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Chapter 11

Making Theories Work

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Gender Studies is a theoretical discipline. We all use theory. Doing feminist theory means knowing which theorists are currently *en vogue*, being able to reproduce the right concepts in the right language, and displaying an awareness of the correct positions in various debates. Most of us have our own favorite theories – the ones you particularly like or find yourself inevitably gravitating toward in your research and writing. You probably also have theories that you heartily disagree with; those are the theories that you love to criticize.

As important as theory is to most critical feminist scholars, however, it is not an easy thing to write theory. Some of us embark on writing theory by providing long and painstakingly accurate expositions of a theorist's work, replete with impressive lists of references trailing behind each and every sentence and sometimes cropping up mid-way through a sentence as well (see also Davis, Chapter 14, this volume). Others of us may treat theory as a matter of showing one's colors, a judicious dropping of names – a dash of Butler, a bit of Derrida, or a fleeting reference to Braidotti – which can help us situate ourselves on the right side of the fence, the fence being whatever is currently considered cutting-edge feminist theory. This allows us to move on without further ado to the business at hand – our research – while leaving the reader to make the necessary connections.

What is missing in both cases is a sense of how we actually engage with a theory. Where are the joyful and painful moments, the eye-openers and the *Eurekas*, but also the doubts and uncertainties which are invariably a part of our engagement with a theory or theoretical debate? What is it that makes you want to draw upon a particular theory at a particular point in the research process? And, most importantly, how is this theory going to actually help you do your own research in a better – that is, more sophisticated, analytically reflexive, or creatively critical – way?

WHITHER FEMINIST THEORY?

In 2000, the feminist sociologists Liz Stanley and Sue Wise addressed some of these questions in a path-breaking and controversial article for *Feminist Theory*.¹ They took issue with what they saw as a troubling tendency within Gender Studies to treat theory as the special preserve of a priestly caste of “theory stars” rather than an activity in which *all* feminist researchers are engaged (Stanley and Wise 2000, 276). This process has led to the canonization of a specific kind of theory – meta-theory – at the expense of theory which is grounded in the analysis of material, social and cultural practices. It has established the criteria for what constitutes not only theory, but “good” feminist theory.

While Stanley and Wise were critical of the benefits of feminist Theory (writ large), their primary concern was neither in, as they put it, “identifying ‘goodies and baddies’” nor in “allocating blame” (Stanley and Wise 2000, 263). Rather they identified with the rank and file of scholars in the field of gender studies: “It is *us*, it is *you and we*, the jobbing academic feminists who are looking and ooh-ing and aah-ing,” they wrote

(Stanley and Wise 2000, 275). We, i.e. the ‘rank and file’, they said, have been relegated (or relegated ourselves) to the role of “translators”, becoming “the recyclers and neophytes who transform the pronouncements of feminist theory into a currency greater than their original value” (Stanley and Wise 2000, 274). Feminist theory has become little more than a “translation industry” (Stanley and Wise 2000, 262), an endless process of “explaining, simplifying, interpreting, and overviewing” the theories of a handful of theory stars – a process which, according to Stanley and Wise, “would become largely redundant if ‘Theory’ was written more accessibly” (2000, 266).

The endless replication and translation of the work of theory stars that Stanley and Wise criticize is not simply a matter of redundancy, however. As anyone who has had to read her or his share of “theory chapters” in dissertations and books can attest, this replication is also – well, quite frankly - boring. Most of us have already read the theories, not only in the original, but in countless recycled versions as well. At a certain point, it becomes difficult to take in another explanation of disciplinary power *à la* Foucault without suppressing a yawn. The ubiquitous name-dropping which is *bon ton* in contemporary feminist scholarship is even more sleep producing. It not only disrupts the flow of the text, forcing the reader to stumble through long lists of references before being allowed back into the text, but it seriously undermines the author’s authority. Too many references gives the reader the impression that the author is unable to say anything without first getting some theoretical backup.ⁱⁱ

