

What purpose, if any, could a feminine theory of education serve today?

GIUSEPPINA D'ADDELFO

Riassunto: *L'obiettivo del saggio è delineare i contorni di una teoria dell'educazione al femminile all'interno della cornice epistemologica della fenomenologia. Infatti, anche se, finora, sono stati fatti ampi riferimenti all'epistemologia femminista soprattutto in altre scienze umane così come negli studi di storia dell'educazione e di didattica, considerevoli benefici possono essere tratti anche ai fini di una teoria dell'educazione. Viene illustrato che il progetto originario degli "studi delle donne" – combattere la loro invisibilità ed esclusione anche dal lavoro di produzione del pensiero – insieme alla considerazione fenomenologica dell'essere personale e, in particolare, del corpo umano, possa essere una preziosa lente per guardare l'educazione contemporanea, affrontando le sfide provenienti da un approccio meramente biologico e positivista alla differenza sessuale, dal cosiddetto "differenzialismo dei sessi" e dal relativismo postmoderno.*

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to depict the contours of a feminine theory of education within the epistemological framework of phenomenology. Actually, in spite of the fact that a widespread appeal to the many aspects of feminist epistemology have so far been developed mainly in other branches of human sciences as well in many studies of history of education and pedagogical methods, considerable benefits can be gained also for the sake of a theory of education. It is argued that the seminal project of Women Studies – fighting women's invisibility and exclusion also from the work of producing thought – together with the phenomenological account of personhood and, in particular, of human body can be a precious lens through which to view contemporary education, meeting the challenges of a merely biological and positivistic approach to the sexual difference, of the so-called "sexual differentialism", and of postmodern relativism.*

Keywords: *Women's Studies, Feminist epistemology, Postmodernism, Phenomenology, Lived-body.*

Although in actual educational settings such as family and school the specific engagement of women is wide-ranging and undeniable, the way in which women see, understand, and value pedagogical aims and methods seems to be neglected by the current theory of education. Indeed, a significant gap can be recognized between the practice of education and its

theory. Actually, Women's Studies have made it possible for a feminine theoretical approach to anthropology, philosophy, sociology, history (including sociology of education as well as history of education, see: Uliveri, 2007), and several other disciplines to be envisaged; however, the same does not apply to educational theory.

Moreover, the possibility of a meaningful "feminine perspective" on educational issues seems to be challenged in many ways, precisely due to some current feminist epistemology developments.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to address such gap and challenges. Namely, I will first deal with the strong link between the seminal aim of Women's Studies and education; then, I will present the epistemological debate on human science by stressing the relevant role of women's studies and the possible opportunities and threats of a "different" epistemology in education; finally, I will argue that a feminine epistemology is liable to be placed into dialogue with the phenomenological approach to personal identity, which may turn precious in contemporary education.

Women's Studies and Education: some history

We owe Women's Studies (WS hereafter) to a group of feminist researchers who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, began exploring the surreptitious ways whereby gender and gender inequality had been shaped by their cultural, social, and personal worlds. In fact, they engaged with the issue of gender itself, namely wondering how a) the definitions of masculinity and femininity are socially built, b) the notion of gender is related to other socially demarcated positions such as class and race, c) gender norms subordinate women, d) women can overcome such subordination. Most of all, on the one hand they denounced the "peculiar eclipsing" (Smith 1978) that had largely excluded women from the work of producing thought and, on the other hand, tried to detect the resources (both practical and theoretical) available to women in order for them to recognize their subordinate status and voice their perspective.

Actually, from an epistemological point of view, the seminal goal of WS was to bring women's lived-experiences and, indeed, *different voices* into all branches of knowledge – where an alleged neutrality prevails and, insofar as it is overlooked, needs to be unmasked. "Objectivity" might then be reframed as "male subjectivity" (Caplan, 1988), so that even the supposed

gender-neutral meanings of many terms that are crucial in both scientific discourse and ordinary language (Fox Keller, 1985) actually hide the construction of gender identity as shaped by power dynamics. For example, terms like “man” and “mankind” (for “human being” and “humankind”, respectively) encode a male worldview, thus contributing to perpetuate the objectionable idea that men include all humans and that women’s role and existence are virtually invisible.

Such emphasis is in accordance with the phase the feminist movement was then undergoing – i.e., its passage from a first-wave equality approach to a “difference feminism”.

In 1981, the prominent philosopher of education Jane Roland Martin wrote: “Plato was wrong when, in Book V of the *Republic*, he said that sex is a difference which makes no difference. I do not mean by this that there are inborn differences, which suit males and females for separate and unequal roles in society. Rather, I mean that [...] there are sex differences in the way people are perceived and evaluated and there may well be sex differences in the way people think and learn and view the world. A conception of the educated person must take these into account” (Roland Martin, 1981, 109).

