

Ethical counselling considerations for corporate managers regarding feminist epistemology

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Abstract: Feminist epistemology is an alternative to traditional epistemic paradigms. It emphasizes the importance of considering diverse perspectives, particularly those marginalized within patriarchal systems, and critiques the limitations of a universal epistemology that often excludes women's experiences and contributions. We will argue that corporate knowledge should be impacted by feminist knowledge and that feminist epistemology is necessary for achieving gender equality in big private organizations for female leaders. The risk of having a hegemonic masculine epistemology overflowing from moral philosophy to political philosophy and thus in all area knowledge occurs. Philosophy influences every aspect of our lives as humans. The importance of the feminine top leader knower in a private organization is valuable and salient for the well-being of female employees, other marginalized groups, end consumers, products, ethical decisions, social justice or high increased profits according to some studies. One solution to increase the participation of women in leadership positions is to acknowledge their unique contribution to corporate knowledge creation by offering ethical counselling to corporate managers, both men and women, so they can understand, promote and encourage women participation in top leadership positions.

Key-words: feminist epistemology; corporate knowledge; gender equality; female leadership; ethical counselling;

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Introduction

This paper will introduce feminist epistemology as an alternative to traditional epistemic paradigms. It emphasizes the importance of considering diverse perspectives, particularly those marginalized within patriarchal systems, and critiques the limitations of a universal epistemology that often excludes women's experiences and contributions. One of the areas where feminist epistemology is not considered sufficiently is in big private organisations. In order to bridge the gap between feminist epistemology and feminist epistemology in big corporations with ethical counselling for corporate managers, men and women, so the feminist epistemology is enhanced in corporate decisions, projects, finance and human capital development.

Feminist Epistemology

According to Britannica, epistemology is “the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The term is derived from the Greek *epistēmē* (“knowledge”) and *logos* (“reason”), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge. Epistemology has a long history within Western philosophy, beginning with the ancient Greeks and continuing to the present. Along with metaphysics, logic and ethics, it is one of the four main branches of philosophy, and nearly every great philosopher has contributed to it (Martinich & Stroll, 2024). It is well known that universal epistemology and western epistemology was dominated by male philosophers living in patriarchal societies from antiquity to present. Whether Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle or the Europeans St. Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger or Michel Foucault, the universal epistemology is in fact a white privileged heterosexual male epistemology. Many characteristics of this world are not facile to explain and turning to the subject of this thesis we consider that the gender equality topic is not a philosophical matter that can be solved solely with male dominated epistemology. The feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, explains that the world is the result of the work of the men from their point of view, and, very important,

men consider this world the absolute truth (de Beauvoir, 2012). Women will just have to adapt to a world created by men, socially, professionally and individually, e.g., access to sanitation, urbanization, seatbelts, financial solutions, family live. We will argue that human knowledge should be impacted by feminist knowledge. The paper will argue a feminist epistemology is necessary also for achieving gender equality in big private organizations for female leaders. The top leadership of companies worldwide is dominated by male top leaders, female top leaders acquiring around only 20%. Having around 20% female top leaders in private organizations and around 30% of females elected in parliaments, the feminist social epistemology falls short in some key areas of societal players. Women represent around 45% of the global workforce, but their low representation in private executive boards or management boards, parliaments can only draw the conclusion that their conception of knowledge or reasoning a certain thing is at fault. Thus, half of the world workforce remains underrepresented, and women are very often banned directly or indirectly by discriminatory practices from ascending to top leadership positions. From the ancient Greek philosophers to the modern time philosopher, women are disadvantaged by the current practices of understanding the world. The present time philosophy is still largely dominated by males. A Philosophy Report issued by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences found that out of a total of 7,830 faculty members, only 2,030 members are female (26%) (White , Chu, & Czujko, 2014). In the U.K, Equality Challenge Unit (known currently as #ACTonGender) found out that “over 70% of philosophers in UK universities are men”, prompting The Guardian to question: “Philosophy is for posh, white boys with trust funds? (Ratcliffe & Shaw, 2015).”

In this paper, we will refer to woman/women or female/females in top leadership positions. For a better understanding the terms woman/women or female/females refer to gender as a social and cultural construct and not to the anatomical sex. We will detail further what some philosophers of the 20th century who have argued on feminist epistemology and who considered it is important and crucial to bring to the table the feminist way of knowing as it is shaped by their concerns, attitudes, experiences skills, sensibilities, bodies, values, power, cognitive styles, believes or worldwide views, including the crucial role of feminist

epistemology to the development of private organizations by promoting female in top leadership positions.

