Researching minority culture women’s standpoint and experiences of rights

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the methodology that I have employed to examine some of the issues that stemmed from conducting my doctoral research on Liberian and Afghan women in South Australia. I argue that a feminist approach is the most suitable to situate the representations of newly arrived women from minority cultures, since it challenges the invisibility and distortion of women’s experiences. I examine some of the dilemmas associated with representation within the feminist framework and acknowledge that, to implement the most adequate strategies of representation, a feminist researcher must be mindful of the ways that the differences between others are invoked and relied upon. I argue that feminist standpoint theory provides an invaluable basis from which to commence theorising about women’s lives. Finally, I address some of the ethical issues within my research and also, in the context of managing some of the challenges when conducting cross-cultural research, I discuss my own position as an insider/outsider.

My PhD research\(^2\) explored the theoretical parameters of the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism.\(^3\) In order to scrutinise the validity and the practical

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implications of these theoretical contributions I consulted the standpoint of those discerned by theorists as vulnerable under multicultural accommodation, namely, certain women from minority cultural groups. Accordingly, in this paper I discuss the theoretical framework that influenced my research methodology and I also address the dilemmas arising when researching women from different cultures.

In this paper I pursue two arguments. Firstly, I argue that a feminist approach is the most suitable to situate the representations of newly arrived women from minority cultures, since it challenges the invisibility and distortion of women’s experiences. Secondly, I argue that feminist standpoint theory provides an invaluable basis from which to commence theorising about women’s lives.

On the dilemmas of representation within the feminist framework

In my PhD research I sought to do the work of excavation, shifting the focus from the theoretical concerns in the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism to the voices of the women rendered vulnerable by these debates. I did this in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of minority culture women. This is where the feminist paradigm becomes particularly useful as its aim is to include women’s perspectives and experiences. The value of a feminist framework lies in its attention to the complexities of the differentiation and

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2 My dissertation was based on a qualitative research project that addressed the multifaceted issues of experiences of rights of Liberian and Afghan women in their countries of origin and in Australia. I examined how these women negotiate the multiplicity of rights experiences in the areas of education, work and family in their countries of origin and in Australia.

3 The extensive literature from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States warns about the tensions between women’s rights and cultural rights amongst minority cultural groups in multicultural contexts. A feminist concern in the debates on these tensions is that the preservation of cultural laws and traditions accommodated under cultural rights impacts mainly, but not solely, on the female members of the cultural groups in question. Women are the most affected by the preservation of traditional laws, particularly those who are mothers and wives, as they are considered to be bearers of culture. In my dissertation I outlined the main arguments that emerged at an early stage of the debates which involved theoretical arguments between the mainly liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin (1999) and the liberal culturalist Will Kymlicka (1999). The debates have since involved feminist theorists like Ayelet Shachar (2001) and (briefly) Martha Nussbaum (1999) and liberal culturalists Jeff Spinner-Halev (2001) and Chandran Kukathas (2001).
the affiliated fading of the concept of ‘universalised “woman” or “women”’ (Olesen, 2000: 221).

Considering the numerous complexities pertinent to researching the differences amongst women I recognise that a framework within which to facilitate an analysis of the effects of feminist/multiculturalist tensions under diasporic conditions in Australia demands particular sensitivity to issues of Eurocentrism, essentialisation and homogenisation of women’s experience. Thus, I aimed to avoid the fixations on culturalisation that characterise the debates about representation (Hinterberger, 2007).

I was mindful of how to consider and utilise difference. I pursued this in the light of works such as those of Gayatri Spivak (1988: 271 and 1999: 269), who in her famous thesis ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ reminded us of the dangers involved in assuming to know and to speak on behalf of others (specifically the subaltern woman). In discussing and speaking about others, Spivak (1999: 265) argued that the ways that some intellectuals deconstruct and claim to know ‘oppressed people’ with simplicity and transparency are problematic. A detrimental effect of this is that, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. (Spivak, 1999: 304)

Furthermore, in the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism culture is too often invoked and represented as a monolithic concept, and the basis for differentiating (and often stereotyping) between groups and individuals. This adds difficulty to the task of representing others who are culturally different from oneself. This complexity was

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3 Notwithstanding the challenges, it can be argued that diverse feminist contributions are triumphing in their endeavours to create a more inclusive form of human rights discourse.