With this, she aimed at throwing light on the fact that the circulating ideal of “educated person” (as envisaged by R. Peters) was embedded in a male cognitive perspective and that this unconsidered bias harmed both sexes. In her own words: «When sex or gender is thought to make no difference, women’s lives, experiences, activities are overlooked and an ideal is formulated in terms of men and the roles for which they have traditionally been considered to be suited. Such an ideal is necessarily narrow for it is rooted in stereotypical ways of perceiving males and their place in society» (*Ibidem*).

Similarly, in her 1982 milestone volume, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, Carol Gilligan criticized Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, challenging the all-male research sample. Namely, she pointed out that, since his standards of moral growth are only derived from interviews to male subjects, the different ethical insights possibly stemming from women’s experiences remain unseen. Instead, in Gilligan’s long-standing research, women’s voices seem to suggest different ways of experiencing morality as well as one’s own self in relationship with others. In fact, she claims that precisely this inclusion of different voices enhances both women’s and men’s lives. Put differently: “If the omission of half the human population was not seen, or not seen as significant, or not spoken about as a problem (by women or men), what other

omissions are not being seen? [...] The contribution of women's thinking [...] is a different voice, a different way of speaking about the relationships and about the experience of self. [...] Listening to girls and women, we have come to listen differently to boys and men. And we have come to think differently about human nature and the human condition, and in turn, about psychology and education, disciplines devoted to understanding and improving human life" (Gilligan, Ward, MacLean Taylor, 1988, V).

On the same wavelength, in the following years, Marie Field Belenky *et al.* examined the "ways of knowing" of a diversified group of women. Their focus was on identity and intellectual development as they emerged from the women's narratives of their own "powerful learning experiences" (including motherhood). Their 1986 work – *Women's Ways of Knowing* – soon became another landmark place in the pathway of feminist epistemology insofar as, by listening to the voice of women, «some common themes emerged, themes that are distinctively, although surely not exclusively, feminine» (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, 191).

Along the same line of thought, many feminist scholars have since tried to reorient traditional disciplines through the so-called "prism of sex" (Sherman & Torton Beck, 1977), thereby also developing "different" vocabularies, methodologies, and epistemologies in many areas including educational practice and pedagogy.

To this respect and in response to the historically masculine bias of the academy, an educational movement known as "feminist pedagogy" arose in the late twentieth century. The phrase, forged by the feminist artist Judy Chicago in the 1980s, calls for developing new teaching models possibly challenging the dominant educational approaches.

Feminist pedagogy can be considered as a form of critical pedagogy since it recognizes a "hidden curriculum"¹ and the relevant authoritarian tendencies to be disclosed in learning settings. In fact, it revolves around the factors influencing how knowledge comes to exist and, secondly, aims at developing the consciousness of one's freedom constraints as well as possible engagements in a transformative action in the world (also see Paulo Freire). In other words, feminist pedagogy «acknowledges the existence of oppression as well as the possibility of ending it, and foregrounds the desire for and primary goal of social transformation» (Robbin, Sapp – Licon, 2009, 3). However, due to its explicit foundation in WS, feminist pedagogy stresses how the social construction of gender necessarily entails power relationships. Therefore, the alleged neutrality of traditional educational

settings deserves an effort of “deconstruction”. Consistently, such critical pedagogy puts a peculiar stress on schools and academic settings reproducing and reinforcing gender inequality as well as public/private, reason/emotion, and, primarily, masculine/feminine oppositions – the former element being considered as more valuable in each case.

In practice, the feminist pedagogy mode of teaching and learning – frequently employed in WS classes (and not only) – orbits around transforming learners from objects to subjects, making them respect differences, being empathetic, and achieving mutual goals (see also Carl Rogers). Feminist pedagogy is indeed a kind of participatory learning, where personal experiences are valued (hence the relevance of narrative methodologies) and critical thinking is encouraged. The classroom is therefore shaped as a “liberatory environment”, where persons learn to be «connected in a net of relationships with people who care about each other’s learning» (Shrewbury, 1997, 166). Insofar as feminist pedagogy aligns itself with other forms of critical pedagogy (including those focused on race and ethnicity, class, post-colonialism, and globalization), it focuses on educating the oppressed through strategies aimed at both empowering the self and building community.

The aim of this paper is to pose questions for philosophers of education and, since feminist pedagogy is above all an alternative instructional model; posing questions for practitioners, it is not the specific topic of this paper. However, it underlies an intriguing theoretical approach which unfolds through two interwoven points:

1. a specific philosophy of education, in particular of adult education, driven by a focus on the relational and affective dimensions of learning (Taylor – Tisdell, 2000);
2. a challenge to the claim of “truth” and “objectivity” exhibited by the positivist idea of knowledge as if it were the only possible model of scientific knowledge.

Let us now focus our account on this epistemological issue.

