

Chapter Eight

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A WOMAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF FEMINIST STUDIES

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The real courage begins when we refuse
to treat life as a series of missed opportunities...

E. Cioran, *Solitude et destin*

Writing this text I am attempting to reflect on the autobiographical dimension of my research work. I am trying to express this reflection *in extenso*, as honestly as I can. I will start with writing in the first person. In this way, I am trying to achieve symbolic empowerment of myself with a view to carry out self-identification as a social researcher, and also a feminist.

My academic achievements are thematically very diverse. I have written on various topics: pop culture, narcissism, taboo... And all this was born out of me (to paraphrase Adrienne Rich),¹ but I have to admit that I do not feel the satisfaction of the published books and articles. On the contrary, I have always had a sense of 'insufficiency' concerning words, some unsaturation, fragmentation. I have longed for something and it has been the kind of longing which makes one sad, because it results from knowing that you can (you could) avoid this yearning, but for the lack of courage. Today—to a significant degree thanks to my readings²—I have

¹ I refer to the title of a book by Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (1986).

² My most important recent readings have been the essays by, among other authors, bell hooks, Carolyn Ellis and the aforementioned Adrienne Rich. An important source of

enough courage to admit that I was not convincing enough for myself in what I did; and I was not convincing because I did not realize the potential that I have; that is, I did not use the potential of my autobiographical experience. It comprises, first of all, the experience of being a woman; a woman at the university, a sociologist, a researcher. These experiences are important because they determine my sense of identity.

Write Myself, Write with Myself

Despite the fact that for several years I have been dealing with sociological and anthropological analysis of the phenomena of contemporary culture, I have not written *explicite* about experiencing the reality (social, academic) from the point of view of a woman; a woman who wants to express something with her own voice, but instead of speaking she remains silent or talks about something else. I denied myself the right to speak of what I wanted to say. I was looking for 'substitutional' subjects, I imitated the language foreign to me, I learned from others, carefully studying their words, thoughts, and biographies—all in order to get confirmation that what I'm doing meets the criteria of 'scientificity';³ not wondering at all whether or not it is possible to have science existing independent of the knowing subject (Smith, 1990, p. 62).⁴ I shaped my 'professional' biography as well as my research and writer workshop not based on my own experience, but on the knowledge acquired from others, on the methods coined by others and on their mistakes. And one should write 'his/her way,' i.e. write without forgetting about who he/she is. Who am I?

I do not hesitate to place this question (questions are a condition of self-reflexivity), although I am aware of the pathetic tone, which can be caused by the further reflection moving forward in the direction of the most fundamental issues—existential and decisively undecidable. However, the question, 'Who am I?' makes me wonder not so much about the specific statements and visions of my own identity, but the means of

inspiration have been (and are) the biographies of women, including Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt.

³ I used quotation marks because I had (and have) doubts as to how scientificity is defined in social sciences. I wonder whose this scientificity is, since it is not based on the researchers' reflection on the correctness and authenticity of their own work, but from the beginning—as part of the socialization of the university—it has been the result of uncritically inculcated abstract rules, imposed from the outside, without regard to the contexts: situational, historical, political, etc.

⁴ I refer here to a question posed by Dorothy Smith, "How can there be 'knowledge' that exists independently of knowers?" (Smith, 1990, p. 62).

looking for/discovering tips/answers, ways of documenting the process of 'becoming myself.' One of these ways is writing. Thus, in response to the question, 'Who am I?', I can at this point say: 'The one who writes.' What does she write? About what does she write?

Through ethnographic and autoethnographic inspirations I know that one can write *with* experience and *about* experience (Ellis, 2008; 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996). And this is my challenge: to make the autobiographical episodes the source of reflection and inspiration in my work on biographical experiences of women. I would like, using (auto)biographical experience—my own and that of other women—to perform a reflection on the dynamics and contextuality of identity. I am also interested in the language through which the experiences getting into the realm of words become a 'text,' and at the same time are granted the intersubjective availability. Simultaneously, at the time of being articulated and subjected to reflection, these experiences are (re)constructed and lived.

Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 925) notes that "The researcher—rather than the survey, the questionnaire, or the census tape—is the 'instrument.' The more honed the researcher, the better the possibility of excellent research." Therefore, I would like to reach out to others, coming out of myself. To this end, I intend to use writing as a specific method of research, and myself as a tool. My ambition is to write on a road to self-discovery, emancipation (including intellectual and 'professional' emancipation); to write from the point of view of a woman, and more specifically: a woman identifying with feminism.

Feminism—in a general, broad sense—I understand as a social philosophy and political movement;⁵ first of all questioning the androcentric social order (disagreement to defining male as universal and neutral), and second: postulating to replace the patriarchy and male domination with gender equality.⁶ In a narrower, more personal sense, feminism is for me the question of the modus of life—a life lived in an autonomous and reflective way; this is a question backed up by the courage to talk about oneself in terms of the subject, as well as to pursue the realization of one's own potential (cf. Braidotti, 1995, p. 34). My feminism I would include into the "third-wave feminism" (Starr, 2000, p. 474), that is feminism

⁵ My understanding of the term 'feminism' refers primarily to the tradition of the 'second-wave feminism,' whose origins date back to the 1960s of the twentieth century.

⁶ The main issues are: equal civil rights, equal rights to work and adequate remuneration, equal political rights, the right to dispose of one's own body, equal access to education. What seems to me to be of particular importance is the feminist demand for the access to science, both when it comes to education and 'pure' knowledge (the possibility of creative work, reading, writing, etc.).

growing out of the criticism of maternal inheritance (the 'second-wave feminism') as a starting point to determine its own identity makes negative identification and is therefore a manifestation of individualism opposed to (forced) community (Świerkosz, 2010).⁷ The process of individuation of a woman feminist is seen in this model as a result of her mis-identification (or an ambivalent relationship) with the symbolic mother and sisterhood, and with other women. It is about the kind of 'disconnection' or 'non-belonging,' which is not the result of exclusion, but voluntary action, and which creates a kind of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 1994). The 'third-wave feminism'—which I think is particularly important—uses the description of the individual experiences of a woman and applies for this purpose the genre of autobiographical essay (Graff, 2003).

Feminist Methodology

Making the reflection on the autobiographical experience an inherent part of my research work, I support—which has been signaled above—a feminist perspective. I'm interested in the reflection carried out using the feminist categories, both in relation to the issues of epistemology and methodology. Behind this decision there are some valid arguments, whose presentation I choose as the main objective of this chapter.⁸ These arguments stem from the following questions: 'What can be offered by the methodology oriented in this way?' and 'What does the feminist perspective give me—a particular researcher?'

An attempt to answer the above questions should start with explaining what feminist methodology is. For this purpose, first of all, I reach for the texts that have already become classics (from the late 1980s and 1990s of the twentieth century), including those by Sandra Harding,

⁷ 'Third-wave feminism' is an umbrella term for a variety of events, attitudes, and practices related to the feminist movement of the 1980s of the twentieth century. We can distinguish three main aspects in it: 1. Emphasis on the problems of women in the least industrialized countries in the world; 2. Criticism of the values dominant at work and in the society; 3. Eliminating barriers to experiencing love and sexual pleasure for women.

⁸ The pedagogical purpose—so to speak—would be to nullify the kind of aversion to anything that is associated with the term 'feminism.' Every time I try to talk about feminist methodology, I come across rather significant reactions. These are usually not so much critical voices as such trying to discredit the methodology practiced by scholar-feminists. What is hidden in these statements is a message not expressed directly, but implying the futility of the research perspective appointed by feminism. It regards more the reservations and doubts about feminism that causes specific negative connotations, than the methodology itself.

