

Margaret L. Andersen



THINKING ABOUT WOMEN

Sociological
Perspectives
on Sex
and Gender



Second Edition

THINKING ABOUT WOMEN

Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender

SECOND EDITION

Margaret L. Andersen

University of Delaware, Newark

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**THINKING ABOUT
WOMEN**

For my Grandmother,

Sybil R. Wangberg

Preface to the Second Edition

Since the publication of the first edition of *Thinking About Women*, feminist scholarship in all the disciplines has grown and flourished. There is now extensive research and policy on topics that were barely named when the first edition appeared in 1983. The second edition of *Thinking About Women* incorporates several new topics, including sexual harassment, marital rape, and eating disorders, as well as new research on other topics throughout. There is additional material included on sexuality, a new chapter on women and religion, and more inclusion of material on men. Data are updated throughout the book to include the most current available.

The study of sex and gender remains an interdisciplinary subject; *Thinking About Women* is a comprehensive review of feminist scholarship in the social sciences, although it is grounded in sociological theory and research. The first edition of *Thinking About Women* also attempted to recognize diversity among women by including discussion of race and class throughout the text. Because integrating race and class is an ongoing process in the reconstruction of knowledge, this edition has been updated to reflect the increasing scope of the subject.

Part I 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 new scholarship on women has brought to traditional sociological ways of thinking. Chapter 2 develops the perspective of the sociology of knowledge—one that sees ideas as socially constructed; the chapter introduces students to this framework through examination of women's roles as depicted in the media and education. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the most immediately experienced part of the sex/gender system relations—human biology and the

individual in society. Chapter 3 reviews research on biology, sex, and gender and their relationship to culture and social structure. Chapter 4 examines the process of sex role socialization and the acquisition of gender identities.

Part II studies the significance of gender in contemporary social institutions. Chapter 5 discusses women, work, and the economy. Chapter 6 is an analysis of women and families. Chapter 7 discusses women, reproduction, and health care. Chapter 8, a new addition in the second edition, is a discussion of women and religion, based on the idea that religion is both a liberating and oppressive part of women's experiences. Chapter 9 reviews research on women and crime, women as victims of crime, and women in the criminal justice system.

Part III reviews theoretical perspectives in feminist thought and the origins of the women's movement. These chapters are organized according to the dialogue that has emerged between liberal and radical perspectives in feminist thinking and research; both perspectives are also examined for their implications for social change. Chapter 10 discusses liberal feminism and its origins in liberal social thought and also includes a discussion of liberal strategies for social change. Chapter 11 reviews socialist and radical feminism, both as theoretical viewpoints and as the basis for feminist activism. The development of the women's movement is discussed throughout both of these chapters.

Acknowledgments

In addition to those who gave their assistance and support for the first edition, there are many whose support for this work has been invaluable to me. I especially appreciate the comments I have received from students and faculty who have used the book. And, I thank Niki Benokraitis, Bill Chambliss, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Valerie Hans, Gloria Hull, Peggy McIntosh, Gerry Turkel, and Kathy Turkel for their encouragement for this project and the time they have taken to discuss different aspects of this book with me. The following reviewers also provided extensive suggestions that improved the second edition: Susan E. Marshall, University of Texas at Austin; Margaret L. Signorella, Pennsylvania State University; Peter J. Stein, William Patterson College; Martha Thompson, Northeastern Illinois University; and Kersti Yllo, Wheaton College. Helen Gouldner, Dean of the College of Arts and Science at the University of Delaware, and Russell Dynes, Chair of the Department of Sociology, provided funds that facilitated the book's completion. I thank Susan Brytenson, Director of Morris Library, for providing "a room of my own" where I could work uninterrupted and Becky Knight for helping, especially at the last minute,

to locate government documents. Although I do not know them all by name, the staff of the Reference Room at Morris Library gave extensive assistance throughout the preparation of this book; I am enormously grateful to them for their skills and patience. I thank Mary Thornton for her enthusiastic support and for using her extraordinary organizational skills to help in preparing the final manuscript. Without the hard work of Carol Anderson, Claire Blessing, Judy Watson, and Anna Wu, this would never have been finished on time. Ken MacLeod and Christine Cardone, editors at Macmillan, both encouraged the publication of a second edition and worked hard to see that it took place. I appreciate their editorial advice and encouragement, as well as Aliza Greenblatt's work as production editor. Most of all, I thank Richard Rosenfeld for his love, support, and patience; he is a sea of calm in what often feels like a gale of work.

M.L.A.

Preface to the First Edition

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.

This book is intended to sensitize students to the position of women in American society and to 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.

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, middleclass, and heterosexual women. Throughout this book, the questions must be asked, "Is this true for women of color 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.

Acknowledgments

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, Gerry Turkel, Leslie Goldstein, Tricia Farris, Caryn Horwitz, Jan DeAmicis, Patty Klausner, and Marion Palley for discussing numerous parts of this

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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.

M.L.A.

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