

Scribbles on Theorizing the Personal in Feminism and Women's Research

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Abstract: *The terms "personal" and "political," like "private" and "public," are undergoing important changes in the current era, where Carol Hanisch's famous dictum "the personal is political" still serves as a persuasive justification for more recent uses of primary evidences in research and autobiography studies.*

Second wave feminism has clearly benefited from the awareness that 'the personal is political,' which influenced the growth of social analyses and theories, sparked fresh activities, and expanded the range of topics that could be categorized as 'feminist issues.' We have a strong aversion to the notion of subjectivity even in the context of subjective writing projects and are aware of the impersonal, distant tone employed and encouraged in academic works. The article questions why certain personal/subjective information is valued as knowledge or truth while some other information is downplayed or dismissed as anecdotal or just as personal experience, and it proceeds to examine feminist research and interventions in the area.

Keywords: *personal, political, Second wave feminism, subjectivity, memory*

We find that 'Personal' and the 'Political' like the 'Private' and the 'Public', are regularly going through significant changes in the present era where Carol Hanisch's famous phrase "the personal is political" still serves as an effective explanation of the rationale behind more contemporary uses of the primary evidences in research and autobiography studies. It is through the authors' participation in these changes that the women's autobiographies become most significant. The phrase "the personal is political," sometimes known as "the private is political," is a political catchphrase often used by feminists to emphasize the idea that women's personal experiences are influenced by their socio-political circumstances and gender inequality.

It is not difficult to demonstrate how the importance of women's personal experiences took the center stage during the second wave feminism movement.

The late 1940s post-war was distinguished by an unprecedented economic growth, baby boom and a move to family-oriented suburbs with the ideal of companionate marriages. The second wave of feminism in the United States emerged as a delayed reaction against this renewed strategy of domesticity of women after World War II. Domestic and household responsibilities that were considered to be the primary responsibility of women, approved and portrayed by the society and media, frequently left the women discontented and alone at home, cut off from participations in politics, economics, or law. Women tended not to seek jobs during this time. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Betty Friedan was deliberate in her criticism of the stereotyped portrayal of women in the media and how confining them to their homes (as "housewives") constrained their potentials and squandered them. In cities and towns across the United States, organizations like the YWCA and League of Women Voters were crucial conduits for feminist advocacy. Women started speaking up in awareness raising groups (Consciousness-raising groups- often abbreviated as CR), began sharing their emotional experiences about confinement and dissatisfaction in their lives, began to converse openly on previously forbidden topics like abortion and domestic abuse. As women started to identify recurring leitmotifs in their narrations, they developed their own theories on why women were oppressed. Feminists contended that pre-existing ideas that were widely accepted as common knowledge and truths did not apply to everyone and were instead based on masculine experiences that were presented as universal. An easy illustration would be the early Marxist ideology, which defined employment as paid work performed outside the home that in turn obscured the unpaid domestic labor performed by women. An important groundwork was laid by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) that investigated the notion of women as the "other". "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself". (Beauvoir, 5)

The phrase 'personal is political' gained popularity with the 1970 publication of an essay by American feminist Carol Hanisch, titled 'The Personal is Political' where she advanced her claim that many personal experiences

(particularly those of women) can be traced to their location within the system of power relationships. Written from the need to fight male supremacy as a movement instead of blaming the individual, Hanisch's essay visibly focused on the subjugation of women and the dominance of men.

When Hanisch was writing, the male-dominated political left frequently portrayed a conflict between personal and political matters; as a result, whenever women convened a discussion group around personal issues, it was disdainfully referred to as "therapy," a label Hanisch understood to be misleading.

WLM groups had been springing up all over the country—and the world. The radical movements of Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, and Old and New Left groups from which many of us sprang were male dominated and very nervous about women's liberation in general, but especially the specter of the mushrooming independent women's liberation movement, of which I was a staunch advocate. (Hanisch: 2006)

Hanisch asserted that women's personal issues were primarily political issues. Since women's inequality was to be blamed for the problems they faced and women themselves were not at fault, the only way to address these issues would be through reformations rather than through personal solutions. Many feminist organizations supported this approach. For instance, the radical feminist group Redstockings argued that women were blind to the social nature of their situation, the class hierarchy in which the men are positioned over women. A black group emphasized that their feminism was formed by the personal experiences of its members which included experiences of racism and sexism.

