WS 800-5: Methodology in Women’s Studies Research  

Susan Wendell

In the first section of the course, we will study some basic concepts, controversies and methods in Women’s Studies research. In the second section, we will discuss students’ presentations of examples of research methods employed in an area of special interest to them.

Topics for the first half will include:

1. Differences among Women. How should Women’s Studies research reflect differences among women and take full account of not only gender, but age, class, race, sexual identity, (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion and other aspects of a person’s identity? Is gender still a meaningful category of analysis?

2. Ethics. What is involved in the ethical treatment of people (and other living beings), communities and cultural products during research? What standards of ethics have been developed/adopted by feminist researches? What ethical controversies should researchers consider and take into account? How can researchers avoid or minimize exploitation and appropriation?

3. Quantitative and Qualitative Methods. Why is there controversy among feminist researchers over the ethics and politics of quantitative versus qualitative methods? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

4. Writing with and from One’s Own Experience. Can a feminist researcher use her own experience in creating knowledge without placing herself at the centre of everything she contemplates? What are the ethics of writing and criticism?

5. The Practical Politics of Academia. Caplan’s book presents an overview of academic life for women in Canada. In the seminar, we will also discuss practical strategies for submitting and revising papers, presenting at conferences, publishing, getting recommendations, applying to Ph.D. programmes, job searching, tenure, etc.

6. Work-problems. It is my belief that every person doing creative work encounters work-problems, such as writer’s block, petrifying fear of failure (or success), procrastination, post-partum depression, terror or self-doubt in the face of criticism, and fallow periods in which it seems that the brain has been emptied of all potential. Successful academics rarely speak of their work-problems; their silence tends to isolate students and professors who are having trouble working. What kinds of work-problems typically arise for academics, and for graduate students in particular? How do people cope with and overcome them?

In the second section of the course, students will make critical presentations to the seminar of studies/articles/essays that they particularly admire in their own areas of interest, and the seminar will discuss the methods employed by these examples of research. The purpose will be to help each student begin to find methods for her/his research and to identify and answer the major methodological questions s/he is likely to encounter.