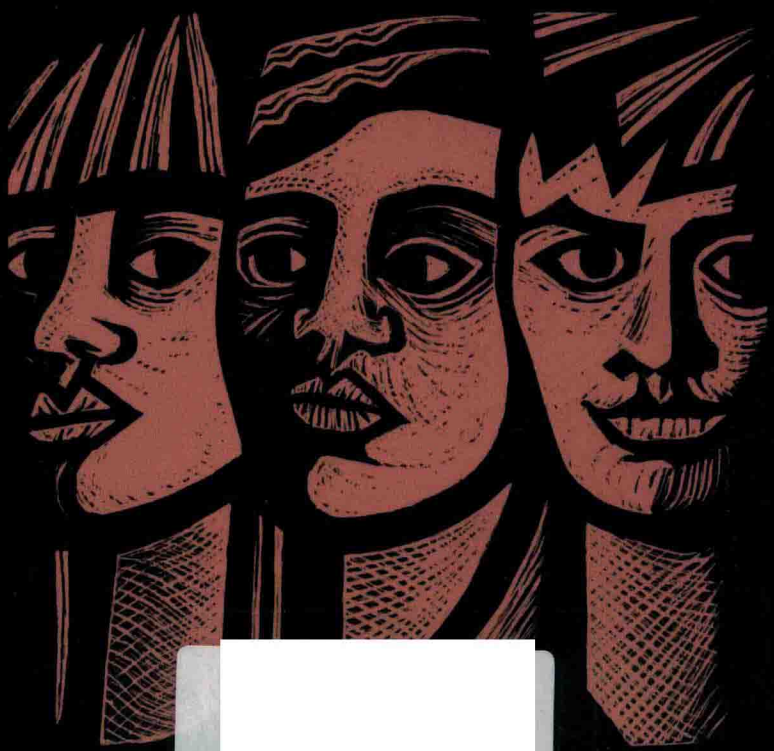
KNOWING WOMEN



FEMINISM AND KNOWLEDGE

Edited by Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a contribution to the growing field that has, within the United Kingdom, become known as 'women's studies'. The accidental ambiguity in the field's name – whether it is what women study, or the study of women – is a fortuitous one for this book. For its purposely ambiguous title *Knowing Women*, which could mean either how we know about women or how we as women know, parallels the development of the field as a whole. 'Knowing women' no longer just means developing knowledge about women, in which women feature as the *objects* of knowledge. It also means understanding the subjective process whereby women understand, create and use knowledge. In other words, 'knowing women' now also involves understanding women as the *subjects* of knowledge, subjects both in the sense of being subject to and shaped by the social forces constituting particular forms of knowledge, and in the sense of intentionally creating and using new forms of knowledge to transform those social forces. It is this newer slant which justifies a whole volume on the topic.

Feminism as a political movement has, at every stage, produced a complementary academic interest in the study of women. In the initial stages of current feminism – in the late 1960s and early 1970s – the aim was to make women visible as objects of study. Existing studies had either ignored women altogether or homogenized them with men, subsuming them under the supposedly ungendered category of 'human-being'. Women as a gender were thus invisible, either because they were absent or because their gender was thought irrelevant. The task of feminist studies in those early stages was to render women visible, to claim equality for women as objects of knowledge.

This paralleled the feminist political project of creating equality for women, where that meant equality with the existing position of men, by the removal of those disadvantages currently associated with being a woman. However, this perspective failed to recognize that men's positions in society were just as gendered as women's. It was not only that women were disadvantaged by their gender, but that men were privileged by theirs; in a hierarchy it is, of course, impossible for everyone to be on the top. Similarly, in the theoretical project of making women count as equals, if women

were to be rendered visible by measuring them against scales appropriate to men, all that could be shown was the ways in which women were either the same as or different from men, and little could be said about the structural interdependence of women's and men's characteristics.

