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By any other name? The Women and Geography Study Group

Katherine Brickell, Avril Maddrell, Amber Martin and Linda Price

if one grants that meanings are constructed through exclusions, one must acknowledge and take responsibility for the exclusions involved in one's own project. (Wallach Scott 1988, 7)

Names can be important, as an identity marker and public persona, especially if they shape our own and others' expectations – ask any woman named Hope or Patience. In this short piece we consider what the Women and Geography Study Group of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) represents to both those inside and outside the group in the 21st century and make a case for change to a more inclusionary title.

Tensions in the definition and purpose of the group were inherent from the outset, in many ways reflecting contemporary debates between different strands of political and theoretical feminism. These tensions were literally embodied in the dialectic juxtaposition of the group's name and the founding aims. The name specifies women, but the founding aims of the group unequivocally refer to gender, and state that the group was open to both women and men (see Wyse 2013, this issue). Some men have joined the group and others have participated in WGSJ activities (see Hopkins and Jackson 2013), but their small number (currently five) tells their own story. But this is not only a question about men, what of those women who are gender researchers or activists who do not belong to the group or have been slow to engage with it? This prompts us to ask: do women and men working on 'gender' feel they have a home in the WGSJ? Should those interested in all aspects of gender research, including masculinities, have to read the group's aims or be 'expected to know' that the Women in Geography Study Group incorporates this spectrum of work and concerns? Sandra Harding (1986) provided a valuable insight into the mechanisms for understanding gender when she identified individual, structural and symbolic gendering processes. Symbolic gendering often acts at a discursive level, one that establishes norms: the pictures on the wall, the dress code, the form of address. This understanding has caused feminists to reject as spurious those arguments that suggest that the generic terms 'man', 'chairman', 'headmaster' etc. obviously include (or at least don't preclude) women. This is the crux of the matter here: does the name Women and Geography Study Group exclude potential members by dint of the very symbolic processes we campaign against elsewhere?

For some, the Women and Geography Study Group testifies to inclusion and solidarity; for others exclusion (or at least a 'failure to be invited') and partiality. At the heart of this debate lies the question: does that matter? What's in a name? We have to ask could the title of the WGSJ be read as essentialised and symbolically exclusive? Would the WGSJ lobby on behalf of men where they were excluded because of their gender? Are we in danger of embodying that very exclusion? Are there other gender related concerns and advocacy issues for feminist scholars that don't come under the heading of 'women'? For those of us writing here, as feminists, it is important that the WGSJ is seen to 'practice what it preaches' in terms of gender inclusion and this includes the group's – symbolic – name. Hence we think the name should be changed to a more inclusive form.

Does this mean the work of feminists in geography is done? Over 30 years after the foundation of the Women and Geography Study Group, there is undoubtedly still a political necessity to continue to focus on women – within and beyond the discipline – witness the continuing promotion gap evidenced in the 2011 WGSJ Survey and the recent Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) debate regarding the allowance for maternity leave in terms of the number of submissions within UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) evaluations. Within geographical enquiry, attention to gender is uneven: integral to some sub-disciplines, still woefully absent in others. Where absent, the subject has failed to engage with gender conceptually and methodologically, as well as failing to see its own gender-blindness, and this typically necessitates a focus on women's experiences/perspectives/needs in order to begin to redress the balance. Indeed, focusing on gender as a conceptual category allows us as feminists to prioritise a focus on women as appropriate (e.g. Maddrell 2009), but the 1990s debate on difference (e.g. see WGSJ 1997) and more recent related work on intersectionality has taught us that we can't treat women as an essentialised homogenous universal sisterhood; and what we are examining is gender, gendered roles, gendered power-relations (see WGSJ 1984 1997 2004 – none of which include 'women' in the title).

However, while acknowledging these on-going intellectual and political necessities, we believe they should not act as a barrier to reflecting on what it means, at this juncture, to be a group of geographers known as the 'Women and Geography Study Group', what that represents and how it is perceived in 2013. We acknowledge that there are cautionary tales regarding women's issues being de-centred under the umbrella title of 'gender', but do we think changing the group's name will lead to marginalising women in the group or advocacy for women in the discipline? We can't see that happening on our watch. Equally, we argue advocacy for women in the discipline should not be ghettoised in the WGSJ but should be a discipline-wide concern and responsibility.

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