

key concepts

JANE PILCHER & IMELDA WHELEHAN

# 50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies



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JP: To my daughter, Ana, this one is for you!

IW: For Miriam and Laurence, with love.

## introduction

everywhere and somewhere: gender studies,  
women's studies, feminist perspectives and  
interdisciplinarity*Imelda Whelehan and Jane Pilcher*

What is gender studies and from where has it originated? We begin our introduction to this book by providing a brief account of the development of gender studies, before going on to make some general remarks about the key concepts themselves and how readers might make best use of them.

The academic study of gender has a relatively short history. Its emergence can be dated as recently as the late 1960s, and its development triggered by second wave feminism. Along with developing a critique of gender inequalities, in both personal relationships and in social positioning (especially economically and politically), second wave feminism began to draw attention to the ways in which academic disciplines and sets of knowledge acted to exclude the experiences, interests and identities of women. For example, prior to the 1970s, the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, largely ignored gender. The 'people' it studied were mainly men and the topics it focused on were aspects of the social world especially significant for men, such as paid work and politics. Women were almost invisible in pre-1970s' gender-blind sociology, only featuring in their traditional roles as wives and mothers within families. Differences and inequalities between women and men at this time were not recognised as an issue of sociological concern and were not seen as problems to be addressed. In the context of second wave feminist critiques, however, a number of disciplines across the social sciences, the arts and humanities began to pay increasing attention to gender. Thus, in sociology during the 1970s, differences and inequalities between women and men came to be regarded, especially by women sociologists, as problems to be examined and explained. Initially, studies were focused on 'filling in the gaps' in knowledge about women, gaps left by the prior male

bias. Attention gradually moved to those aspects of experiences especially significant to women, including paid work, housework, motherhood and male violence.

In disciplines such as English Literature, women had begun to contest the hegemony of a 'canon' of great works of literature, which practically excluded women writers altogether and had nothing to say about the material and social conditions that prohibited the emergence of 'great' women in this arena. Once such questions were asked, the momentum was extraordinary and the search for answers took scholars beyond the normal boundaries of their 'home' disciplines. Kate Millett's pathfinding *Sexual Politics* (1971) moved effortlessly from literary criticism to a critique of Freud and Marx (perspectives that were later to become very much the 'business' of literary studies). At this time in the 1960s and early 1970s, the sheer number of women concentrated in the humanities in comparison to other academic fields made it an area ripe for feminist critique, since women's existence in such numbers here was itself the result of the gendered logic of the workplace. It is at this stage, during the late 1960s in the US and from the mid- to late 1970s in the UK, that women's studies as a specialised area of academic interest began to develop, as well as rapidly spreading elsewhere around the globe (the first British women's studies programmes were all taught MAs, emerging first in Kent (1980) and then York and Warwick). Thus women's studies as a discrete area of study was born, even though the early days were characterised by a huge rush of energy, where 'such courses began to be taught, quite spontaneously and without substantial prior organisation, at many US colleges and universities beginning in 1969' (Tobias 1978: 86). It was a similar story in the UK and it was only retrospectively that teachers in the field communicated nationally and internationally and debated what women's studies was and could be (the first national women's studies conference in the UK took place in 1976). Early on the link to feminist politics was tangible – these scholars were often found beyond the academy, in women's liberation newsletters, at conferences and generally networking with like-minded thinkers. They saw women's studies as not only challenging the boundaries of existing knowledges and developing new areas of study, but also as legitimising the differing social and cultural experiences of women. Many women's studies courses contained a consciousness raising (CR) component where the experiences and identities of the students themselves determined the dynamics of the classroom. Formal characteristics of academic study, particularly the teacher–student relationship and assessment, were kept under scrutiny and other means of teaching and assessment than the

formal lecture or seminar, the essay or examination were experimented with. One thing is certain: the creation of this area announced with confidence that women were worthy of study in their own right, and suggested a clear success for feminist political analysis.

Firmly interdisciplinary in perspective, women's studies initially resided mainly (if uneasily) within the disciplines of English, history and sociology, and was dependent upon the energies of sometimes isolated individuals working within a generally male-oriented curriculum. Once women's studies programmes emerged, often gathering together the work of scholars across the disciplines into one centre or as the core team of a master's or undergraduate degree, the area developed a clearer identity. Rather than seeing its major role as casting a critical eye over the traditional disciplines, women's studies could become more broadly a contestation of knowledges under patriarchy and allow a revaluation of knowledge, art and experience that had formed the basis of women's lives. Broadly speaking it is still centred around the social sciences, arts and humanities rather than the physical sciences and related disciplines such as engineering and medicine, but the presence of women's studies in the academy has had wider ramifications as the core practices and prejudices of the latter come under scrutiny.

