

Part I

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# Theoretical Foundations



## Chapter 1

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# Feminist Theories and Their Application to Public Administration

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### Introduction

Currently, there is no defining body of feminist theory in the field of public administration (PA). Although PA scholars have researched and written on the topic, the groundswell of interest in a feminist culture has not occurred. Perhaps scholars view theories of PA and feminisms as unrelated; however, this thinking implies that women's issues (which are also men's issues) have little bearing on the field. To the contrary, they have everything to do with PA theory and praxis. Public service depends heavily on women's labor, yet women have been largely excluded from PA discourse until recently. Entreaties to envision a feminist praxis have been met by the empiricist's demands for evidence that such visioning and revisioning will qualitatively and positively alter the PA landscape (Meier, 2003). We submit that a project of this magnitude, a feminist revisioning of PA, is indeed possible, but is the work of generations and one we are beginning none too soon.

The purpose of this chapter is to relate feminist theory to practice in mainstream PA. In the pages that follow, strategies are suggested for achieving a feminist PA along with brief summaries of several, not all, feminist theories. Potential applications of these theories are linked to the work of administration and the administrative state. Suggestions are posed for developing a feminist epistemology as a reference point for a feminist theory of PA.

### Theoretical Framework

The second wave of feminist activism began around the early 1960s with the publication of Betty Friedan's widely read book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan was also a founder of the National Organization for Women, or NOW, which mobilized women to claim their individual and collective personhood while recognizing that male hegemony (patriarchy) was in large part responsible for women's lack of equal status in the workplace and at home. This was both an exciting and a confusing time for many women, who began naming their oppression: rape, sexual harassment, invisibility in the private and public worlds. Women then had lived their oppression but needed the aid of other women to

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finally see it. Scholars, at the time, began thinking and writing about women's oppression, examining the threads that were becoming visible and seeking a paradigmatic framework for the movement. The framework that began to develop became the standpoint epistemology, attributed to Sandra Harding (1987), under which various feminist thematic strands could be seen. Standpoint theory accepts women's viewpoints and experiences as privileged. This privilege emanates from her oppression, because as someone who is marginalized, she sees her oppression and understands her oppressor.

A goal was to identify a covering theory for the signifier "woman," one that would unite women and explain women's struggle for recognition as oppressed. However, there were many critics within the women's movement, most of whom declared the theory essentialist, because it did not account for racially and ethnically diverse women and their long history of working at low-income jobs, often for the women who now sought "freedom." The uses of standpoint theory could be seen as referential in women's political and social recognition and the feminist project. Criticisms of essentialism gave voice to postmodern feminisms (purposely plural), which sought to overcome the proclivity to place one another in categories and to be inclusive of all women. If standpoint and postmodern are considered paradigms, the theories that are discussed below could be claimed as either one or the other.

### Strategies for a Feminist PA

In an earlier article (Condit and Hutchinson, 1997), several strategies were identified to achieve a feminist PA. One is already familiar to PA. It necessitates that women be given access to and encouraged to join the world of work, politics, and knowledge production. This is the "affirmative action" step that moves us toward the liberal feminist goal of participatory equality and is a consistent theme in the scholarly contributions of women to PA journals. Liberal feminists seemed to suggest that this strategy alone would be enough to effect change; however, they were surprised to discover how well women replicated the very boundaries, dichotomies, and exclusive systems they once set out to eliminate. It became clear that simply adding women to preexisting structures would never be enough. Feminists coined a term for this: "add women and stir." Also, adding women to the world of work had little relevance for women who had historically worked all their lives.

Another strategy with relevance to laying the groundwork for a feminist theory of PA exhorts us to reexamine the field's fundamental theories, mechanisms of analysis, and primary values that have given shape to our epistemologies and assumptions, generally and in PA in particular. Sought here is a fundamental shift in human knowledge production that results from "seeing" through the feminist lens. This shift necessitates the recognition that we truly are living in a patriarchal, heteronormative world and, because we would rather not, we are obliged to use a nonmasculinist approach to conceptualizing epistemology and methodology and, in the process, remake ourselves in our own image.