Donna Haraway and Dorothy Smith. The texts of these authors not only contributed to the overall interest in the feminist methodology, but also designated the direction of the criticism of that methodology, both outside and within the feminist movement.⁹

The major problem associated with the settlement of what feminist methodology is lies in the fact that even among the feminist-oriented researchers themselves there is no consensus as to one common definition (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 8).¹⁰ Sandra Harding (1987a) asks bluntly, 'Is it a particular method, a set of methods, or a research strategy?' This question remains open, similarly to another one: 'Is it even possible (and advisable) to talk about a methodology common to all feminist researchers?' Jennifer Brayton argues that the ambiguity of structure of the feminist research is the reflection of the ambiguity of feminism as a theory and practice (what seems to be common to the different strands of feminism is the general focus on the category of 'gender' (Brayton, 1997)). Virginia Olesen (2005, p. 236) explains the diversity of the forms of feminism in the following way: "Feminisms draw from different theoretical and pragmatic orientations that reflect national context where feminist agendas differ widely." As it turns out, feminism takes on many forms and it is a dynamic notion subjected to the (continuous) process of *rewriting*.¹¹ In this situation, it seems to be appropriate to display only a certain set of the generally accepted rules that govern the research conduct.¹²

⁹ The preparation of this text—within the elaboration of the primary sources—ran in a chronological order (from the oldest texts to the newest ones). More attention has been devoted by me to classical texts (which contributed to the emergence of feminist methodology) than to the works being a later development, revision and criticism of the primary sources. The discussion of the latest publications on feminist methodology will be the subject of a separate article.

¹⁰ It would be more correct to use the term 'feminist methodologies,' but the literature of the subject has adopted the form of a single 'feminist methodology' (this does not preclude the understanding of the term as a set of different research orientations). This measure itself seems above all to emphasize the close relationship with feminism, and the secondary issue is the complexity and scope of the definiendum. Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland argue that the use of the term 'feminist methodology' is a short-cut and it mainly serves maintaining the simplicity of terminology. This way of comprehension I also adopt for the purpose of this discussion.

¹¹ I realized this while writing this article. The multiplicity of approaches and interpretations of what feminism is (from the perspective of the twenty-first century) calls for a synthetic collective recognition, but at this stage of my research, this task turns out to be extremely difficult and requires more substantial preparation.

¹² My aim is not to present a comprehensive review of feminist research strategies, but to identify several key features, the most important ones from the point of view of the tackled problem, namely the autobiographical contexts of research.

Mary Maynard (1995, p. 106) considers as an important designatum of the feminist methodology "the question we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work." Brayton (1997), in turn, indicates that what constitutes the uniqueness of feminist research are the motives, interests, and knowledge brought into the research process.

Searching for the subsoil supporting the emergence of feminist methodology, without much risk we can accept that what worked here was a mechanism to resist the dominant models of research, previously functioning within social sciences. Their use not only proved to be rather ineffective (no answers to the posed questions), but also revealed the illusory nature of the preconceived assumptions, including those on the neutrality and objectivity of the researcher (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 8). The traditional (sociological) strategies, although they made females the subjects of research, did not take into account their point of view, neglected their experiences, needs, social roles, i.e. all that would make women the actors in the research. Simply put, studies run according to the conventional model produced a male vision of femininity; confirmed (men's) vision of the world in which there was a breakdown by gender, in which the roles were rigidly defined, and the position of women was confined to the place designated by the dominant social order.

Most commonly, the term 'feminist methodology' is associated with the research carried out *by* women, *for* women and *with the participation of* women. It is true that feminist research is focused around the female theme and problematizes different situations of women (the studies include, among other things, the material conditions of women's lives, their status and social roles; relationships with men, children and other women; attitudes towards their own bodies, the problem of identity and subjectivity; and finally: the relationship with their own history). The exploration covers the networks of social relationships between gender and economic forces, family, sexuality, politics, science, etc. The purpose of this research is to create equal opportunities for women to express themselves and to participate in the academic, social and political life. The accent is put on the exploration (listening to) of the things women have to say. Mary Maynard (1995, p. 103) explains, "What was most usefully required was an approach to research which maximized the ability to explore experience, rather than impose externally defined structures onto women's lives. Thus feminists emphasised the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's own description and accounts." For this reason, feminist studies resign from the introduction of pre-categorization. Maynard justifies this decision as follows: "At its heart was the tenet that feminist

research must begin with an open-ended exploration of women's experiences, since only from that vantage point is it possible to see how their world is organized and the extent to which it differs from that of men" (ibid., p. 103). The research pursuit is therefore—generally speaking—mining and understanding the meanings which women attribute to their experiences.

