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Linda McDowell

Linda McDowell (1949-) is a feminist economic geographer specializing in the issues of work, employment, migration, workplace identities, gendered divisions of labor, and geographies of labor-market change. Educated at Cambridge and University College London, her academic career has spanned the Open University, Cambridge, the London School of Economics, University College London, and Oxford. McDowell was instrumental in making and shaping the project of feminist geography, beginning in the early 1980s, a time when the label itself was barely acknowledged in the discipline. (“Coming in from the dark” is how she would later characterize the unbidden arrival of feminism in geography.) Working initially on housing and urban issues, McDowell began to focus on questions of work, employment, and labor-market change in the early 1990s, topics on which she would make career-long contributions. Her extensive work in feminist economic geography, which from the start was developed in close dialogue with feminist research and praxis from across the critical social sciences, would prove to be foundational in disciplinary terms and through exemplary research practice.

When Linda McDowell started teaching, at the Open University in the late 1970s, she had on her office wall a feminist poster depicting an image of ‘work’. In the background, a factory belches out smoke, while the foreground pictures what amounts to a reproduction line, tended by women, feeding the supply of labor to the factory and attending to its care at both ends of the working day. In the context of this discussion of McDowell’s creative methodological contributions to the critical social sciences, the poster can be taken to symbolize position her both as a feminist geographer *avant la lettre* and as a researcher committed from the start to rethinking (while situating) conventional categories and theories of gender, work, and the economic.

Never one to relegate discussions of method to footnotes, Linda McDowell has explicitly and actively engaged with questions of research practice, ethics, and methods, modeling commitments to methodological transparency and reflexivity in such a way as to reshape economic geography and human geography more generally. Self-describing as a labor ethnographer, elsewhere as an economic geographer or labor geographer, but always as a feminist, Linda McDowell could easily pass as a sociologist and sometimes as an anthropologist, although her chosen (qualitative) methods set her work considerably apart from norms in orthodox economics. Taken as a whole, McDowell's project has contributed decisively to the spatialization of feminism as well as the feminization of geography, both of which remain works in progress. The following discussion begins with her pioneering work in feminist geography before moving on to examine her methodological contributions to the study of gender and gender relations, culminating in observations on McDowell's project of "thinking through work."

Feminist geographies

It was on the heels of Jan Monk and Susan Hanson's (1982) intervention, "On not excluding half of the human in human geography," that Linda McDowell published a paper in the newly launched journal *Society & Space* advocating for both feminist theory and feminist modes of inquiry. Striking what would become a programmatic theme, she insisted that "the object of feminist research should not be women alone, but rather the structure of social relations that contribute to female oppression," along with the spatially variable interrelationships between production and reproduction (McDowell 1983, 59). If some of the first moves for a largely gender-blind human geography—as necessary as they were insufficient—had been belatedly to 'see' women, to acknowledge women's work and women's lives, and then at least to 'add women in', a more far-reaching (and challenging) imperative was to develop new ways of seeing and indeed understanding. Beyond simply adding knowledge of women's geographies to those that were, in effect (universalized) geographies of men, this demanded different ways of doing research, different relationships with research subjects, different modes of

representation and recognition, different purposes. Not least, it would involve developing research by *and for* women, challenging masculinist optics and practices, and exploring various aspects of the gendering of sociospatial relations. This included unpacking some taken-for-granted categories of analysis which were themselves constitutively gendered, including basic distinctions drawn between public and private, work and home, production and reproduction, city and suburb, in which those trailing positions, sites, and worlds—private, home, reproduction, suburb—were conventionally assumed to be those of women, and as such were simultaneously relegated to secondary status in theory, politics, and practice.

These and other questions would open up transformative agendas within, and for, human geography, quickly dispelling any notion that some new specialism of feminist geography might simply be slotted into the established division of labor, maybe somewhere between economic, social, and political geography. Clearly, feminist theory, analysis, and methods should not (and would not) be contained in this way, just as they called into question a whole series of calcified divides between domains of inquiry and intervention. Much more than a project of critique and deconstruction, this was also a different way of doing geography, one in which feminist priorities and sensibilities would shape what for many have become axiomatic commitments to ‘relational’ analysis. Accordingly, what McDowell (1996, 30) portrayed as geography’s characteristically “middle-range focus” would become sensitized in new and generative ways to connectivity, context, and comparison, and to the need to recognize positionality, situated knowledge, and multiple perspectives, including “links between processes and people at a range of scales from the local to the global and the ways in which these scales are themselves fundamentally interconnected.”