Specific feminist theories that have informed this dismantling and rebuilding of knowledge production are discussed below. However, the implications for strategies for PA are clear. Challenging received methods (e.g., methods of gathering evidence, methodologies, and epistemologies) and revisioning our PA world through a multigendered lens require that we dispense not only with additive notions (e.g., add women and stir) but also with the idea that there is one distinctive way of knowing. Paraphrasing Sandra Harding (1987, p. 6) on the subject, if the defining characteristics of an issue are masculine, the issue's solution will be defined in masculine terms. If knowledge production in scientific inquiry is patriarchal and heteronormative, the results will not only be highly suspect, the picture of the social world we are examining will be utterly incomplete.

## Foundational Theories of Feminism

Feminist epistemologies of organizing, including theories of process and structure, are wide ranging in their explanations of inequality, all suggesting different methods of strategizing for change. The global diversity in feminist theories and praxis has rendered impossible a coherent picture of what the quintessential feminist organization looks like. It is possible, however, to identify some common themes in organizations informed by specific feminist theories.

Liberal feminist organizing, for example, is characterized by a desire to integrate women into preexisting public institutions and to guarantee women the same legal, political, and social rights that men enjoy. Using individual men and the institutions and systems erected by a male-dominated society as the standards for equality assumes that the system is only flawed insofar as it is absent of women.

Liberal feminists are primarily concerned with one objective: to level the playing field for women and men. Liberal feminists see the main goal of the feminist movement in terms of women's social, legal, and political rights. To achieve true equality, therefore, women must infiltrate the public spheres from which they have traditionally been excluded. Because it is the goal of liberal feminists to eradicate gender-specific roles, we should ideally see women's entrance into the public sphere soon followed by men's entrance into the private (domestic) sphere and, eventually, a meshing of masculinity and femininity to the point of androgyny (Friedan, 1981). Nearly 30 years after Betty Friedan's prediction, women have successfully entered the work world—at least in its lower rungs; however, men have progressed only marginally in their involvement in the so-called private (domestic) sphere. As to androgyny, that is being addressed by third-wave feminists.

The fundamental choice to work outside of the system creates a feminist organizing dichotomy: There is liberal feminist theory of organization and, well, everything else. This is not meant to suggest that all nonliberal feminist organizing is alike, or even similar. Nevertheless, the choice to formalize, whether to a lesser or greater degree, is a distinctly liberal choice and one that becomes a defining characteristic of any organization or agency. Feminist organizing can include aspects of two or more feminist theories; in fact,

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most do. However, to say that a fundamentally liberal organization is a feminist organization is problematic on both a theoretical and practical level (see al-Hibri, 1999; Okin, 1999; Shachar, 2001). Indeed, nonliberal feminisms are quite varied in their philosophies and agendas.

Much of contemporary feminist theory sets itself in opposition to traditional liberal feminism. This is true mostly because liberal feminism was the initial spark that ignited the first wave of feminist organizing and played a central role in second-wave feminism in the United States. Eventually, other feminisms came out of and later dramatically diverged from liberal feminism, which was viewed by many scholars as a rather conservative, insufficient approach to fighting gender oppression. Nevertheless, in practice, feminist organizing is perceived as working within a liberal framework.

Unlike liberal feminists, radical feminists claim that gender equality can never be achieved without a complete revolution intended to overthrow the patriarchal world order. All Western institutions are viewed as conceived in patriarchy and designed to maintain the existing order. A core principle of radical feminism is that the sex/gender system is the fundamental cause of women's oppression. Women's oppression is not accidental. Individual men and the patriarchal system intentionally seek to control women through institutions, primarily institutions of heterosexuality and reproduction.

