

# **A Study of Women's Epistemology: Analysis of the Scientific Research Literature (1970-1999)/ Erev Chai**

## **Abstract**

This study reviews the short written history of women's methods of inquiry and ways of acquiring knowledge (women's epistemology). It is argued that until the end of the 1970s there was no awareness that the written history of human epistemology, after a span of over two thousand years, did not include women. The questions as to whether it is worthwhile to carry out research into women's epistemology and what possible consequences such a study might have are considered. The historic-academic context of the rising awareness of women's different methods of inquiry is presented, and women's epistemology is characterized in contrast to both traditional epistemology as depicted in the philosophy of science and to male epistemology. An interdisciplinary approach of "book and society" is used to operationalize and test research hypotheses, and the bibliometric method is used to analyze them. The "book-society" approach proposes studying socio-cultural questions by collecting data from the "book" and from a range of aspects related to it. Collecting such data from a population of books or documents, and processing them with the aims of testing research hypotheses, constitutes the bibliometric analysis.

The aim of the study is to examine empirically whether women have distinct and characteristic ways of acquiring knowledge (women's epistemology), ways different both from those described in the philosophy of science as justified and from those described in developmental psychology as the highest stage of human cognitive development. And also, to characterize a number of the dimensions of growth and spread of the idea.

The hypotheses were tested on the populations of the documents and their authors, dealing with the subject in the scientific research literature.

The primary hypothesis and its ramification were confirmed: 71% of the articles on the subject supported the idea that there is a distinct women's epistemology, while only 7% denied it. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the rate of publications on the topic continuously increased; the number of researchers in the field grew continuously as did the number of journals publishing papers on it; there was a continuous rise in

the number of disciplines from which the researchers publishing these articles came as well as in the number of disciplines represented by the journals publishing such articles — for a given time period. Similarly, it was found, in accordance with the hypothesis and with common sense, that 66% of the researchers in the field are women, while only 11% are men. The results showed that researchers in the field do not tend to empirically investigate the subject: only 2% of the papers examine women's epistemology empirically, while 39% of the researchers use the idea of women's epistemology, as a base whether for the purpose of further theoretical development, or as a methodological rationale, or as an explanation for other phenomena.

To examine the level of acceptance of the idea of women's epistemology in wider circles, a comparison was made between the corpus of documents on this topic and a related corpus of documents that deals with a subject for which women's epistemology is very relevant: women and science. The comparison of the corpuses reveals that the number of documents dealing with women and science is much larger than that of the documents on women's epistemology.

It also turned out that in 97% of the papers on women and science the term "epistemology" was not mentioned, but 35% of the studies examined quoted at least one of the four main researchers of women's epistemology. Another 35% of women and science studies did not quote even one of the four main researchers and tended to propose changing methods of learning and conditions of employment so as to encourage women and girls to study and work in science (52%) rather than changing the scientific methods (14%).

Two additional arguments raised in the introduction to this study were confirmed: According to the first, there was no awareness of a distinct women's epistemology until the beginning of the 1980s. Results showed that whereas in the decade of 1970–9 only one article was published in this field, in the decade of 1990–9 there appeared 582 articles. According to the second, until the beginning of the 1970s, publications dealing with women were few - in the decade of 1960–9 only 42 papers dealing with women and science were published, while over 5,000 articles were published on the topic in the decade of 1990–9.

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