# Learning critical feminist research: A brief introduction to feminist epistemologies and methodologies

**Britta Wigginton**
University of Queensland, Australia

**Michelle N Lafrance**
St. Thomas University, Canada

## Abstract

This article serves as a welcoming introduction to feminist epistemologies and methodologies, written to accompany (and intended to be read prior to) the Virtual Special Issue on 'Doing Critical Feminist Research'. In recalling our own respective journeys into the exciting field of feminist research, we invite new readers in appreciating the steep learning curve *out* of conventional science. This article begins by sketching out the emergence of feminist scholarship – focusing particularly on the discipline of psychology – to show readers how and why feminist scholars sought to depart from conventional science. In doing so, we explain the emergence of three main ways of doing and thinking about research (i.e. epistemologies): feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, and the various 'turn to language' movements (social constructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, poststructuralism). We then connect the dots between feminist epistemologies, methodologies and methods. We close by offering suggestions to guide the readers in using the Virtual Special Issue on their respective research journeys.

## Keywords

critical feminist methodology, research, epistemology, feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, social constructionism, postmodernism

**Corresponding author:**
Michelle N Lafrance, Department of Psychology, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada,
E3B 5G3.
Email: lafrance@stu.ca

Feminist scholars, including feminist psychologists, have long debated the commitments and methods involved in conducting research and generating knowledge (Chen & Cheung, 2011; Cook & Fonow, 1986; DeVault, 1996; Fine & Gordon, 1989; Grabe, 2018; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Macleod, 2006; Magnusson & Marecek, 2017; Ussher, 1999; Wilkinson, 1997). These conversations can appear daunting or impenetrable to a reader just beginning to explore these debates. Equally so, the decades of writing on feminist research can be difficult to navigate when designing a feminist study. In this article, we speak to those in a position of *learning* (e.g. students, or researchers new to feminist research) or *teaching* (e.g. academics developing courses in methods, feminist psychology, or critical psychology).

   We begin this article with a brief sketch of the emergence of feminist scholarship, particularly in psychology, and explain what was happening in the (social) sciences that compelled feminist scholars to either re-evaluate or depart from conventional science. We then turn attention to three main feminist epistemologies, or ways of thinking about knowledge and research, that have been taken up both within and beyond psychology: feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, and the various 'turn to language' movements (social constructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, poststructuralism). A goal of this article is to serve as an accompanying (and brief) introductory text to our Virtual Special Issue, 'Doing Critical Feminist Research' (see Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). In doing so, this article explicates the broad and diverse terrain of feminist scholarship, while touching lightly on some disciplinary debates.

## Feminist challenges to man-made science

Although purporting to be 'objective' and value-neutral, science has often functioned in the disservice of marginalized groups, and feminists have been among the most vociferous critics (e.g. Stacey & Thorne, 1985). For instance, pioneering feminist psychologist Naomi Weisstein was one of the first to document the systemic biases and stereotypes about women that dominated the discipline of psychology, ultimately classifying women as:

> inconsistent, emotionally unstable, lacking in a strong conscience or superego, weaker, 'nurturant' rather than productive, 'intuitive' rather than intelligent, and, if they are at all 'normal', suited to the home and the family. (1993 [1968], p. 207)

Feminist scholars exposed how such sexist conclusions were derived from psychology's deep androcentric bias, where men are regarded as the 'norm', and women, by default, are regarded as either irrelevant for understanding the human experience, or deficient – a 'problem' (Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Magnusson & Marecek, 2017; Tavris, 1993). One of the ways in which this androcentrism was reflected was in the standard practice of developing psychological theory from research conducted by men with men as the sole

participants – most often, young, educated, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, white men (Fine & Gordon, 1989; Tavris, 1993). A classic example of this practice is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which was developed from research on boys and young men and which is still described in an unqualified way in most introductory psychology textbooks. Later, comparing men and women on their levels of moral development, he concluded that women failed to progress to the same 'stage' as men:

> While girls are moving from high school or college to motherhood, sizeable proportions of them are remaining at Stage 3, while their male age mates are dropping Stage 3 in favor of the stages above it. Stage 3 morality is a functional morality for housewives and mothers; it is not for businessmen and professionals. (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969, p. 108)

It was androcentric research like this that spurred feminists to develop ways of thinking about and doing research differently. In relation to Kohlberg's work, feminist scholars argued that the 'problem' was not women's underdeveloped morality, but the inadequate theory against which they were measured (Gilligan, 1982). Further, these scholars drew important attention to the consequences of presumably 'objective' knowledge produced in the academy for women's everyday lives (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990; Oakley, 1998; Smith, 1987, 1991; Tavris, 1993). In particular, they demonstrated how the results of psychological 'science' had the effect of supporting gender inequalities (which are compounded by intersecting racial ethnic inequalities) and ultimately justifying women's exclusion from positions of power in society (Fine & Gordon, 1989; Wilkinson, 1997).