4 It is interesting to note that the original sentence in Spivak’s 1988 essay did not include the phrase ‘culturalism and development’. This phrase was added in Spivak’s 1999 revision and it highlights ways the new discourses of the ‘Third World woman’ leave the subaltern silent.
highlighted in my research, since I endeavoured to speak with the other who was culturally different to me. As Schutte contended, such communication is ‘one of the greatest challenges facing North–South relations and interaction’ (2000: 47). Schutte (2000: 50) argued that there will always be a ‘residue of meaning’ that will not be overcome in cross-cultural endeavours and that this produces a level of cultural incommensurability.5

In seeking the most appropriate ethical practice of representation, I have been mindful of the ‘(im)possible perspective of the native informant’ in order to evade getting lost in some ‘identity forever’ (Spivak 1999: 352). This difficulty with advocacy would not be alleviated even if I possessed more commonalities with the participants in my research. ‘The general idea of mirror representation’ is, as Kymlicka wrote, ‘unteachable’ (1995: 139). Young concurred, arguing that ‘having such a relation of identity or similarity with constituents says nothing about what the representative does’ (1997: 354).5 Nevertheless, despite the awareness that my feminist strategies of representation were going to imply a difficult and frustrating mission, I maintained my interest ‘in recovering subaltern voices because … [of my] investment in changing contemporary power relations’ (Loomba 1998: 243). Thus, rather than speak on behalf of, I aimed to hear the different voice of the other (Spivak 1988, 1999).

The position I endorse throughout my research is that ‘there are almost always possibilities for congenial or at least tolerable personal, social and political engagements’ (Pettman 1992: 157). I do not assume that these engagements are without boundaries and that each conflict of interest is reconcilable (Yuval-Davis 2006). Instead, I recognise that my search for specific forms of knowledge in the participants (on concepts like human rights, community and belonging) does not include the possibility of ever fully knowing others (Ahmed 2000). Nevertheless I maintain that, as long as the differences between women are considered

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5 Similarly Australian feminist Ien Ang (1995) advocated the ‘politics of partiality’ in her proposals for feminism to stop acting like it is a nation, always ‘managing difference’ within it.

6 I discuss this further in the section on ‘Negotiating insider/outsider status’.
thoroughly via relationality\(^7\) and intersectionality,\(^8\) the feminist common goals of empowerment and gender equality can be achieved (Ang 1995).

I advocate that feminist methods of representation also need to be self-critical of the selective ways cultural differences are employed as unquestionably incommensurable (see Hinterberger 2007).\(^9\) The fluid and changing nature of culture adds to the ambiguity in identifying and defining cultural differences. Complete dependence on notions of incommensurability as the only and inevitable cultural capacity can reify a western–non-western dichotomy (Didur and Heffernan 2003: 11). The issue with such a dichotomy is that it is entrenched in the idea of irreconcilable cultural differences that are left unconsidered and uncontested.

Presuming inability to discuss and contest women’s rights issues due to irreconcilable differences is problematic because the question of essentialist representation by feminists (in the feminism and multiculturalism debates and elsewhere) is not the only problem afflicting women in immigrant or Third World communities. There are a number of oppressions that women from minority cultures face that, therefore, necessitate a critical feminist engagement.\(^10\) Although I recognise that we need to attend to essentialist representations, I

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7 In my dissertation I pursued a multicultural feminist perspective according to the claim that feminism is reconcilable with multiculturalism. Relationality, in the context of a multicultural feminism and in the context that I utilised it throughout my thesis, relies on dialogistic and historical analyses. As Shohat argued, ‘Although the concept of relationality goes back to structural linguistics, I am using it here in a translinguistic dialogic and historicized sense. The project of multicultural feminism has to be situated historically as a set of contested practices, mediated by conflictual discourses, which themselves have repercussions and reverberations in the world’ (2002: 72)

8 I employ intersectionality as a concept that ‘highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed’ (Crenshaw 2003: 176).

