
Gendered, material, and partial knowledges: a feminist critique of neighborhood-level indicator systems

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Abstract. As researchers and community-based organizations increasingly move toward a more 'holistic approach' to addressing urban problems, the use of neighborhood-level social indicator systems as a tool to inform resident activism is becoming common practice. In this paper, I use a feminist theoretical framework to critically assess the epistemology and methodology of current practices in the use and development of neighborhood-level indicator systems. Using the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership as a framework, I critique the practices of using quantitative, spatial statistics to 'democratize information' within the feminist theoretical debates surrounding the production of knowledge, the use of quantitative methods, difference across gender, essentialism versus antiessentialism, and the discursive production of gender. In so doing, I demonstrate the importance of a feminist theoretical and practical perspective in informing the future development of urban neighborhood-level indicator systems.

Introduction

The turn away from fixed identity categories that have characterized social thought and been influenced by postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial thinking over the last few decades has created what some consider a 'crisis' for modes of thinking engaged in dislodging oppression. Feminism, in particular, appeared to be left without a subject as a result of the interrogation of the desirability and legitimacy of the category 'women.' Yet, as a result of this critical engagement with identity categories, some feminist theorists were able to emerge with a vision of categories as simultaneously socially constructed, materially relevant, and historically contingent. A second, if less immediate, consequence of the turn away from traditional identity categories has been a concern about the relevance of feminist theory. As academic feminism grappled with the complexities these new theoretical commitments posed, many lamented that feminist theory had little to offer feminist praxis. By contrast, however, I argue that a revived, strategic, feminist subject can provide possibilities for feminist praxis. This paper is an attempt to interrogate those possibilities through a critical engagement with techniques of knowledge production for purposes of addressing urban poverty.

Using the practices of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) as an entry point, I offer an analysis that begins to consider the essentialism and/or antiessentialism debates in and through the context of concrete, politically motivated, engagements with neoliberal governance reforms. In particular, I examine the practice of producing new knowledge about people, places, and communities for purposes of alleviating urban poverty.

NNIP is an umbrella organization organized by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, DC. It provides resources, guidance, and networking opportunities for twenty-one urban community-based organizations that house neighborhood-level indicator systems. These indicator systems represent extensive databases of statistical information gathered from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, the US Census, police departments, school systems, hospitals, and health agencies (Kingsley, 1999).

The goal of NNIP and its partner organizations is to foster a holistic approach to community development and poverty alleviation. The drive toward a 'holistic' approach comes as think tanks like PolicyLink and the Urban Institute declare that the 'issue-based' approach of the late 1970s and 1980s was ineffective (Kingsley, 1996; Marsh, 2003). The issue-based approach focuses specifically on sectors, such as transportation, housing, and social services. By contrast, a holistic approach attempts to understand poverty and quality of life as more than just a sum of individual factors, but as an integrated web in which the entire social and physical environment must be addressed. The Regional Equity movement and the Healthy Cities movement are two examples of the holistic approach. The Regional Equity movement, championed by the think tank PolicyLink, works to get activists in urban areas working on individual issues to work together on a holistic agenda. The Healthy Cities movement operates from the foundation that physical health is about more than health care:

"people are healthy when they live in nurturing environments and are involved in the life of their communities, when they live in Healthy Cities" (Healthy Cities, 2006). NNIP is similarly inspired by a desire for a holism in addressing urban poverty, and works toward this goal by serving as a 'one-stop shop' (Kingsley, 1999) for a variety of different types of data.

The innovation in their approach, as they see it, is in what they call the "democratization of data" (Kingsley, 1999). The democratization of data is actualized in three steps. First, data are collected from a variety of sources and warehoused in a single database, enabling comparison. Second, the data are geocoded and disaggregated to the neighborhood scale. Third, data are made available to residents so that they can perform their own analyses. Though a geographical information system (GIS) is often an element of these indicator systems, it is not the driving technology, and its use is not emphasized in the NNIP literature.

In this paper, I argue that the methodology and epistemology of NNIP effectively function to inhibit their larger goal of 'democratizing' data and decision making in urban neighborhoods. Drawing on feminist debates around essentialism and the category 'women', I assess the potential implications of a holistic approach to community development and poverty alleviation. To address the issue of knowledge production, I use feminist insights into epistemological considerations about knowledge produced for and about marginalized groups to critique, and provide alternatives to, the epistemology of NNIP and its partner organizations. Finally, I use two examples from NNIP partner organizations to interrogate the way in which gender is discursively produced through their use of various indicators. In so doing, my intent is to use feminist insights to consider the larger implications and desirability of the current trend toward 'holism' in progressive urban policy.