Questions that emerged very quickly from the feminist research were: 'What is meant by a 'woman'?' 'When I say a «woman», do I mean the biological sex or a set of some characteristics attributed to women?' 'In whose name do I actually speak and can I, as a feminist researcher, speak «on behalf of» (all) women?'¹³

The claim that (all) women form one community (due to their gender) share the same social positions that can be studied by a researcher (also a woman) who 'understands' them is incorrect.¹⁴ Women do not have the same experiences and do not form single subjectivity. Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland (2002, p. 8) stipulate, "Feminists cannot speak for 'we humans,' 'we women' or 'we feminists' without specifying the nature and boundaries of the collectivity or category they speak for." Therefore, as it turns out, the category 'woman' is what conditions the complexity of the feminist research. The fact that these studies are done by women and including women cannot be a distinctive trait of feminist research. Gender alone does not guarantee access to knowledge and life of a woman (Olesen, 2005, p. 248). It is rather about not ignoring the differences that exist between women, which relate to both the individual experiences of women and different socio-cultural features (social class, ethnicity, etc.). Olesen explains, "As the concept of a universalized woman or women faded, understanding grew that multiple identities and subjectivities are constructed in particular historical and social contexts" (ibid, p. 241). The focus, therefore, is pinned on the exploration and analysis regarding the reality of the position of individuals or groups, with a strong emphasis on the diversity and differences of biographical experiences. Ilene Alexander points out that feminist thought has many ways

¹³ These questions are very important to me because they cause a series of autobiographical references. My process of individuation as a woman ran in the context of a (strong) opposition to other women and in the general state of loneliness. Particularly painful was experiencing Otherness towards/among women. My feminism was born in opposition not only to the structures of patriarchy, but also to other females, including feminist units organized as a group of women whom I did not want to identify with.

¹⁴ I am skipping at the moment (as falling outside the scope of this text) the discussion on the crisis of representation and legitimacy in the contemporary humanities and social sciences.

of defining the differences; she clearly emphasizes that these are “differences” and not “divisions” (Alexander, 1989, p. 100). It can be therefore assumed that the subject of interest of feminist methodology are different experiences of different women. But only women?

An important finding of the ‘second-wave feminism’ were the categories of a ‘difference’ and ‘gender.’ The concept of the difference, in a broad, general sense, refers to the (dichotomous) division of the world into masculine and feminine. However—according to Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993, pp. 2-3)—the difference is more than a guiding principle regulating and organizing the social life.¹⁵ The difference conditions the existence of a strong relationship between gender and every aspect of life (styles of dressing, speaking, experiencing emotions, etc.). Gender is the socio-cultural sex, understood as a social construct, the relation of the difference between the biological sex and the cultural sex (Chodorow, 1995; Brannon, 2002; Harding, 2008, pp. 110-114). This term refers to features, social roles, behaviors, stereotypes, etc., i.e. a complex set of elements related to the construction of gender (the creation of images, expectations and ideas about gender) in a given society. Gender intersects with the class, racial, sexual, ethical, and regional modalities. The scope and multithreading of this concept result in a situation in which feminism comprises many theoretical and research approaches of this category. Olesen (2005, p. 250) says that “Gender, the workhorse concept of feminist theory and research, also has undergone changes that make contemporary use of this concept much more complex and differentiated than at the outset of the second wave.” Consequently, Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland propose to use in place of ‘gender’ the term ‘gendered lives,’ which—since they consider it to be more accurate—refers to the research concerning the differences and similarities of individual human biographies, relationships, inequality and experiences (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 6). In this way, rather than on gender, we should focus on the specific sub-categories, such as for example: power relations; sexuality and reproduction; sexual differences; the social constructs of male/masculinity and female/femininity; relationships and social interactions; social practices and discourses; corporeality. Clarifying the answer to the question regarding the subject of interest of