Feminist epistemology and the paradigmatic shift

When, in the 1970s, academia was first challenged by feminism and the biases of ‘masculine’ knowledge and women’s invisibility were unmasked, the positivist approach to science was also critically considered, precisely «because the voices of women as an oppressed social group are unlikely

to be heard using such an approach» (Oakely, 1998, 708). This echoes the so-called “dilemma of the qualitative method” (Hammersley, 1989), whereby a kind of knowledge of one’s experiences that is “objective”, valid, and rigorous shall be sought for.

Actually, the early feminist methodology studies strongly refused quantitative approaches and, rather, celebrated qualitative methods as best fulfilling the objective to consider women’s views and insights. In the 1980s, indeed, the quantitative/qualitative dualism was of paramount importance and became inextricably bound up with the key contentions of WS – i.e., traditional modes of knowledge ignoring or marginalizing women and their relevant issues as bodily lived-experiences, emotions, and caring.

The idea of a “feminine theory” is, therefore, closely linked to the twentieth century criticism to Enlightenment epistemology, i.e. to the positivist idea of knowledge, and the following “paradigmatic shift”, which conveyed the idea of different possible paradigms in science². Such idea implies several options for inquiry, since each paradigm underlies several philosophical assumptions about reality and knowledge (Creswell, 2007; Guba – Lincoln, 1994, 2005).

With regard to human sciences, which encompass our focus, it is worth stressing that such paradigmatic shift is rooted in the nineteenth century *Methodenstreit* deriving from Dilthey’s distinction (further developed, among others, by Windelband and Rickert as well as Gadamer) between “understanding” and “explanation”. Dilthey opposed natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) to human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and argued for the autonomy of the latter due to the peculiarity of its subject matter, i.e. the “human spirit”. In fact, whereas natural sciences aim at providing a causal explanation (Erklären) of the sensory experience, the goal of human sciences is understanding (Verstehen) the inner experience.

Since then, the proper methodology for human sciences and their relationship with natural sciences has been a controversial issue.

Thanks to the paradigmatic shift, the focus on understanding has been expanded. In particular, the positivist approach appeared inadequate to disclose people’s lived-experiences and to empower them to change their world including, first and foremost, themselves. It, therefore, also seemed inadequate to explore educational issues since, as in the above-mentioned Gilligan’s approach, a theory of education is precisely devoted to understanding and improving human life.

Moreover, in these last few decades, understanding has been stressed

as the task of educational knowledge due to its connection with empathy. Indeed, an empathetic and not intrusive way of knowing is emphasized by the post-positivist approaches to human sciences, together with meaning-making and new forms of knowledge. Such epistemological hints pave the way to supporting committed social movements (as, explicitly, in critical theory) aspiring to contribute to social justice. Hence, the convergence with early feminist epistemology clearly emerges.

While the opposition to positivist epistemology has not come from feminism alone but, also, from critical theory, post-structuralism, critical psychology, ethnography, and other approaches denying a “neutral knowledge”, the 1970s and 1980s feminist scholarship undoubtedly introduced new themes in this debate. Most of all, it became clear that the quantitative/qualitative dualism is paralleled by other oppositions: masculine/feminine, public/private, rational/intuitive, intellect/feeling, social/natural, objective/subjective, separation/fusion, autonomy/dependence, voice/silence, etc. In other words: «Feminism and the so-called postmodern turn in the social sciences represent a serious challenge to the methodological hegemony of neopositivist empiricism» (England, 1994, 81).

In particular, within the framework of such challenge, the feminist notion of “positionality” seems to be particularly precious. The term reveals each knowledge as always “situated”. This is neither a threat nor a danger but, indeed, a powerful resource since the bodily, historical, and social contexts are the very requisites for understanding.

In fact, whereas the traditional positivist and neopositivist research methods consider true knowledge as a faithful mirror of the objective order of things (“the world out there”) and the researcher as a detached expert, the feminist epistemological project, instead, entails that all humans, including those of us who are engaged in both theoretical and empirical studies, are «differently positioned subjects with different biographies; we are not dematerialized, disembodied entities» (*Ibidem*, 248). Therefore, the identity of the researcher (as well as of each participant in an empirical research) does affect the inquiry. In other terms: «Within positionality theory, it is acknowledged that people make meaning from various aspects of their identity» (Kezar, 2002, 96).

This implies the awareness that knowledge is always partial as well as the need to consider “where we are situated” as we try to understand. In fact, some feminist scholars have further developed the positionality approach into the “standpoint theory”, whereby an «attempt to explain the

relationship between the production of knowledge and practices of power» (Harding, 2004: 1) is made.