Lorraine Code FRSC (b. 1937) is a Professor Emerita of Philosophy at York University in Toronto. Her principal area of research is feminist epistemology and the politics of knowledge. We will refer to two of her works, namely *“Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemically Significant?”* in *Metaphilosophy* 12 (Code, *Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?*, 1991) and *“What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge”* (Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, 1991). In *“Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemically Significant?”* (1981), Lorraine Code in one of the first feminist epistemology published articles, questioned whether the sex of the knower influence the knowledge. The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argues that the individual is an active participant in forming the knowledge, that the individual subjective experiences are part of the knowledge. She argues that in some instances the knower is only known as “S”, and who S is not relevant. If “S” is question who she or he is, this might be interpreted as relativism and this for sure scares some philosophers. Relativism might be considered by some philosophers as opposed to knowledge. “For a relativist, who contends that there can be many valid ways of knowing the phenomenon, there is the possibility of tacking several constructions, many perspectives into account” (Code, *Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?*, 1991, p. 3). One of the perspectives to be accounted should be the feminine perspective. The feminist philosophy simply did not exist, and any assumptions made in the philosophical world, from the Greeks to the modern philosophy were based on a white heterosexual privileged male philosopher and it is time “to stop assuming that ‘man’ could be read as a generic term” (Code, *Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?*, 1991, p. 26). Code argues that by considering philosophy close to science, and considering it a gender-neutral science, it can only institutionalize the stereotypical masculine values into a discipline, leaving totally outside the values, problems, concerns that are typically feminine. Because the epistemology lacked the feminine input that does not mean that the whole epistemology is wronged, it simply means that some important and valuable perspectives, the feminine ones, were overlooked, not included and some of the areas can be improved. The risk of having a

hegemonic masculine epistemology overflowing from moral philosophy to political philosophy and thus in all area knowledge occurs. Philosophy influences every aspect of our lives as humans, and it certainly influence the decisions made in the social life, from decisions forums like parliament to key players in the economic areas like the big private organizations.

The importance of the feminine knower in a private organization is valuable and salient for the well-being of female employees, other marginalized groups, end consumers, products, ethical decisions, social justice or high increased profits according to some studies.

Let's take an example from the science world. Dr. Astrid Linder is female Professor and Research Director of Traffic Safety at the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute VTI and Adjunct Professor of Injury Prevention at Chalmers University (Sweden). But this is not she is most famous for, although it should be. She is famous for introducing the first female crash test dummy in testing safety for vehicles passengers in 2022. It took tens of years to understand the obvious, namely that the anatomy of females is different from the males', to understand that females have greater odds at being injured than man in collisions and to take the ethical decision to protect also the lives of females. The muscles of the neck of a woman are weaker than man's. This is one example of a deadly outcome of a world designed by men and built for men. Having a seatbelt fasten at a first glance has nothing to do with gender bias or feminist epistemology, but having a deeper dive into it, it does, and as seen the consequences are macabre and costly for the society.

Women as a social and cultural constructs are still seen through the communal lenses as mothers, taking care of the family, of a sick relative and continue to be blamed for neglecting their families if they run for public office or if they get a leadership position. With all the stereotypes, biases, legends and myths about women, it is fair to say women are facing stronger winds than men if they do want to get a leadership position.

After centuries of philosophical research, we cannot ask ourselves why were women invisible to philosophy for thousands of years? Sandra Harding is asking the same in her article "Why has the Sex/Gender System become Visible Only Now?" (Harding, 2006). She argues that men control women in their labour and their reproduction abilities, that a epistemology revolution is necessary too and that we need to investigate more fully why it is that only now can we understand "patriarchy," "misogyny," "sex-roles,"

“discrimination against women,” and “the first division of labour – by sex” as mere appearances of the underlying reality of the sex/gender system (Harding, 2006). Extrapolating the distribution of labour for the women in the workplace, we will show the example of Dr. Sabrina Cohen-Hatton (b.1983) is a British fire-fighter, psychologist and writer. She is the Chief Fire Officer of the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service. She began her live as a racial Jewish-Moroccan female. At the age of 15 she became homeless as a result of her father’s death and at the age of 18 she became a firefighter. While being a firefighter she completed a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a PhD in behavioural neuroscience. She is also the author of a book called „The Gender Bias: The Barriers That Hold Women Back, and How to Break Them.” When she became a firefighter, only 1% of the firefighters in the U.K. are women. She is now a chief fire officer (highest rank that can be attained), and yet and there are still more chiefs called Chris than women holding that rank (Cohen-Hatton, Dr., 2023, p. 3). We will exemplify below an example from a casual encounter with people at a party:

„Two people are firefighters and do the same job, when one is asked what they do for a living, their response is met with ‚That’s amazing, you are so brave!’, while the other is asked ‚Isn’t that dangerous? Aren’t you scared? What about your kids?’ Can you guess the difference between the two?” (Cohen-Hatton, Dr., 2023).

