

THE
CONCEPTUAL
PRACTICES
of
POWER

A
FEMINIST
SOCIOLOGY
OF
KNOWLEDGE

DOROTHY E. SMITH

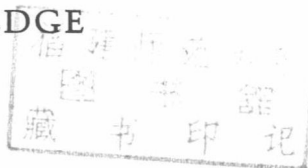
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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	ix
INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1	Women's Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology 11
CHAPTER 2	The Ideological Practice of Sociology 31
CHAPTER 3	The Social Organization of Textual Reality 61
CHAPTER 4	Textual Realities, Ruling, and the Suppression of Disjuncture 83
CHAPTER 5	The Statistics on Women and Mental Illness: The Relations of Ruling They Conceal 107
CHAPTER 6	No One Commits Suicide: Textual Analyses of Ideological Practices 141
CHAPTER 7	Ideological Methods of Reading and Writing Texts: A Scrutiny of Quentin Bell's Account of Virginia Woolf's Suicide 177
CHAPTER 8	Conclusion 199
NOTES	207
BIBLIOGRAPHY	223
INDEX	231



FIGURES

Figure 2.1	<i>The inner structure of the social scientific observable</i>	39
Figure 2.2	<i>The set of observables</i>	48
Figure 2.3	<i>Making mystical connections</i>	49
Figure 2.4	<i>The box conceived</i>	50
Figure 3.1	<i>The social organization of textual reality</i>	72
Figure 3.2	<i>Images of hippies 1</i>	76
Figure 3.3	<i>Images of hippies 2</i>	77
Figure 5.1	<i>Thinking mental illness 1</i>	118
Figure 5.2	<i>Thinking mental illness 2</i>	122
Figure 5.3	<i>Repairing the ideological circle</i>	132
Figure 6.1	<i>The actuality-data-theory circuit</i>	148
Figure 6.2	<i>From actuality to account</i>	152
Figure 7.1	<i>The ideological circle in operation</i>	180
Figure 7.2	<i>The construction of the ideological circle in the countdown to Virginia Woolf's death</i>	184
Figure 7.3	<i>The course of reading: Transformations 1</i>	189
Figure 7.4	<i>The text's work: Making connections 1</i>	190

FIGURES

Figure 7.5	<i>The text's work: Making connections 2</i>	190
Figure 7.6	<i>The text's work: Making connections 3</i>	191
Figure 7.7	<i>The course of reading: Transformations 2</i>	191

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INTRODUCTION

Gail Scott has written a passage that expresses the problematic of this book:

We women have two ways of speaking. The first begins in our mother's womb as we listen to the rhythms of her body (likewise for our brothers). As girls, we continue to develop this largely oral tongue in our ongoing relationship and identification with her (here, said Freud, our brothers start to differ). But at the same time we are developing another relationship to the "fathertongue" of education, the media, the law—all patriarchal institutions. Consequently, we end up with a split relationship to language: there is the undernurtured woman's voice, badly heard outside in what my mother always called a "man's world," and the other language, the one we try to speak in order to bridge the gap.¹

Scott is working with a theory I don't share; she is in debt, I think, to a theory, evolved by Julia Kristeva and based on the constitutional conventions of Jacques Lacan, that identifies the entry of the subject into language as at once the constitution of the subject and the subject's subordination to the law of the father. Kristeva creates a realm of language prior to and underneath and before the "fathertongue": the babble of women to their children, the speech that is not speech. Scott and I disagree on theory, but not on what she is talking about. That experience of a split relationship to language, of the undernurtured woman's voice outside the "man's world"—that is mine, too.

I understand the split differently and not as language alone. I under-

stand the “fathertongue” as the mode of participation in the relations of ruling; I understand our use of the language and conceptual practices of the fathertongue as entering us into those relations as agents or objects. For the novelist the undernurtured language of women is to be discovered as a method of writing; for the sociologist a more ambiguous problem emerges. The fathertongue would seem to be the essential language of our discipline in the sense simply that it cannot otherwise be written. Perhaps this is so; but in the work developed here I’ve chosen to risk other possibilities: that we, too, can speak in the relations mediated by texts that are organized conceptually and as knowledge, and that we are not condemned forever to a “borrowed language.”

This book begins by examining the properties of a patriarchal sociology from the standpoint of women’s experience; it seeks to characterize just what it is in sociological practices of writing that alienates and occludes the standpoint of experience, and to identify what we do when we think in ways that place us on the wrong side of the split. It explores sociological practices of writing as ideology, addressing them as instances of a class of practices—called here *ideological*—that subdue the lived actualities of people’s experience to the discourses of ruling. Here language is not addressed as a phenomenon artificially differentiated from its local historical uses. Rather, the focus is on the socially organized and organizing practices of using language that constitute objectified knowledges. The analyses developed here are specifically concerned with those forms of objectified knowledge that are embedded in and integral to the relations of ruling—the kind of knowledge that bureaucracies produce and sociologists depend on (census data, labor statistics, demographic information, epidemiological data, and so forth).