Opening up distinctive pathways between abstract theorizing and concrete research, “feminist methods should value subjectivity, personal involvement, the qualitative and unquantifiable, complexity and uniqueness and an awareness of context” (McDowell 1988, 165). During the 1980s, particularly in Britain, experimentation with these approaches in economic geography was aligned with a parallel methodological project inspired by critical realism (which shared an emphasis on with the role of case studies, “intensive” research methods applied to local sites and situations, the use of interviews and ethnography, and

carefully conceptualized forms of causal analysis), both of which contributed to an enduring 'qualitative turn' in the field (see Barnes et al 2007). Around the same time, a high-profile (and in some circles controversial) round of 'locality studies' began to open up questions about the distinctive intersections of class and gender relations across the scales of the home, the workplace, and the (local) community, as well as their implications for politics, culture, and divisions of labor (Bowlby et al 1986).

Since the early 1980s, McDowell and other feminist geographers have pressed questions and advocated approaches that have progressively "challenged the very conception of [the] discipline" (McDowell 1996, 31). At the same time, they have sought to realize a series of explanatory and political goals that have become integral both to the spirit and purpose of a broad swathe of critical geographical inquiry—the recognition of situation, context, location, and positionality; an appreciation of the mutually interacting and jointly constituted nature of (social) relations in all their 'local', non-universal, and intersectional forms; and an insistence that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. McDowell had entered the discipline at a time when the training of geographers was largely concerned with the mastery of quantitative techniques and regional empirics, when it was accepted that "research must be based on scientific objectivity, denying personal experiences and personal interactions between a researcher and her informants" (McDowell 1999, 227). Since this time, feminist geographers have been instrumental in a far-reaching, if hardly complete, transformation of methodological philosophy and practice in the field, as advocates of and role-models for methods like in-depth interviewing and ethnography, collaborative, participative, and action-oriented approaches, contextual and standpoint theorizing, expositional reflexivity and explanatory modesty. They have also worked to widen the substantive horizons of the field, including new lines of investigation around issues like care and responsibility, work and employment beyond the waged sphere, and sociospatial constructions of femininity and masculinity, to name but a few.

Doing gender

McDowell maintains that, as a research practice, 'doing gender' entails an emphasis on intersubjectivity rather than 'objectivity', actively working through questions of positionality, power relations, and ethics both within and beyond the field (McDowell 1992b, 406). She has described qualitative interviewing, for example, as a "game in which participants are often playing with a different set of rules," with researchers sometimes being positioned as supplicants in relation to more powerful subjects, like corporate elites, while in other situations presenting as authority figures whose questions demand answers (McDowell 1992a, 214). Although interviews are typically better suited than more standardized approaches to the challenge of probing issues of causality and the complexities of social context, they are nevertheless inescapably situated encounters in which the entire spectrum of emotional, behavioral and linguistic of human interaction is in play—not least gender relations (McDowell 1992a, 2010). The attendant conditions of intersubjectivity mean that the insights generated from interviews are not only partial, but also interpersonal and context-dependent—a far cry from positivist notions of scientific detachment, neutrality, and replicability. Yet it is also the case that feminist methodologies draw strength from their philosophical and practical critiques of scientific neutrality, as well as from their reflexivity.

This was a methodological premise for McDowell's book *Capital Culture*, which examined the restructuring of gender relations in the 'new' economy of the financial-services sector by way of an intensive case study of workplace cultures in three London-based merchant banks. This was a situation in which questions of positionality made an up-front difference, preconditioning the accessibility of (elite) research sites and impacting recruitment of research participants, since informal connections and institutional reputations would often come into play, as would matters of cooperation, compliance, and consent in securing interview referrals. In practice, it proved very difficult to convince these elite workers to agree to interviews both at work and at home, with the result that what became a program of workplace interviews could not help but relegate, to varying degrees, a series of important research questions relating to the organization of domestic lives (McDowell 1998). Female bankers, many of whom were

already having to defend their status in this highly masculinized social environment, proved to be particularly reluctant to reflect on their lives outside of work. Rather than some simple failure of interviewing protocols, the resulting silences were in a sense also data points, being symptomatic of workplace culture that valorized 'independence', in which few of the young female and male workers had any family responsibilities to speak of, while more senior male employees typically relied on the unpaid domestic labor of their wives.