Within the field of geography, there have been considerable and extensive critiques, feminist and otherwise, of the use of GIS in general, and as a tool for the production of transformative knowledge specifically [see Hanson (2002), Kwan (2002a), McLafferty (2002), and Schuurman and Pratt (2002) for a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between feminism and GIS; see Lawson (1995), Moss (1995), and Rocheleau (1995) for analysis of the feminist methodological debates specifically as they pertain to geography]. The case studies I pursue here are less concerned with the epistemologies of GIS, the ontologies it might assume, or its capacity specifically as a transformative tool. Based on work by Elwood and Leitner (2003), Knigge and Cope (2006), Ghose (2001), and Kwan (2002a; 2002b), it is clear that, done carefully, the integration of GIS into community-based advocacy and knowledge production can be effective and transformative. Rather, the purpose here is to critique the practice of building and maintaining indicator systems at the neighborhood scale as a tool for addressing

persistent poverty and as a means of 'democratizing information' from a feminist perspective.

Geographers have also critically assessed the implications of various conceptualizations of space, place, and scale and their utility for understanding social relationships in ways that *do* need to be considered with respect to NNIP practices. With respect to space, geographers have shown that space is better understood as relational, rather than as absolute. That is, space becomes significant not as a location, or as a location in relation to other locations, but "from the content of the social and economic processes which link it to or separate it from other locations" (Rose et al, 1997, page 6). Massey (1994) has argued for a "progressive sense of place" in which places are understood not as bounded regions, but rather as the complex sets of social relationships that stretch across space and converge for people in places in dynamic and fluid ways. Geographers have also critically assessed how shared understandings of place are produced, arguing that power relations are inherent in the discursive production of place (Rose et al, 1997). In so doing, geographers have challenged the possibility of uncontested representations of place. Feminist geographers have shown how experiences of space and place, including urban space, are always gendered (Bondi and Rose, 2003). Finally, geographers have argued that scale is not an ontologically fixed concept, but rather one that is socially produced. Marston (2000), in particular, has argued that notions of gender and patriarchy are always caught up in the social production of scale. As I argue below, NNIP and its partner organizations fail to engage with these complexities inherent in the concepts of space, place, and scale, with deleterious effects for their goal of producing knowledge to address urban poverty.

Producing knowledge about women

In this section I review the debates that have unfolded in feminist theory and geography to define the parameters of a feminist critique of NNIP, and ground my analysis in a particular reading of feminist debates. I begin by addressing questions that feminists have raised around essentialism and subjecthood and the implications therein for political practice. I then review the feminist debates around epistemological considerations, with specific attention to methodological questions, the multiplicity and partiality of knowledge, and the type of knowledge necessary for emancipatory purposes.

The heated conversation within feminist political theory surrounding the category 'woman' is a useful entry point to begin to think about the potential political implications of a holistic approach to community development. The debate around the validity and usefulness of the category 'woman' has many important subquestions that address the validity of categories in general, the political possibilities that categories enable, the ability of one to speak for or represent many, and the gap between theory and practice. The subquestion I want to focus on addresses the political possibilities that antiessentialist and essentialist strategies provide for marginalized groups. This analysis will serve as a foundation for an assessment of the implications of a holistic approach to community development.

Mohanty and other feminist development theorists have waged trenchant critiques of the effects of essentialism on women in general, and Third World women in particular (Mohanty, 1991; Ong, 1998). Mohanty argues that the very category 'Third World woman' only serves to create an 'other' or a 'subaltern', thereby limiting our ability to understand the intersectionality which creates conflicting needs and desires of woman living in the Third World. Her critique is a powerful and long-lasting one, and has considerably influenced work in feminist theory and geography with respect to understanding, researching, and representing the intersectionality of women's lives.

Such a perspective challenges feminists to avoid reducing our analyses to simple, fixed categories of man and woman, and to reflect the multiplicity of both our own subject positions, and those we research.

At the same time, however, Hartsock (1990) has posed important objections to antiessentialism. Without subjecthood, she argues, feminist political practice has no constituency, or no entry point for political activism. She asks,

“Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?” (page 163).

The adoption of intersectional theory does not have to paralyze issue-based advocacy or knowledge production, however. Rather, it precludes an a priori assumption of commonality of experience *based* on common identity categories. As Valentine (2007) has demonstrated, an intersectional approach to knowledge production requires a close investigation of the salient manifestations of identities in a particular spatiotemporal context. Thus, an intersectional approach to knowledge production does not rule out attention to gender (or other identity categories), if and when it is deemed meaningful by the group of people about which knowledge is being produced.