Of course, the man firefighter is seen as courageous, while at the same time, the female firefighter is seen as taking risks not putting her children first. The small percentage of women firefighters and the bias they face in their workplace shows that biases still exist against women in certain jobs. Elisabeth S. Andersen (b. 1959) is an American philosopher and university professor at the University of Michigan. Some of her areas of research are moral, social, and political philosophy, feminist theory, social epistemology, and the philosophy of economics and the social sciences. In her article „Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science” (Anderson, 2024) firstly published in August 2000 and republished with substantive revision in August 2024 in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, she analyses the feminist epistemology and how gender influence knowledge, knowers and practices of inquiry and justification. The dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge developed by white privileged males disadvantaged women by (1) excluding women from inquiry, (2) denying women epistemic authority, (3) denigrating

“feminine” cognitive styles, (4) producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, or significant only in the ways they serve male interests, (5) producing theories of social phenomena that render women’s activities and interests, or gendered power relations, invisible, and (6) producing knowledge that is not useful for people in subordinate positions, or that reinforces gender and other social hierarchies (Anderson, 2024).

Feminist epistemologists are interested in how the norms and practices of knowledge production affect the lives of women and are implicated in systems of oppression. Feminist epistemologists seek to understand not only *how* our social relations of gender have shaped our knowledge practices, but also whether and how these relations *should* play a role in good knowing (Grasswick, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is not to hold accountable the male philosophers from antiquity to modern times, but to find practical solutions to modern ethical dilemmas in the social world, where we consider the feminist epistemology shall be considered. The world spins and evolves, and the ethical dilemmas become more complex and new ethical dilemmas emerge. The situations in which some of these male philosophers have lived they would not have allowed them to have these kinds of dilemmas. Moral systems change constantly, they are not fixed, finite or bounded. That also does not mean that the knowledge is damaged, but rather it has identified a gap in more complex social situations which can be improved by in discriminatory practices of knowledge which will benefit in acquiring gender equality.

The increased number of women in top leadership positions will generate new theories, methods and findings, show how female leadership with its feminine values, experiences, and perspectives influence the transformation of organizational culture, provide a more inclusive working environment for them and for other disadvantaged groups and provide advancement. Elisabeth Andersen (2024) argues that the central concept of feminist epistemology is of situated knowledge, in which the perspective of the knowers is informing the situated knowledge. Feminist epistemologists have considered situated knowledge within three traditions: standpoint theory, postmodernism, and empiricism.

Standpoint theories claim to represent the world from an epistemically advantaged socially situated perspective usually claim that the perspectives of subordinated social groups have an epistemic

advantage regarding politically contested topics related to their subordination, relative to the perspectives of the groups that dominate them (Anderson, 2024). But not all the women have the same universal point of view. One postmodernity opinion is that the women's perspective is unitary, and that behind the assertion of a universal women's viewpoint stands in fact the perspective of relatively privileged white women (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Women in the Workplace Report issued by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company is the largest study in on the state of women in the workplace in corporate America. Between 2015 and 2021, over 750 companies participated in the study, and more than a quarter of a million people were surveyed on their workplace experiences. In its report from 2021, 65,000 employees were surveyed and women of diverse identities, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities were interviewed. Their finding is that women of colour continue to have a worse experience at work. While all women are more likely than men to face micro aggressions that undermine them professionally— such as being interrupted or having their judgment questioned—many women of colour experience them at a higher rate and not only do women of colour still face higher rates of micro aggressions, they also still lack active allies (Burns, et al., 2021, p. 28).

The report captures a testimony of a black senior manager woman „As a member of a minority, there's additional stigma that I've had to face. When I would go to court to represent a client, people would constantly say, 'Where's your attorney? Where's the attorney?' They would assume that I was either an administrative assistant or a mail clerk, and that I couldn't possibly be an attorney" (Burns, et al., 2021, p. 30). Feminist postmodernism questions attempt to transcend situatedness by appeal to such ideas as universality, necessity, objectivity, essence, and foundations. It opens up space for imagining alternative possibilities that were obscured by those claims. Feminist empiricism stresses methodological rigor and the interrogation of power dynamics and special structures into empirical investigations. Empiricism, in philosophy, the view that all concepts originate in experience, that all concepts are about or applicable to things that can be experienced, or that all rationally acceptable beliefs or propositions are justifiable or knowable only through experience (Fumerton, Quinton, & Quinton, 2024). While early feminist science criticism by working scientists may have presupposed a naive version of

empiricism, feminist empiricists today stress the pervasiveness of situated knowledge, the interplay of facts and values, the absence of transcendent standpoints, and the plurality of theories (Anderson, 2024).

“Feminist epistemology can be described as a having a pragmatic orientation with a focus on how situated knowers can know well and inquire well in their particular social worlds” (Grasswick, 2006).