The basic tenets of radical feminism often lead to separatism in organizing. The argument is that if all of male culture is to be rejected, then working alongside men, in a system created by men and for the benefit of men, cannot be of any real value to women. Hoagland (1995) argues that to achieve true liberation, women must collectively abandon the institution of heterosexuality and the false construct of "femininity" so that women's acts of resistance can be recognized and acknowledged as such. Hoagland contends that as long as heterosexuality and femininity (as constructed and perceived by men) persist, women's collective resistance will never be fully realized. On the problem of man's construction of reality and women's collective resistance, Hoagland (1995, p. 178) writes as follows (p. 178):

"Femininity" normalizes male domination and paints a portrait of women as subordinate and naively content with being controlled. . . . Yet if we stop to reflect, it becomes clear that within the confines of the feminine stereotype no behavior *counts* as resistance to male domination. And if nothing we can point to or even imagine counts as proof against the claim that all (normal) women are feminine and accept male domination, then we are working within a closed coercive conceptual system.

Alternatively, radical/cultural feminists argue for a revaluation of femininity and all that is "inherently female," principally women's ability to reproduce. This essentialist argument, made by theorists including Susan Griffith and Adrienne Rich, suggest that woman's true power lies not in her ability to hold political office or achieve an education in a system that devalues women in the first place, but rather in her ability to gestate, nurture, and mother (literally and metaphorically). Both views, though different in their

conceptions of what is good and bad for women, are similar in that they translate into organizing for change without the “help” of men and outside of the institutions created by them. A more recent entry into the discussion is ecofeminism, which includes claims that the preservation of the nurturing earth and its flora and fauna should be accorded the same reverence as women who reproduce and nurture.

The radical feminist and radical/cultural feminist standpoints would seem of little importance to the field of PA, except that the nurturing quality that radical/cultural feminists espouse has clearly been adopted as situated space for women who are encouraged to contribute to the management and administration of organizations. This seemingly positive move to bring women into organizational management for their abilities to nurture and mediate is another example of essentialism. As noted, essentialism means that the category “women” is essential and necessary for focusing attention on women’s suppression. However, its detractors claim that corraling all women into one category, or even several categories, denies women their many and varied differences, including race, ethnicity, culture, age, education, and so on. The argument opposing essentialism has to do with marginalizing women by categorizing them, often negatively.

One of the most controversial questions in contemporary feminist thought was introduced by postmodern feminist scholars: How do we deal with the issue of difference among women? Postmodern feminisms, which focus on the value of difference, argue that the search for one, common feminist standpoint or “reality” is not only futile but just another example of how male language and culture attempts to erase the valuable differences that exist among women and among women and men. Rejecting radical/cultural feminism, which focuses on women’s sameness, postmodern feminists value difference as a tool that allows women as “outsiders” to criticize the conditions and consequences of the dominant culture (heteronormative patriarchy). This view allows us to embrace our differences and ideally creates an open flow of ideas that include respect, diversity, and acceptance.

Perhaps postmodern feminism’s greatest contribution to feminist theory and praxis is its recognition that a new feminist movement, a third wave of activism in the United States and elsewhere, must include the insights, participation, and leadership of an entirely inclusive movement. On recognizing the importance of diversity among women, postmodern feminists embrace the view that most differences result from socialization and our own unique location(s) in a particular place and time, not unlike Iris Marion Young’s (1994) redemption of Sartre’s notion of seriality (1960). The way in which and the degree to which a woman is oppressed vary depending on multiple factors.

To help understand the complexities of diversity in relation to oppression, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1999) proposes a construct of intersectionality that acknowledges the interconnectedness of ideas and social structures as well as the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, economic class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Intersectionality recasts gender as a multidimensional “constellation of ideas and social practices that are historically situated within, and that mutually construct multiple systems of oppression” (p. 263). Collins’

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theory responds to complaints that the second-wave feminist movement was composed of white middle-class women. Feminist intersectionality theory appears to be compatible with recent treatments of representative bureaucracy that also seek to recognize the potential power of women and minority groups in seeking their social justice ends in a capitalist democracy (see Dolan, 2002.)

Another nascent branch of the postmodern project is queer theory, which critiques and expands our knowledge of sexuality in general (Beemyn & Eliason, 1996) by examining the ways in which different sexualities have historically been and continue to be constructed. The notion of gender, sexuality, and even sex as variable across time and space is a central tenet of queer theory (see Bornstein, 1994; Butler, 1999; Feinberg, 1998; Katz, 1998; Richardson, McLaughlin, & Casey, 2006; Rupp 1999). This variation has important implications for a theory of multigendering in PA, particularly in light of supporting evidence from neuroscience researchers, a point discussed shortly.