¹⁵ Sandra Lipsitz Bem talks about the polarization of kinds, which she includes, together with androcentrism and biological essentialism, to the prisms of a kind, that is, the schemes of thinking, responsible for the preservation of the existing, unequal social order. These prisms, according to Bem, reproduce the male domination in two ways: the cultural and social practices put women and men on uneven positions; and secondly—people in the process of socialization absorb the patterns imposed on them concerning the reception of the world and shape their identity accordingly.

feminist methodology, we can say that now it embraces 'gendered lives,' various experiences of different people (men and women); the experience of what it means to be a woman/man.

On the basis of the outlined attempts to define what feminist methodology is and what its object of study is, I'm now going to tackle three basic approaches that exist among researchers-feminists. I will refer to the already classic proposal of Sandra Harding, who was one of the first to make the epistemological recognition within the feminist methodology (Harding, 1987b, pp. 182 ff.; 1991, pp. 105-137); Harding distinguished the following variations of feminist research: (i) feminist empiricism; (ii) standpoint theory, and (iii) temporary epistemologies (postmodern theories).

Feminist empiricism is an approach whose core aim is active inclusion of women—as actors and researchers—into science. The presence and scientific research activity of women have influenced the improvement of the quality and reliability of scientific knowledge, for many years limited only to the male perspective. For this purpose, it is important to identify the prejudices inherent to the methodological assumptions underlying various disciplines of science. According to female researchers, androcentrism—responsible for blocking women's access to education and inhibiting their development—can be overcome through two complementary ways, namely: empowerment of the perspectives of women researchers in science and the use of more adequate research methods and principles of methodological correctness (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991, pp. 19-50).

The standpoint theory refers to the Marxist thesis of the epistemological superiority of knowledge from the oppressed class; in this case, women are an oppressed class. As Olesen (2005, p. 243) writes, "standpoint research [...] took up the feminist criticism of the absence of women from or marginalized women in research accounts and foregrounded women's knowledge as emergent from women's situated experiences."¹⁶ It is worth noting that these were the advocates of the standpoint theory that "dissolved the concept of essentialized, universalized woman, which was to be replaced by the ideas of a situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her place in the material division of labor and the racial stratification systems." Olesen includes sociologists Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins, political scientist Nancy Hartsock and philosopher Sandra Harding among the main representatives of this trend.

Postmodern theories (the so-called transitional epistemologies) have the form of a loosely associated collection of views; although they refer to

¹⁶ In accordance with the standpoint theory, claims to knowledge are socially situated and some social places are better than others as starting points for the study of particular problems and acquiring knowledge.

feminist empiricism and the standpoint theory, they go beyond those epistemologies (e.g. in terms of language, which according to the postmodern approach is not considered as a representation, a reflection of reality, but as its presentation, and therefore interpretation). Postmodern feminists (such as Jane Flax, Donna Haraway) are skeptical about the idea of common awareness or the unity of women and their experiences; they reject universal (and universalizing) claims about the existence, character and power of reason. They also question the idea that there is such a thing as objective reality. According to Harding (1987b, pp. 186-187; 2008), postmodern theories are relevant to contemporary societies that are in a permanent state of change and crisis.

In view of the previously assumed goal, in the later discussion I will primarily refer to the standpoint theory. It seems at this point the most adequate (most promising) approach for the reflection on the issues that I find interesting, and these are: experiencing social reality from the point of view of a woman and self-reflexivity of a female researcher.

