

THINKING ABOUT WOMEN

*Sociological and
Feminist
Perspectives*

 Margaret L. Andersen

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Margaret L. Andersen

University of Delaware, Newark

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For my Grandmother,

Sybil R. Wangberg

P R E F A C E

Thinking About Women introduces students to the contemporary research and theoretical perspectives which observe and explain the sociological character of women's lives in American society. The idea for this book emerged from my dissatisfaction with textbooks on sex roles and gender that take primarily a social-psychological view and that also ignore theoretical issues about gender relations. Since I began teaching courses on the sociology of sex roles in the early 1970s, a rich and intellectually exciting literature has developed among feminist scholars. In the most recent years, this scholarship has not only contributed new research insights, but it has also initiated theoretical discussions that make women's lives central to the basic concepts and perspectives of sociological thinking.

The sociological perspective is one that roots the experience of individuals and social groups in the social organization of the society in which they live. But much of the sociological theory and research has been flawed because it has largely overlooked women's roles in society and the way in which gender influences social organization. Like other major sociological categories—class and race—gender influences who we will become in society, what resources will be available to us, and how we are defined by others. The wealth of research that has emerged from feminist analysis of sociological issues shows how gender shapes our personalities, skills, and self-concepts, organizes the social institutions in which we live, and influences the distribution of wealth, power, and privilege.

Hopefully, this book will sensitize students to the position of women in American society and will give them the intellectual tools with which to comprehend women's experience. The sociological perspective is particularly significant to feminist thought because it ties individual experience to the social organization of society. Although this book is not

intended to help students find personal solutions to collective problems, it does show how individual experiences are created and transformed through social, political, and economic institutions. Feminist scholarship helps explain the structure of these institutions, and is also a means of dispersing this knowledge to promote liberating social changes for women and for men.

Part One of *Thinking About Women* introduces the sociological perspective and the emergence of feminist thinking in sociology. Chapter 1 is a discussion of feminist perspectives in sociology and it outlines the criticisms that the feminist movement has brought to traditional sociological study. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the most immediately experienced levels of gender relations—human biology and the individual in society. Chapter 2 reviews biological issues about gender and its relationship to culture and social structure. Chapter 3 examines sex role socialization, which is the process by which social expectations about gender are developed.

Part Two studies the significance of gender in contemporary social institutions. Institutions are established and organized patterns of values, norms, roles, and status that develop around some of the basic functions of a society. The persistence of these social institutions defines the social structure in which we live and also makes each society distinct. Chapter 4 discusses women and economic institutions; Chapter 5 is an analysis of women and the family; Chapter 6 examines issues surrounding women, reproduction, and health care; and Chapter 7 discusses women, crime, and social deviance.

Part Three reviews feminist theoretical perspectives and the origins of feminist thought. The ideas we form about women and gender, although they are subjective in character, have their origins in objective social systems. The dynamic relationship between social structure and consciousness is such that one must understand social change as involving both changes in consciousness and objective social conditions. Chapter 8 discusses the social construction of ideas about women and gender, especially as they are created in the public media and in academic knowledge. Chapters 9 and 10 review feminist theory and its implications for social change. These chapters are also organized according to the dialogue that has emerged between liberal and radical perspectives in feminist and social theory.

In developing research and theory on gender relations in society, feminist scholars do not mean merely to create another abstract category for sociological analysis. Like race and class, the social organization of gender has specific social, economic, and political consequences for

women, as well as for men. Feminist studies in sociology are not intended to construct abstract empirical analyses of gender, nor to develop grand theories that have no relevance to the lives of actual human beings (Mills 1959). While concept-building and observational studies are necessary in constructing accurate feminist accounts of social life, their purpose is the transformation of gender relations and the society in which we live. Thus, complete accounts of social life must explain the experiences of all women. Just as male-centered sociological studies are biased by their omission of women, so are feminist studies flawed when they are based only on the experiences of white, middle-class, and heterosexual women. Throughout this book, the questions must be asked, "Is this true for nonwhite women and lesbian women?" and "How is their experience similar to and different from other women?" Because feminist analysis seeks to understand the commonalities and the differences in women's experiences, sound feminist scholarship must entail an understanding of race, class, and heterosexual relations. Although this book may not stand up completely to the challenge, I hope that it does contribute to feminist scholars' growing analysis.