I want to foreground my analysis of the holistic approach to community development in this debate. Without the category ‘woman’, we have no grounds for assessing the material inequality that is starkly manifested along gender lines that I highlight below. At the same time, however, as I will demonstrate through one example the uncritical use of essentialized categories can reinforce harmful, inaccurate stereotypes that have the very result that Mohanty (1991) vehemently critiques.

By, in effect, arguing both against essentialism and for retaining subject categories, I am attempting to adopt the nuanced strategy of Kobayashi and Peake (1994) in which essentialism is “built around issues, not biogenetic categories” (Knowles and Mercer, 1992, page 111, quoted in Kobayashi and Peake, 1994). They envision a political strategy that engages the particularities of the place and time by focusing on the “specific conditions as temporary historic moments” (Kobayashi and Peake, 1994, page 236). This is similar to Mouffe’s (1992) conceptualization of hegemonic “nodal points” around which individuals converge to engage in political action. I do not want to eliminate the important political possibilities available to single mothers, for example, as a group, or the potential political implications of their shared material realities that result from their shared subjectivities. At the same time, however, I reject the ‘natural discourse’ which emerges through one of the examples below, that casts poor, minority, women as somehow more responsible than their male counterparts as a result of their ‘biogenetics’. I will return to this issue in the empirical sections to consider the potential implications of a holistic approach to community development adopted by NNIP and its partner organizations.

Feminist engagements with questions of epistemology are also applicable to the practices of NNIP. The particular epistemological debates I want to highlight here address the usefulness and implications of qualitative and quantitative methods, the partial and situated nature of knowledge, and the nature and origins of transformative or emancipatory knowledge. There is no agreement among feminist geographers as to whether there can, or should be, a feminist method (Kwan, 2002a). There is general agreement, however, that quantitative methods, while useful and important, should be understood as capable of telling only part of the story. Instead, many feminist geographers, though certainly not all, use some form of quantitative methods and triangulate their findings with qualitative methods.

Research using quantitative methods, and the subsequent findings, have been important for feminist geographic scholarship and activism. To name just a few examples, quantitative work done by feminists (geographers and otherwise) has shown that poverty has become feminized (Jones and Kodras, 1990), women's access to labor markets is restricted (Hanson and Pratt, 1995), women earn less than men, and women comprise an alarmingly low percentage of faculty at universities (McLafferty, 1995). Quantitative methods can also show important disparities among women. For example, McLafferty (1995) found, using quantitative methods, that the commutes of African-American women and Latina women are substantially longer than those of white men and women.

Despite the important role that quantitative research has played in advancing the feminist cause, feminists geographers remain critical of quantitative methods for a number of reasons (McLafferty, 1995). Arguing that the categories upon which they are based are falsely 'fixed', they critique the claim that quantitative methods are objective, scientific, and gender neutral. The categorization required for quantitative analysis, feminists argue, fails to capture the intersectionality of people's lives. Their static nature functions to obscure "the very processes and existences historically denied by those categories" which, Mattingly and Falconer-al-Hindi (1995, page 428) argue, feminists are trying to make visible. And though these categories are initially understood as partial representations, once invoked, they are often taken as homogeneous and uniform (Scott, 1998).

Additionally, feminists argue that the categories invoked in quantitative analysis are not neutral, as their proponents often claim them to be. Rather, as Kabeer (1994) argues in the case of international development, the material reality of women's lives is obscured by a focus on supposedly 'gender-neutral' categories of analysis, such as the economy, gross national product, and the formal and informal sectors. A close analysis, she argues, shows that these 'neutral' categories present a view of the world that both legitimates male dominance and obscures gender bias. According to Kabeer, it is the privileging of objective, scientific methods of knowledge production that perpetuates gender asymmetry. As a result of the overprivileging of quantitative categories that are gender biased, Harding (2001) argues that a "body of ignorance" about gender and its material implications develops.

The positivist epistemology that informs quantitative methods is also at issue for feminists. Though there is little in the way of agreement or consensus with respect to the value of a perspective of knowledge that is partial or situated (following Haraway, 1991), Kwan (2002b) argues

"feminist geographers recognize the partiality and situatedness of all knowledge and the importance of critical reflections on one's own subject position relative to research participants, the research process, and knowledge produced" (page 646; see, for example, Gilbert, 1998; Hanson, 1992; Rose, 1997; see Walby, 2001 for a dissenting view).

According to Rose (1997), the aim of situating knowledge is to "produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges" (page 315). The need to situate knowledges, she argues, is based on the argument that the knowledge produced depends very much on who produces the knowledge.

