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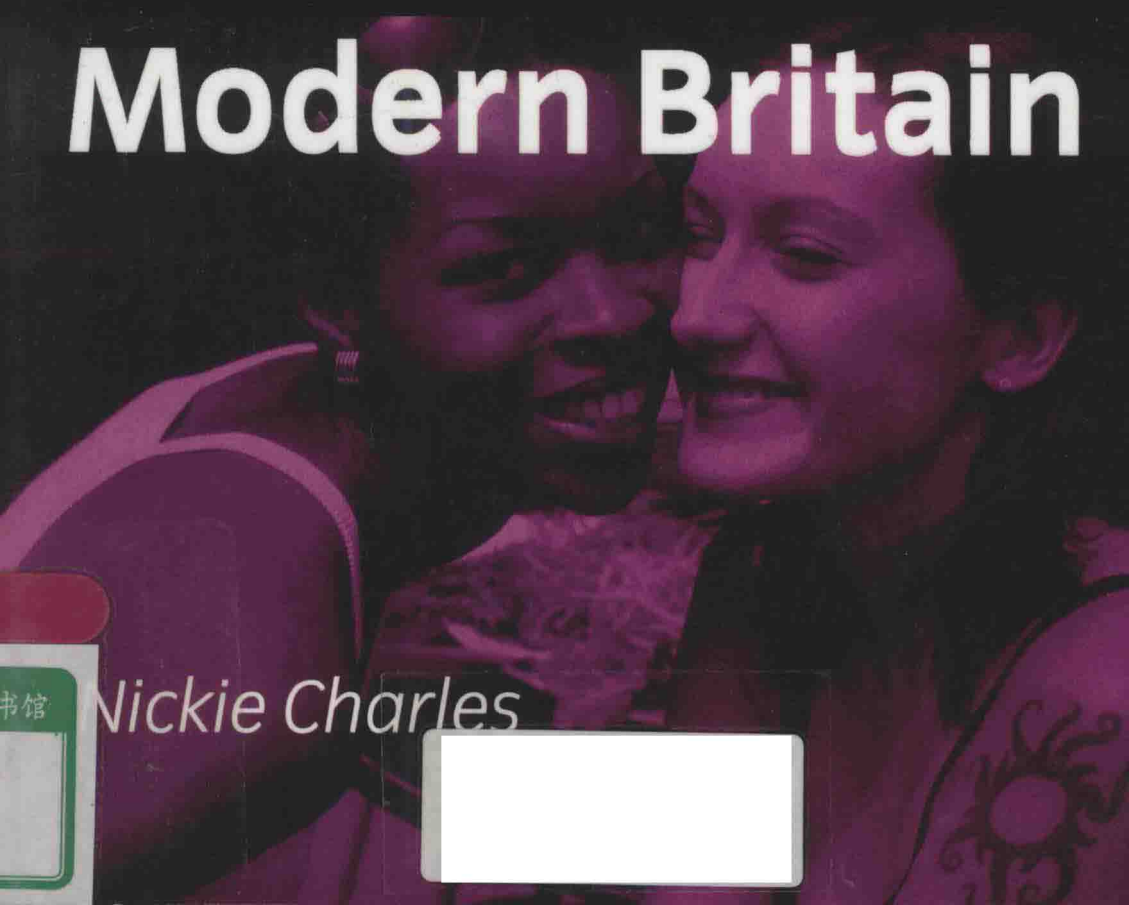
Gender in Modern Britain



Nickie Charles

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Nickie Charles

Series Editor: John Scott

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Gender in Modern Britain

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This book is dedicated, with love and gratitude,
to Mary and Freddie Charles,
the best parents anyone could hope to have

Foreword

THE Oxford Modern Britain series is designed to fill a major gap in the available sociological sources on the contemporary world. Each book will provide a comprehensive and authoritative overview of major issues for students at all levels. They are written by acknowledged experts in their fields, and should be standard sources for many years to come.

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Books in the series are intended to present information and ideas in a lively and accessible way. They will meet a real need for source books in a wide range of specialized courses, in 'Modern Britain' and 'Comparative Sociology' courses, and in integrated introductory courses. They have been written with the newcomer and general reader in mind, and they meet the genuine need in the informed public for accurate and up-to-date discussion and sources.

John Scott
Series Editor

Preface

THERE are many books on gender which provide detailed descriptions of the state of gender relations and the direction of change. This book attempts to do something different. As well as describing some important aspects of gender relations in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century and charting changes since the 1950s, it provides a discussion of how sociological theorizing and research into gender have developed and changed in the half century since the ending of the Second World War. It also engages with current debates about gender, such as whether there is a crisis of masculinity, the problem of boys failing at school, the debate over the family and mothers' employment, and the best means of ensuring a more equitable gender balance in formal political representation. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of gender relations in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century and there are, inevitably, aspects of gender that are not included or are only discussed in what may seem a rather peremptory way. I would have liked to include more but this would have made the book too long and I would have taken longer still to finish it, so there was nothing for it but to select what to include and what to exclude.