Psychology has certainly not been the only discipline responsible for promulgating particular 'truths' about women. Feminist sociologists and anthropologists have also voiced critiques of their disciplines' androcentric knowledge. In particular, these scholars began to question the homogeneous circle of white men located in Global North countries responsible for producing so-called 'objective' knowledge (Smith, 1987), who huddled together like footballers "facing one another between plays and speaking in codes that only team players could understand", and playing a game that only they could win (Collins, 1992, p. 73). In response, feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith challenged the overwhelmingly white, male membership of this inner circle who were doing research 'on' women without considering its consequences or relevance 'for' women. She argued that:

> Women have been largely excluded from the work of producing the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered. We can imagine women's exclusion organized by the formation of a circle among men who attend to and treat as significant only what men say. The circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backwards in time as far as our records reach. What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. (Smith, 1987, p. 18)

Instead, Smith called for a sociology *for* women, starting with women's experiences of their everyday lives (see section entitled 'Feminist standpoint theorists'). In reflecting on her own standpoint as an academic and mother, Smith (1991) recognized a disjunction between the theory she worked with and the realities of her lived experiences at home. She wrote:

> sociology claims to speak of the same lived world I inhabited with my children and yet somehow I could not find the world I knew at home with my children in the texts of sociological discourse. The sociologies and psychologies I had learned were not capable of speaking of what I knew as a matter of my life. (p. 157)

In developing standpoint theory (see later section), Smith (1987) aimed to examine women's articulations in order to understand how their realities are organized, and the ways in which social relations and societal structures inform their experiences. In short, it is knowledge created by women for women.

Feminist scholars across disciplines have shared a joint commitment to the task of re-writing knowledge in explicitly non-androcentric and decolonizing ways. Together, they have worked to understand how 'conventional' approaches to knowledge production, colloquially termed ''good science'', might ''promote or obstruct'' the (re)making of democratic societies and gendered relations (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 2009). Part of this inquiry has involved a thorough consideration of the way in which science can be viewed as an institution, in much the same way that healthcare and education are institutions (Harding & Norberg, 2005). As an institution, science is complicit in governing, classifying and controlling populations by producing particular 'truths' about certain people/groups (Harding & Norberg, 2005) – truths that are far from being neutral, but are complicit with colonial, capitalist and patriarchal structures, and which ultimately reinforce an unjust status quo (Anderson, 2011; Fine & Gordon, 1989; hooks, 1990). In response, feminist scholars have made evident the ways in which biases inevitably arise throughout the research process (including which research questions are (not) asked, funded, published, and circulated), to demonstrate the value-laden influence of science, which has historically resulted in the privileging of some knowledges over others (Fine & Gordon, 1989; Harding & Norberg, 2005).

In the sections that follow, we explore different approaches taken by feminist scholars to address the problems of man-made science. The 'approaches' we will introduce are what are termed *epistemologies* – defined as theories of knowledge that influence what and how we can 'know', and who can know (Harding, 1987). We will outline three major *feminist epistemologies* (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987): 1) feminist empiricism, 2) feminist standpoint theory, and 3) the various 'turn to language' movements (social constructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, poststructuralism). These are summarized in Table 1. While we present these as distinct for the purpose of illustration, it is important to note that there are overlaps and debates within and across these areas of scholarship. It is not our intention to unearth and resolve epistemological debates within and across these epistemologies – an impossible task to be sure! Rather, we would like to introduce