bell hooks, the American feminist activist, and researcher has emphasized that it was her own experience as a woman that served as the foundation for her feminist philosophy. To this end, she discussed her own childhood experiences as a young black girl, in which she felt constrained within her family by gender ideologies and stereotypes. hooks responded by engaging in naive "theorizing" to better understand her situation because she was unable to specify it or articulate it to her family. Theory and politics were not remote and abstract to her personal life but rather closely related to it. The characteristics of "Black feminist epistemology," according to American sociologist Patricia

Hill Collins, encompass "lived experience as a criteria of meaning." She said that because it is based on real-world situations, personal experience is valued more highly among many black women than science or theory in terms of ontology.

Hanisch wrote that:

They [SCEF staff] could sometimes admit that women were oppressed (but only by "the system") and said that we should have equal pay for equal work, and some other "rights." But they belittled us no end for trying to bring our so-called "personal problems" into the public arena—especially "all those body issues" like sex, appearance, and abortion. Our demands that men share the housework and childcare were likewise deemed a personal problem between a woman and her individual man. The opposition claimed if women would just "stand up for themselves" and take more responsibility for their own lives, they wouldn't need to have an independent movement for women's liberation. (Hanisch: 2006)

Second wave feminism clearly benefited from the awareness that 'the personal is political,' which influenced the growth of social analyses and theories, sparked fresh activities, and expanded the range of topics that could be categorized as 'feminist issues.' However, it was not Hanisch alone who first made the argument that societal institutions or inequality are accountable for the disgraceful personal experiences of women. American sociologist C. Wright Mills in his *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) had presented an argument that personal experiences were inexorably linked to the larger social and historical environments. If a person lacks a job, for instance, there may be bigger societal patterns of unemployment that were tied to that person's joblessness. Betty Friedan wrote about "the problem that has no name" in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It was a time women felt restricted, dissatisfied, and unhappy in their duties as spouses, mothers, and homemakers despite the fact that doctors and the women themselves frequently handled this discontent as 'personal issues'. Friedan attributed it to the status of women in society. Although it may be argued that *The Feminine Mystique* was only applicable to white middle-class women, the book eventually came to be regarded as a classic in feminist theory and history. The process, we know, had started with Friedan's surveying her

Smith College classmates for their 15th reunion; the findings encouraged her to interview other suburban housewives and include psychology, media, and advertising into her study. *Feminine Mystique* was built on personal narratives collected and collated. Looking back, we see that women's individual experiences have always served as the foundation for organizing feminist opinions since the beginning. For instance, we may look into the history of 1948 Seneca Falls convention.

The concept of the 'personal' in feminism has gone through significant developments by the end of the third wave of feminism in 2010. Personal experience is now increasingly recognized as a reliable testimony since speaking out about what one has experienced or witnessed has its direct practical and political significance. Without personal reports, we would not be aware of the horrifying incidents of rape and racial prejudice and other oppressions that are prevalent in the world.

Personal experience obviously is the most significant testimony if honestly dealt with. However, a debate seems persistent whether individual testimony should be accepted as authoritative sources in research. Individual works can only speak of individual subjectivities. The autobiographies, memoirs and life writings that are accounts of the authors' personal experiences reveal the relative nature of knowledge and how one's understanding of the world and common sense fluctuates depending on their social situation. The argument for personal experience as a significant testimony is part of the far wider challenge that is linked to postmodernism that critiques a component of a much larger account of what is now known as universalizing theory of the grand narratives.

We all possess a profound suspicion of the idea of objectivity in the context of subjective writing endeavors and are aware of the impersonal, detached tone used and encouraged in academic writings. The term 'objective' refers to factual information backed by data that is independent of bias. However, we ought to note here that what we consider to be objective material, especially historical information, may actually be the outcome of a subjective judgement or sentiment. Vicki Bertam in her article, 'Theorizing the Personal: Using Autobiography in Academic Writing' has posited a question on why some material is accepted as knowledge or truth while other information is demoted or

discarded as anecdotal or as merely personal experience. In this connection, it is helpful to see what D. Philips writes about Subjectivity and Objectivity,

A person does not have to write widely in contemporary methodological or theoretical literature pertaining to research in social sciences and related applied areas , ... in order to discover that “objectivity is dead” when the term happens to be used it is likely to be set in scare marks “objectivity” to bring out the point that a dodolike entity is being discussed. Or there is no such thing, authors confidently state, unmindful of the fact that if they are right then the reader does not have to break into a sweat—because if there is no such thing as objectivity, then the view that there is no such thing is itself not objective. But then if this view is subjective judgment of a particular author—readers are entitled to prefer their own subjective viewpoints – which, of course, might be that objectivity is *not* dead. (Philips :1990).