9 As Yuval-Davis (2006) argued, compatible values can cut across differences in positioning and identities. Her position is that ‘the struggle against oppression and discriminations might and mostly does have specific categorical focus but it is never confined to just that category’ (1999: 96). Also, irrespective of the differentiating accounts, women’s rights are, nevertheless, utilised by many diverse women’s rights movements all over the world.

10 My findings reveal that in the diaspora Afghan and Liberian women, as refugees from war-torn countries, often live with their experiences of wars, of life in the refugee camps, and of the unnatural deaths of numerous family members including children, husbands and parents. As a result many suffer a number of physical and psychological problems (Mehraby 2007). In their new settings, these women are expected to build new lives and integrate quickly into their host society. This integration is complicated by a number of factors and the women experience a range of vulnerabilities within both private and public spheres. In the private sphere, refugee women lack the traditional social support provided by extended families and social
also argue that the anxiety inherent in assumptions of incommensurability should not cause a lack of critical engagement with issues affecting minority culture communities or communities in the Third World. Feminists can present local empirical accounts without universalising and ahistoricising (see Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Empiricism without objectivist foundations requires us to extend self-reflexivity to recognise that ‘our analyses, as well as their objects, are culturally specific’ (Alldred 1998: 157).

In order to conduct research within a theoretical framework that is inclusive of differences between women and of the specificities of the contexts that produce and reproduce those differences, I utilise feminist standpoint theory. I endorse standpoint theorising that only by starting from women’s lives can we understand women’s heterogeneous experiences, as their positions, resulting in double consciousness, provide for a more objective interpretation of social reality. I examine standpoint theory next.

**Standpoint theory**

The theories, concepts, methods and goals of inquiry inherited from dominant discourses consist of an abundant collection of facts about women and their lives. However these add up to a partial and distorted understanding of the patterns of such lives. In order to understand women’s lives we need to consider the standpoints of the women in question. For this reason I adopt the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint epistemologies (hereafter referred to as standpoint theory) (Harding 1983: 43). Standpoint theory scholars aim to give voice to gatherings. Irrespective of their relationship status, these women struggle. If they are married, they have to deal with their husband’s traumas and their integration into the host settings; if widowed or a single parent, the settlement problems that they have to face on their own often leave these women feeling overwhelmed. In the public sphere, women’s experiences of discrimination due to differences of race, culture and religion significantly impacts on their feelings of exclusion from mainstream society.

11 For instance, I started my research in blind reliance on the claims of feminists from the debates on the multicultural/feminist dilemma. Then, as I commenced my writing, I had to learn not to focus exclusively on the misrepresentations and cultural stereotypes of minority culture women, as this resulted in me almost denying that there were problems that needed to be addressed. The standpoints of the women interviewed in my research kept me on the path of critical engagement; my journey equipped me with both the awareness that particular fixations are likely to be connected with particular locations and the enthusiasm to challenge this situation critically.
members of oppressed groups and to reveal the knowledge that members of such groups have cultivated from living life on the margins.

Standpoint theory is an appropriate framework in which to consider the issues that stem from the debates on the tensions between multiculturalism and feminism and the impact of these tensions on minority culture women. Standpoint theory, as an approach, is committed to knowledge building, and as such it breaks down boundaries between academia and activism; between theory and practice (Harding 2004a; Longino 2001). A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world; a point of view of social reality that begins with and is developed directly from women’s experiences (to improve conditions for women and to create social change). More importantly, standpoint theory is of particular relevance for my research that considers groups of women from different cultural, political and social backgrounds who have quite different lived experiences. Standpoint theory commences from the standpoint of the subject. The subject is conceived as the situated, embodied person who actually lives and acts rather than the de-materialised subject produced by certain technologies of research12 (see Haraway 1988; Smith 1987).