McDowell (1998, 2141) advocates a *relational* method of 'listening' as a means of positioning qualitative and (inter)subjective questions like "validity, representativeness, voice and ownership" at the center of her research practice. In a practical sense, this involves reading or listening through the interview transcript several times, paying close attention to a range of different voices—the voice of the plot, recounting the story of how events unfolded, the voice of the speaker narrating her own interpretation of those events, and finally, the voices that reflect the relationships between the research subject, the researcher, and the wider web of social relations within which they are embedded. Following feminist scholars Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, McDowell suggests that such multi-layered approach to listening and transcript analysis is necessary to capture the (gendered) nuances of the interview, as a staged social interaction between differentially situated individuals, in which *how* something is formulated is often just as important as *what* is being said, not to mention what might be left unsaid. Interviewing requires mutual respect, empathy and listening skills of a kind that could never be reduced to 'objective' precision. Interview data are socially produced through embodied relations; the setting of (productive) interviews bears no resemblance to the sterile environment of the scientific laboratory.

These principles hold true not only for research on elites, but also for researching disadvantaged or marginalized populations, as McDowell's subsequent work has shown. Her *Redundant Masculinities* was based on longitudinal research on working-class 'lads', documenting protracted crises of socialization, employment security, and identity formation. McDowell's *Migrant Women's Voices* involved a yet longer-range study of migrant-worker lives and livelihoods, a book styled as a feminist analog to Studs Terkel's classic book, *Working*. The social relations of research involved in these projects have been closely focused, personal, and

often intimate, and they have raised demanding questions concerning gendered, raced, and generational positionalities. For example, McDowell's interviews with working-class teenagers in Sheffield and Cambridge could not but engage with the starkly different positionalities of the researcher and her research subjects, in contrast to the 'lads studying lads' scholarship that tends to dominate this branch of ethnography. Rather than reinforcing spectacular aspects of 'deviant' youth culture, as those 'running with the crowd' have often tended to do, McDowell's research focused on the more low-key and everyday processes through which convention-conforming young men with low educational achievement sought to make sense of working lives marked by contradictions between value systems grounded in working-class masculinity and the realities of those casualized and feminized jobs available in the local service economy.

Working through work

"Thinking through work" has long been a hallmark of Linda McDowell's research program, both inside and outside geography. It has led her to question claims concerning epochal transformation predicated on narrow and selective readings of 'work', such as masculinized labor relations in Fordist factories and the 'flexibility' with which it is conventionally contrasted, not least in light of the stubborn continuities in patterns of paid and unpaid work among women, "in cleaning, caring, cooking, mopping up, soothing the sick and elderly, and generally ensuring what we, as feminists, used to call 'the daily and general reproduction of the labour force'" (McDowell 2016, 355). The scope and intensity of these multiple-shift activities may have increased, as many have become marketized and commodified in new and variegated ways, often with deleterious consequences for working-class women of color in particular, but from this perspective visions of some new age, or epochal break with the past, are wide of the mark.

Returning to some of the themes that marked her entry into the field of human geography in the early 1980s, involving the deconstruction and reconstruction of received categories of analysis, McDowell's work on work raises challenging methodological questions about the handling and interpretation of complexity, difference, multiplicity, inequality, and

intersectionality, including the limitations of feminist empiricism and the costs of disaggregating ‘connective’ categories of analysis. In dialogue with sociologist Leslie McCall, she has asked whether it is sufficient to problematize the intersections, crossing points, and interrelational constitution of ‘standard’ analytical categories like race, class, and gender—in other words their *inter-categorical* attributes. Furthermore, she asks whether the recognition of multiple and fluid identities, intersectionality and situated difference must lead inexorably to the invalidation (or incapacitation) of ‘modern’ analytical categories such as these, necessitating a poststructural embrace of *anti-categorical* thinking. Raising critical questions about both these approaches—the first of which engages complexity (principally) through the register of intersectionality, while the latter reads this complexity as a mandate for the dissolution of the categories themselves—McDowell joins McCall in making a methodological case for *intra-categorical* analyses, an approach “falling conceptually in the middle of the continuum in its adherence to traditional categories but with a critical assessment of their conventional boundaries” (McDowell 2008, 492).

This allows her creatively to navigate the space between political-economic treatments of (global) economic restructuring and (macro)regulatory transformation and the alternative perspective of those poststructuralist scholars who emphasize the intricacies of everyday life, the fluidity of identities, and the diversity of embodied experiences, rather than to one-sidedly privilege one approach over the other. Refusing to accept the debilitating methodological choice between, on the one hand, unbending master narratives of structural transformation, and on the other, an unprincipled proliferation of case studies, narratives, and splintered concepts, McDowell argues for an intra-categorical sensibility attentive both to the plasticity of received categories and to their performative roles in shaping social worlds. In these and other ways, her work remains restlessly creative in conceptual, methodological, and substantive terms, as it works through commitments to a more humane human geography.

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