Outside of the realm of academia, constructing a 'partial and reflexive' knowledge might be a more subtle process. Moreover, for activists, such a seemingly timid approach to truth claims might seem counterproductive. Indeed, Walby (2001) insists that feminists should be "bolder about [their] truth claims, rather than retreating into a defensive stance about partial knowledges" (page 435). I will argue below, however, that the practices of NNIP do, in some ways, reflect a tacit recognition of the partiality of knowledge.

Finally, some feminists are concerned with identifying the best and most useful approach to knowledge production for the purposes of producing empowering, transformative knowledges. Harding (1991), Hartsock (1990), and other standpoint feminists have been particularly critical of the usefulness and objectivity of quantitative methods. They argue that they represent a view from a position of power, or a ‘view from above’, which is inherently distorted (Hartsock, 1990). “When people speak from opposite sides of power relations”, Harding argues, “the perspective *from the lives* of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than the perspective from the lives of the more powerful” (1991, page 269).

Hartsock (1990), in particular, has distinguished between theories of power *about* women, and theories of power *for* women. For Hartsock, theories of power for women are generated by women from their material experiences. She argues that transformative knowledge should be generated from the material experiences of the marginalized. Similarly, Haraway (1991) argues,

“we are ... bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (page 192).

I will return to this point when I discuss the epistemology of NNIP.

The final element of feminist analysis that I want to draw out as relevant to a critique of the NNIP is the emphasis on gender difference, as it is both materially manifested as well as discursively constructed. In conducting an analysis of a phenomenon, feminist geographers ask two types of questions. First, they ask: how are the lives of men and women materially different? For example, do they earn more or less? Do they face different types of obstacles? Second, they ask: how are the lives of women and men discursively produced? Examples of such questions include: How are gender roles differentially represented? How is gender difference represented through discourse? I will use these questions to conduct a gendered analysis of two reports written by NNIP partner organizations in the second empirical section below.

In the following section, I will apply the questions raised above around essentialism and antiessentialism and epistemology to critically examine the foundations and overarching approach of NNIP in general. Then, I will provide two examples from NNIP partner organizations to take a close look at how partner organizations address material gender differences and its discursive construction.

NNIP: foundational goals and epistemology

Social indicators have come in and out of fashion over the years as tools to measure quality of life and the success of social programs. Currently, they are enjoying a comeback, as an increasing number of research institutions, universities, and think tanks are developing and maintaining neighborhood-level socioeconomic indicator systems with the overarching goal of addressing persistent urban poverty. The revival neighborhood indicators can be attributed to three driving objectives: a desire to take a ‘*holistic*’ approach to community development, an interest in statistical, socioeconomic, data at the *neighborhood scale*, and a desire to ‘*democratize information*’ (Kingsley, 1996). Twenty one of the organizations currently maintaining such indicator systems have joined together to form the NNIP, an umbrella organization managed in part by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan think tank (Kingsley, 1996).

As members of the partnership, community-based organizations in cities including Boston, Atlanta, Providence, Denver, and Sacramento each collect and maintain datasets that their organizations are able to obtain and are relevant to the particularities of their locations. Common data sources include crime data, health outcome data, and

socioeconomic data collected from organizations such as police departments, hospitals, and the US Census (Kingsley, 1999). Data categories include standard socioeconomic data provided by the census bureau, including income categories, family composition, languages spoken, data from other sources including number of violent crimes, as well as health data including rates of obesity and asthma. All of the data are spatial in nature (Kingsley, 1996).

NNIP organizations often partner with community-based organizations to provide data and information to support community-based planning efforts. Such efforts are both ‘internally’ and ‘externally’ focused (Kingsley, 1999). An internally focused project is one implemented by the community itself, whereas an externally focused project is designed to compel city officials or developers to take a particular action. Examples of such collaborations provided in a report by the Urban Institute typically include a community-based organization approaching an NNIP partner for assistance with a particular problem. The NNIP partner typically provides technical support for the community-based organization in making a spatial, statistical, argument for its initial insight. In one such example, a community-based organization in Camden, New Jersey, believed vacant lots were contributing to high crime rates. With assistance from the NNIP partner, they were able to use census and crime data to show correlation between crimes and vacant properties (Kingsley, 1999). In another case, a community-based organization in Milwaukee wanted more grocery stores for residents in an inner-city neighborhood. Using economic data and store location information, residents put together a package of information for negotiations with prospective chains.⁽¹⁾

The innovation of such projects is threefold. First, these indicator systems aggregate data from a variety of sources in a single database, enabling comparison. Second, the data are collected and stored in such a way as to make neighborhood-level analysis possible. Finally, the datasets are made publicly available, usually through a website, such that individuals can conduct their own queries and do their own data mining. These three innovations correspond, respectively, with the objectives outlined above of holism (through comparative capacity), focus on the neighborhood scale, and the intention to ‘democratize information’ by making it publicly available.