The engagements in epistemological criticism , which itself has a long history, are attempts to define knowledge formation, value judgments and expose society’s biases and exclusions. The superior status of written over oral knowledge is one objective that the critics of epistemology pay close attention to. These engagements endeavor to address the (often unintended) impact(s) that may result from the fact that a text is never innocent but is always embedded in power structures. Much of the twentieth-century literature dealing with the analysis of knowledge takes the tripartite analysis of knowledge consisting of “justified true belief” (often abbreviated as the “JTB”) as the starting point for the analysis of knowledge. Michael Foucault has made it known that ‘power is everywhere’, diffused and embodied in discourse, in knowledge and in ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1991); he is “highly suspicious of claims to universal truths” (Rabinow 1984: 4);

...truth isn’t outside power or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it

introduces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true ; the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements ; the means by which each is sanctioned ; the techniques and the procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth ; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 151)

Given the fundamentals of what is considered as knowledge, the use of autobiographical material where the traditional distinction between the researcher and the research is disturbed becomes problematic as the data used in research of these types become very subjective. A radical shift in conventional epistemology takes place each time a writer uses subjective knowledge of memories, experiences, etc. as data. The instances might be seen as exhibiting research that is unrelated to information sources conventionally derived from detached, objective authorities.

There is a shaky but tenuous consensus on reading autobiographies among readers and critics on several points. The link between the autobiographer, the text, and the audience has been dealt with at length by researchers like Elizabeth Bruss. The autobiographer, who is the narrator and is responsible for the development and structure of the text, is the key character of the text and her /his presence in and beyond the text can be independently confirmed. Moreover, the autobiographer also claims to believe what she/he says. The readers are permitted to take the autobiographical reports—whether they are about private experiences or publicly visible events—as accurate, yet it is also permitted that they independently verify or refute them.

Feminist sociologists have produced significant works in this field (theorizing the personal in women’s writings). The discomfort with the traditional relationship between researcher and research subject, which feminists found morally dubious, served as an early motivation. They were also dissatisfied with how most survey papers tended to treat women as passive objects of research (and frequently mistreated or suffering) rather than as active agents. In particular, Frigga Haug's work, namely, *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (1987) has had a significant impact. Haug and her coworkers

were interested in understanding the processes of female socialization because they wanted to reflect on the complexity of their own experiences accurately and give female agency back to descriptions of the process. They developed a collaborative theorizing of a methodology in which they served both as the subjects and the objects of their investigation. Frigga Haug and the other researchers of the methodology of “memory work” focused in particular on women's sexualization and the formation of gender and made a novel addition to the existing debates by using their own bodies as the subjects of research. They did this by recalling important past experiences —not the typical conventional ones like losing one's virginity, but experiences that came to them spontaneously and so appeared to have special significance for their unconscious. Everything related to each of these occurrences was remembered in as much detail as possible. Conventional autobiography's narrative progression was also disregarded by them in the process since it so blatantly appropriates its concepts of significance and sense of causality (in hindsight) from prevailing ideological structures. By doing this, they hoped to avoid merely copying the research paradigm that had already mapped the landscape of female socialization. Their groundbreaking study helped us gain a more comprehensive understanding of how societal standards and personal aspirations constantly interact. In the course of their investigation, they came to question the exaggerated value placed on individuality, highlighting how much individual identity is reliant on collective social experience.

In opposition to notions of experience as fundamentally unique, individual and arising from people's individual interiority, memory workers understand experience as collectively produced (Haug, 1987). Working as a collective facilitates researching both the shared aspects of experience and the social processes through which experiences are produced. Memory work typically entails a group of people with a shared interest in interrogating a particular topic – such as female sexualization (Haug, 1987, 1992), the gendered construction of emotions (Crawford et al., 1992), or embodiment (Brown et al., 2011) – meeting regularly over a period of months or years. The group members take on the roles of both research participants and researchers: they put

forward their own experiences as data (in the form of written memories) and they undertake a collective analysis of these experiences. They interrogate the social production of their experiences trying to identify points where experience is amenable to being reinterpreted, reworked and lived differently. In under-taking memory work, Haug and others found that what they had previously thought to be the natural sequences of their lives, started to appear as historically constituted avenues for interpreting and managing the material and social realities in which they were immersed. They began to see themselves as 'living historically', as women of their time and women able to act on and intervene in their time.