**Table 1.** Overview of three main feminist epistemologies and their scope.

| Feminist epistemology | Scope and researcher positioning |
| --- | --- |
| Feminist empiricism | Argues that there is a reality 'out there' to be discovered (known as realism), and that researchers can detach themselves from the reality they observe and study. Objectivity is accepted on the premise that sexism and androcentrism can be 'managed/removed' by applying more rigorous scientific methods (Harding, 1992). Objectivity is defined on the basis of ensuring the knower does not 'contaminate' the observed reality. This epistemology allows feminists to work *within* the system of conventional science by advocating for 'better' science (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). |
| Feminist standpoint theory | Argues that science does not operate *apart* from the social order, but is necessarily *a part* of it. Challenges the 'god view' of science ("seeing everything from nowhere"; Haraway, 1988, p. 581), to argue that all knowers are socially situated, and hence all knowledge is socially situated (i.e. there is no such thing as a neutral, detached observer). Objectivity is reconceptualised to what has been called 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1992), which means, quite simply, "becoming answerable to what we see" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). While some earlier interpretations of standpoint theory have suggested an essentialist view of gender (e.g. 'women's nature') and closer approximations of 'truth', more recent iterations favour the plurality of situated standpoints with appreciation of intersecting, marginalized identities (Anderson, 2011). |
| Feminist social constructionism | Argues that science does not reflect or mirror reality but rather creates reality, so researchers (and their social locations) are inherently part of constructing that knowledge. Seeking an objective truth/reality is rejected as an impossible goal; instead, truths are relative and dependent on who is doing the asking and from what social location(s). Accordingly, social constructionists tend to favour pluralism, i.e. multiple truths and realities located in a particular time, space and place (also termed relativism). Social constructionists examine language as a vehicle of representation and reality (Burr, 1995). However, language is not regarded as a neutral medium but as reflecting the interests (and power) of dominant groups and knowledge systems in a society. Therefore, studying language (or 'discourse') allows insight into the ways in which power manifests and is resisted. |

some of the ways in which these three feminist knowledge projects have contributed to the contemporary social sciences (and indeed the broader project of challenging androcentric knowledge), and how the lines demarking their limits have become increasingly blurred (Anderson, 2011). Taking this a step further, this overview provides the necessary scaffold for readers who are new to the field of critical feminist psychology, and who wish to 'dig deeper' in this Virtual Special Issue (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019), which showcases critical feminist scholarship within *Feminism & Psychology*.

Collectively, feminist epistemologies have taken issue with the question of *who* can know – or, who is the knower (Anderson, 2011; Haraway, 1988). While each epistemology suggests its own approach to inquiry, there is a shared interest across approaches in interrogating how gender (and a multitude of social locations) situates 'knowing'. This concern orients to a key critique of man-made science, or what Haraway (1988) describes as 'the god trick': being everywhere but nowhere all at once. Or put another way, mainstream science assumes a detached knower who is neutral in their question formulation, objective (and somehow removed) in their pursuit of studying and knowing reality, and value-free (and 'position-less': Smith, 1991) in their writing and representation of that reality.

*Feminist empiricists* conduct what most people understand as 'science'. They assume that there is an objective reality or truth that is waiting to be discovered (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). With this in mind, empiricists apply conventional scientific methods and assumptions of rigour to observe and study reality. This involves modifying research practices or processes to remove any source of bias and ultimately to produce 'better' and more objective science (Harding, 1992). Indeed, it was feminist empiricists who worked to 'correct' the androcentric biases of science by including women in research samples and by asking questions that offered important insight into women's experiences such as rape, mothering, and work-family conflict (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Harding (1992) explained the value of this epistemology for feminists in the social sciences

> ...who were trying to explain what was and wasn't different about their research process in comparison with standard procedures in their field. They thought that they were just doing more carefully and rigorously what any good scientist should do: the problem they saw was one of 'bad science'. (p. 439)

She further explained that feminist empiricists believed that

> sexism and androcentrism could be eliminated from the results of research if scientists would just follow more rigorously and carefully the existing methods and norms of research – which, for practising scientists, are fundamentally empiricist ones. (p. 439)

It is necessary to acknowledge that one of the attractions for feminists who adopt an empiricist epistemology may well relate to the rhetorical power of this epistemology among academics (Hundleby, 2012). Indeed, this 'conservatism' allows feminist research to infiltrate the mainstream research laboratories without evoking

accusations of disloyalty to standards of "good science" (Harding, 1992, p. 441). With its rhetorical advantages (Hundleby, 2012), proponents may see the value of this epistemology in furthering feminist agendas within an already powerful (and well accepted) system of knowledge production. For example, Oakley (1998) suggests that there is a strong case for experimental and quantitative research, common procedures used in empirical research, that reflects feminist values and goals of emancipation. Indeed, many findings arising from an empiricist epistemology have furthered feminist agendas, for instance in documenting the links between women's psychological distress and the material conditions of women's lives (e.g. Belle & Doucet, 2003). As such, research conducted within this epistemology has made important contributions toward dismantling the androcentric bias in research simply by advocating for 'good' science (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

