

## Engaging with a shift to the empirical in feminist scholarship: A symposium

Held over a half-day at the University of Sydney on Friday Nov 11 2016, the symposium focused on the possibilities that re-engagement with the empirical hold for innovative theoretical and methodological developments in feminist scholarship. The call for papers attracted interest from academics from all stages of career spectrum, from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and from universities across NSW as well as interstate.

As a means of creating a relaxed and inclusive yet intellectually stimulating environment, we decided on a round table format. Participants were encouraged to prepare a 5 to 10 minute discussion on a topic or concept relevant to the symposium theme. The decision to make the symposium a 'PowerPoint free event' was welcomed by presenters and the cap on participant numbers meant the presentations on specific topics acted as springboards into broader discussions inclusive of all participants.

Some presentations focused on research practices, including the concept of collaborative ethnography; implications of new materialist theories for ethnographic research; the effects of the 'digital revolution' on feminist research including the place of digital technology in the construction of identity and ethical and methodological issues surrounding the use of the material artefacts of digital technologies (for example email as research data). Others explored the deployment of particular concepts such as heterosexuality and consent in empirical research or the ways in which particular theories are enacted within specific fields or disciplines. An interesting example was of finding one's self as both the object and subject post-colonial theory in the field of development studies and the ways in which this theory can be observed in the minutiae of daily practices amongst researchers.

The presentations stimulated much discussion on the place and role of empirical research, the methodological and ethical implications of digital data and around the tendency for disciplines to work in isolation. For example, a similarity was noted between the contemporary practice of 'collaborative ethnography' and long standing feminist methodologies. Two themes that stood out were the seeming perennial nature of some issues discussed (the role of the researcher, the place of the participant, the function of research,) and the difficulty of transferring or operationalising theoretical ideas to inform empirical research (for example, how to use new materialist theories to inform ethnographic research). Finally, despite the apparent shift to the empirical the symposium

highlighted the continuing importance of wrestling with theory as a means of understanding social issues well as the value and challenges of getting '... one's hands dirty with data' (Lather, 2009, p. 224) For example a spirited, theoretically rich and illuminating discussion of the seduction of feminism by neoliberalism).

Feedback at the conclusion of the afternoon indicated that the symposium had been an extremely valuable event. There was also a positive response to keeping in touch via email and holding a semi-regular (perhaps annual) event. We would like to thank AWGSA for the event funding which as well as covering catering-meant we could offer two travel bursaries to low income PHD or sessional academics. These were awarded to two PhD scholars Joyce Das (Australian National University) and Shawna Marks (University of South Australia).

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Lather, P. (2009). Getting lost. Feminist efforts toward a doubled(d) science. *Frontiers*, 30(1), 222-230.