In general, in developing philosophical frameworks for making sense of sexual difference, many feminist thinkers have dealt with the notion of positionality to consider the relationship between corporeality and personal identity. For example, in 2006, Linda Alcoff presented gender as «a position one occupies and from which one can act politically» (Alcoff, 2006, 148), thus arguing that the subjective experience of being a woman and the very identity of women are constituted by women's position. According to her, there is an objective basis for distinguishing women and men – on the grounds of their (actual or expected) reproductive roles – which also underlies the cultural and social phenomena that “position” women and men.

Along this line of thought, feminist theorists are currently devoting a new attention to the body and its role in constituting our sense of self and our attitude to relate to others – which seems to be an opportunity for further studies.

However, the stress on positionality also implies some risks for education. Such risks can precisely be avoided by considering the history of feminist theory as well as some of its current developments and contradictions. Let us briefly consider the threats specifically relevant to our topic.

Upon envisaging a feminine theory of education, we must, first of all, avoid any stereotyped image of “femininity” or biological essentialism – which has both been a polemical target and a trap of feminist epistemology. Actually, it is well known that early feminists regarded the body with great suspicion insofar as they aimed at liberating women from their reproductive tasks and at pinpointing the rational capacities of a human mind as well as human dignity independently of corporeal differences (see M. Wollstoncraft).

In other words, early feminist scholars rightly considered it essential not to “naturalize” and, so, hierarchize the sexual difference since, by refusing to view the body as a destiny, they broke all deterministic links among bodily characteristics, mental faculties, social roles, and personal dignity. However, the role of the body in one's personal identity and capability to know should not be neglected, otherwise the old mind/body dualism and the relevant underevaluation of emotions in human thought (against which feminist theorists have long argued, see: Jaggar, 1997) are repeated and re-endowed.

Secondly, the view that men and women are two separate blocs – “sexual differentialism” (Badinter, 2006) – should be avoided too. Indeed, as “cultu-

ral differentialism” considers cultures as bound entities keeping “us” separate from “them”, sexual differentialism keeps women separate from men, thus making it impossible for them to communicate and to learn from each other. In both cases, the groups are not hierarchized but, insofar as a within-group homogeneity and a between-group separation are argued, there is no room for a dialogue among differences.

Some feminist theorists, indeed, have claimed that we need a feminist epistemology to replace the masculinist one that has ruled for so long; they have, therefore, exalted the “female” virtues of nurturing, relatedness, and community as opposed to the “male” values of domination, rationality, and abstraction (Hekman, 1990, 5). In fact, the WS approach might even envisage a reversal of the male-oriented mode of thought, thus privileging the female perspective over the masculine. However, once again, this implies re-endowing another dualism, i.e. the male/female.

Finally, what seems to most jeopardize the possibility of a meaningful feminine theory of education is the postmodernist perspective that some feminist thinkers have embraced.

At a first glance, due to their common critical approach, feminism and postmodernism seem indeed to share several points. On the one hand, following Nietzsche and his hermeneutics (according to which “there are no facts but only interpretation”), postmodernism questions the Enlightenment epistemology, thus facing up each kind of foundationalism and essentialism. This is also the reason why the above-mentioned paradigmatic shift is often labelled as the “postmodern shift”. On the other hand, feminism seems to pose a similar opposition to modern thought whereby the notion of positionality is likely to lead to relativism. Both feminism and postmodernism challenge a defining characteristic of modernism, i.e. the anthropocentric definition of knowledge (Heckman, 1990, 2).

However, it is now becoming clear among feminine theorists that the postmodern critical stance and the relevant shift in emphasis from women to gender, albeit useful, may also be dangerous, especially when the materiality of human bodies does not matter at all (as it happens in Butler’s “performative” account of gendered subjectivity). Postmodernism, rejecting all normativity and insisting that we cannot go beyond cultural constructions and interpretations, will not produce viable practical and theoretical programs for the emancipation of women (and men) – which takes us back to WS seminal aim (see: Oakley, 1998b). Namely, the postmodern accounts on gender have fragmented the very sense of female so that, if women have

nothing in common, there is nothing for any feminine theory to be about. More specifically, postmodern feminism entails the “great tragedy” of the “lack of ethical ground” and, then, of the “loss of a sense of public commitment” (Nussbaum, 2000). This makes it impossible to either advocate or reject any particular political action, for example to justify why the destabilization of gender norms is good but, instead, the subversion of justice norms – as social exclusion due to sexual orientation or other forms of violence – is bad³. Both this loss of commitment and lack of ethical ground should be viewed as threats to a possible theory of education.

It is worth stressing here that the paradigmatic shift is not only a “post-modern shift”. Namely, the shifting also concerned phenomenological realism, thus allowing for an epistemological approach that, despite its perspectivism, does not entail relativism precisely due to a specific idea of truth and the recognition of personal body value. Such stress on truth as well as body is the focus of our next paragraph.