*Feminist standpoint theorists* have pointed out how traditional approaches to science fail to acknowledge the influence of the context and perspectives of the 'knower' who is responsible for generating the questions, conducting the research, and interpreting the data to ultimately decide what counts as knowledge (Naples, 2007). Therefore, they rejected the claim that the researcher's perspective can (ever) be stripped free from the research process by following technical scientific procedures (Harding, 1992; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Riger, 1992), and they fundamentally disrupted empiricists' notions of 'objective', 'value-free' science (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). Further, they argued that women's experiences have not been adequately represented by mainstream research because they have been framed within, and interpreted by, dominant (i.e. men's) conceptual categories. That is, women's experiences have been understood in concepts and language largely developed by educated white men.

To reflect this predicament, Smith (1987) stated that women "have a 'bifurcated consciousness' – daily life grounded in female experience but only male conceptual categories with which to interpret that experience" (Riger, 1992, p. 733). Rather than starting from the *a priori* categories and assumptions of empiricist science, then, standpoint theorists begin inquiry with the experiences of individuals who are not members of dominant groups with the goal of opening up different ways of understanding by foregrounding 'marginalised voices'. Harding (1996) explains:

> The point here is not that every poor or otherwise marginalised person already can or does 'see the truth', but rather that discourses oppositional to the dominant ones can arise as marginalised groups begin to articulate their histories, needs, and desires 'for themselves' instead of only in the ways encouraged by their 'masters' favoured conceptual frameworks. (pp. 445–6)

Feminist standpoint epistemology was originally taken up as a means of attending to women's experience in particular, and is associated in some circles with more essentialist understandings of gender. For instance, in response to Kohlberg's androcentric theory of moral development, Carol Gilligan (1982) studied women's engagements with moral dilemmas and developed a woman-centred theory in which women were described as speaking in a 'different voice' than

men. While such trailblazing work has been central to some feminist projects, it was also critiqued for only 'speaking to' the experiences of Western, white, middle-class women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990). African American scholars led the way in requiring consideration of the ways in which experience is shaped by a multiplicity of social locations, including race, sexuality, dis/ability, age, social class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991), and this work profoundly shaped the development of feminist standpoint theory. Accordingly, this epistemological approach developed as a way to avoid the sexist, colonialist, racist, and heterosexist knowledges so readily produced from the standpoint of privilege. Moreover, in '"starting off thought' from the lives of marginalized peoples" (p. 445), the intention is to open different ways of understanding that, potentially, will be more enabling and empowering for those on the margins of society. Thus, feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the role of research as an impetus for social change.

Although standpoint research may be conducted from the margins, it is never, as Harding (1992) reminds us, value-free, and new ways of dealing with the values and interests inherent in the process of inquiry are needed. She argues that the existing "methods and norms in the disciplines [empiricism] are too weak to permit researchers to *systematically* identify and eliminate" the values, interests and agendas of the scientific community (Harding, 1992, p. 440, emphasis in original). Therefore, objectivity, as operationalized within empiricism, cannot detect sexist, androcentric, or racist assumptions. On that basis, objectivity has been fundamentally reconceptualized within feminist standpoint epistemology. 'Strong objectivity' requires locating and interrogating the researchers' subjectivity, so that researchers do not speak as invisible 'god-like' authorities, but instead as historically-placed subjects, with their own desires and interests (Harding, 1987). 'Strong objectivity' means acknowledging the "limited location and situated knowledge" we produce, and being answerable for what we see and how we see a particular reality (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

The power in standpoint epistemology, therefore, lies in the epistemic privilege or authority gained through particular socially situated perspectives. Scholars have argued that the perspectives of systematically oppressed groups are of most value, because of their access to deep(er) knowledges of society (Anderson, 2011). For example, this epistemology led African American feminist scholars, such as Collins (1990), to articulate black women's experiences of racism and sexism. In particular, standpoint theory enabled an understanding of how black women resist racist and sexist imagery of black women, empowering them to critique these representations and embrace their identities with pride (Collins, 1990).