### The Feminist Project and PA

We have already witnessed the influences of feminist praxis in PA. The tenacity of feminists (professed or closeted) has forced recognition, if grudgingly, of the social, political, and economic inequities experienced by women; however, most women toil in the lower and middle ranks of management, and only a relative few achieve senior level policymaking positions. Administrative processes have also been influenced by feminist praxis with the addition of the terms, if not the practice of, empowerment, participatory management, and representative bureaucracy, among others. But, these are indeed fragile concepts that are difficult to operationalize in practice!

As previously noted, little attention has been given to developing a feminist theoretical framework for PA. The most that can be said is that a few scholars in the field have written and conducted research focusing on issues related to women, for example, the glass ceiling, pay equity, hiring and promoting women faculty members, and, more recently, emotional labor (Guy, Newmann, & Mastracci, 2008). Camilla Stivers is likely the most recognized contributor to contemporary feminism in PA. She has given scholars and students of PA an opportunity to think about the broader question of women in PA. Stivers (2002, p. 127) writes as follows:

What we really ought to be doing, in thinking about public administration, is examining our simultaneous dependence on and denial of gender dichotomies. My belief is that only by exploring public administration's gender dilemmas, instead of denying their existence or minimizing their significance, will we begin to develop a form of public administration that merits public approbation. Only then will we find paths that lead us toward change.

By revealing the unrecognized masculine and feminine aspects (images) of PA, Stivers prompts public administrationists to examine gender issues. Certainly, an important



contribution has been problematizing for public administrationists the undeniable omnipresence of masculine hegemony in PA. PA is not neutral, nongendered terrain. PA is gendered masculine.

Stivers' work intimates the ambivalence many women feel about feminism, fearing the label as one that will further limit their opportunities while agreeing with most of feminisms' practical aims for workplace equality, domestic job sharing, and political recognition. Women's ambivalence also comes from being reminded repeatedly about the gains women have made in the past 30 years or so. It is true that women are better off in many respects than they once were. However, as long as it is necessary to cite these justifications, there is more work to do. She recommends that public administrationists develop strategies that "destabilize central gendered concepts in the field without being explicitly based on feminist theory" (2002, p. 131) as a way around the antifeminist leanings of both PA scholars and practitioners. This may be strategic in its intent; however, it denies the fundamental importance of calling PA to account for its insensitivity to basic gender inequities. The better alternative, in this view, is to desensitize through knowledge production the language of feminisms with the transparent goal of bringing (women's) truth to power.

In keeping with the objectivist traditions in mainstream PA, women scholars, in particular, have been encouraged to conduct studies that seek to "prove" what is known by women, intuitively and by experience, to be true. For example, in an interesting survey of women and men decision makers in the federal executive service, Julie Dolan (2002) found that both representative bureaucracy and organizational socialization theories apply. Namely, women who have female colleagues and who work in organizations that have some interest in women's issues are more likely to favor spending on programs that are important to women. Women who have few female colleagues and work for organizations that do not have an interest in women's programs tend to make decisions that are more compatible with their male colleagues. Joan Acker (1990, p.139) describes the exceptional woman in powerful organizational positions as a biological female who acts as a social male.

Theorists of representative bureaucracy claim that if the organization is demographically representative of the public it serves, the decisions made generally represent the interests of those publics. This suggests that the representative inclusion of men and women, people of color, different ages, disabilities, and different classes, each "voting" their interests when making policy decisions would result in decisions that favor their respective groups (for more on representative bureaucracy see Keiser, Wilkins, & Meier, 2002; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999).

Alternatively, organizational socialization is the view that workers socialized into the culture of the organization and to the pursuit of the organization's goals will forego their personal values and interests in favor of those of the organization. Dolan's (2002) findings appear to support these competing theories as they relate to the preferred spending choices of women in senior-level decision-making positions in the federal government.

