender-defined society" (p. 64).

4. Note the emphasis on a material base in this definition of patriarchy by Hartmann (1979): "I define patriarchy as a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is thus the system of male oppression of women" (p. 232).
5. See debate between Smith-Rosenberg and Dubois in *Feminist Studies*, Spring 1980. DuBois emphasizes the need to study men's oppression of women, and Smith-Rosenberg disagrees with this focus. She explains that while in the past she had "explored male ideology," she came "to realize that such an exclusive emphasis on male oppression of women had transformed me into a historian of men" (pp. 60-61). Instead, she argues for the study of the female world (p. 62) and of women's interactions with each other (p. 59). Only then, Smith-Rosenberg says, can historians "begin to untangle the intricate relation between the female world and the economic and institutional power structure of the 'external world'" (p. 59).
6. Whether or not women could be included as students and employees in equal numbers with men in higher education without fundamentally challenging underlying values and structures, including social inequality, raises different issues and questions.
7. Refer to note 2 for use of the term "patriarchy."
8. Omission of a concern for the physically disabled is apparent in the writings from all the perspectives. Consciousness of the disabled is too new to criticize any perspective for thus far having excluded them, however.
9. See a similar view of liberal feminists expressed by Eisenstein (1981) in her book on liberal feminism.
10. The article compared the world views of physics and feminism (Perreault 1980), argued the need for a paradigm shift to interconnectedness and interdependence, and outlined the contributions of feminism and physics to such a shift.
11. I am not here arguing that every feminist must work on every issue, since that is impossible. I am saying that one should consider and note in one's writing the importance of these other areas. For example, for various reasons, education has been the focus of most of my feminist works so far, but in speaking on education I always preface my speech with comments about the interrelationship of all areas and that we each make choices about where we put our energy.
12. I recognize that this analogy has its limitations. The different parts of an elephant are compatible with each other, whereas the different feminist views are not. Nevertheless, the analogy is useful in communicating both the usefulness and limitations of the different views.
13. Liberal feminists within higher education in contrast to those outside may differ on the question of neutrality versus activism and may see a more-activist role for feminists within higher education as well as for higher education in general. The present essay did not, however, seek to answer this question.

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