*Social constructionist, constructivist, postmodern, and poststructural feminists* contributed to the critiques of feminist standpoint epistemology offered by African American feminists by emphasizing the ways in which our experiences of ourselves and the world are always grounded in context, and therefore forever shifting and multiple (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994; Hollway, 1994; Riger, 1992). Therefore, they share with feminist standpoint scholars a rejection of empiricism and its notions of objectivity. Accordingly, they also share a fundamental distrust of 'grand theories' or law-like generalizations of human

experience (e.g. any theory that presumes to represent a universal human experience, like morality).

Scholars working from these various frameworks (social constructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism), henceforth referred to as social constructionists,[1] share a 'turn to language' to understand how knowledge and meaning are made. That is, they look to the ways in which language itself fundamentally shapes experience. Traditionally, language has been viewed as a passive vehicle that serves to express our internal thoughts, emotions and experiences (Burr, 1995). Instead, social constructionists articulate how the terms and concepts available within a particular social and political context reflect and reinforce prevailing systems of power (Marecek, 2003; Radtke, 2017). To acknowledge the performative role of language in the social construction of knowledge and experience, social constructionist scholars have taken up the term 'discourse'. Discourse can be thought of as "a system of statements which construct an object" (Parker, 1992, p. 5). It refers to "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce particular versions of events" (Burr, 1995, p. 48). Therefore, the language or discourse available at a certain place and time "creates what we take to be reality" (Marecek, 2003, p. 62).

For social constructionists, then, the terms taken by empiricists to point to 'entities within individuals' (e.g. gender, intelligence, personality) are revealed as cultural artifacts (or social constructions) that empiricists, in studying and writing about them, then reify as 'real' and the way things are (this is called essentialism). In its most pernicious applications, such research has been mobilized to 'demonstrate' the inferiority/superiority of some genders and races over others – which all feminist scholars (regardless of their epistemology) condemn as reprehensible. For social constructionists, the problem with this work is not simply a matter of 'bad science', but of ignoring the social and political context in which people make meaning and of misattributing issues of power to the level of the individual. Thus, a social constructionist perspective on Kohlberg's theory of moral development would view it as situated within a particular point in time and place (1950s and '60s USA), reflecting the interests of white boys and young men and the available discourses about women within American culture at the time.

The anti-essentialist stance adopted by social constructionists turns research attention away from the 'subject' (i.e. looking inside the person at their 'nature') and toward language as the site of both meaning-making and power (Burr, 1995; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). For example, instead of regarding morality as an internal quality of the person, a social constructionist researcher would look to unpack the concept of morality itself and the ways in which it is constructed between people in localized instances of talk and text. Social constructionists might explore how 'morality talk' is mobilized in an exchange between people on the street, media representations of issues such as 'teenage pregnancy', in psychology textbooks, or in a presidential address. They might explore what discourses are drawn on to situate a speaker as 'moral' (e.g. 'protecting' national interests in relation to immigration policies). Whose version of morality is represented? How is it constructed and with what effects? Who 'wins' and 'loses' in the exchange? And

importantly, how do those on the margins of society *resist* being positioned as less moral, less worthy?

## How, then, to conduct research? The links between epistemology and methodology

How one engages in research (defined as *methodology*) necessarily flows from one's epistemological commitments at the time of inquiry. Therefore, clarifying these commitments (about what and how we know, and who can know) is a first essential step in research. Those committed to feminist empiricism will remain guided by the standards of mainstream science in which objectivity and neutrality remain central. However, those who situate their investigations within standpoint or social constructionist perspectives will require radically new directions.

Abandoning the dictates of empiricism can be a disorienting experience. For example, drawing on the children's book *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865),[2] Riger (1992) suggested that a traditional scientist trained in empiricism who is learning about postmodernism for the first time is comparable to Alice falling into a Wonderland of perplexing language and customs. What was once familiar and stable (e.g. traditional notions of 'psychological variables', such as gender, morality, or intelligence) is revealed as unsettled, problematic, multiple, and imbued with power relations. In other words, the world Alice (our former empiricist) once knew no longer 'exists' in concrete and fixed ways as it once did. It is our aim to guide researchers who, like Alice, are unfamiliar with the new terrain they are in – through both this article and the accompanying Virtual Special Issue (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019).