The epistemological value of the human body: the phenomenological approach

The paradigmatic shift entails the awareness that there is no single truth and that all truths are partial and incomplete (Denzel – Lincoln, 2005, 189). Such awareness is certainly the manifesto of postmodernism, within which this multiplicity of perspectives implies a most welcome emancipation from the restriction of a single regime of truth.

Nevertheless, the statement about all truths being partial and incomplete may also be viewed as crucial in Husserl's, Heidegger's, and their disciples' phenomenology, although in a very different fashion.

Actually, in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, one of the prominent aspects of Heidegger's teaching is described as follows: «He teaches us to think that truth is both revealing and concealing [...] What is expressed is not everything. The unsaid first brings the said to the word which can reach us» (Gadamer, 1997, 27). Such description of truth as disclosure and “unconcealment” (*Unverborgenheit*), which Gadamer adopts as his own, is in fact a development of Husserl's account of truth. Indeed, without going into the details, it may still be relevant to our topic to highlight the concept of “profile” (*Abschattung*) as central to Husserl's phenomenological method. According to it, reality emerges as only showing a different profile to dif-

ferent persons at different times, which means that every view and insight (both these terms have here a specific relevance) of an object, a person, and the world have their own perspective. There is no view and, therefore, no consciousness (another crucial term in this approach) or possibility of knowing, without a perspective.

Moreover, according to Husserl and his several disciples, each perspective on reality discloses itself from a point, namely a personal body presented as the “zero-point” (*Nullpunkt*) through which all spatial and cognitive (intentional) orientations towards the world are possible and understood. In other terms, the body is our gateway to the world insofar as our awareness of the world, our own self, and the self of others is *embodied*.

Phenomenologists also make a key distinction between the body viewed from a physical point of view, i.e. as a matter like other material things (called *Körper*), and the body considered as lived by a subject (called *Leib* as in *Leben*, to live). This distinction is obviously logical and not factual since each person is at the same time body-object and body-subject. We may even say that each *Leib* is a *Körper*, even though a *Körper* is not always considered as a genuine *Leib* by the person who has it or by the others (as in the case of several kinds of oppression or when a person’s dignity is eclipsed). We may be body but we are certainly more than body insofar as our material existence is lived and inhabited by a consciousness.

In order to describe this peculiarity of the human body, some phenomenologists have used the term “flesh”. For example, according to Edith Stein, our soul penetrates our body to such an extent that the latter can be meant as a “spiritualized body” and the former as a “materialized spirit” (Maskulak, 2007). In the phenomenological framework, this unity is the core of the notion of personhood as well as of knowledge.

Feminist thinkers may all agree on the phenomenological legacy that our body should never be considered as a mere object; however, not all of them might appreciate that, even if the human capacity to know is universal, i.e. equally shared by men and women, yet it is not independent of corporeal differences. Indeed, this certainly applies to our personal dignity but not to our knowing, which does not take place apart from our bodily existence.

Actually, phenomenology helps us recognize that our personal identity, our consciousness, our flesh, and our possibility to understand are all intertwined and mutually engaged.

According to Edith Stein, for example, empathy is the way to get to

know the others – and, thus, ourselves – and precisely starts with a bodily experience (Stein, 2013).

In the same way, in his study of perception, Merleau-Ponty maintains that one's own body (*le corps propre*) is not only a thing, a potential object of study for science, but also a permanent condition of experience, a constituent of the perceptual openness to the world. In other words, we do not *have* a body as we have other physical objects: *my* body never leaves *me*. (Merleau-Ponty 2003). Merleau-Ponty's famous statement "I am my body", therefore, shall be interpreted as advocating more than a merely materialist stance.

As a consequence, since Husserl considers consciousness as intentionality, we can gather that each intentionality is not only socially but, indeed, also corporeally situated, i.e. sexed. And this can be considered as a clear-cut foundation of a "feminine theory" meant as the feminine *view* on education. In fact, it was with the first publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir, where Merleau-Ponty's account on body is developed, that the relation between the body and the self became central in feminist thought. Beauvoir claims that «to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world» (Beauvoir, 1972, 39). What is crucial in her account is that such bodily existence and the point of view it provides are lived differently by men and women.

Her famous claim that «One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman» (Beauvoir, 1972, 295) must, therefore, be understood out of the awareness that the meanings and significance we give our corporeality cannot be disentailed from that materiality, as instead in a postmodern interpretation of gender. Certainly, she aimed at liberating women from all deterministic links among bodily characteristics, intellectual faculties, and social role by, for example, stressing that the experience of embodiment is the product of a given situation whereby women too often live their bodies in an objectified way (as it happens when they internalize the gaze of the others and contribute to make their bodies objects – which is exactly the opposite of a proper phenomenological consideration of the human body). However, she also stresses the differences between male and female bodies as central to men's and women's capacity to know and understand the world. In her own words: «for, the body being the instrument of our grasp on the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another» (*Ibidem*, 65).