Even though the 'women's studies' identity suggests a degree of empowerment for feminist knowledge, it is always pulled in two directions – as a critique that transforms existing disciplines and as a specialist, even separatist, area of academic concern. Within the disciplines, this critique sometimes amounted to 'adding women in' rather than recognising that men too are gendered beings. Gradually, though, and arising out of men's pro-feminist politics, there began to develop in the 1980s a body of knowledge and theorising around men as 'men'. Consequently, books (both popular and academic) on men and masculinity proliferated in the 1990s, to the extent that 'men's studies' is now recognised as a specialist area of academic focus. 'Gender studies' is seen by many to further open up the field of women's studies, beyond its beginnings in the politics of the Women's Liberation Movement.

At the same time that women's studies and, later, men's studies became established as specialised areas of academic inquiry, broader theoretical developments began to undermine their very rationale. In postmodernist and post-structuralist approaches, the very idea of 'women' and 'men' as discrete and unitary categories is challenged. The individual status and position of those we group together and call 'women' and of those we call 'men' are argued to vary so greatly over time, space and culture that there is little justification for the use of these collective

nouns. Similarly, in post-structuralist analysis, 'women' and 'men' are regarded as constructions or representations, achieved through discourse, performance and repetition rather than being 'real' entities. Together, these theoretical approaches have had a great impact on feminism, women's studies and men's studies, and have been a key driver of the increased recognition of diversity and difference. Inequalities and differences, not just between genders but within genders, based on class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, nationality, religion, and citizenship status, for example, are now attended to. In this context, 'women's studies' and 'men's studies' have become increasingly contested terms. As understandings of gender have developed as a complex, multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary area, involving the study of relationships within as well as between genders, the term 'gender studies' has gained currency, albeit not uncontested.

For some women's studies proponents, 'the rise of gender studies can take the form of making women *per se* invisible in the study of masculinity or male/female relations' (de Groot and Maynard 1993: 6). Concurrent with this is the sense that the fact of women's continued social inequality becomes obliterated, resulting in the depoliticisation of a subject that grew out of controversy and political radicalism. Some feel that women's studies has lost its confidence and sense of direction and that 'gender studies' is a dilution – a sign that feminist knowledge has been tamed and reconstituted by the academy. There are elements of truth in these positions, in that 'gender studies' does fit more easily within the institution and feminist politics are not the key motivating force behind its maintenance: gender studies also better incorporates not only men and masculinity studies, but also those who take the post-Judith Butler view that gender assignation only takes meaning through performance and iteration. Women's studies has had to accept that a monolithical model of 'woman' can exclude and affirm inequality, and gender studies is one way of addressing this concern.

Whatever label given to the academic study of gender relations in the twenty-first century, there are a number of features that have endured. First, the study of gender remains resolutely multi- and inter-disciplinary and that is its key strength, and has had the most profound impact on contemporary theory and attitudes to the production of knowledge. Second, alongside the more focused, if varied, constellation of texts, knowledge and theorising on and about gender that constitutes gender studies, gender issues continue to penetrate mainstream disciplines more widely (though not always with ease) and are enthusiastically embraced by students. Third, feminism remains a central perspective for the study

of gender relations, reminding us that this discipline emerged from the identification that women as a group were misrepresented – in both the public sphere and in the conception of their ‘real’ natures. As gender relations continue to change and mean different things, so feminism as a political ideology will change and find new avenues to explore. Academic institutions themselves have changed markedly in the last 30 years and, in Britain, the shift from the university/polytechnic divide to the old/new university one (from 1992) has had an impact on the development of women’s studies, not least because of a certain broadening of access and a higher proportion of mature or non-standard applicants coming into university, many of them women. Furthermore, many women’s/gender studies academics now in the academy constitute the first generation to be educated in gender as students themselves and are correspondingly distant from the heady politics and campus activism of the 1960s and 1970s. While challenges can be made from within the institution from a gendered perspective, these are performed with an awareness that gender/women’s studies remains itself dependent upon the academy (and the means by which it receives funds) for survival and for the support of feminist and gender-related research.

*50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* reflects the shift in thinking about gender as a complex, multi-faceted topic but within which feminist perspectives remain central. The 50 concepts focused on here are not random, and value-free selections, but instead represent an account of gender studies, both as an academic specialism and as a broader perspective across a range of disciplines and knowledge boundaries. Our selection of 50 key concepts was by no means straightforward, or fixed. It evolved during the period of writing, and reflects our understanding of those issues of enduring presence along with issues of more recent and current concern. Our selection of concepts reflects too our own political and disciplinary selves, and so we write as white, middle-class feminists, working within the disciplines of sociology (JP), and English and women’s studies (IW). Our view of gender studies, reflected in this book, also reveals to some extent our positioning within Western industrial societies, and more specifically, Britain.