Experience

Personal experience—in line with the thesis: *personal is political*—has gained the status of a significant source of knowledge in feminist research. Its value lies in the fact that from the most original level, the most primary one, it discloses what is important from the point of view of women. Rosi Braidotti (1995, p. 34) considers the experience, and actually the “lived experience of real-life women” as the central concept and the foundation of feminism. She discusses the category of ‘experience’ reaching to the term ‘politics of location,’ coined by Adrienne Rich (1984, pp. 210-231). “The politics of location means that the thinking, the theoretical process, is not abstract, universalized, objective, and detached, but rather that it is situated in the contingency of one’s experience, and as such it is a necessarily partial exercise” (Braidotti, 1995, p. 34). However, this bias has a positive value because it promotes fuller presentation of the reality. Turning the attention to the experience of women (specific, everyday, individual, personal, bodily), feminist researchers want to reach the key knowledge, namely the knowledge of women’s position as resulting from a specific location in the social space. What I know about myself and others is *explicite* determined by my location within the society. Thus, from the perspective of feminism, social research is about the disclosure of the contexts of social activity, especially those areas that have been/are ignored, distorted or invisible in the discourse.

Braidotti (*ibid.*, p. 35) draws the attention to another aspect linking the areas of ‘experience’ and ‘location’ of women. As she states, in terms of the

feminist approach, the main habitat of location is the body: "The subject is not an abstract entity, but rather a material embodied one. The body is not a natural thing; on the contrary, it is a culturally coded socialized entity." The field of particular tension, where the experience and physicality of women are ousted, is provided by science. Dorothy Smith shows, on the example of sociology, that a woman who wants to deal with science is required to suspend the knowledge of herself and of her own sex, in other words, she needs to perform a separation of an intellectual, abstract 'I' from the fleshy, everyday 'I' (Smith, 1990, pp. 21-22). Such a situation causes a kind of split personality. To prevent this, we should not rub out our 'traces' permeating into the language, questions, problems and interpretations, but on the contrary—we ought to knowingly subject them to reflection, and incorporate as an important part of the research work. The category of 'experience' (personal and private) can therefore be regarded not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a method of cognition. As a researcher, I can build something of value in terms of cognitive science, not denying the experience of being a woman. Deliberate 'erasing' of what appears to be personal, emotional, confusing, unnecessary, unsightly, literary, etc., is *de facto* the act of 'blurring' the credibility of the description/picture of reality. Ironically, everything that goes beyond the canon of science in its positivist sense, is significant from the point of view of feminist methodology. When the description of the world is as close as possible to what is manifested in concrete experience, then—as said by Dorothy Smith (*ibid.*, p. 62)—science is reliable. Its primary objective should be the reflection on its own position.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is in the research procedure an essential tool to take care of the quality and transparency of the process. It is not irrelevant to the overall assessment of the objectivity and reliability of the research. For Donna Haraway (1988), objectivity (feministic one) means "situated knowledges." In her opinion, obtaining the 'full,' 'total,' 'all-encompassing' and the so-called neutral knowledge is unrealistic. "Knowledge from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational" (Haraway, 1991, p. 587). One cannot be at the same time in all positions, so only a partial/local perspective offers an objective look. Objectivity is always 'watching from somewhere'; it is not about transcendence and tearing apart the relationship between the subject and object in the study. It is knowledge resulting from looking from a particular social perspective; a look that does not claim to ensure absolute knowledge, but takes the responsibility for that part of reality which it sees and displays. This is

the so-called strong objectivity, arising from the awareness of (one's own) location in the social space (Harding, 2004).

Jennifer Brayton argues that traditional social studies, and the postulate of objectivity preached by them, carry a 'flaw,' because they do not take into account the basic notion: they do not see how their own assumptions (prejudices, opinions, etc.) influence the research process, from the selection of the study subject, to the final presentation of the results (Brayton, 1997). An important consequence associated with a privileged position of a scientist-researcher is highlighted by Smith. In her view, a description/voice of a researcher is socially privileged; in the sense that it is spoken from the position of an authority, or someone to be listened to/to be heard, because his/her voice is loud (louder than the voices of others). Critique usually misses the fact that the voice of a scholar is not the only version of what is 'real,' 'true,' and 'objective,' but since the other voices are less audible (or even inaudible at all), they are not taken into account (Smith, 1990, p. 33).

