Call for special issue: Feminist participatory methodologies: Creating spaces of inclusion or exclusion?

Feminist epistemology aims to subvert the power-loaded research relationships by engaging in a process of knowledge co-production between researcher and participants (Maynard 1994). This point is also addressed by post-colonial critics, who raise the question of how researchers represent the studied "other", and with what consequences (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Despite an intense theoretical discussion on these issues, the literature on how to operationalize the former principles is quite limited. Arora – Johnson states (2014; 11): “feminist participatory research that has sought to collaborate with local communities has brought about meeting spaces that have shown to make a difference and have given rise to new questions” However, we ask: how do we carry out a socially responsible research that aims at "investigating with the participants rather than about the research subjects" (Riaño 2012)? What forms of inclusionary spaces can be created to co-produce knowledge with the research participants? These are the crucial challenges for contemporary feminist scholars and post-colonial critics that we would like to address in our special issue.

Participation and dialogue have become buzzwords and they have come to mean many different things (Chilvers, 2009). Dialogue, in social science, is conceived as communication among participants that sparks the process of collaborative process of knowledge co-production. Communication is not intended as a one way street from the researcher to the research subject. It is rather the main trigger of a process of co-determination where an array of contingent and experiential types of knowledge is discussed in order to create an inclusive space which reflects all subjectivities involved. This process has the potential to empower both the individual and the group and can lead to a more balanced relation between power and knowledge (Phillips et al. 2013).

Whereas a cornerstone of feminist critical thinking is that knowledge is not objective, scientific validity is still an ideal which we strive forward. To be able to reach this goal we must be clear about the unspoken procedures that we as researchers put in place to create participation (Baxter & Eyles 1997). How do we ensure transactional validity through participation (Cho & Trent 2006)? Scientists turn into facilitators (Chilver 2009), but continue to enact power in an attempt to prompt collaboration among participants. However, often participation remains an ideal: scientists in fact hold power over knowledge production in the writing process and participants are not acknowledged as co-authors. Moreover, a space aimed at mutual learning and co-determination can be encompassed by conflicting interests and can set off tensions. The “co” part of co-production, co-determination, and collaboration can constitute a space of frictions and strains (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2013). Research partners and gatekeepers are however, not "powerless" as they control access to the field and are able to negotiate the conditions of their participation (Riaño 2012). How do we as scientists, facilitators and participants enact counter – power? How do we resolve these challenges through collaboration? And most importantly, in which ways and in which levels do we perform disruptive change in our research milieu?
In this spirit, we invite conceptual and empirically grounded papers on new emerging approaches, tools and methods intended to build dialogue, communicative interaction, trust, mutual learning, and co-determination, giving "an accurate reflection of reality (or at least, participants 'construction of reality)" (Cho and Trent 2006: 322) while at the same time facilitating a less hierarchical relationship between the researcher, the gatekeepers, and the research participants (Riaño 2012).