Stanley and Wise locate the problem in how feminist theory is being “done,” arguing that it is time for us to stop “performing” the theories of others and instead use theories as resources to help us tell our own story. Anyone who does (feminist) research

has a story to tell – this is what doing research is about. This story includes our *intellectual autobiography*ⁱⁱⁱ – that is, how we become attracted to certain theories, the struggles that we invariably have in trying to make sense of them in the context of our research, the things we like and agree with as well as the things we dislike and do not agree with at all, how our ideas change as we become more immersed in our research. This is not background noise to the real business of doing theory; it is what doing theory is all about. Thus, Stanley and Wise urge feminist scholars to reclaim theorizing (not Theory) as an integral part of *any* feminist inquiry (2000, 266). Theirs is an impassioned plea for a return to the notion of theory as an active and collective process, which takes as its starting point the shared production of feminist ideas.

In this chapter, I want to take up Stanley and Wise's call to feminist scholars – from the graduate students writing their dissertations to the seasoned academics working on their latest books - to reclaim feminist theory and transform it into something that can help us in our research. How can we engage with theory in such a way that it is not reduced to the tame and obedient performance of the ideas of others? How can doing theory become a personal, passionate, and creative enterprise - something that enables us to take risks, embark on unexpected paths, and, in so doing, command our audience's full and appreciative attention?

WRITING THEORY

Obviously, there is no simple solution for writing theory. However, I have a modest suggestion – one which will help scholars engage with theories more personally,

creatively, and adventurously. This engagement will provide a starting point and some of the building blocks for transforming feminist theory into your own theoretical story.^{iv}

Instead of treating Theory as an authoritative model to be reproduced, theories can be seen as a resource, important, first and foremost, for helping critical feminist scholars formulate their research problems and frame their inquiries in more interesting ways. Theories at best should allow us to discover the unexpected and to make sense of our research material in ways that we could not have anticipated before embarking upon our research. Theories should not make us fearful and worried about making mistakes; they should encourage us to be daring, critical, and reflexive. Theories are not about telling someone else's story; they are about telling our own.

The method I am proposing owes a debt to much of the work currently being done in qualitative research.^v For those of us who do qualitative research, one of the first things we learn to do is keep a research journal. This is a record of our impressions and experiences in doing the research. It is done alongside the process of thinking about our research problem, collecting material, analyzing and interpreting. Journals allow us to pay attention to values, insights, and intuitions as we do research. They contain the preliminary analyses of our material. They are the place where we work through the snags we invariably encounter while doing research. They help us situate ourselves critically in our research, think about the ways our locations shape our research, attend to power differences at play during the research process. We may use parts of our journal in the book/chapter/article we are writing, but even if we don't, the journal shapes our writing in significant ways.

While research journals are usually considered helpmeets for doing research, they are less frequently applied to the business of theorizing. However, it is my contention that such journals could be a perfect way to appropriate theory, to engage with it in a creative and reflective way, thereby making it work for you and for your research. Just as a person might keep a journal to make sense of her or his research (or, for that matter, life), s/he might employ a journal to record, explore, and work through her or his responses to a particular theory or theories. By reflecting upon theory in a personal and creative way, the theory will become less a static display of colours than a friend and a resource for telling an interesting and novel story.

In the following section, I will offer some brief suggestions about how to get started on keeping a theory journal. They are not meant as a recipe to be followed to the letter. You may want to leave out certain steps or add some of your own. It can be applied to the collected works of a particular theorist or to a book, or even just one article. However, I guarantee that it will help you write theory in a different and more imaginative way.

THEORY JOURNALS

The first step is the most prosaic. You need a journal.^{vi} Some people will want to write their journal on the computer and, in that case, you need a file, specifically designated for that purpose. However, others may want to write their journal by hand. I personally prefer keeping my journals in notebooks, usually with an inspiring illustration on the front cover. I like to use a cartridge pen with black ink. The idea that I have to leave my computer in order to write in my journal is appealing to me. Sometimes I head for my

living room, other times I sit outside under a tree to write, and occasionally I go to my favourite café. The main thing is to keep the activity of journal writing separate from the actual writing of a book, article or chapter. Writing in a journal is about giving one's thoughts free rein, letting them "flow" and, above all, about not being goal-directed. This is not about end products, it is about process.