The debates in feminist theory regarding essentialism, antiessentialism, and intersectionality are a useful entry point to begin to think about the potential implications of a holistic approach to community development for women. I want to, in some ways, echo Hartsock’s indignant question I made reference to above regarding the problem of subjecthood. Why is it that as the phrase ‘feminization of poverty’ has become common, the concept of issue-based advocacy has become problematic? Why is it that, when empirical research has continued to uncover the multiple ways in which women are disadvantaged economically and 80% of single-parent households are headed by women, community development is no longer interested in addressing single issues? In some very important ways, the holistic approach disables women and activists from acting on issues of significance specifically to women because it requires us to think of the ‘whole picture’ (Pollitt, 2001). My concern is that the holistic approach to community development will obscure feminist concerns for the welfare of women as a group, as well as disable feminists and others to advocate for the very real, and often different, needs of poor women in urban places.

As I demonstrate below, NNIP and its partner organizations have largely ignored the material implications of gender difference, while simultaneously reifying gender roles through discourse in their attempt to actualize a holistic approach to community development. Mouffe (1992) argues that feminism is about more than just the struggle

⁽¹⁾ According to Kingsley (1999), they were unsuccessful in attracting a chain grocery store.

for equality of women, “rather [it is] a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category ‘woman’ is constructed in subordination” (page 382). But for Mouffe, feminist concerns about the material differences across gender, the discursive production of gender, as well as the more theoretical concerns outlined above, have to be a central component of such a struggle. To date, the NNIP and its partner organizations have shown quite definitively that a feminist perspective is not integral to the holistic approach. As such, the political options available to women and others within the framework of the holistic approach have to be carefully considered. It appears that the ‘holistic approach’ may ultimately mirror patriarchal priorities if a feminist perspective is not seriously incorporated.

The second innovation that characterizes NNIP and its partner organizations is the emphasis of the *democratization of information*. The democratization of information is actualized, according to NNIP, in two ways: (1) through an emphasis on the neighborhood scale, and (2) by making statistical data widely available to neighborhood residents. NNIP defines the democratization of information as providing

“factual information directly for use by poor people in poor communities who have historically been denied the data they need to plan for their own future effectively” (Kingsley, 1996, page 14).

The emphasis within NNIP is on importing standard ‘objective’ data to neighborhoods and breaking it down to the neighborhood scale to give residents the information ‘they need’ in order to transform their situation (DiGiacomo, 2004).

The emphasis on the neighborhood scale is fueled by the recognition that city-wide averages are inadequate for tracking microtrends in quality of life and poverty levels across uneven urban spaces (Kingsley, 1996). Further, urban poverty is manifested in a particular spatial form, often concentrated in specific neighborhoods. City-wide data, according to NNIP, are inadequate for understanding changes within city boundaries. This emphasis on delineating specific areas at a singular scale runs counter to the NNIP’s emphasis on holism. NNIP reports represent these neighborhoods as bounded, coherent, regions, and the emphasis on the neighborhood scale obscures the socio-spatial relationships between the neighborhoods under study and the rest of the world. Further, the use of census tracts as primary units of analysis, and the practice of aggregating tracts to create neighborhoods, suggest that the particular spatial unit of analysis may be arbitrary with respect to the lived experiences of that space. In at least one case, residents expressed interest in a resident survey to determine the most salient ways of constructing spatial representations of neighborhoods (Kingsley, 1998).

Geographers have also argued that hegemonic notions of place often arise from positions of power. NNIP partners are unreflexive about the power they wield as producers of notions of place through their representation of neighborhoods. As Scott (1998) argues, categories produced for purposes of state control and legibility are seldom the most useful categories for the less powerful.

NNIP also tacitly operates with problematic assumptions about both the spatiality of community and the homogeneity of ‘community’ in general. As Joseph (2002) has argued, the deployment of the concept of ‘community’ can often do more to mask difference than identify similarities [see also McCarthy (2005) for a critical engagement with the concept of community]. As Marston (2000) and others (see, for example, Agnew, 1997; Brenner, 1997; Smith, 1992) have shown, scale is always being socially produced rather than discovered. NNIP partners produce, through representation, neighborhoods as ontologically given and absolute, bounded spaces. As such, their representations and reports limit the possibilities of understanding the spatiality of the social relationships that converge and produce the poverty in the neighborhoods they are studying.