Many people have contributed to the development of this book. Their ideas about women and their encouragement and support for this project have been invaluable to me. Many provided thoughtful reviews of earlier drafts of this book and many worked long hours typing and editing the manuscript. I see it as a measure of the success of the women's movement that this project has been accomplished with the help of such a strong network of women friends and colleagues and the lively and interdisciplinary community of feminist scholars who are working to transform the academic disciplines.

In particular, I thank Peggy Phelan, Valerie Hans, Gloria Hull, Jerry Turkel, Leslie Goldstein, Tricia Farris, Caryn Horwitz, Jan DeAmicis, Patty Klausner, and Marion Palley for discussing numerous parts of this book with me and providing careful reviews of my work. I also thank the members of Sociologists for Women in Society for sharing their criticisms of this book with me and for the many stimulating discussions we have had. Although many of my students remain unnamed here, they have stimulated the creation of much of this book, both through their enthusiasm for the material and their questioning about the issues involved. I appreciate the timely support of a Grant-in-Aid from the Dean of the College of Arts and Science at the University of Delaware.

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Although I have no wife to thank for her constant support, attention to detail, and undying loyalty, I do express my thanks to friends who, in their own ways, helped me complete this book. Time and time again I faced the problem of expressing my ideas with confidence and clarity while retaining the intellectual doubts and questions that are essential to the development of ideas. The very act of writing brings authenticity to what we think and there were many times when maintaining the balance between doubting and knowing would not have been possible without the support of some very special friends. Especially, I want to thank Lewis Killian and Michael Lewis for teaching me the value of sociological thinking and the necessity for creating a humanistic approach to the study of social problems. There is no one who has contributed so enormously to my feminist thinking as Sandra Harding. Her friendship, wisdom, and intellectual challenge have kept me working when it seemed impossible. I thank her deeply for her careful reading of my work, her work as a coteacher, and her persistent passion for feminist theory. Linda Hall and Jane Bennett have shown me the value of women's lives in a way that no academic study could, and I thank them for the support they provided throughout the time I was working on this book. Also, I thank Jane, whose meticulous attention to detail made order of a chaotic bibliography. And, in more ways than I could show in print, I thank Richard Rosenfeld for his patience, humanity, and humility and for keeping the home fires burning.

Margaret Andersen

Thinking About Women

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P A R T O N E

***WOMEN'S LIVES
AND THE
SOCIOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE***

C H A P T E R

1

SOCIOLOGICAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

In the ordinary course of our daily lives, we are surrounded by evidence of the position of women in American society. In the checkout lane at the grocery store, most of the cashiers are women; the managers and baggers, men. Where children are playing, there is usually a woman nearby. In bars, men touch women more often, more aggressively, and in more different places than happens when women touch men. Gender differences can even be seen between men and women who cross the street against the light. As one student observed, men not only cross against the light more often than do women, but, when they do, they walk without hesitating and with a steady gait. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to pause, laugh, and then run.

Each of these examples reveals patterns of sex role behavior; yet, much of the time, these patterns go unnoticed. So deeply are they embedded in the minds of both men and women that, unless they

become a problem, we are hardly aware of them. We take these patterns of everyday life for granted, and they become part of the natural landscape that surrounds us in the social world.

This book studies patterns of behavior and social organization as they are influenced by gender relations. Only recently, because of the influence of feminism, have sociologists begun to study gender as a sociological issue. As sociologists began to look more carefully at gender in society, they often had to change some of their previous assumptions about the roles of women and the ways in which gender relations were organized in society. Consequently, new studies about gender roles and women's status have transformed sociological perspectives on society and the position of men and women within it. In this book, we will see how sociological and feminist perspectives inform us about women's lives, and we will review some of the recent research and theory that scholars have produced in studying that experience.

First, this chapter will discuss feminism and its influence on sociological thinking. The chapter will introduce students to some of the basic premises of the sociological perspective and will discuss the meaning of feminism and its pertinence to sociological study. As we will see, the rebirth of feminism in the 1960s has caused us to reconsider much of what we thought we knew about women and men in society. Thus, the influence of feminism on sociological thinking has been considerable and has raised new questions about the social organization of gender relations, the possibilities for social change, and the relationship of social change to academic knowledge. This first chapter introduces these issues and discusses the emergence of feminist perspectives in sociology and its related disciplines. We will begin by discussing feminism and the sociological perspective.

FEMINISM AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

As already noted, patterns in gender relations are found throughout society, although much of the time, these patterns remain invisible to us. But at some point, we may start to notice them. Perhaps at school we see that most of the professors are men and that, among students, men are more outspoken in class. Or perhaps at work we notice that women are concentrated in the lowest-level jobs and are sometimes