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Will empirical evidence, such as Dolan's, that supports intuitive knowing lead to substantive change? Guidance from scholars is contradictory, confusing, often obscure, and often too radical to find acceptance among most women. Is the organization a neutral construct that is shaped by its occupants, or is it, as many feminists believe, a creature of masculine design, built by men to signify masculine hegemony and carefully constructed to withstand the huffs and puffs of deviants who would question patriarchy? Both the representative bureaucracy and organizational socialization theories, cited above, would presume that the organization is a neutral, nongendered structure.

The notion of the neutral organization is difficult to support, because organizations are the creations of the people they embody. They are like a house, built to the builder's specifications, changed over time by its occupants, but essentially the same core structure. The essential materials of which the house is constructed and its specifications and design are driven by the masculine definition of what a house is. One could argue that here the metaphor falls apart, because what goes on in the house is women's work, the domestic, private sphere. However, housekeeping tasks occur in organizations and have been assumed largely by women. Joan Acker's (1990) influential article on hierarchies, jobs, and bodies argues persuasively for the masculine organization and the deeply gendered structure of modern work life (Lorber, 1990, p. 138). The public/private dichotomy is the basis for this argument (for a readable discussion on this topic, see Fraser, 1997; Stivers, 2002).

Though the public/private dichotomy appears to continue to plague women in social arenas, it too has been criticized as false. For example, male/female, masculine/feminine, strong/weak, and so on are viewed as exclusionary and heteronormative because they do not admit of the vast gray areas in between. If an organization is representative, as in the representative bureaucratic model, all its members should have equal "talk time." However, women and minorities that are socially marginalized may not empower themselves to speak, and men may not give up some of their space to hear them. Apparently, the mere presence of men is enough to silence women. This common behavior is a clear challenge to public administrationists.

Women and men will continue to organize and create policy together; however, for the process to be equitable and for "women's issues" to be clearly defined and heard, it is evident that men must yield the floor. This means going beyond simply creating opportunity. It means literally silencing oneself to make space for others to speak and to take stock of who in one's organization one most regularly communicates with and why.

If we accept that the current organizational paradigm is inherently masculine, even those created by women, then it follows that the only possibility for creating an alternative feminist structure is revolution. Revolution requires a new conceptualization of what it means to come together in common purpose and what the processes for achieving these common purposes would look like. It would result in discarding current organizing models and creating a new feminist ideal (Acker, 1990, p. 154). It should be noted that this idea is not a new one. Another, perhaps more pragmatic, strategy is to envision a new administrative paradigm theorized as an intersectional, multigendered ideal type.

This may eventually lead to an inherently feminist administrative paradigm that does not exclude those who are traditionally marginalized—or *white men*. Suggested here is expanding PA thinking to embrace a new conceptualization of gendered discourse that is, in the broadest sense, both inclusive and multigendered. This ideal type is discussed below.

## An Inclusive, Multigendered Administrative State

In her book, *Brain Gender* (2004), psychologist and neuroscientist Melissa Hines analyzes the role that biological factors, particularly the gonad hormones androgen and estrogen, play in influencing the development of regions of the brain and on behaviors that show sex differences. Hines reviews the popular and scholarly literature on the role that the human brain plays in the determination of gendering the body, or sexing the body as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) describes it, and finds that many of the significant differences that some suggest are present can be ascribed either to methodological issues or, in the cases of earlier works, a lack of empirical evidence.

With advances in basic research on hormones and sexual differentiation of the human brain, it appears that differences in intellectual abilities between women and men are negligible: Ascribed differences, a common one being the notion that men are better than women in mathematics, do not emanate from brain studies, but from social myths. “Few if any individuals correspond to the modal male pattern or the modal female pattern. Variation within each sex is great with both males and females [at] the top and bottom of the distribution for every characteristic” (Hines, 2004, p. 18). This science reinforces earlier propositions that encourage viewing our public selves through a multigendered lens (for a more in-depth treatment of multigendering, see Hutchinson, 2001, 2002).