The shifts in approaches to gender over the last few decades themselves make a compelling reason for a book focusing on the key concepts that have shaped, and continue to shape, gender studies as a discipline. Conveying the complexity of gender as a topic of study to students, working within a wide range of academic disciplines, is a challenging task. Ideas, debates and theories are presented in this book with such diversity in mind. We have tried to provide clear definitions and

explorations of each concept in a way that is easy to understand, but which does not sacrifice the level of detail and critical evaluation essential to grasp the complexity of the subject matter. Each key concept begins with a concise definition, followed by illustrations of how the concept has been applied within the field. Examples of use are further developed into a critical revaluation of the concept under focus. Cross-references to related key concepts are included, along with suggestions for further reading. Unlike dictionaries of gender concepts or glossaries of terms found in some textbooks, the intention is to offer a full and informed discussion of each concept and demonstrate how they are utilised in a gender studies context. Each entry is long enough to do justice to the, on the face of it, more complex concepts (such as psychoanalytical feminism, postmodernism, queer theory and cyborg) while drawing attention to the hidden complexities of other oft-used terms (such as identity politics, backlash and equality). To get the fullest benefit of this book, you will find it useful to read all the entries cross-referred to the concept you are interested in. In many ways, the attempt to separate out and explain these concepts in all their distinctness has drawn more interconnections and links than we had first imagined. In this way, as is often the case in feminist research, the process of explication has resulted in new insights for us. As suggested above, no such volume could pretend to neutrality, but we have tried to afford the reader a variety of stances in relation to many of the concepts, as well as trying to aid an understanding of why some issues, such as pornography, became so controversial at certain points in modern feminism's history and why a concept such as consciousness raising should explain both the success and failures of feminism's second wave.

Our book is not intended as a substitute for reading the original works from which the key concepts are drawn, but rather as an aid to reaching an informed understanding of them. Our selection of 50 key concepts inevitably means that the important contributions to the study of gender made by a wide range of authors are not included, despite the originality and significance of their writing. We hope, however, that through the representation of gender studies made within this book, students are encouraged to read more widely. Hopefully the extensive bibliography also operates as a source for books that have been landmarks in the study of gender over the past 30 years and more, including as it does useful student-friendly volumes alongside long out-of-print feminist classics. This book gives testimony to the health of gender studies and the study of gender issues within a wide range of disciplines and looks forward to an ever-shifting dynamic of debates and ideas. As academics who teach at

undergraduate and postgraduate levels, we are only too aware of how popular gender-related topics remain, and how much satisfaction many students gain from working in this area – many finding fundamental echoes with their lived social and political experiences. Not only does this remind us of one of the key aims of early women's studies courses (the focus on the authenticity of experience as a valuable tool of research and knowledge), but it is also testimony to the fact that gender and women's studies remain a vibrant and productive area of academic activity, whose full integration continues to have significant implications for the larger body of academic knowledge as a whole. Moreover, it is an area that has clear applications in the world beyond the academy, and its effects continue to change the way people think about themselves.

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The SAGE Key Concepts series provide students with accessible and authoritative knowledge of the essential topics in a variety of disciplines. Cross-referenced throughout, the format encourages critical evaluation through understanding. Written by experienced and respected academics, the books are indispensable study aids and guides to comprehension.

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# androcentrism

Deriving from the Greek word for male, androcentrism literally means a doctrine of male-centredness. Androcentric practices are those whereby the experiences of men are assumed to be generalisable, and are seen to provide the objective criteria through which women's experiences can be organised and evaluated. Some writers, particularly those influenced by psychoanalytical theory, prefer the terms phallogocentrism or phallogocentric, in order to draw attention to the way the penis (or phallus) acts as the symbolic representation of male-centredness. A related concept is that of phallogocentrism. Deriving from the work of Derrida and Lacan, this term describes those ideas centred around language or words (*logos*) that are masculine in style. Postmodern feminist writers such as Cixous argue that phallogocentric language is that which rationalises, organises and compartmentalises experience and it is on this basis that terms ending in 'ism' (e.g. feminism) may be rejected (Brennan 1989; Tong 1998).