An important dimension of gender relations that I *have* included is the way they are shaped by ethnicity. There is a difficulty here in so far as different studies adopt different classifications. Rather than attempting to resolve this problem I have simply chosen to go along with the classifications used by the author/s whose work is under discussion.

Most of the material in this book is new and much of it is based on a course I teach at Swansea on gender, work, and households. Some parts of Chapter 1 have appeared in similar form in the first chapter of *Practising feminism: identity, difference, power*, a book I coedited with Felicia Hughes-Freeland and which was published by Routledge in 1996. Similarly, some of the ideas in Chapter 9 are derived from work I did for my book *Gender divisions and social change* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) and from the work I did with Helen Hintjens for our edited collection, *Gender, ethnicity and political ideologies* (Routledge, 1998).

This book has taken rather longer than expected to see the light of day. I therefore need to thank the series editor, John Scott, for his patience and forbearance; he must at times have wondered if it was ever going to materialize. I also want to thank my editors at Oxford University Press, Tim Barton, and latterly, Angela Griffin. Angela has been particularly understanding about the difficulties I have faced in meeting ever-extending deadlines. I also owe a debt of

gratitude to Chris Harris, whose enthusiastic insights about the symbolic significance of the suit for him as a young man chimed in with what I was reading about masculinities, and who has read and commented on the entire manuscript. And, once again, Lis Parcell has ridden to the rescue with food and drink and a rash promise to read the manuscript. On her recommendation, it may be advisable for readers who are unfamiliar with sociological discussions of conceptual issues to begin their reading not with Chapter 1 but with the more familiar territory of Chapter 2.

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Chapter 1

Theorizing Gender

In the past fifty years the study of gender within sociology has undergone several transformations, reflecting both theoretical developments within the discipline and political developments outside it. The most significant political development was the emergence of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s which has, arguably, resulted in the study of gender becoming central to the sociological enterprise. It has also been associated with profound social change, something which sociologists are concerned to understand and which I attempt to describe in the course of this book. In this chapter my focus is on shifts in the way gender has been theorized within sociology. In the chapters that follow I explore the effect of these shifts on the way sociologists have studied gender and the changes that have taken place in gender relations in the second half of the twentieth century.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of sex-role theory, which dominated the sociological study of gender in the immediate post-war years and was not displaced from its pre-eminence until the early 1970s and the emergence of feminism. I then consider attempts by feminist sociologists (influenced by Marxism) to develop structural explanations of gender divisions of labour. Such structural explanations ground to a halt in the early 1980s leading to pronouncements about Marxist feminist sociology being 'all but dead and buried' (Roseneil, 1995b:199). I explore the subsequent shift from studying 'things' to studying 'words'—which is how the influence of poststructuralism and the associated 'cultural turn' have been characterized (Barrett, 1992)—and argue that, alongside the 'cultural turn' with its focus on subjectivity and identity, there has been a continuing engagement with materialist theorizations of gender and, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a tension between poststructuralist theorizations of gender and various forms of materialist feminism.

Sex-role theory

It has often been asserted that prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism gender was not taken seriously within sociology and women, if they appeared at all in sociological research, were present as wives and mothers in the sociology of the family. Studies of work, politics, and practically everything else focused on men. Part of the project of feminist sociologists from the 1970s onwards was to rectify this omission, to study women as workers and as political actors, and to problematize gender divisions which had heretofore not been conceptualized as a constitutive part of the social division of labour (Stacey, 1981). It is not strictly true, however, that gender was not studied before the advent of second-wave feminism. A considerable literature exists on sex roles which has been revisited recently by those interested in the study of masculinity (see e.g. Carrigan et al., 1985 and Chapter 6). Sex-role theory, which derives from structural functionalism, conceptualizes role as the 'active aspect of a status'. In Christine Delphy's words,

> each status had roles which the individuals who held that status had to fulfil. This perspective is clearly sociological in the true sense of the word. Thus, people's situations and activities are held to derive from the social structure, rather than from either nature or their particular capacities. (Delphy, 1996:31)

A role is therefore associated with a particular position within the social division of labour. Furthermore social roles, of which sex roles are one type, provide scripts which are learned and followed by social actors; the process of learning being socialization (Connell, 1987:30). The concept of sex role was developed by Talcott Parsons and is associated with his analysis of the family in industrial society. According to Carrigan et al., Parsons derived sex-role differentiation

> from a general sociological principle, the imperative of structural differentiation. Its particular form here was explained by the famous distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive' leadership. Parsons treated sex roles as the instrumental/expressive differentiation that operated within the conjugal family. (Carrigan et al., 1985:555)

And it was within the family (conceptualized as a social group) that socialization took place. This way of theorizing gender defines a norm for masculine and feminine personalities and, by implication, there can be deviation from this norm. Thus homosexuality or juvenile delinquency can be explained by a 'failure' in socialization and conceptualized as deviant (Connell, 1987:49). This approach also recognizes that in industrial societies the feminine sex role is unstable because it involves a tension between being a full-time mother and

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