Both the political project and the related academic one were based on an individualist philosophy in which the common humanity of women and men as rational, self-motivated individuals justified their equal treatment. However, the rational individual implicit in this picture of a shared humanity had some inherently 'masculine' characteristics and the picture was thus necessarily incomplete. For, even if men in our society were to behave as if they were such rational, self-seeking individuals, they could do so only because society also contains others – women – who do not behave in that way. For no society can continue in existence without its members being reproduced. But such unsexed, self-contained and self-seeking individuals could not reproduce themselves, nor would they altruistically choose to care for a dependent future generation. Real societies are thus structurally dependent on forms of behaviour which cannot be explained within the parameters of an individualist philosophy. And this implies that some difference between the sexes becomes a necessary additional assumption to support the very model upon which denials of the significance of sex are based.

Whether rational individualism provides an adequate model of the behaviour of individual men is not an issue here; what is at issue are its limitations as the basis of a theoretical model of society, and these become clear as soon as reproductive difference is recognized. Within the individualist model, women can only be discussed in terms of their failures (and occasional successes) to conform to this supposedly gender-free norm. In reality, however, the problem is that the norm itself comes from a model which is completely inappropriate to understanding a gendered, self-reproducing society.

A second, more theoretical stage in the development of women's studies, beginning in the 1970s, was the recognition that women's lives were centred around different issues from men's and that these needed to be studied if we were to gain an understanding of the way gender was structured in society. Thus areas that had not previously been theorized, such as the family, sexuality, interpersonal relations and other aspects of the private domain, all became objects worthy of theoretical analysis. This was an attempt to rectify the previous mode of studying women as substitute men. Women (and men) were to be studied not just in the masculine public domain, according to its criteria, but also in their own domain of the private. The recognition of the theoretical importance

of those aspects of society around which much of women's lives and relations between the sexes turned, was supposed to correct the masculine bias of existing social theory with its concentration on the public domain of politics and economics.

Politically, this meant recognizing that women's position would be fundamentally improved only by a radical transformation of society in which the divisions between women's and men's arenas, between public and private, were transformed. Both these projects, the theoretical and the political, were extremely ambitious, for such a radical transformation of society would leave no aspect of it untouched. Similarly, the theoretical project of analysing previously untheorized parts of society involved a re-examination of all existing social theory, which had concentrated on the apparently separable, public, masculine aspects of society, ignoring their interdependence with the private domain. A new feminist social theory was sought which would be a totalizing theory, encompassing both public and private domains and showing not only their interdependence, but also the way in which the very separation between them was the product of a gender-divided society. In practice, of course, theory was more piecemeal than that and the study of housework or sexuality tended to be added on to existing theory, often sitting uncomfortably next to, rather than unseating, previously pre-eminent traditions.

By 1990 work on the project of developing such a totalizing feminist theory had largely been abandoned; whether this indicates a failure of ambition, or realism in the face of an inherently impossible task, remains an unresolved question. In the 1980s much academic feminist theory, along with similar trends in other branches of social theory, moved onto a different course. Rather than attempting to reconceptualize the whole world, a critique was developed of the aims of existing theory and its claims to objectivity. This critique, which formed part of what became known as 'post-modernism', took issue with two central tenets of Western Enlightenment thought: first, that underlying the particular forms that we observe there are essential general truths to be uncovered; and, second, that the role of theory is the pursuit of objective knowledge of such truths. Instead, post-modernism claims that the pursuit of totalizing theory is mistaken, for such theory is inevitably 'essentialist' in that it makes invalid generalizations, universalizing what should be seen as local and historically specific. It also argues that there are different vantage points from which the world can be seen, no one of which can make claim to have privileged insight into any objective truth. In this view, the subjective position from which theory is produced is just as relevant as its object.

Such post-modern arguments posed a new critical agenda for feminist theorizing. The false claims to objectivity of existing theory

were to be debunked by showing how they masked masculine privilege and self-interest. And, at the same time, feminists were freed to construct their own theories without having to make any such claims for themselves, for the aim was no longer to arrive at some new universally valid objective truth which masculine bias had failed to uncover. Instead, the recognition that the standpoint of the subject – or producer – of knowledge cannot be divorced from the content of the knowledge produced left space, it was claimed, for the development of an autonomous feminist theory, rather than one developed in relation to existing men's theory.