There are elements of the practice of NNIP that reflect feminist insights into epistemology that are, in some ways, revolutionary and worth noting. The close attention to scale and their subsequent assertion that different scales can obscure different truths is a tacit acknowledgement of the partiality of knowledge; truths apparent at one scale can be unsettled at a different scale. Further, the emphasis on enabling residents to conduct the analysis themselves reflects the feminist position that knowledge is situated, and always shaped, by the knower. Truths that can be uncovered or made known by knowers in one situation (researchers or organization employees) will be different than those of knowers in another situation (residents of the neighborhood). The effort to bring 'official' data to neighborhood residents so that they might conduct their own analysis amounts to a recognition that 'objective' data and subsequent analysis are always situated, and that, as Rose (1997) suggests, the knowledge created always depends on *who* is creating the knowledge. NNIP ends its critique of objective data there, however, and suggests, through its practice, that simply by addressing these issues, data will be 'democratized'. Unlike most research organizations, NNIP members generally refrain from making policy recommendations or doing in-depth analysis. Instead, they consider their primary role to make information available to residents.

I do not mean to diminish what I see as the significance of these practices as a step toward a real-world application of feminist insights into knowledge production. I do, however, wish to call into question the usefulness of the data that they are 'providing' for transformative goals. I also want to question the extent to which information is being 'democratized' through wider availability.⁽²⁾ By contrast, I want to argue, based on the feminist insights laid out above, that the overreliance of the NNIP and its partner organizations on 'official' information is a counterproductive adherence to categories of analysis developed by the state or state institutions for governing purposes.

By repeating and amplifying 'official', 'objective' data, while avoiding interpretation on behalf of residents, NNIP and its partner organizations do little to influence the hegemonic discourses of poor neighborhoods, or to challenge ways of seeing, interpreting, or understanding neighborhood problems. NNIP partner organizations get the majority of their data from government agencies and use categories of analysis established by the government and those in power. The view that they enable is only through data which use categories of analysis established by the government and those in power. Such categories include race, gender, household size, and all other categories found in the census. As Scott (1998) has convincingly argued, these state-produced categories are arbitrary and abstracted from the reality they are meant to capture. Thus, NNIP is actively trying to change the material and discursive realities of those in the neighborhoods they work in by giving them greater access to information *about* them. Rather, from the feminist perspective outlined above, what is needed for real transformation is information *from* them. Furthermore, research grounded in the work of Foucault, particularly in the concept of governmentality, has shown that the act of making a population or environment 'legible' is often in service of those in power for purposes of controlling populations (Foucault, 1977; Rose-Redwood, 2006). Such an objective would appear in direct contrast to the NNIP objective of empowering citizens with knowledge.

At its inception, NNIP partner organizations did pay cursory attention to the need to collect and reflect resident perceptions of their neighborhoods. The Cleveland Community Building Initiative facilitated a process in 1997 that included residents in developing indicators. This practice was dismissed in NNIP reports, however, as being

⁽²⁾ The extent to which impoverished urban residents are able to access the internet to conduct these analyses is another question that I do not have room to address here, but is worth considering.

too costly. “Clearly”, the report states, “many of the possible indicators that are likely to interest local stakeholders cannot as yet be incorporated at low cost” (Kingsley, 1998, page 52). The report does not indicate precisely which indicators would be cost prohibitive to incorporate, but the NNIP model of using existing datasets suggests that the costly indicators would be those that would require new data-collection initiatives. The report cites a number of indicators of interest to the local community which would require residential or institutional surveys, including “resident fear of neighborhood violence”, consensus on boundaries of neighborhood, “density of neighborhood acquaintanceships”, and “perceived responsiveness of service providers to resident needs” (page 10).

The ‘Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project 2004’ report makes reference to an in-depth residential survey that asked “respondents across the region to evaluate the quality of life in their communities” (Adams et al, 2004, preface). Sawicki and Flynn (1996) also document a case in which the Atlanta Project added indicators of food supply after residents complained of inadequate grocery stores in their neighborhoods. These are positive first steps in collecting information *from* residents. This type of data collection, however, is not part of the official NNIP comparative data-collection protocol.

Gender and representation by NNIP partner organizations

To examine the ways in which NNIP epistemology and foundational philosophy is manifested through its partner organizations with respect to gender differences and the discursive construction of gender, I conducted two brief case studies: NNIP partners, The Piton Foundation based out of Denver, Colorado, and CamConnect based in Camden, New Jersey.⁽³⁾

The Piton Foundation

The Piton Foundation of Denver, Colorado, was founded in 1976 by a Denver ‘oil man’ (DiGiacomo, 2004). The foundation is primarily supported by Gary-Williams Energy Corporation, as is the ‘community-investment division’ of the company. The vision of the foundation is “a better future for the low-income children of Denver” and “to provide better opportunities for children and their families to move from poverty and dependence to self-reliance” (DiGiacomo, 2004). The ‘fact book’ that I draw from here is published in collaboration with the Community Planning and Development Agency of Denver City and County. The impetus for the production of a fact book is the Piton Foundation’s “belief that reliable and objective information should be the basis of all political, policy and economic decisions” (DiGiacomo, 2004, page 1).