An early use of the term 'androcentric' was made by Charlotte Perkins Gillman who subtitled her 1911 book, 'Our Androcentric Culture'. In feminist analyses, most societies, historically and in the present, exhibit androcentric tendencies whereby their culture, knowledge, organisations and institutions reflect and reproduce the dominance and power of men. As Smith writes with reference to the modern Western context, 'The problem is not a special, unfortunate and accidental omission of this or that field, but a general, organisational feature of our kind of society' (1988: 22). One simple illustration is provided by the androcentric use of language. In Britain up until at least the 1980s, 'mankind' and 'men' were widely used in a generic way, instead of the more gender-neutral 'humankind' or 'people'. Similarly, the pronoun 'he' was routinely used in preference to 'she', or even to 'he or she'. Feminist analyses have problematised the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns, arguing that such linguistic practices both reflect and contribute to the marginalisation of women and are symbolic of their status in general.

Several writers have addressed the issue of the ways in which the 'male standpoint' (Smith 1988) or the 'male epistemological stance' (Mackinnon 1982) is evident in academic theories and research. In general terms, the consequences of the 'male standpoint' are that findings from men-only research studies have been generalised to women, and that areas of enquiry have focused on issues important to men's interests and

experiences, while those important to women have been overlooked. As Maynard (Maynard and Purvis 1996) explains, the perception that what counts as knowledge derives from masculine interests and perspectives has been the impetus for the development of women's studies. In its critique of androcentric knowledge, women's studies has shifted from an early concern with 'adding women in' to pre-existing fields of enquiry (leading to studies of women and paid work, or women artists, for example), to focusing on previously ignored topics of importance to women (such as motherhood, or sexual violence), to devising new concepts and theories with which to analyse women's experiences.

A classic example of feminist work in response to the androcentricity of academic theories and research is provided by Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan's work engages with psychological theories of development, in relation to morality and the self-other relationship. She criticises the repeated exclusion of women from theory-building psychological studies and their tendency to adopt the male life as the norm. Gilligan argues that the androcentrism embedded in psychological research has led to a disparity between academic theories of 'human' development and the experiences of women, a disparity seen to be caused by women's development rather than the faulty research and theory itself. In her own research, Gilligan includes the group previously left out in the construction of theory (that is, women) and aims to show the limitations of androcentric psychological research for an adequate understanding of the development of men, as well as of women. Arising from studies of men's moral development, morality has been constructed as being concerned with justice and fairness, and moral development has been seen as the understanding of rights and rules. In this moral code, the individual self is paramount and personal achievement, autonomy and separatism are orienting values. On the basis of her research, Gilligan argues that women's morality and self-other relationships may differ. In women's constructions, morality tends to be centred around an ethic of care, of responsibility for others, so that moral conflicts or problems must be resolved with a view to maintaining relationships with others. In this moral code, self and other are seen as interdependent and relationships with these others are seen as central to life. For Gilligan, her findings reveal the need for development theories in psychology to be revised, so that their analysis of the characteristics of moral conceptions in both women and men is more expansive.

Initial criticisms of androcentrism, in all its many forms and guises, have been supplemented by an increased critical awareness of the partiality of some feminist-produced knowledge itself. In the 1980s and

1990s, feminist critics argued that feminism displayed a tendency to centre white, middle-class and heterosexual femininities at the expense of other femininities (for example, Ramazanoglu 1989b; Maynard and Purvis 1996). Developments in masculinity studies have also pointed to the diversity of men's status and position in society, a diversity which belies the notion of a unitary androcentric culture whereby all men have a privileged standpoint over all women (see Connell 1987, 1995). Morgan (1992) has shown that androcentrism in sociology meant that, not only were the experiences and interests of women overlooked, but that the research and theorising on men lacked a critical awareness of them as gendered beings.

**See also:** *(the) Other, standpoint*

### FURTHER READING

A collection of classic statements on the rationale for women's studies as a counter to androcentric culture and knowledge can be found in Bowles and Duelli Klein (1983). Marshall (1994) examines the debates around modernity and postmodernity and finds a common tendency to neglect the role of women and the significance of gender in the making of contemporary societies. Hekman (1995) critically evaluates the work of Gilligan in relation to feminist moral theory.

## backlash

Backlash literally means the jarring of a wheel, or other part of machinery, which is not properly in alignment. Figuratively, it is a term that has come to mean a strong reaction against a system or state of affairs that had been changed. In the 1950s and 1960s the word was used in the US to describe a political reaction against black integration and generally connotes a forceful swing back to a previous status quo (see also *OED* online, 2002).

In feminist parlance it has become used to describe a fierce rejection of an ideology by forcefully reiterated counter-arguments. In the case of second-wave feminism, backlash commentators often used the language of feminism itself to turn against its own principles. These tendencies were brought into wider debate by the American journalist Susan Faludi