Following the clarification of one's epistemological position comes the consideration of research questions and accompanying methods. It is worth stating upfront that there is no 'superior' method, nor is there a method that is in and of itself feminist. Indeed, methods are merely tools or techniques for gathering data (Harding, 1987). However, even methods have assumptions built into them. Take, for example, the use of a survey measuring 'femininity'. This method assumes an internal quality of individuals that can be measured independent of context. It also assumes that with its presumably sound psychometric properties, the construct of femininity is stable across time, cultures and populations. These assumptions are likely to sit comfortably for an empiricist who seeks to 'uncover' an observable truth/reality, yet are inappropriate for social constructionists and standpoint theorists who reject such assertions, and instead tend to be interested in language as a means of/for representation, and therefore often use qualitative methods (e.g. interviews or focus groups).

Perhaps, then, a more useful instruction is that certain methods better fit particular epistemologies in terms of their assumptions and possibilities for answering research questions (Marecek, 2003; Parker, 2007). For example, social constructionists and standpoint theorists might be interested in the experiences or meanings of femininity, and while their focus (i.e. research questions and associated methods of analysis) would likely vary, both would assume that these are socio-culturally and historically located.

Accordingly, with no distinctive feminist method (Harding, 1987), one cannot claim that qualitative methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews) are inherently 'feminist', or that quantitative methods (e.g. survey measures) are 'unfeminist'. All methods can be used in sexist ways; and, conversely, all can be used toward feminist ends (Peplau & Conrad, 1989). In fact, a preoccupation with methods has often distracted from "the most interesting aspects" of feminist research, which is the research process (Harding, 1987, p. 1) – from design to dissemination. The issue at hand, then, is not one of 'methods' but of the larger consideration of methodology. *Methodology* refers to a "theory or analysis of how the research does or should proceed" (Harding, 1987, p. 3), which is where the distinctiveness (and, in our view, most exciting features) of feminist research lies. This requires a deep consideration of how we engage in the process of asking questions, developing 'answers', and representing and mobilizing the resulting knowledge.

Feminist scholars critical of man-made science have been particularly concerned with questions of methodology and have written extensively about it. With our shared interest in these ideas, we compiled the accompanying Virtual Special Issue, entitled 'Doing Critical Feminist Research: A *Feminism & Psychology* Reader' (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). We focus on methodological considerations that we believe are at the heart of critical feminist psychology. This field of scholarship draws on a range of epistemologies, including standpoint theory and social constructionism (described earlier), in order to expose, oppose and address the conservative political agenda of psychology, including its effects on/for communities defined/united by gender, race, sexualities, class and/or abilities (Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Crossley, 2007; Lee, 2006). The methodological considerations we introduce in the Virtual Special Issue are showcased in terms of their potential for strengthening feminist research. We do this by drawing on a selection of 15 articles published in the archives of *Feminism & Psychology* – the 'home' of critical feminist scholarship in psychology. For ease of reading, the trajectory of our discussion in the Special Issue is summarized here in Table 2, where we outline the five key methodological considerations for critical feminist research, and the associated lines of questioning.

There is no single way to engage with this Virtual Special Issue. However, we would like to briefly offer some suggestions to those new to the field and looking for direction. One practical place to start would be to begin with a research journal in which to record one's thoughts, inspirations, reactions, and observations throughout the research process – from the first intimations of a topic of inquiry, to the final process of dissemination. This journal may be used as a means of clarifying one's epistemological commitments, which will then guide methodology and methods. Further, self-reflection, peer supervision, consultation with experienced researchers (e.g. supervisors), and further explorations of the literature all form part of ongoing reflexive practice. After having read the Virtual Special Issue, Table 2 – while not exhaustive – may at least serve as a useful anchor point for reflection throughout the research process. Fine (2016) reminds us of the importance of deeper reflection and engagement in our research processes, and in particular the "existential" question of "to whom are we accountable?" (p. 362). It is