I have, therefore, sought to hear what women say about their experiences of the conflict between women’s rights and cultural rights. I do so with the conviction that the ‘complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. ‘[The experience] is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know’ (hooks 1991: 183).

Standpoint theory offers an alternative theory of knowledge and seeks less distorted, less partial accounts of social reality, and its inequalities and hierarchies (Harding 1992: 583). It does this by undermining the claims of the dominant and powerful forms of social inquiry (such as positivism and empiricism); by exposing their epistemological and politically

12 The ‘certain technologies of research’ or ‘relations of ruling’ is the apparatus of social power that organises practices (Smith 1990: 144). Smith (1990) argued that certain technologies of research have been formed by men reproducing the values and preferences that they have historically propagated. Smith concluded that specific kinds of subjects are historically marginalised (Haraway 1988) and that their ways of life are not legitimised in relations of ruling. Thus women’s standpoints are situated outside of these relations of ruling.
unacknowledged and systemic biases and by starting from the standpoint of women, and particularly marginalised women. Donna Haraway, a feminist standpoint theorist whose work in the history of science has been foundational and influential, summarised standpoints as ‘cognitive-emotional-political achievements, crafted out of located socio-historical-bodily experience – itself always constituted through fraught, non-innocent, discursive, material, collective practices’ (1997: 304).

I propose standpoint theory as a helpful framework within which to start researching the issue of the tensions between women’s rights and cultural rights of some Afghan and Liberian women for three reasons. Firstly, women’s different social location creates knowing subjects since feminist research yields ‘empirically and theoretically’ more adequate science (Harding 1991: 1, 48, 74). Secondly, standpoint investigations start from the women’s standpoint (Harding 1991: 128, 150). Cultural factors influence women to be more likely than those in the dominant social group to produce less distorted science (Harding 1991: 48, 56, 121); the system of knowledge of the standpoint epistemologies, which draws on women’s insights and starts from their predicaments, will be richer than the one that draws only on the insights and starts from the predicaments of privileged groups alone (Harding 1998, 2004b). Thirdly, by starting from women’s standpoint, I endeavour to challenge the dominant and privileged views in the debates on tensions between feminism and multiculturalism and thus expose the multiple oppressions that minority culture women face. As Alison Jaggar (1997) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argue, standpoint theory research demonstrates that women’s experiences and the knowledge acquired from these experiences can be used as a means to

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13 Alison Jaggar’s (1997) work also shows how women’s everyday experience, together with the knowledge that accompanies that experience, can be helpful in comprehending women’s social world. Thus she argued that women’s responsibilities in daily household activities and compliance with some socially normative women’s roles (for example, a caretaker) result in an authentic set of skills coinciding with them.

14 Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) research on African-American mothering explored the everyday lives of African-American women. A practice that Collins called ‘other mothering’ involves women caring for children of friends, neighbours and family members whose biological mothers work away from home. Collins accentuated the practice of other mothering as indicative of the creativity of African-American women and as an authentic and useful ability developed for and by women. African-American women’s daily experience of other mothering, and their dependence on it, also points towards bigger problems these women face in social and economic spheres: unequal gender relations as well as unaffordable child care in the United States.
highlight the inequalities and injustices in society as a whole. Understanding society through the lens of women’s experiences leads towards constructing a feminist standpoint.

Women’s experiences not only point us to flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws. Considering that women’s experiences and the feminist standpoints that evolve from them offer us a deep understanding of the ‘mechanisms of domination’, they also help us ‘envision freer ways to live’ (Jaggar 1997: 193). As Nielsen explained: ‘without the conscious effort to reinterpret reality from one’s own lived experience – that is, without political consciousness – the disadvantaged [women] are likely to accept their society’s dominant world view’ (1990: 11).

My inquiry is more than just research about women, by a woman and for women; it is about linking theory with the study of women and of gender, and about recognising the participants as the experts and authorities on their own experiences as the starting point of research. By starting research from the lives of the marginalised I do not intend to interpret those lives; I endeavour to offer ‘a causal, critical account of the regularities of the natural and social worlds and their underlying causal tendencies’ (Harding 1991: 385).