Hines (2004) notes that sex differentiation involves “a sculpting of the brain by environmental factors including the chromosome environment prenatally and neonatally, as well as social influences and other experiences from birth to death” (p. 214). We are neither completely masculine nor completely feminine but rather embody aspects of both, falling anywhere along the gender distribution (Hines, 2004, p. 18). Perhaps this is one reason why we see such versatile expressions of gender throughout time and space. Postmodern queer theorist Judith Butler (1999) suggests that gender is not just something we possess but rather that which we do. We may gender masculine or feminine or anywhere in between.

This notion of gender as a verb allows us to conceptualize everyone as a virtual drag queen, rendering one’s sexuality and the physical body beneath our “costume” irrelevant. For example, individuals born biologically male engage in certain behaviors because they were socialized as young boys to do so, but there is nothing that says they must be “men” tomorrow. They make the choice to behave as they always have, performing the actions of “real men,” and so, because they give the appearance of “real men” and behave like “real men,” we classify them as men. But transgendered individuals who were born biologically female may be men by gendering male (exactly like biological males). Those who wish to

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socialize as men without revealing their sexual anatomy may do so. Butler takes gendering even further, pointing out that social constructionists who view gender as something we become through socialization, rather than something we are becoming in every moment, are limited in their ability to conceptualize potential for change because construction suggests a definitive final project, whereas performance implies an ongoing process.

We have suggested that sex and gender are one and at the same time, multiple, even evolving, according to Butler (1999). Broad acceptance of this concept offers significant possibilities for PA. The concept is really rather simple. By accepting our multiple permutations we do two things: We acknowledge the devastating consequences of defining each other using the narrow constructs of outward appearances and correct them, and by doing so, we liberate one another to achieve the full range of opportunities for self-actualization—for women, *and men*. And, it is very possible, that our hope for achieving this organizational nirvana lies with those “deviants” who persist in challenging the existing order.

## Summary

Feminisms should not be viewed as separate and apart from the PA discipline or even as merely contributing to the general body of theory in PA. Rather, we contend that the feminist perspective determines the future of the discipline itself. Indeed, the multigendered feminist theory we proposed extends far beyond the realm of “women’s issues” in PA. One would hope that all public administrationists would eventually become feminists and that important PA theories would incorporate feminist perspectives. Moreover, it is time to develop a body of feminist theories of PA as well as a distinctly feminist praxis to add to the considerable body of theoretical work from other disciplines. PA scholars and practitioners owe it to the discipline to become well versed in feminisms sufficient to comprehend and contribute to a nuanced PA feminist discourse.

Several prominent feminist theories have been mentioned, each of which has contributed to the development of a feminist praxis in organizing and each of which can contribute to feminist PA theories. Most notable among them for its influence on PA is the liberal tradition. By pressing for equal pay and equal opportunities to achieve power, liberal feminists have kept gender issues on the table and kept the debate alive. However, radical feminists have pushed the envelope and incited passionate debate while giving women, considered deviant in straight society, a home. We can thank the socialist feminists for reminding us that men should be a part of the feminist PA project, sharing the burden of domesticity in the organization and in the home. But, of all, the postmodern feminists have been the most creative thinkers, challenging us to “think wild.” It is in thinking wild that the most creative work is done. Queer theorists, with their neanarchistic streak, have shown us this and will continue to do so as we become more comfortable challenging early, counterproductive conceptions of sexuality.

Finally, evidence is presented that supports the view that multisexing/multigendering is, as has been previously asserted, a fact as well as a basis for a feminist theory of PA. We

assert that it is up to women scholars, and their male colleagues who recognize the injustice of masculine hegemony in the administrative state (and elsewhere), to keep pressing for a new order that values the diversity that is present in us all. With persistence, a feminist revolution in PA is possible.

## Discussion Questions

1. Standpoint is both theory and epistemology. Explain the differences between these two constructs and the importance of standpoint to the feminist paradigm.
2. Explain the relationship of postmodernism to feminism, particularly in relation to standpoint theory.
3. If postmodernism eschews categories, how are women to achieve their feminist objectives?

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