**Table 2.** Key methodological considerations for critical feminist research.

| Methodological considerations | Potential lines of questioning for researchers |
|---|---|
| The politics of asking questions | Questioning the (research) question:<br>Whose interests are served in asking this question?<br>What assumptions are inherent in the concepts under investigation?<br>What might the consequences of the findings be?<br>How can we produce a corpus of work that resists (rather than justifies) systems of inequality? |
| Attention to language/ discourse throughout the research process | Questioning the language we use:<br>How do the terms we use in recruitment procedures shape which participants we invite (or exclude)?<br>How do our invitations prefigure the stories people tell (and don't tell)?<br>How do interview prompts position participants and what they are then entitled to say?<br>Are the terms we use heavy with dominant discourse, or are they more ambiguous and open?<br>Do our questions allow for complexity and contradiction, or do they require certain (socially expected) responses? |
| Reflexivity | Locating the researcher in the research process:<br>How do our personal experiences or identities shape the selection of our topics of interest, our research questions, interactions with participants, and readings of the data (*personal reflexivity*: see Wilkinson, 1988)?<br>How do our assumptions and values inform our research; to what extent does our research (including our aims, theories and methods) fulfil feminist objectives (*functional reflexivity*: see Wilkinson, 1988)?<br>How are bodies (or emotions) relevant to the topic under study? In what ways are our physical, embodied or affective realities as researchers negotiated in the research process (e.g. face-to-face data collection), and with what effects on the participant-researcher dynamic and research 'findings' (*embodied reflexivity*: see Burns, 2003)? |
| Representation and intersectionality | How can the 'differences' between the 'knower' and participants be acknowledged and addressed?<br>To what social locations do research participants orient and how are these important for understanding their accounts?<br>How do a variety of points of difference 'matter' to the issue at hand and how can these best be made visible in representations of the data? |

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** Continued.

| Methodological considerations | Potential lines of questioning for researchers |
|---|---|
| Mobilizing research for social change | How can our research *transform* culture and discourse?<br>How can our research move beyond academic paywalls, technical jargon and the 'ivory tower' of academia to more freely available and accessible platforms and spaces?<br>How can we move from 'telling it like it is' (deconstruction and critique) to 'telling it as it may become' (reimagining and reconstructing) (see Gergen, 1992)? |

our intention that the methodological questions evoked in the Virtual Special Issue and summarized in Table 2 serve to ignite the imaginations of scholars and ultimately support transformative feminist research.

## Conclusion

In recognizing the potential teaching value of a welcoming introductory article to critical feminist research, we envisioned this supplementary article as a starting point for those new to feminist research (to be read prior to reading the Editorial Introduction to the Virtual Special Issue). The purpose of this article was to sketch the emergence of feminist scholarship (particularly within psychology), and outline the challenges it sought to address of man-made science. Following this, we sought to connect the dots between epistemologies, methodologies and methods, as this relates to feminist scholarship, and offer guidance on how to use the Virtual Special Issue.

One goal of the Virtual Special Issue, more broadly, is to introduce critical feminist methodologies to the next generation of scholars by harnessing a sample of inspiring publications from *Feminism & Psychology*. In recalling our own respective journeys into this eclectic and exciting field, we invite new readers to appreciate the steep learning curve *out* of empiricism and into social constructionist and standpoint epistemologies. Those new to the field may be, like Alice, falling into – and then deconstructing – a Wonderland of perplexing language and customs. We hope that this article may guide and support new readers through the dense and complex conversations beyond the constraints of empiricism.

## Notes

1. English language scholarship in the 1980s took up a number of theoretical frameworks in the "turn to language". While social constructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism are distinct (sometimes contested, sometimes conflated) theoretical frameworks, we cluster them together here to point to the shared focus on the culturally-situated ways in which people make themselves and the world intelligible. For the sake of simplicity in presentation, we have made the tricky editorial decision to refer to them under the umbrella term social constructionism.
2. *Alice in Wonderland* is a children's novel depicting the adventures of a girl (Alice) who falls through a rabbit hole and finds herself in a fantasy world in which common-sense understandings are turned upside-down.

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## Author Biographies

**Britta Wigginton** is a social scientist, trained in psychology, who advocates for ways of thinking and being that challenge the status quo in pursuit of justice. Her program of research harnesses qualitative methods to explore the intersection of gender, health and the environment.

**Michelle N Lafrance** is Professor of Psychology at St. Thomas University. Her research and teaching interests are rooted in critical, postmodern, and feminist approaches, exploring the social construction of distress and wellbeing. She has published and presented in the areas of women's experiences of depression, self-care, leisure, and sexuality, including critical explorations of the DSM and the medicalization of women's distress.