Influences from standpoint theory

The usefulness of standpoint theory to my research resides in its attention to women’s lives which results in a feminist standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory reflects heterogeneous women’s experiences and as such consists of strong objectivity and double consciousness. Standpoint theory is also appropriate for my research since it addresses issues with the representation of the other. I scrutinise these aspects in the following paragraphs.

Strong objectivity

I adopt the feminist framework of standpoint theory to interpret my research findings in reliance on its main premise according to which women as knowers produce more objective accounts of reality (Harding 1995: 331). As Alison Jaggar (2004: 56, 57) explained, women’s ‘distinctive social position’ makes possible a ‘view of the world that is more reliable and less
distorted’ than either ‘the ruling class’ or men possess. Research that begins from women’s everyday lives as members of an oppressed group will lead to knowledge claims that are ‘less partial and distorted’ than research that begins ‘from the lives of men in the dominant groups’ (Harding 1991: 185).

Because women can know and understand the dominant groups’ behaviours and ideologies as well as their own, starting research from women’s lives means that ‘certain areas or aspects of the world are not excluded’ (Jaggar 2004: 62). As Sandra Harding put it: ‘starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order’ (2004b: 128).

Analysing my research findings within the standpoint theory framework is crucial in my aims to establish whether minority culture women experience tensions between their commitment to maintain their cultural heritage and their rights as women; and, if there are tensions, to understand how these are manifested in the lives of women. By uncovering the problems experienced by minority culture women we can begin to understand the multiple oppressions that these women face. Feminist standpoint theorising is useful in understanding some of the facets of marginalisation that some cultural groups and their members face. The understanding of the marginalisation that stems from the ‘social order’ (Harding 2004b: 128) of multicultural societies is of particular importance to the themes examined in my research since we are continually warned by theorists that, in the immigration context, the exclusion of and discrimination against minority culture groups by host societies increases the risk of members of ethnic communities who hold conservative patriarchal values turning inwards and continuing to exert pressure on women by holding onto the patriarchal values of their culture (Shachar 2001; Deveaux 2000; Parekh 2000). In my PhD dissertation I considered some

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15 My examinations suggest that in their countries of origin minority culture women have experienced a number of vulnerabilities due to patriarchal relations (which are not structured monolithically and thus differ between cultural contexts). They are also survivors of wars, witnesses to loss of life and destruction, and refugees. Notwithstanding these oppressions and great difficulties, these women have demonstrated agency and made positive gains. In diasporic settings in Australia, although women are re-negotiating their identities and re-constructing their lives, they are still marginalised; they face a number of vulnerabilities as women, as ex-refugees, and as members of different ethnic and religious minorities.
segments of mainstream exclusion that are particularly associated with the tightening of patriarchal control over some women.

**Double consciousness**

Double consciousness is another aspect of standpoint theory that is particularly important in my analysis of Afghan and Liberian women’s cultural and women’s rights. Standpoint theory scholars argue that women, as members of an oppressed group, have cultivated a double consciousness – a heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group (which is mainly constituted of men). Women are tuned in to the ‘dominant worldview of the society and their own minority perspective’ (Nielsen 1990: 10). As a result, women have a ‘working, active consciousness’ of both perspectives (Smith 1990: 19). In some cases, women’s capacity for double consciousness occurs as a result of their compliance with socially dictated roles (e.g., wife, mother). In other cases, women attain a double consciousness in order to secure their own and their family’s survival (hooks 2004; Smith 1990).16 Marginalised – in the context of this research – Afghan and Liberian women may develop double consciousness in accordance with the gender roles in their countries of origin, whilst in diasporas this double consciousness may be supplemented by other means of survival.