Similar accounts have later been developed, as in Irigaray (1985, 1994) who pinpoints that the different morphology of the body is reflected in the different morphology of certain thought processes (Irigaray, 1985, 1994), or in Ruddick (1989) and Muraro (2006) who hint at a specific “maternal thinking” also underlying public issues and, therefore, not merely confined to women. Other more recent thinkers use the phenomenological theory of embodiment to provide a complex and non-reductive account of the intertwining between the material and the cultural in human life. For example, Elizabeth Graz, Linda Alcoff, and Iris Marion Young have carried on the project started by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir, thus making visible the variable experiences of gendered, raced, classed, differently abled and differently aged bodies. In particular, Beauvoir’s account of human embodiment has recently been revisited with a view to arguing for “embodied selves” (Gatens, 2003) and their formation (Uliveri, 2006; Cagnolato, 2010).

To sum up, phenomenology urges us to take what we see and the “position” from which we see very seriously. At the same time, in the phenomenological framework, stressing that reality appears to our situated consciousness thus only revealing some of its aspects does not imply that no reality exists outside of ourselves. Phenomenological perspectivism – the above-mentioned “profile” – is neither subjectivism nor relativism but, instead, is consistent with a realism, as made clear by the Husserl’s insistence that *the things in themselves present themselves to us* (if we are well-disposed and attentive). This is also the reason why the hermeneutics rooted in Husserl’s thought, mainly developed by H. G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur is very different from Nietzschean and postmodern one.

The phenomenological approach prevents educational researchers and practitioners from falling into nihilistic and anti-scientific positions, often supported by postmodernism. As it is well known, postmodern thinkers advocate a constructivist approach, according to which the world does not exist independently of us. Whilst constructivism refutes notions like knowledge, truth, and science, current phenomenology can also be meant as an effort to better understand such terms (Giorgi, 2007). This effort may turn particularly precious for any theory of education today since, in the framework of such phenomenological realism, the challenge posed to education by the postmodern relativism can be met. The same applies to the temptation of a positivist approach, whereby human sciences are flattened out on the model of natural sciences.

Actually, while positivistic epistemology is driven by the principle of domination, the phenomenological way of knowing is guided by the truly pedagogical principle of attention and care (Bellingreri, 2011). Indeed, the phenomenological educational posture «is not interested in “mere facts”, but in their impact on flesh and blood subjects, nor does it attempt to objectivize facts photographically» (Mortari – Tarozzi, 2010, 45), precisely because we are subjects embodied in a world and belong to a history as well as a context.

Concluding Remarks

The notion of women's and gendered ways of knowing was particular influential in the twentieth century. This paper has orbited around a possible feminine contribution for the current theory of education. In fact, I have even wondered whether such contribution is possible and have come to the conclusion that educational theory can considerably benefit from feminist epistemology.

Specifically, I have argued for a feminine theory of education to be envisaged within the epistemological framework of phenomenology. Actually, the seminal project of WS – i.e., fighting women's invisibility and exclusion also from the work of producing thought – can be, together with the phenomenological account of personhood, a precious lens through which contemporary education may be viewed. Indeed, according to both phenomenology and feminist epistemology, the starting point is a deep awareness of our situadeness or “positionality”. The latter is not, within a WS framework, exclusively linked to postmodern relativism which, although fashionable and influential in the current public debate, rather entails some risks for women as well as education.

By recalling the seminal goal of WS and rejecting their postmodern relativistic development, I have also tried to warn against gender blindness and sexual differentialism. To this purpose, what J. Roland Martin says about a fruitful educational setting can apply to an equally fruitful theoretical landscape to be opened: indeed, such landscape should neither be “gender-blind” nor “gender-bound”. A purposeful theory of education, therefore, should not reject the masculinist bias only to replace it with a feminist one (a possible threat deriving from an epistemology where the feminine prevails over the masculine) since this would make it as misleading. The positionality approach might then encourage researchers not

only to bring their own particular “position” into the research itself but also, and more deeply, to think in terms of “multiple perspectives” and “alliances of different viewpoints” (Wolf, 1996).

For all of the above, a feminine theory of education to be implemented today will only truly serve education if it remains open to dialogue with the male difference as well as other differences⁴. Namely, I have argued that *i*) some aspects of reality are more, if not only, visible from a woman’s point of view (existentially and historically, rather than figuratively, meant); *ii*) this feminine perspective does not necessarily imply an opposition with the masculine point of view but, conversely, requires a dialogue with it and may even illuminate it.

Of course, more studies are needed. I have only depicted some traits of a frame still to be developed. For example, new theoretical researches might expand on the peculiar philosophy of education underlying WS and, in particular, recover the sense of their seminal aim to make visible the invisible. Further studies may also explore the relevant potential of phenomenology.