The report addresses eight categories of indicators, comprising population, race and ethnicity, immigration, households and families, education, jobs and wages, poverty, and housing. Within each category, indicators are frequently disaggregated by race, but seldom disaggregated by gender. For example, in the discussion of jobs and commuting, the Piton Foundation reports that Denver’s share of jobs has decreased significantly in ten years. Further, the report finds that most people commute from the suburbs to the city center (DiGiacomo, 2004). Feminist geographic research has shown definitively that there are important differences in access to job markets based on the differences in willingness or ability of men and women to commute to work (Hanson and Pratt, 1995). Ignoring the gendered dimensions of commuting, as one example, prevents the Piton Foundation of meeting their stated aim of collecting objective data to inform policy decisions. If, as Hanson and Pratt (1995) have shown, women will take

⁽³⁾ I chose these two organizations as case studies because they had the most thorough and exhaustive reports of the indicators they used that were available for download from their websites.

lower paying jobs closer to home, then the relocation of jobs further away from the city will have different implications for men and women. As such, job training and economic-development policy decisions that might be influenced by the foundation's fact book will not reflect these differences. Thus, failure to pay attention to gender difference will result in policies being crafted and informed by incomplete or ineffective data.

Another example of the Piton Foundation's lack of attention to gender is illustrated in their discussion and analysis of 'single-parent families'. Single-parent families, according to the Piton Foundation, have the highest poverty rate of all family compositions (28% compared with 10% for families with two parents present). In 1998, 84% of children in the US living with a single parent lived with their mother (Lugalia, 1998). If Denver follows nationwide trends, most single-parent households will be headed by women.

US Census data show that 46% of female-headed households in Denver County were making less than US\$25 000 a year (US Census, 2000). The Piton Foundation reports that the 'self-sufficiency standard' for a family of three is US\$40 000. Sixty-nine percent of female-headed households were earning less than US\$40 000 (US Census, 2000).⁽⁴⁾ In Denver the poverty rate for single mothers is 32%, whereas the poverty rate for single fathers is 15% (DiGiacomo, 2004). Further, in poor neighborhoods targeted by the Piton Foundation, single-father-headed households account for 2.9% of households, whereas single mothers account for 13.7% of all households (DiGiacomo, 2004).⁽⁵⁾

Thus, policies that address poverty for single-parent families must, if they are to be effective, address the fact that 'single-parent families' are a gendered issue. Most single parents are women, and women have different, specific, barriers with respect to income and livelihood than men, as many feminists have shown. By repeatedly representing single-parent families as a gender-neutral problem, the Piton Foundation obscures that gendered issue. In addition to ignoring material gender differences, the Piton foundation is contributing to the discursive construction of poverty issues as gender neutral through their choice to use a gender-neutral phrase (single parent) when the issue is, as I have shown, largely gendered.⁽⁶⁾ It strikes me as counterproductive that a report founded on the principle that large-scale, aggregated, data obscure important micro-patterns which mask issues related to addressing persistent poverty, would aggregate data that subsumes the gendered patterns here.

CamConnect

"Camden Kids Count" (CKC) (Ziegler, 2004) was published in 2004 by CamConnect, an NNIP partner organization based in Camden, New Jersey. The report disaggregates county data to the city and neighborhood level to provide a detailed look at child

⁽⁴⁾ Of course, this does not address the fact that not all female-headed households have at least three members, but it is also likely that many have more members.

⁽⁵⁾ While these data were obtainable from the published report, they were not made very visible. There are a number of different ways in which data are illustrated in the report. Most indicators are given a full-page graph, while some data are listed in large tables with small font. I consider the indicators and text on full pages to be data 'emphasized' in the report, and data found in large tables with small font to be 'deemphasized'. In the cases where family composition was reported in full-page graphs, the categories were always aggregated to 'single-parent households'. It was occasionally disaggregated by male-headed and female-headed households in the large tables, which is how I was able to obtain these figures from the report.

⁽⁶⁾ Additionally, through the language of 'self-reliance' found in its mission statement and the reference to 'pulling oneself up' in the organization's name (a piton is a tool used in mountain climbing), low-income residents and children of Denver are represented as dependants on 'the system' who are not contributors to society, but rather dependent on society for their well-being.

welfare in Camden. The goal of the organization is to

“expand and democratize access to information for residents and organizations that live and work in the City of Camden” (preface).