According to the point of view of feminists, a research method that leads to acquiring reliable knowledge is the use of critical thinking. This reflection takes place in two ways: "It can mean reflecting upon, critically examining and exploring analytically the nature of the research process in an attempt to demonstrate the assumptions about gender [...] relations which are built into a specific project. It may also refer to understanding the 'intellectual autobiography' of researchers" (Maynard, 1995, p. 108). Reflecting upon the autobiographical dimension of the research work is significant because life experience of the researcher affects the analytical process and, eventually, the interpretation and the derived conclusions. In various feminist studies, according to Maynard, gender is not perceived just "as something to be studied, but as an integral dimension of the research process which itself is to be examined" (ibid.).

Language

The situation of conducting a study means for a female researcher directing special attention to the linguistic methods used for constructing and attributing sense to specific experience on the part of women. In order to make this possible, an essential element is not only the use of the language that is understood by both the informer and the researcher, but also the existence of such a language that allows women to express themselves in a manner acceptable to them. The problem is—according to Lucyna Kopciewicz (2003, p. 25)—the "non-existence of an alternate language that you can use to be more adequate (not referring to the existing meanings of femininity) while describing specific female experience."

Marjorie DeVault (1990, p. 96) notes that it is impossible to mirror the specificity of women's point of view without the simultaneous acquisition of the dominant language, which still remains the language of the male discourse. From a feminist point of view, the language used by men cannot be also the language of women, for instance because it ignores or devalues the experience of women; what is female is located outside the framework of rationality, logic or science. Within the discourse practiced by men, women's point of view, and thus also the way of speaking and writing characteristic for women, remains on the margins of what is valuable. Since they do not fit the categories typical for the male discourse, women's narratives appear to be chaotic (hysterical), incidental or even insignificant. This is the source of women's hardships in speaking and writing with their own voice; in expressing their own experience; and also with the free manifestation of "their own vision of the world, different from the male patriarchal one" (Ślęczka, 1999, p. 413). Hence, this is also the origin of the 'complex of a female author' and the absence or marginal position of women in traditional historiography. For feminism, it is the argument confirming the thesis that the traditional historical discourse makes a continuous story of the male experience. Women, to communicate their visions of the reality, to become 'audible,' must mimic male language, need tools for 'translation' or appropriate adaptive techniques, otherwise they are condemned to silence or being misunderstood. An interesting example of an adaptive technique of female authors is given by Virginia Woolf (1989 [1929], p. 74), who writes, "She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis", and further on: "She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others" (ibid.). Woolf, on the example of literature and women's writing, shows that the values relevant from the point of view of women do not coincide with those valid for men, and that is why women—in order to reach positions of writers—were forced to adjust their visions to the requirements of the ruling authority.

Feminism offers a chance to 'recover' women's history. *Herstory* (or actually *Her story*)—the category created as a result of playing with the meanings grown from the word 'history' introduced by Adele Aldridge (Marzec, 2010, pp. 34-43)—is a way to run a narration from the point of view of women, a microperspective, allowing for analyzing female characters, through the story of what has been hitherto ignored (Kusiak, 1995). Natalie Zemon Davis implies that one can write history changing not only the object of study, but also the language of description (Świerkosz, 2010). What is likely to happen, therefore, is going beyond the definitions of woman in terms of negation or reversal of the male pattern. Feminist

research pursues launching alternative, feminine discourses, and indirectly—liberating from the dominant, stereotypical patterns of speaking and writing about women and on their behalf. Monika Świerkosz writes, “What connects various feminist projects researching the past is the common goal—to resist the notion that women do not have their (significant) place in the history, which would make them beings devoid of historical consciousness, uprooted from traditions, disinherited from culture” (ibid.). A similar objective, referring to historical research, also guided the contemporary feminist research, both literary and social. The problem of their own language, the status of women and their presence in the official discourse still persists. The issue of the patriarchal horizon in women’s thinking remains unresolved and it is passed on and perpetuated in the process of socialization and education. A challenge for feminist researchers, therefore, becomes giving women access to the space for free expression and (self)reflection, and for the recovery of *Herstory*. There is a challenge and a need for writing about the experience of women, giving their accounts, their stories.