Thus the practices of thinking and writing that are of special concern here are those that convert what people experience directly in their everyday/evernight world into forms of knowledge in which people as subjects disappear and in which their perspectives on their own experience are transposed and subdued by the magisterial forms of objectifying discourse.

The book as a whole is a reflexive inquiry—what we make here an object of investigation is what we ourselves are immersed in. The ideological practices explicated here are our own. Explicating such practices enables us to become aware of how, in deploying them, we participate in the relations of ruling. Feminism, a commitment to

women, does not alone protect us from being implicated in the relations of ruling, the language of which is the "fathertongue."

I have relied heavily on analyses of the ideological practices of psychiatry in this inquiry—partly because at an earlier stage of my life as a sociologist I specialized in this area and am therefore particularly familiar with it, partly because it has had a distinctive political significance for women. Though I have not incorporated it here because it does not bear on ideological powers and practice, one of my earliest feminist analyses was an essay on women and psychiatry that understood the latter as an enforcer of women's dependent and subordinate situation in the home.² That essay conjoined two moments in my own life, one predating, one postdating the advent of the women's movement.

When my marriage was working badly a good many years ago, I went for three or four years to a number of different psychiatrists. My husband did not. The work those psychiatrists and I were committed to was that of working through and thereby eradicating whatever it was in me that made me discontented and difficult in my marriage. That process ended at a point I now see as having more significance than I recognized at the time. I stopped going to therapists, and at the same time I wrote a long paper on becoming mentally ill. Examining in-depth interviews collected by John Clausen some years earlier of accounts of "paths to the mental hospital,"³ it traced a dialectic between someone's need to act out of desperation, fear, or rage and the social invalidation consequent upon being identified as mentally ill, an invalidation that progressively denies the possibility of socially coordinated and hence socially effective courses of action.⁴ I had never been diagnosed as mentally ill nor gone so far down the road of despair and disorganization that I could not get back, but I knew enough about it as an insider to write about it and so somehow or other (though I wrote theoretically and not about myself) to decide not to do it any more.

The second moment was early on in the women's movement, when being bold still gave us the shakes. Meredith Kimball (a psychologist) and I insisted that women had to be represented in a series of six public lectures that the late Ernest Becker had organized in Vancouver, British Columbia. While other speakers got an evening all to themselves, we two women were bundled into one. But that was enough. I don't remember exactly what we said, but I remember the exhilaration of speaking of psychiatry's oppression of women, of

breaking with the professional complicity that normally silences such critique, and beyond that of proposing that psychiatry's own methods of knowing ensured psychiatry's ignorance of people.

I have come to see the problem of psychiatry's ignorance as analyzable as using the same ideological practices that I first explored in the context of sociology. This line of thinking and investigation builds on what I have learned in analyzing the alienative practices of sociology. Three substantive chapters analyze ideological practices in different sites of the institutions of psychiatry: Chapter 5 explores the professional and bureaucratic relations that generate the statistics on mental illness and seeks to understand the underlying relations that implicate this method of knowing people in enforcing familial forms of patriarchy. Chapter 6 analyzes the conceptual work of transposing accounts grounded in primary experience into the narrative forms of psychiatry. Chapter 7 analyzes the ideological organization of Quentin Bell's interpretation of the last few months of Virginia Woolf's life as displaying the mental illness that led to her suicide. It also explores the reader's own interpretive competence and hence implication in the intended interpretation of Bell's narrative.

As Scott formulates the "fathertongue," the only option for women is to slide away sideways from the ruling institutions and find modes of speaking the "mothertongue" into texts. The fathertongue is a condition of speaking beyond what we learn from our mothers; it is ineluctable; we may bridge the gap between the mother- and father-tongues, but Scott does not envisage changing the fathertongue (and by implications the relations that it is embedded in and organizes) so that it would speak differently. I do propose such an alternative. Exploring ideological practices provides us both with an alternative method and with discoveries to be made in using it. Indeed, the possibility of exploring ideological practices as I do in this book depends upon having worked out an alternative method that at least enables awareness of what we're doing and what we're joined to when we take them up. Of course, I don't think speaking differently comes all at once, but the aim of this book is to work toward a different method of thinking and knowing the society we live.

The general strategy of the book is an exploration, beginning in chapter 1 with what I have come to see in taking up the standpoint of women in our everyday/everynight worlds and disclosing the abstracted, conceptual mode of the ruling relations that is contrasted to and opposes it. The following three chapters isolate those ideological practices with which sociology alienates its own modes of con-

sciousness from those of people's lived experience, the social organization and relations of objectified knowledge, and the structures of power that underpin them. The final three chapters, devoted to different aspects of psychiatry, deepen the analyses of ideological practices and their implication in the relations of ruling; they also sharpen the method of analysis by focusing on a particular institutional configuration at a number of different sites. These final chapters illuminate, I hope, the distinctive modes of psychiatric oppression and elucidate the ways in which we, as participants in those relations and as competent users of Scott's "fathertongue," play our part. The conclusion summarizes an alternative, reflexive, and materialist method of developing a systematic consciousness of our own society through which we can become conscious both of the social organization and relations of the objectified knowledges of the ruling institutions and of our tacit and unconscious complicity in them when we speak the "fathertongue."