A good way to begin an entry is to situate yourself. This means describing where you are, what is going on around you, what you are doing, and how you feel at the time of the writing. At its most basic level, it means locating yourself in space and time. The feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1999) has written extensively about the importance of the author locating herself in the text as a prerequisite for doing feminist research. She compares it to the map in the shopping mall with the yellow arrow "YOU ARE HERE" (Smith 1999, 5). This marks your location, where you are right now at the time of writing. This not only places you, the author, squarely in the process of writing about theory ("I am curled up on the couch with my trusty journal, a glass of white wine, and the sounds of Bach cello sonatas wafting through my earphones. The answering machine is on, no one can disturb me"). The experience of writing becomes grounded in the body, in the physical world, and, therefore, provides the starting point for an embodied, personal engagement with theory.^{vii}

The next step is to collect your first impressions from reading the text. This is NOT the same as a synopsis. Indeed, a basic rule for journal writing is to avoid blow-by-blow descriptions of the theory and its premises. When I ask students to keep journals during classes, for example, I do not accept entries which summarize the content of theory. A journal entry is not about *what* you read, but *how* you engage with it. This

means being as associative as you possibly can. You might want to put the theoretical text aside, at this point, and just let your thoughts flow onto the paper. For example, you can write about what struck you especially about the theory, what inspired you, and what made you angry or disapproving. You do not have to stick to the main points, but can pick out small details, interesting examples, or odd observations that catch your fancy. Do not worry if your associations seem trivial or irrelevant. This is all about collecting those aspects of the text that – for whatever reason – appealed to you enough to be remembered. It means taking your reactions seriously!

Having collected associations – and be sure to give that plenty of time - the next step is to explore them in more depth. Texts do not stand alone, but evoke all kinds of associations with other texts. We all “borrow” meanings from other texts in the course of reading and these meanings shape how we understand a text. This is what “intertextuality” is about (Kristeva 1980). Texts may be works by the same theorist which resonate with the text you are now reading. However, you may be reminded of other academic texts that you have read in the same field. Often reading a text lands you squarely within an academic debate, forcing you to consider what kind of position you would want to take. Intertextuality is not just about the reverberations between academic texts, though. Particularly when you are reading a feminist or critical text, you may be reminded of the current political situation or a specific historical context. A text may make you think of films you have seen or novels that you have read. And, last but not least, texts will invariably make you think of personal experiences, encounters or events you have witnessed. Use the journal entry to explore in the broadest possible way the

resonances that the text has for you and to make connections with a broad tradition of feminist and other texts.

The final section of the entry involves pulling together the experiences and interpretations which have emerged thus far. By engaging with the text in such a personal and associative way, you will find that you have become entangled with the theory. You will have a much clearer sense of what it is about the theory which interests you (and why). You will know what you specifically like or dislike about it. You will have glimmerings about how it can be useful for your present research. You will inevitably have many more questions than you had at the outset. This is the moment to pause and consider where you are, to collect any issues that are unclear to you, to formulate questions that have emerged, to note areas that you want to explore and issues that you feel need more reflection. This can be written as a series of points to be addressed or as a project or task that you want to take on next. It is a summary of your engagement with the theory, but it also – and more importantly - signals that your theoretical journey has only just begun.

[CALL OUT TO COPY-EDITOR: PUT EXERCISE BELOW AS BOX:]

BOX 40. Writing Exercise: Keeping a Theory Journal

- 1. Choose a theorist, theoretical school, or concept for your journal entry.^{viii}**
- 2. Decide where and how you want to keep your journal.**
- 3. Situate yourself ('here I am').**

- 4. Collect associations, first impressions, and idiosyncratic details (no synopsis!).**
- 5. Think about intertextuality (make connections with other texts, events, or debates).**
- 6. Take stock (what is useful for your research and why?).**
- 7. Reflect on open questions (points that need to be explored)]**

CONCLUSION

At this point, many readers will probably already be worrying about when they will find the time to write a theory journal. Most of us are under considerable pressure to publish (or perish) and we have learned to keep our eye fixed firmly on the “prize” – the end product, the peer-reviewed article in an international journal, the dissertation. Keeping a journal seems, at best, a luxury, and, at worst, a waste of our precious time and energy, inefficient for getting our research into a publishable form as quickly as possible.