One more matter is undeniably important for female researchers. I mean here the awareness that the separation from the (male) language, as well as the methods of cognition and theories organized by the patriarchal rules, cannot be tantamount to abandoning science. It is therefore essential, being a feminist, not to exclude oneself, not to hide in hermetically sealed enclaves, available only to groups identifying themselves with the postulates of feminism.¹⁷ The idea of modern science should not be reduced to a ‘role reversal,’ i.e. the substitution of the so-called male science with the female science. In feminism—as argued by Evelyn Fox Keller (1985, p. 3; quoted after Ślęczka, 1999, p. 432) (a representative of feminist empiricism)—it is all about “eliminating the absence of women in the history of social and political thought.” To put it more generally, the feminist vision of science seeks to integrate different aspects of the human experience: both male and female. It involves not only tracking the mechanisms of discrimination/marginalization of women in science, but also active and systematical integration of their potential, knowledge and experience into science. The task of feminist researchers in this situation is broadening the field of science with views and reflections represented and established by women.

¹⁷ It is true that within feminism there are voices that call for escapism from the world of men and, therefore, also from the science cultivated according to the androcentric perspective. For example, Mary Daly postulates the creation (by women) of a new living space designed exclusively for women.

Feminist Imagination

In the presented text, I attempted to meet two goals. First, I tried to articulate and organize the main themes of the feminist methodology, with the emphasis placed on the emanation of arguments that can be directly applied to the biographical studies of women's experiences. I figured *experience*, *reflexivity* and *language* as the most important categories. These categories I adopted as valid also for the level of analysis of the researcher's role and location in the research project. Second, my aim was to launch a process of self-reflection over the autobiographical dimension of my own research, which I link to—in this case—the (continuous) animation of 'feminist imagination.'

Adoption of the feminist perspective, which I support, is the choice opting for connecting the research and pedagogical-emancipation dimensions. The task of conducting feminist-oriented research involves not only documenting various aspects of the reality as experienced from the women's point of view, but it is also about taking a personal, political and committed approach to the world. A part of the pedagogical and emancipatory dimension of feminist works, requiring a strong emphasis, is the above-signaled feminist imagination (Bell, 1999).¹⁸ This category I consider to be a special kind of self-awareness, to be precise—the awareness of one's own position in the social space, which is much more than simply the ability to analyze the social world (history, politics, etc.) in terms of 'difference' and 'gender.' Feminist imagination appears also as specific social sensitivity, manifested, *inter alia*, in the action for equality and fair treatment of people irrespective of their gender, age, and socio-ethnic origin. Feminist imagination is however, above all, courage; courage to make my life the central value; to subject it to creative self-reflection.

The topic proposed by me (autobiographical contexts of feminist studies) was just sketched here. It calls for further analysis and taking up in-depth studies, supported by further reading and critical reflection; however I already feel satisfied due to the fact that I dared to take the challenge of writing from the perspective of a woman. After years of searching, I discover in myself feminist imagination through which I gain new insights both into the research issues that I am interested in (biographical experiences of women) and my own life. In this context, the postulate of Gayatri Chakravory Spivak, calling for 'working on one's own ignorance' has a special ring to it (Spivak, 1990, p. 9). Further results of my work on my ignorance I hope to present in the near future.

¹⁸ It is worth recalling here the competences called 'sociological imagination' and 'anthropological imagination' known in human and social sciences.

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