And it opened up quite a different political project: not the pursuit of either equality for individuals or a degendered society, but of autonomy for women in which the criteria set by men need be of no relevance. Furthermore, knowledge developed along these lines itself becomes inherently political. For once a universal standard of objectivity is rejected, the only post-modernist test of feminist ideas becomes their political effectiveness. In this view, the production of knowledge becomes itself a political intervention.

Against this, other feminists argued that the post-modernist project can only be a critical one. It has value in uncovering the male-centredness of existing theory. But it goes too far, even to the point of undercutting the base upon which the whole feminist project stands. For, by rejecting as incoherent all universals and essentialisms, the very concept of women itself is undermined. Anti-feminists have used essentialist definitions of women to claim the inevitability of women's subordination, by arguing, for example, that women's current social position is a direct consequence of their reproductive capacities. A rejection of such anti-feminist essentialism does not, it was argued, entail a rejection of all essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman. Indeed, some such notion is implicit in any argument for feminism. Essentialisms that reduce the social to the biological and universalize particular forms of social relations between women and men do have to be challenged. But feminism could not and should not attempt to reject essentialism in itself.

According to this position, then, uncovering false universalisms remains a feminist tactic, but feminism can have a more constructive theoretical project too, one which can make greater claims for itself than the male-centred theories it criticized. This alternative 'feminist standpoint' argues that women, through their subordinate position in society and their experience of reproductive as well as productive labour, are able to develop a more objective viewpoint than men who have more restricted experience and have more to gain from hiding the truth. This standpoint, it should be noted, shares with post-modernism the view that what distinguishes feminist theory is that women are its subjects.

This shared claim, that it makes a difference who does the theorizing, forces us again to recognize that women are not just individual, rational members of an ungendered humanity. Here, however, that recognition leads to women being seen as holding a specifically gendered consciousness. This affects not only the way that they behave as objects of study, but also the way in which they as the subjects of knowledge understand themselves and the world. Feminist theory can no longer be defined only by its object of knowledge; indeed, a measure of the success of feminism has been the extent to which non-feminists have taken up theorizing about women and gender too. Rather, what is specific to feminist theory, according to both the post-modernist and the feminist standpoint view, is that it is carried out by women, that women are the knowing subjects of feminist theory.

The influence of such trends on academic feminism has been pervasive over the 1980s; whether they will remain so important in the '90s, we cannot at the moment tell. Despite post-modernism's current significance, there remain plenty of practitioners of earlier modes of studying of women and gender divisions. However, the questions post-modernism has posed for feminism, concerning what it means to be a woman and how this affects the way we theorize the world, are important not only to those feminists who are either sympathetic to or engaged in argument with post-modernism, but to all feminist research.

These questions have fundamentally influenced the structure of this book, which is organized around four themes: differences among women, the relation between sex and gender, the notion of subjectivity and the politics of identity.

DIFFERENCES AMONG WOMEN

The whole notion of feminist politics depends on women having some interests in common. But women are different: white, black, old, young, rich, poor, heterosexual, lesbian and so on. If women's difference from men gives them fundamentally different interests and theoretical approaches, is that not also true of differences between women? If the knowledge we seek is no longer to be seen as universal, but fundamentally imbued with the historical circumstances of its creation and therefore gendered, should it not also be seen as white or black, old or young etc.? Can anybody, then, speak for women as a whole? Black women, for example, have criticized white women for speaking as if the issues that concern them are universal feminist issues, arguing that white feminists can represent only the particular interests of one specific group of women in one specific set of historical circumstances. But can there be any such universal feminist issues? And does this question not also apply to knowledge about women? Must we reject the project

of 'knowing women' at any level of generality, as the post-modernist critique of overarching theory would indicate, and instead see our project as one of simply learning what we can about all the different positions women find themselves in? If so, what remains of the political, or theoretical, project of feminism?