Actually, since the debate on the proper methodology for human sciences started with Dilthey’s work, it has continued to be a controversial issue. Two principal arguments have emerged: on the one hand, human sciences should imitate the method of natural sciences as the only valid model of scientific knowledge; on the other hand, human sciences require different models of knowledge because, as stressed by Dilthey and reinforced in the phenomenological framework, their aim is neither explanation nor empirical description but, rather, understanding and interpretation.

For possible further reflections, we might even add that the former argument is likely to endorse the death of the theory of education, thus solely justifying the validity of empirical sciences, whereas studying education within the phenomenological framework of a feminine theory may provide us with a chance to deepen the criticism to the positivist idea of knowledge as the only context for a meaningful truth.

In this wavelength, it would be helpful to properly consider the renewed interest in phenomenology, in the footsteps of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir, which this paper has only hinted at. The dualisms too often persistent in several educational settings and recalled in this paper – i.e., reason and emotion, justice and care, individuality and relationality, and, last but not least, male and female – might then have a more detailed and specific consideration.

Moreover, I have outlined that new researches on the body are now being developed within a feminine perspective. Some of these explicitly unfold with a specific focus on current educational challenges (Cagnolati, Pinto Minerva, Uliveri, 2007), while other studies engage an active dialogue with critical race theorists (Ahmed, 2000; Gooding-Williams, 2005), as well as with theorists concerned with disability (Inahara, 2009), body vulnerability, aging health, and illness (Toombs 2001; Gonzalez-Arnal, Jagger, Lennon, 2012). Each of these issues deserves a specific consideration for the sake of contemporary education.

Notes

¹ In the framework of critical pedagogy, by “hidden curriculum” scholars mean the set of norms, values, and beliefs implicitly transmitted to students through the rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school. (H. Giroux and D.E. Purpel, 1983). WS on school practices have highlighted a “gendered hidden curriculum” (Jane Roland Martin (1985; 1994; 2000).

² According to Kuhn, a “paradigm” can be meant as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by members of a given scientific community” (1962, 75). When a given discipline moves from one paradigm to another, a *scientific revolution* or a *paradigmatic shift* takes place.

Today, different paradigms – constructivism, participatory action frameworks, ecological approaches, critical theory, etc. – frame and organize both theoretical and empirical research.

³ According to Nussbaum, the lack of ethical grounds in Butler’s writing lead these alleged feminist thinkers into an amoral, non-practical, and “almost autistic path”, namely far from addressing actual questions of injustice harming women.

⁴ Such approach can be recognized in the recent debate on empirical educational research about diverse women’s issues needing diverse research methods, which, as long as they are applied from a “different” perspective, there is no need for the dichotomous «us against them» or «quantitative against qualitative» debates. (Nicole Westmarland 2001). In particular, the contemporary rise of mixed methods in the frame of feminist empirical researches clearly indicates the current effort to dissolve the dualism of the qualitative/quantitative that occupied many methodology debates within and against feminist approaches in the 1980s and 1990s.

Author’s Presentation: Giuseppina D’Addelfio is Professor at University of Palermo.

References

- AHMED, S. (2000), *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, Routledge, New York.
- ALCOFF, L. (2006), *Visible Identities, Race, Gender, and the Self*, trans. by Oxford University Press, New York.
- BADINTER, É. (2006), *Dead End Feminism*, trans. by J. Borossa, Polity, Oxford.
- BELENKY, M.F., CLINCHY, B.M., GOLDBERGER, N.R., TARULE, J.M. (1986), *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Basic Books, New York.
- BELLINGRERI, A. (2011), *Pedagogia dell'attenzione*, La Scuola, Brescia.
- BUTLER, J. (1993), *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "sex"*, Routledge, London.
- CAGNOLATI, A. (2010), *La grande avventura di essere me stessa. Una rilettura di Simone de Beauvoir*, Aracne, Roma.
- CAGNOLATI, A., PINTO MINERVA, F., ULIVERI, S. (eds.) (2013), *Le frontiere del corpo. Mutamenti e metamorfosi*, ETS, Pisa.
- CAPLAN, P. (1988), "Engendering Knowledge: The Politics of Ethnography", *Anthropology Today* IV, 8-17.
- CRESWELL, J. (2007), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Choosing among five traditions*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- DE BEAUVOIR, S. (1972), *The Second Sex*, trans. by R.G. Hail, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- DENZIN, N.K., LINCOLN, Y. S. (2005), *Paradigms and perspectives in contention*, in N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 183-190.
- ENGLAND, K. (1994), "Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research", *The Professional Geographer*, XLVI, 80-89.
- FOX KELLER, E. (1985), *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- GADAMER, H.G. (1975), *Truth and Method*, Continuum, New York.
- GATENS, M. (2003). *Beauvoir and Biology: a Second Look*, in Card C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 266-285.
- GILLIGAN, C., WARD, J.V., MACLEAN TAYLOR, J. (ed.) (1988), *Mapping the Moral Domain. A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education*, Harvard University Press.
- GILLIGAN, C. (1982), *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press.
- GIORGI, Á. (2007), "The Contrasting Approaches of Postmodernity and Phenomenology to the limits of the empirical paradigm in psychology", *Encyclopaedia*, XXII, 31-52.
- GIROUX, H., PURPEL, D.E. (ed.) (1983), *The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education: Deception or Discovery?*, Berkeley, McCutchan.
- GONZALEZ-ARNAL, S., JAGGER, G., LENNON, K. (ed.) (2012), *Embodied Selves*, Palgrave MacMillan, London.