However, I am convinced that journal writing is not going to slow you down and, indeed, it may even speed things up. As someone who knows only too well what it feels like to stare at the blank computer screen for hours on end without knowing where to begin, I know that journal writing is one way to manage, utilize, and ultimately overcome the inevitable writer’s blocks which are endemic to all academic writing (see also Koobak, Chapter 6, this volume, for a good account of how this works).

Keeping a journal will not necessarily make your task of writing theory quicker. It is not a panacea. One of the most difficult tasks facing all researchers is how to integrate a theory into their research in ways that will enable it to work for them. A journal will not eliminate the difficulties that inevitably accompany this process. What it does do, however, is to allow the researcher to engage in a personal and creative way with theories and theoretical texts. It enables a researcher to get to know a theory in an embodied way – not as a fixed body of knowledge to be absorbed or “mastered”, but rather as an encounter, as an occasion to explore what is interesting and worthwhile about the theory for the researcher and her specific research project. While I believe that this process makes doing theory more enjoyable and rewarding for the individual researcher, this is not the only – or even the main – reason for keeping a theory journal.

The primary reason is that it will contribute to the production of better critical feminist theory. It will encourage a *reflexive* stance toward the production of knowledge. Theorizing becomes an ongoing process of critically interrogating and revising knowledge in the context of the researcher’s embodied interaction with theory. It will enable a more *creative* approach to theory – one which focuses on the generation of new questions and unexpected perspectives. Theorizing will become less about reproducing already existing knowledge and more about discovering novel connections. And, finally, it will promote theorizing as a *collaborative* endeavour. It will diminish the problematic distinction between those who do theory and those who merely translate or cite it. In this way, feminist theory becomes what it has always been intended to be – the collective process of producing critical knowledge.

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NOTES

ⁱ See, also, some of the critical rejoinders by Petö (2001), Stacey (2001), King (2001) and Lykke (2004).

ⁱⁱ There is, of course, much more to say about the practice of citing the work of others. For example, it is problematic to only cite the big names, thereby neglecting the work of lesser known theorists. At the same time, long lists of references are unwieldy and make the text difficult to read. How to select references judiciously and present them in a balanced way, while situating oneself as an author(ity) would be a topic of another chapter.

ⁱⁱⁱ This term refers to the process by which researchers come to know their subjects, including how they draw conclusions. An intellectual autobiography makes these processes explicit, opening them up to critical reflection and interrogation. See, Stanley and Wise (1993); Stanley, ed. (1990).

^{iv} The idea that (feminist) theories are stories is nicely set out by Hemmings (2011). I am using a narrative approach to theory as stories we all tell about the world around us, about ourselves and others, and about social structures and social change.

^v Handbooks for qualitative research tend toward guidelines and recipes rather than inspiring the would-be researcher to embark on her own journey of discovery. I would, therefore, refer the reader to the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* which contains many innovative examples of how to do theory in not only a grounded, but also a creative and personal way.

^{vi} See also Koobak (Chapter 13, this volume) for a lovely rendition of the process of choosing a journal and the important effects this can have on the writing process itself. I recommend reading this chapter, more generally, in conjunction with the present one as it illustrates many of the points I make here.

^{vii} This method is not unlike how a researcher might begin to engage in a politics of location whereby she explores the ways gender, class, race or ethnicity, national belonging, sexual orientation shape her perceptions, thinking and research practices (See Davis, Chapter 1, this volume, and Brewster, chapter 4, this volume).

^{viii} Here is another exercise which can be helpful. First, choose a theorist. Then pick a friend or family member (preferably non-academic) with whom you like to talk. Write a letter/email to this person in which you explain why this theorist is important to you. You do not need to send the letter; it is just meant as a writing exercise. But it is important to have a specific person in mind, and to start your letter with “Dear ...” and end it with “All the best” or “Love” and your name. If you are in a group situation, you can read each other’s letters aloud and discuss the experience of writing the letter.