Women’s capacity for double consciousness enables them to see and understand ‘certain features of reality … from which others are obscured’ (Jaggar 2004: 60). This distinct mode of seeing and knowing the dominant group’s attitudes and behaviours as well as their own places women in an advantageous position from which to change society for the better. It is necessary to become familiar with dominant approaches (examined in the multiculturalism and feminism debates), but also the standpoint of those deemed oppressed in the debates, in order to understand the extent of the impact that those dominant approaches have on the women in question. The knowledge gathered from women’s double consciousness can be

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16 bell hooks’s (2004) account of growing up poor and black in Southern Kentucky provides another example of how double consciousness can develop as individuals fight for survival, in particular material survival. hooks and her neighbours would work in the white section of town (as maids, janitors, and prostitutes) but they were not allowed to live there: ‘There were laws to ensure our return. Not to return was to risk being punished’ (2004: 156). Through their work experience, hooks and her neighbours developed ‘a working consciousness’ of the white world as well as of their own.
applied in detecting social inequalities and injustices and in building and implementing solutions. In the words of bell hooks, double consciousness serves both as a powerful ‘space of resistance’ and a ‘site of radical possibility’ (2004: 156).

**Heterogeneous women’s experiences**

The experiences of diverse women are not homogeneous. Standpoint theorising maintains that there is a distinctive women’s ‘perspective’ that is ‘privileged’ because it possesses heightened insights into the nature of reality (Harding 1991). However, theorists like Hawkesworth (1989) argue that to claim that women possess such knowledge about reality is to suggest that there is some uniform experience common to all women that generates this vision. Addressing the issue of the absence of a homogeneous women’s experience is particularly important for the purposes of my research since my theoretical framework, in its aim to recognise difference, employs a relational multicultural feminist view yet aims to add to ‘broader, richer, more complex and multilayered feminist [global] solidarity’ (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 35).

Within my research, I justify this absence of a homogeneous women’s experience on the grounds that, as Harding (1991) argued, women’s diversity is compatible with standpoint theory. This is clearer when we recall the distinction between women’s experience and a standpoint – namely, that a standpoint does not reflect mere experience but must be forged. Standpoint theorists do not emphasise that one needs to be female or that all women experience the same things but rather that knowledge ‘starts from women’s lives’, including the diversity therein (Harding 1991: 180). In my research I do not utilise standpoint theory as a simple theory that claims that some people (ie the women participants in my research) have privileged access to truth; rather I rely on it as a starting point.

As Collins for example argued, ‘it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black woman’s standpoint exists’ (2000: 28). However, living a life as a black woman should provide some core premises or issues with other black women so that ‘a Black women’s collective standpoint does exist’; this standpoint is ‘characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses
to common challenges’ (Collins 2000: 28). These tensions between common challenges and diverse responses are recognised by a black women’s epistemology which thus produces a sensibility that black women, because of their gendered and racial identity, ‘may be victimized by racism, misogyny, and poverty’ (Collins 2000: 26). Hence, whilst the responses of individual black women may differ based on different intersectional interests ‘there are themes or core issues that all black women can recognise and integrate into their self-identity’ (Collins 2000: 26). Finally, I note that standpoint theory is necessary for the analysis of my data as it recognises that the subject/agent of feminist knowledge is multiple and sometimes even contradictory, in that women are located in every class, race, culture and society (Harding 1991: 311).

*Representation of the other*

I found the framework of standpoint epistemologies very helpful for addressing the challenges of cultural relativism that I encountered. Before gaining approval for this research from the university’s Ethics Committee, the committee insisted that I provide the women with the option of gaining the consent of male members of their family, thus, arguably, reifying cultural gender relations and women’s position within their respective cultural groups.¹⁷

This reification confirms my argument that a belief in the absolute incommensurability between diverse women reinforces a western–non-western binary that results in not addressing and not challenging what are seen as fundamental cultural differences. Spivak (1999), relying on her assertion that there is a radical un-translatability (or incommensurability) of the subaltern voice into dominant discourse, warned that feminist strategies of representation need to be wary of the unmediated power of *assumed* cultural differences. Given this, I concur with Didur and Heffernan (2003) that an ethics of representation must guard against reifying notions of cultural difference, which can too easily become the basis for incommensurability. The harm in assuming absolute incommensurability

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¹⁷ This request was made irrespective of the fact that all of the participants would be legally consenting adults in their countries of origin and in Australia.
resides in the possibility of reinforcing ‘cultural relativism as cultural absolutism’ (Didur and Heffernan 2003: 11).