- GOODING-WILLIAMS, R. (2005), *Look, a Negro: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics*, Routledge, New York.
- GROSZ, E. (1994), *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press.
- GUBA, E., LINCOLN, Y.S. (2005), *Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences*, in N. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (3rd ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 191-215.
- HAMMERSLEY, M. (1989), *The Dilemma of Qualitative Methods*, Routledge, New York.
- HARDING, S. (2004), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, Routledge, New York.
- HEKMAN, S. (1990), *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Polity, Oxford.
- HUSSERL, M. (2006), *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. by I. Farin, J. Hart, Springer, Dordrecht.
- INAHARA, M. (2009), *Abject Love: Undoing the Boundaries of Physical Disability*, VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken.
- IRIGARAY, L. (1985), *Speculum of the Other Women*, trans. by G.C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- , (1994), *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. by K. Montin, Routledge, London.
- JAGGAR, A.M. (1997), *Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology*, in D. Tietjens Meyers, *Feminist social Thought: a Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 384-405.
- KEZAR, A., "Reconstructing static images of leadership: An application of positionality theory", *Journal of Leadership Studies*, VIII, 94-109.
- KUHN, T. (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- LINCOLN, Y., GUBA, E. (1994), "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research", in N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Thousans Oaks, CA, Sage*, 105-107.
- MASKULAK, M. (2007), *Edith Stein and the Body-soul-spirit at the Center of Holistic Formation*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, M. (2002), *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by D.A. Landes, Routledge, New York.
- MORTARI, L., TAROZZI, M. (2010), *Phenomenology and Human Science Research Today*, Zeta Book, Bucarest.
- MURARO, L. (2006), *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma.
- NUSSBAUM, M. (1998), *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Harvard University Press.
- , (2000), "The Professor of Parody", *The New Republic*, Nov. 28, 2000, 37-45.
- OAKLEY, A. (1998a), "Gender, Methodology, and People's Way of Knowing: Some Problems with Feminism and the Paradigm Debate in Social Science", *Sociology*, XXXII, 4, 707-731.
- , (1998b), "Science, gender and women's liberation: an argument against post-modernism". *Women's Studies International Forum*, XXI, 2, 133-146.

- RICOEUR, P. (1991), *From Text to Action*, trans. by K. Blamey, J. Thompson, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.
- ROBBIN, D., SAPP, A.D., LICONA, C. (ed.) (2009). *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ROLAND MARTIN, J. (1981), "The Ideal of the Educated Person", *Educational Theory*, XXXI, 2, 109.
- , (1985), *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- , (1994) *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum*, Routledge, New York.
- , (2000), *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy*, Routledge, New York.
- ROSE, E. (1990), *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action*, Routledge, New York.
- RUDDICK, S. (1989), *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston, Beacon Press.
- SHERMAN, J., TORTON BECK, E. (1977), *The Prism of Sex: Essays in Sociology of Knowledge*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin.
- SHREWBURY, C. (1997), "What is Feminist Pedagogy", *Women Studies Quarterly*, 1, 166-173.
- SMITH, D.E. (1978), "A peculiar eclipsing: women's exclusion from man's culture", *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, I, 281-296.
- STEIN, E. (2013), *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. by W. Stein, Springer, Dordrecht.
- TAYLOR, E., TISDELL E. (2000), "Adult Education Philosophy Informs Practice", *Adult Learning*, XI, 6-10.
- TOOMBS, K. (2001), *Handbook of Phenomenology and Medicine*, Springer, Dordrecht.
- ULIVERI, S. (2006), *Femmes et jeunes filles. Costruzione dell'identità di genere ed educazione nell'opera letteraria di Simone de Beauvoir*, in C. Covato (ed.), *Metamorfosi dell'identità. Per una storia delle pedagogie narrate*, Guerini, Milano.
- , (2007) (ed.), *Educazione al femminile*, Guerini, Milano.
- WESTMARLAND, N. (2001), "The quantitative/qualitative debate and feminist research: a subjective view of objectivity", *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2 (1), 13.
- WOLF, D. (1996), *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, Boulder, Westview Press.
- YOUNG, I.M. (2005), *On Female Body Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.