The goal of the CKC report is to address child well-being.

Though the report successfully amplifies the immediacy of the need of children in Camden, in so doing it repeats and amplifies harmful and questionable stereotypes of gender roles in parenting. The lifestyle and behavior of mothers are repeatedly called into attention, while the presence and behavior of fathers are literally never mentioned. As such, the report contributes to a discursive construction of low-income women as victims and bad mothers. At the same time, the report ignores important differences in access to services, earning gaps, and other obstacles posed by gender difference.

In addition to reporting the standard indicators including race, poverty, income, education, and crime, the report includes a series of indicators that specifically address the behavior of mothers. These include: ‘births with no prenatal care’; ‘births to teens’; and ‘mothers engaged in risky behavior during pregnancy’ (Ziegler, 2004). While these are, undoubtedly, risks to child welfare, simply reporting them without a discussion of their causes perpetuates the stereotype that women, especially poor women on welfare, immaculately conceive their children on their own, and are thus solely responsible for them. To report these indicators in such a way ignores the responsibilities of fathers in supporting mothers during pregnancy and in playing a role in raising their children. It is quite likely that an analysis of ‘risky behavior’ by fathers during pregnancy would have just as troubling, though obviously different, implications for poor children.

In addition to this problematic contribution to the discursive construction of women, CKC also aggregates the category of single-parent household in the same way as the Piton Foundation, despite the fact that 80% of total births in Camden in 2002 were to ‘unmarried women’ (Ziegler, 2004). The report states that the annual income needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent is US\$35 680 (Ziegler, 2004). In 2000, 80% of female-headed households in Camden fell below that range (US Census, 2000). In fact, the median income for female-headed households in Camden in 2000 was US\$16 963 (US Census, 2000). It logically follows that increasing women’s wages would be an important step toward alleviating childhood poverty. The CKC report, due to its lack of a gendered perspective, fails to include this information or to make it clear.

In each of the cases outlined above, gender is treated very differently. In the case of the Piton Foundation, gender and gender differences are largely ignored. In the case of CKC, gender relations are reified as biologically determined relationships in which women are, by virtue of their biology, solely responsible for child well-being. By contrast, a feminist-informed approach to producing knowledge about poverty would understand gender as a social relationship and a power-laden process with material implications, rather than a biologically fixed, and hence, naturalized, category. As such, whether and how gender is relevant to the experience of poverty would always be explored. At the same time, however, that exploration would consciously acknowledge the ways in which gender difference is socially produced rather than biologically fixed and manifested. Such an approach would require that quantitative data were complemented by qualitative data in order to ascertain whether and how identities (including, but not limited to, gender) are meaningfully experienced. Finally, a feminist approach to producing knowledge about poverty in a specific spatiotemporal context would require that people about whom the knowledge is being produced participate in the shaping and making that knowledge. As I outline above, feminists have shown that a priori assumptions about the relevant identity processes and categories are insufficient for producing transformative knowledge.

Conclusion

Drawing on feminist theoretical insights from the debates around essentialism and antiessentialism, I have raised objections regarding the current trend toward 'holism' in community development. While recognizing the complexity of urban poverty and its manifestations, I have argued that an explicitly holistic approach can serve to obscure important, and real, differences and needs among citizens. In this paper I have focused on gender, but believe the argument holds for other disadvantaged groups as well. A commitment to holism disallows a meaningful interrogation into the way difference manifests itself with respect to the needs and concerns of residents of impoverished urban neighborhoods.

I have also argued that the applications of feminist insights into methodology and epistemology for purposes of the production of transformative knowledge would better achieve the 'democratization' of information that NNIP partners strive for, and would produce better, more transformative, knowledge for purposes of alleviating poverty. It is clear that NNIP and its partner organizations share some of the concerns of feminists with respect to the 'objectivity' of quantitative data, and have taken steps to address their concerns, including a tacit acknowledgement of the multiplicity and situatedness of knowledge. A more explicitly critical approach to the objectivity of quantitative data, and a recognition of the biases inherent in data produced for purposes of governing, would allow for the production of a more transformative knowledge. This knowledge could better enable NNIP and its partners to achieve their goals of measuring, and improving, quality of life and poverty in urban neighborhoods.

In addition to the more practical considerations raised above, I have also shown that a strategic retention of the category 'women' based on the historically contingent moment is necessary and desirable in the process of producing knowledge about and for urban neighborhoods. Furthermore, I have shown how feminist theory remains instructive for feminist praxis, particularly in addressing urban poverty. These insights matter for theorists, activists, and scholar-activists struggling to consider how abstract theorizations remain relevant for both policy and practice.

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