This issue – concerning the implications of differences among women for what it means to be a woman and for how we as women develop knowledge – forms the first theme of this book. It is taken up explicitly in Chapter 1 and Chapter 7. Chapter 1 poses the question of how feminist theory and politics can recognize diversity among women without divisiveness. This question can be seen as running throughout the book, but is then explicitly returned to in Chapter 7 which addresses the issue of how feminist politics and theory can develop ideas about identity and community which incorporate difference in a positive way.

THE RELATION BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER

Knowing what it means to be a woman, of necessity involves an understanding of the female body. Feminist theory, however, has always had an uneasy relationship with women's bodies, having been founded on the need to refute the traditional definition of women by their biology. Biology has most often been seen as the flag of the other side, used to justify existing social limitations on women. In order to escape such biologically determinist theories of what women can and cannot do, and distinguish the effects of society from those of nature, feminists adopted the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. According to this, gender refers to the differences between 'women' and 'men' which are socially constructed, whereas sex refers to the biological distinction between 'females' and 'males'.

One problem with this distinction is that it seems to imply, at least for an individual, that, whereas nearly everybody is defined as one sex or the other by their body, gender identity is a state of mind. However, there seems to be a logical contradiction in making this split between mind and body, for the experience of inhabiting a body of a particular sex must affect women's and men's sense of themselves. Indeed, we know it does, for why otherwise should gender be dichotomously divided as sex is, and individuals see their gender identity always in relation, even if not in a straightforward relation, to their sex?

Recently, both the logic and the utility of making an absolute distinction between sex and gender has been brought into question within feminism. This is in line with the critique of objectivity, a notion that also depends on a split between mind and body, for it is only disembodied thought which can be the arbiter of objective truth. If minds are never disembodied, the possibility at least arises

that the body, as part of the subjective experience of the thinker, has real effects on the process of understanding. In that case, both sex and gender are relevant to what it means to be a woman.

This theme – the relation between sex and gender – is another that runs through this book. It is taken up most explicitly in Chapter 2 – Biology, society and the female body – which addresses the question of how feminist theory should approach the relation between biology and society, both in understanding individual development and in theorizing about society. It also arises in the subsequent two chapters where various ways of analysing sexuality are explored. These show that while sexuality cannot be reduced to reproductive biology, neither can it be related to gender in any straightforward way. Chapter 3 examines a variety of perspectives on sexuality, most of which focus on the way it is socially constructed, whereas Chapter 4 – Gender and mothering – looks specifically at theories which analyse sexuality in terms of the unconscious negotiation of sexual difference.

SUBJECTIVITY

A third theme in knowing what it is to be a woman is understanding where our sense of self – our subjectivity – comes from. 'Subjectivity' can be defined as that combination of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that make up our sense of ourselves, our relation to the world and our ability to act in that world. Unlike the individualist notion of people as rational, self-motivated individuals in pursuit of their own clear and stable self-interest, the concept of subjectivity can capture both the notion of people as intentional subjects – actors in the world – and at the same time as subject to forces beyond their conscious control. For that reason, it has proved very useful to feminist theory, which has recognized that as women we behave in ways which we do not intend and are not always in our own interests. Such 'irrational' behaviour has been experienced by women as their own failure to make personal and emotional changes that politically and intellectually seem desirable. A need to understand why this happens, or how what is called a contradictory subjectivity is produced, led feminists to examine, among other accounts, psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious. Chapter 5 – Language and difference – introduces some of these theories in order to explore the contradictory nature of subjectivity.