(Stephenson and Kippa: 2008)

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise in their book *Breaking Out*, (1983) argued for a similar in-depth examination of sociocultural study techniques. They claimed that sexism ingrained in the research procedures used by previous "feminist" works had gone unnoticed. In the existing approach, experimentation, objectivity, and rationality are the distinguishing characteristics of reliable and credible research while suspicious views are held about subjectivity, emotion, and experience. Comprehending that this contradiction is part of a problem facing feminist researchers, they presented a more radical strategy in which "experience, theory, and practice should live in a mutual and immediate interaction with each other" (1983: 181). Two other books that must not go unmentioned here are *Doing Feminist Research* edited by Helen Roberts (1981), and *Theories of Women's Studies* (1983) by Gloria Bowles and Renate D.Klein.

Literary theorists from more recent times have given us some similar instances. Nancy Miller aims to eliminate the conventional division between theory and subjectivity by focusing on the splitting of the "private life" and the "merely personal" in conventional academic discourse. Miller questions the public-private hierarchy that is seen as a founding condition of women's oppression. "The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way". (Nancy 1991: 5) She cites Jane Gallop as an example of a highly

sophisticated theorist who openly admits the imperative role that personal experiences play in the formulation of theories. "Nothing precludes us from incorporating personal experiences into our theory-based work". Miller admits that to bring theory and the personal together is to create a profound challenge because " it blows the cover of the impersonal as a masquerade of self-effacement" ... (Miller 1991: 24).

Nicole Ward Jouve advances a similar argument on the personal in writings. Well aware of the slipperiness of expression of identity through language, she maintains that the creation of a self can only ever be achieved through "process and relationship" (Ward Jouve 1991: 10). She entreats us to experiment with various subject positions, to understand how to use the word "as" and to be aware that we are describing a position rather than a person when we say "an image and a relation". "Relations never amount to identity, never are fixed" (Ward Jouve 1991: 11).

Patricia Williams, a black lawyer and Professor of Law at Columbia University uses her own personal experience in her work *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1993) to demonstrate how the so called objective judgments are actually impacted by the racism and sexism of dominant ideology by examining the invisible biases at work beneath the law's advocacy of its neutrality. She draws on her personal experience of how a young, white salesperson turned her away from entering a Benetton store. In New York, buzzer systems allow the store employees to control who can enter the buildings, thus, lowering the risk of theft and violence. Williams was debarred from entering a store and consequently submitted a report against the act in a law review. To her surprise she found that the reference to her race was deleted when the report was finally published because it was "against editorial policy" to describe physical characteristics of persons. She questioned this choice, arguing that without this information the readers would either assume that she must be paranoid or would have to infer her race from her experience thus indirectly reinforcing the stereotype that African -Americans are more prone to commit violent crimes than white citizens. She thus demonstrates how the legal recognition of racism as a crime has unintentionally led to a scenario in which all mention of race is avoided but people's opinions on racial discrimination continue to shape their thoughts. Williams also discusses

how hierarchical discourses are present within feminist discourses. Although Black feminists have made an attempt to claim a theoretical methodology that rejects abstraction, white people still frequently perceive their work as "experiential."

Chrie Morga in *The Bridge Called My Back : Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (1981) has identified that the difficulty lay in attempting to deal with oppression merely from a theoretical framework. No genuine, non-hierarchical relationship between the oppressor and oppressed can transpire without an emotional, passionate examination of the root of the oppression and without naming of the enemy both within and beyond.

Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981: 27)

These varied methodologies have had substantial influences in theorizing the 'Personal' in women's life writings. These researchers have questioned the validity of the assumptions of knowledge and also the exclusions produced by the strictly regulated epistemological paradigm. They broke the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines by admitting material that had previously been rejected into their own research.

Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives by Carolyn Steedman is an autobiography with a twist because it challenges and checks its own veracity while also using autobiographical material to challenge conventional ideas about class, psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and feminism. According to Steedman, such theories are typically created by people who have a strong linkage to the dominant culture and are therefore ill-equipped to capture the many nuances of "lives lived out on the borderlands" (1986: 5), which can include poverty, class, or ethnicity. In her book, she weaves memories through these theoretical frameworks and reveals the gaps in both her own life and that of her parents. Steedman makes the case, for instance, that because of her early realization of her father's powerlessness, she did not engage in the traditional Freudian internalization of patriarchal control. By focusing on theory in this way she makes clear the inadequacies of the fundamental perspectives of

some of our theories. Looking back on her mother's life, she makes the argument that in late capitalism, women's reproductive capacity is something they own and can, therefore, barter it in order to achieve their goals. She interprets her mother's refusal to become a mother as being motivated by her disappointment that her barter did not result in the consumer goods and the status she had yearned for. In doing so, Steedman challenges research paradigms that assume that women's decisions to become mothers are driven solely by biological impulses and the paradigms that have never explored the potential meanings of parenthood. The experience of reading Steedman's book is emotional due to the profoundly personal nature of the author's subject. Although it elicits emotional responses that are not often acceptable in academic writing, it remains analytically sophisticated.

The works of Liz Stanley are based on the idea that personal experience may yield a theory that is analytically sharp and experientially developed (1993: 214). She examines a journal she wrote throughout her mother's post-stroke deterioration, not to delve into her own psychology but to uncover more about the drives and purposes of storytelling. She recalls the pressing desire she had felt to write it, and, in retrospect, observes how bizarre the things she had documented were. This prompts her to reflect on the function of a journal, which provides comfort at a confusing period of time in an individual's life when typical reference points (as the distinction between "alive" and "dead") are shattered. She argues that humans often use stories to cover up the gaps in their knowledge of the contradictions, in their sense of self, since narrative is complicated and its referential claims frequently serve to patch over what is essentially an awareness of ontological complexity and fragmentation (206). The fact that any historical account is not a single linear nor one-dimensional narrative and that the accounts of the past is not/cannot be neutral or objective but rather told from a person's perspective was eventually realized. It was comprehended that writing history did not take place objectively; rather, it was created by authors who were examining their own times in the context of earlier historical eras or earlier periods through perspectives that were their own. These historical narratives might also cover stories about nationalism, patriotism, and a variety of other concepts that form the basis of knowledge data.

Postmodernism is aware that great narratives conceal, muzzle, and ignore the conflicts, instabilities, and differences present in every social structure. "Mini-narratives," or tales that explain particular customs and local occurrences without claiming universal applicability or finality, are perhaps preferred in these postmodern times. (In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard examines the epistemology of postmodern culture as the demise of "great narratives" or metanarratives, which he believes to be a fundamental aspect of modernity.)

Some claim that by pronouncing the author to be dead, postmodern critics have perhaps opened the way for the rise of autobiographers (who are not dead), who may be neither white nor male. Life writings of and by previously disadvantaged groups, such as women, slaves, dalits, and others who were previously concealed from history, can be written and read as histories representative of the lower stratum of the society and these subaltern histories provide a challenge to the grand narratives. (*c.f. The Subaltern Studies Reader* Ed. R.Guha)We have seen Stephen Greenblatt and other new historicists incorporate the co-texts with the contexts and refuse to privilege the 'literary texts' and have known that every piece of information about the past is only available to us in textualized form processed three times: first, through the ideology, outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours, and finally through the language's own (mis)representations. We will conclude with Doris Somner's important question which emphasizes the importance of these autobiographies:

Is autobiography the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counter-discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess that throws doubt on the coherence and power of excessive historiography? (Somner :1998, 1)

Given that subjectivity itself is never complete, whole or entire but rather multiple and shifting and maybe often even be contradictory, we confront a question , whether these life writings and subjective data will be regarded with the same reverence and be seen as authentic data as those in *The Confessions of St. Augustine* or Rousseau's *Confessions* . We, however, must acknowledge that for every evaluation different motivations may be at play. Some feminist critics

prefer explicitly individualized comments over the impersonal, measured evaluations. A personal tone is a strategy that may seem more sincere, or it may imply a critique of the critics' customary methods but it may also allow a space to express the evaluator's desired empathetic response to the person or subject of the study. Mary Ann Caws employs this strategy in her study of *Three Bloomsbury Women* (2020) and refers to her position as 'personal criticism'.

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