Standpoint theories, in an attempt not to ignore the theoretical grounds of all perception and experience and consequently devolve into either authoritarian assertion or uncritical relativism, have carefully attempted to open up an epistemological space beyond absolutist and relativist stances. In this respect, their arguments suggest diverse and contrary intuitions about the essential nature of social reality premised on an immediate understanding of that reality (Gergen 1998: 33, cited in Harding 1998: 132). Standpoint theories identify the historical or sociological relativism of all knowledge claims: that different social activities lead to different interactions with social relations, and thus to different representations of the world. However, standpoint theorists refuse epistemological or cognitive relativism, arguing that not all historically determinate interactions are equally revealing (Harding 1993: 52). Rather they highlight that marginal lives are more revealing than the lives of those who do not live on the margins. In this process, their concern is with the positive scientific and epistemic value of marginality irrespective of whether or not their lives are such marginalised ones (Harding 1993: 55).

I start my research from the lives of the marginalised. The importance of marginal lives should not be underestimated, as these are determinate, objective locations in the social structure. Their exclusion by dominant discourses is not accidental. The exclusivist dominant discourses benefit from binaries and dichotomies. The material and symbolic existence of the oppositional margins keep the centre in place (for example, masculinity can only be an ideal if it is continuously contrasted with the devalued other: femininity) (Harding 2000). Standpoint theorising does not only interpret marginal lives; instead the research should start from this point to produce knowledge. In my research starting from women’s standpoints generated some answers to the many questions raised in the debates about the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism.
The feminist standpoint framework adopted here emphasises women’s experiences as critical and that these are best understood through finding ways for women to articulate their experiences in their own words. However gathering the words and experiences of others is not a simple matter, nor one to be underestimated. I address some of the challenges of conducting cross-cultural research in the following section.

**On doing cross-cultural research: some challenges**

*On reflexivity*

The perspective of the observer is always partial and determines what can be seen (Haraway 1991: 183). In recognition of this, social researchers are becoming more attentive to how the ‘researcher’s self’ is part of the research process (Seibold 2000: 148). An acknowledgment of the researcher’s position and the knowledge gathered in the research process are means toward attaining objectivity. Objectivity, redefined by Haraway (1991), means to *recognise* that knowledge is partial and situated, but also to consider effects of the positioned researcher. The question then is not whether the researcher affects the research process, nor how this can be prevented, but rather on how to turn ‘this methodological [concern] … into a commitment to reflexivity’ (Malterud 2001: 484).

My subjectivity as a researcher, consequently, cannot be avoided in this discussion. Not only was it significant in the conceptualisation and formulation of the research questions and methodology, but it was also present during the data-gathering process. I acknowledge with Kleinman and Copp (1993) in their work *Emotions and fieldwork* that the self is part of the research process and thus I cannot separate myself from the research that I undertook.

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18 My research participants comprised 27 women from Liberian and 19 women from Afghani cultural backgrounds. These women had recently arrived in Australia and were members of their community women’s groups at the Migrant Resource Centre, South Australia (MRCSA). Their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years. The method for the case study included focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information on the impact that their cultural communities have on the women interviewed and on women’s experiences of their human rights entitlements. Individual interviews were conducted in order to allow the participants to single out the issues that they considered to be the most important (since the research was designed so that the issues emerged from the women themselves). The questions in individual interviews were about women’s experiences of work, education and family, and understandings of human rights.
Accordingly, as a feminist researcher, I have adopted the practices of reflexivity and praxis. By ‘praxis’ and ‘reflexivity’, I mean an ‘understanding how one’s own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world, including acts of inquiry’ (Patton 2002: 268–269). Practising explicit reflexive self-examination helps to create an awareness of conscious and subjective knowledge about what is known and how we happen to know it (Schram 2003; Patton 2002). This knowledge is revealed implicitly and explicitly through research assumptions, language and context. In my utilisation of praxis I highlight the significance of the participants in the research, hence my endeavours to communicate their perspectives authentically. In this process I also sought to consider the impact of the inquiry on those being researched. This entails the potential for the knowledge provided by the participants to be used in a way that can be empowering and that can have an ongoing impact (Patton 2002), which were the initial reasons for conducting this research.