Even though our subjectivity is, by definition, what we experience as most personal and most individual, our desires and expectations are acquired in a social context. Chapter 6 – Subjectivity and identity – critically examines theories which explore the relationship between the social and the unconscious processes that are involved in the creation of our subjectivities. This relation is an

important one for feminism, for it may give the space needed to allow for change. For without some way of allowing the social to act upon the unconscious, women would be just as locked in to a subordinate position by the unconscious, according to psychoanalytic theory, as biological determinists would claim we are by our bodies.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

A final theme is the question of identity – what it means for a woman to claim an identity as black, as white, as heterosexual, as lesbian and so on. Rather than being experienced as something purely imposed on one from outside, within feminism it has become a political act to choose an identity or indeed to accept a complex of identities. Differences between women and accusations of racism and heterosexism within the women's movement have made the politics of identity an important issue within feminism. Claiming an identity may be empowering, but it also excludes others. The notion of 'sisterhood' rested on such a claim to a shared identity as women, and this gave feminism power within and against a male-dominated world. But the recognition of differences among women shattered that notion of politics based on a single identity. Instead, the naming of differences became a way to claim a political identity, and at one level seemed to undermine the idea of women having any identity or politics in common.

Chapter 7 – Experience and the politics of identity – takes up these issues by using the analysis of the previous chapters to understand the shifting forces that shape our subjectivities and identities. The forces of racism, heterosexism and so on that shape the identities of black women and lesbians are shown to be equally implicated in the construction of white, heterosexual identities. All women are in that way shaped by all the forces that create divisions among women, and any effective feminism has to be able to recognize differences among women. Only by rejecting the illusion that any of us can lay claim to coherent, untainted identities can the diversity of women's experience be critically understood and incorporated into feminism.

Finally, Chapter 8 returns to some of the issues raised in this Introduction to look at the history and current state of feminist theorizing and, on a fairly optimistic note, points to the future.

The above summary of some of the themes of this book and the theoretical approaches taken in it may make it seem a somewhat daunting prospect. Inevitably, some of the theories that are examined are difficult and have to be presented in a language far removed from that in which feminist struggle is conducted outside academia. Many of those theories were developed initially by men, often men

(such as Freud, Lacan and Foucault) unsympathetic or even downright hostile to feminism. Nevertheless, their theories are worth the effort needed to absorb them, for the critical uses of them made by feminism have been fruitful. We have chosen for this book articles which expound the theories from a feminist perspective, that is, which lay out critically those parts of any given theory which are needed to understand the ways in which they have been incorporated into feminist thought. We have not aimed to give an overview of any particular theoretical approach, be it psychoanalysis or post-structuralism; rather we have been guided in our choice of readings by the need to survey the current state of feminist knowledge and to do so as accessibly as possible. To this end we have used our own introductions to the chapters to explain why we see the particular theoretical approaches taken as important for feminism, and why, for us, they make the project of 'knowing women' a challenging and exciting one.

1
DISCRIMINATION, SUBORDINATION AND DIFFERENCE: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

All types of feminism are concerned with improving the lot of women. All are also committed to analysing women's present position and understanding its causes in order to improve it. However, within this common understanding of the importance of feminist knowledge, there is room for considerable disagreement. Such disagreement is not only about the means through which the position of women is improved, but also about what such improvements would be.

In particular, should the aim be to give women equal opportunities to compete on the same basis as men for the sought-after positions in society that are currently usually taken by men, hoping that women would thereby gain an equal share of the power, status and prizes that go with these positions? Or is it that the positions themselves need to be changed, not just the sex of the individuals who fill them? Must the very structure of society be changed, if women are to have the chance to lead more fulfilling lives? These questions are explored in the first two sections of this chapter, in the first of which – Discrimination and subordination – the differences between the two basic approaches are outlined, while the second looks at how ideology and socialization serve to maintain divisions between the sexes.

Or is the problem more about the ways in which men's and women's lives are currently valued, leaving whole areas of our work and our culture unrecognized and undervalued, in particular those concerning the nurturing side of life in which women predominate? If so, women should refuse to accept men's values which claim that their own activities are the important ones and need to build an alternative woman-centred culture of their own. The third section of this chapter, entitled An androgynous or a woman-centred society?, examines debates within feminism as to whether differences between the sexes should be minimized or revalued, with the following section, Motherhood and women's nature, looking specifically at how the two sides of this debate view women's capacity to bear children. In the fifth section, Gender difference and power, we