Prominent topics of investigation of the epistemic inquiry for (Grasswick, 2006) are:

(1) Epistemic injustice in the forms of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice argued by Miranda Fricker in “Epistemic Injustice Power & the Ethics of Knowing”, which focused on the mechanism of knowing under oppression systems (Fricker, 2007). Kristie Dotson in her 2014 “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression”, frames the challenges of knowing in terms of “epistemic oppression”, which involves “persistent epistemic exclusion”.

(2) Epistemologies of ignorance involves the attendance to the role of ignorance, not only to the role of knowledge for understanding correctly the influence of power relations, on epistemic matters. If we move to the applicability of epistemology of ignorance into the corporate world, it is fair to presume that the white males have all the interest to rely solely on their male interpretation of policies, procedures, working conditions or work-life balance. It will be easier to maintain the world as they see it and in a way that is benefitting their dominant position. It is more beneficial to them and more facile than engaging into overcoming their ignorance

(3) Democratic structures of knowledge production: several arguments can be identified why and how are the democratic practices epistemically beneficial. If we look into the corporate world for an example, we can take the targets to acquire a certain percentage of female leaders into consideration. Although this is an affirmative action not popular in a lot of cases, as it is considered a forced promotion solely based on gender, it has the benefits of providing role models for female leadership, new ways of acquiring knowledge and a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Having women leaders at the table will weaken the patriarchal white heterosexual privileged male knowledge and improve the social justice.

“In various ways then, feminist social epistemologists have argued for deep connections between democracy and the success of epistemic practices. They have attended to the effects of social relations internal to epistemic communities, social relations external to those communities, and social relations between knowledge-producing communities and lay communities (Grasswick, 2006).”

Ethical Counseling Consideration for Corporate Managers

At the root of every practice, process or guideline in the corporate world, is epistemology; how we attain knowledge and the social power of knowledge. An awareness of women issues and knowledge has to enter in the workplace at the level of top leadership of organizations. The ultimate goal is to raise the percentage of women in top leadership positions and to challenge the existing status quo, including by ethical counselling of managers about feminist epistemology.

Various feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge developed by white privileged males disadvantaged women, we will apply the examples compiled (Anderson, 2024) to the corporate world and give some examples to be considered by corporate managers (both men and women) into integrating feminist epistemology in their decisions:

(1) Including women in the inquiry

Acknowledge women’s tendency to have a shy behaviour in the workplace. Their characteristic behaviour should be challenged by managers by consciously including women in processes lead by top leadership (e.g. gender pay gap, leadership trainings for women, inclusive promotions, and new products developed).

Make sure at each meeting or project development the women voices are heard and offer them to speak firstly.

(2) Accepting women epistemic authority

It is easier to believe something when we see that thing. It is the same with gender balances. We speak a lot, theorize a lot about gender equality, but the most powerful way to internalize this is by seeing gender-balanced decision boards. In order to have more female top leaders the pipeline of women leaders at all levels shall be improved. So, a special

attention should be given to women in the promotion sessions. A consideration to women's behaviour should be given, where the impostor's syndrome is higher than in men's.

Offer to the corporate managers a voluntary Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Project Implicit, 1998) or other similar instrument before each promotion session.

(3) Stop denigrating "feminine" cognitive styles

Jesse Prinz outlines experimental philosophy as differing from traditional "armchair philosophy" by directly gathering empirical data through experiments. It investigates people's intuitions, making the field observational and empirical. This approach highlights the importance of studying intuition systematically to provide evidence for philosophical theories. Encourage women's proposals by consciously asking them about their experiences in certain areas.

(4) Producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, or significant only in the ways they serve male interests

Avoid presenting women as inferior by sharing media with women only in positions of secretaries, assistants, supporting jobs or jobs gender based.

Avoid micro aggressions towards women: not having a seat at the main table, being put to organize the birthday cake in the workplace or being put to write the minutes of meeting.

(5) Producing theories of social phenomena that render women's activities and interests, or gendered power relations, invisible

-Make sure women's contributions are recognized in projects, that their research work is valued, or the organizational tasks.

Make sure the women's contributions are highlighted in the communication by women being present in the media of the company.

(6) Producing knowledge that is not useful for people in subordinate positions, or that reinforces gender and other social hierarchies

Make sure no knowledge which involves women is not produced without women's knowledge. A workplace policy which does not take into consideration women's needs into the workplace will end up by having workplaces without parking spots for pregnant women, workplaces without lactation rooms, no child friendly flexible work or incomplete harassment policies.

Conclusion

Feminist epistemology is crucial for epistemology in general in all areas of knowledge, including the development of a more democratic gender balanced workplace environment and for implementing the feminine knowledge into corporate processes, guidelines, science, end products and for increasing corporate profits. The proposals made in this paper for corporate managers could be adapted into a practical training for each company, taking examples from the companies and create an active interaction and challenge the corporate managers to incorporate feminist epistemology in their day-to-day work.

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