**Negotiating outsider/insider status within research**

During the course of my study I was both an external-outsider and an insider. I was an external-outsider as a researcher who is ‘socialized within a community different from the one in which he or she is doing research’ (Merriam et al 2001: 408). The outsider’s advantage lies in curiosity about the unfamiliar, the ability to ask taboo questions and being seen as non-aligned with subgroups, thus often getting more information. My outsider status became an asset with regard to eliciting fuller explanations than would have been given to an insider who was assumed to ‘already know’ (see Merriam et al 2001: 408).

I began my research with an understanding of my outsider position, aware of the benefits and disadvantages within it. I rested my assumptions about the benefits associated with my outsider position on the feminist work of Susan Greenhalgh and Jiali Li (1995: 605), who advocated collaboration on political as well as intellectual grounds with other cultures in the belief that feminists working in other traditions have much to contribute theoretically and often have ‘more political space’ in which to offer critical interpretations of demographic findings. It can be argued that my role as an outsider researcher into African and South Asian
cultural values can be observed positively as I, due to having no ties with the communities, had less anxiety about revealing my findings in the political space (of the university or the academic community) and thus could promote potential resolutions. However I was also aware that my feminist criticism (of some cultural practices or traditions) could be perceived negatively by the respective cultural groups that might seek to deflect such criticism. In addition, my position as an outsider might be seen to prevent true understanding of the cultural groups, gender relations within them or the women that belong to these groups. My research could also be perceived (by the respective cultural groups of the participants) as having imperialist intentions since human rights might be perceived as a primarily western construct. This could also lead to perceptions (by the cultural group and the women in question) of bias in favour of establishing universalising western rights parallels, despite my aim to recognise difference.

My status as an outsider also posed obstacles in terms of accessing the participants and understanding the dynamics inside women’s groups, dynamics within their respective cultural groups (only available to an insider), as well as more factual information (such as their arrival and visa details). There were a number of aspects that the university Ethics Committee enquired about prior to granting me permission to conduct research with these women, including issues concerning the women’s visa status, and enquiring whether women needed a male family member to approve their participation. These issues caused a ten-month delay in gaining the university Ethics Committee’s approval to conduct research.

My status as a former non-English speaker and a woman who comes from a collectivist culture also characterised my participation in the research on cultural rights and women’s rights, positioning me, to some degree, as an insider. I consider that from a multicultural perspective I was also a partial insider. As Banks suggested, from a multicultural perspective ‘we are all members of cultural communities where the interpretation of our life experiences is mediated by the interaction of a complex set of status variables, such as gender, social class, age, political affiliation, religion, and region’ (1998: 5). Thus, notwithstanding the differences between the groups of participants and myself, the mere analogies of gender, non-mainstream
ethnicity and of refugee and war experiences made me both an insider and an outsider within my research. In the words of Kath Weston, ‘A single body cannot bridge the mythical divide between outsider and insider, researcher and researched. I am neither, in any simple way, and yet I am both’ (1996: 275, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 352).

**Conclusion**

I have discussed the methodology for this research and the theoretical assumptions that inform the research. While feminist theorising in general informed the research methodology, the specific theoretical influences come from standpoint theory. This theoretical approach emphasises not only the importance of moving away from essentialist and categorical tendencies (present in some claims within the debates about the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism) and understanding women’s life stories as situated knowledges but also understanding specific issues relevant to Afghan and Liberian women’s lived realities.

In this paper I have also detailed the range of ethical issues that arose in the course of the research process such as the issues of reflexivity and negotiating an outsider/insider position within feminist research.

**References**


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