

Margaret L. Andersen



Thinking About Women

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES
ON SEX AND GENDER

FIFTH EDITION

Fifth Edition



Thinking About Women

*Sociological Perspectives
on Sex and Gender*

Margaret L. Andersen

University of Delaware, Newark

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🕯 For my grandmother,
Sybil R. Wangberg
(1895–1995)

*A woman who always said she was just ordinary
but who was very special to those of us who loved her*

Preface

Thinking About Women, Fifth Edition, introduces students to understanding women's experiences in society from a sociological perspective. The book provides a comprehensive review of feminist scholarship in the social sciences and is interdisciplinary in scope, although it is grounded in sociological theory and research. The sociological perspective is particularly important to women's studies because it situates individual experience in the context of social institutions. *Thinking About Women* is not intended to help students find personal solutions to collective problems, but it does show how the experiences of women and men are created through social institutions and can therefore be transformed through institutional change.

Although the primary focus here is on women, one cannot study gender without reexamining the social structure of men's lives, as well. Gender patterns the experiences of both women and men in society through the construction of identity and consciousness, the development of belief systems, and the distribution of power and economic resources. *Thinking About Women* reviews each of these dimensions of women's experiences in society. It does so through reviewing the current research on the social construction of gender and gender stratification in contemporary social institutions.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Thinking About Women* in 1983, feminist scholarship has flourished in all disciplines. Within sociology, the sociology of sex and gender is now the largest research section; women's studies programs across the United States and, indeed, around the world have continued to grow. Early in my academic career, I could read every piece of feminist scholarship written; now, it is barely possible to keep up with developments in my own field, much less the other disciplines. Such excitement makes working on a book such as this both thrilling and daunting. One book cannot possibly reflect the breadth and depth of feminist writing, but it can excite readers about the possibilities for the new thought, research, and action that feminist scholarship brings.

The fifth edition of *Thinking About Women* represents some of the transformations that have been made in the scholarship on women in the last two decades. In this edition, I did not find it as necessary to provide an ongoing critique of existing sociological work so much as to integrate new research and scholarship on women and gender into the subjects covered in previous editions. Reviewers of the previous editions also indicated that contemporary students were extraordinarily diverse in their reactions to feminism and in their own feminist beliefs. Some students (women and men) are strong feminists in their own right, com-

mitted to multiculturalism, and sophisticated in their understanding of the significance of gender in everyday life. Others are more conservative; reviewers indicated they needed an approach that would make feminist thought accessible to those who were initially put off by it. The introductory chapter will capture the attention of students who think there is no longer a need for feminism. I hope this new edition continues to educate students of diverse backgrounds and perspectives in the continuing necessity for feminist analysis and action.

Like the earlier editions, this new edition of *Thinking About Women* integrates scholarship on race, class, and gender throughout. Just as traditional scholarship has been flawed by excluding women, so is feminist scholarship flawed whenever it excludes women of color. Feminist studies are not meant to construct abstract analyses that have no relevance to human lives. Although one purpose of feminist scholarship is to develop more accurate accounts of social life, its purpose also is to provide the knowledge that will enable the creation of a society that works for all women. Feminist studies are flawed whenever they reflect only the experience of White, middle-class women. Throughout this book, readers should ask, "Is this true for women of color?" Because feminist analysis seeks to understand the commonalities and differences in women's experiences, sound feminist scholarship should reveal the interconnections of race, class, and gender in all social relations.

Similarly, feminist theory has provided rich analyses of the structure of heterosexual institutions and social construction of sexual identities. This edition incorporates these analyses, both in the chapter on sexuality (Chapter 4) and in other discussions throughout. Data and research have been updated to keep the book as current as possible, although the organization of the book is much the same as in earlier editions. This new edition includes current material on welfare reform, teen pregnancy, and poverty among women. It also includes a new section on language, gender, and popular culture, added in response to suggestions from reviewers. More research on bisexuality and transgendered identities is presented and the discussion of the sex-gender continuum has been strengthened. Tables, figures, and data have been updated throughout to reflect the most recent material available.

Part I introduces students to feminist perspectives in women's studies, and Part II studies the significance of gender in everyday life, including the social construction of gender (Chapter 2); the gendered character of knowledge, including in popular culture, the media, and education (Chapter 3); and the importance of gender in sexual and interpersonal relationships (Chapter 4).

Part III examines gender in the context of contemporary social institutions, including work, family, health, religion, crime, and politics. These chapters (5–10) show how gender is experienced and structured within institutions and include reviews of empirical literature in these diverse subject areas.

Part IV reviews theoretical perspectives in feminist thought and the origins of the women's movement. These chapters (11–12) are organized according to the dialogue that exists among liberal, socialist, and radical perspectives in feminist theory. Chapter 13 examines new developments in feminist theory, particularly new questions in feminist epistemology, feminism among women of color, and postmodernist theory.

Throughout the book, research findings are integrated with concepts and theory. The book's basic premise is that empirical research makes sense only in the context of theoretical analysis; thus, attention is given to the frameworks of feminist analysis and what they reveal about observed social facts in regard to gender and women's experiences.

A Note on Language

Transforming thought to be more inclusive of gender, race, and class also involves a process of transforming language. As the civil rights and women's movements have taught us, the language we use to describe different groups is deeply social and political in nature. It can belittle, trivialize, marginalize, and ignore the experiences of different groups.

In this book, I have capitalized *Black* because of the specific historical experience of African Americans in the United States and because, increasingly, this practice represents the self-identity of African American people in this country. For consistency, I have also capitalized *White*. The experience of being White has not historically been associated with a group identity in the same sense that being Black has signified a racial identity; yet new scholarship is emerging that now shows how the term *White* has been socially and historically constructed. Categories like *Black* and *White* are fraught with social meaning, with implications far beyond seemingly simple matters of writing style. Although not all readers will agree with my stylistic decisions about capitalizing these contested terms, I hope it will challenge them to probe the sociological meanings of these labels. The terms *African American* and *Black American* are used interchangeably throughout the text. I have also used *Native American* and *American Indian* interchangeably.

When referring to Latinos, I use *Latino* in the most generic sense—to refer to all groups of Spanish descent in the United States. I use the feminine form, *Latina*, where appropriate. *Latino* and *Hispanic* are sometimes used interchangeably. I use *Chicana/Chicano* to refer specifically to those of Mexican descent born in the United States. I have used *Hispanic* when that is the label used in the research being cited. These distinctions are particularly problematic in citing government data. In most reports, the U.S. Census Bureau groups Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexican Americans together. Even worse, in many of these reports, Hispanics are included in the category "Black," as well as "White."

I realize that these general categories homogenize the experiences of groups with diverse social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. The same is true of the phrase *women of color*. These categorical labels also reflect common experiences held across groups and, as such, are sociologically useful despite their limitations. Likewise, "Asian American" is a category incorporating highly diverse group experiences. Many of the data sources used here do not report on Asian Americans; thus, some of the empirical work here is limited in its ability to capture these diverse experiences.

My choices about language and style are not perfect, but language and style reflect ongoing social and political, as well as linguistic, problems. Readers should be aware of the significance of language in discussing the many topics that are

part of this book. New scholarship on gender and different racial and ethnic groups also promises to add to our knowledge in years to come.

Pedagogical Features

The fifth edition of *Thinking About Women* retains the pedagogical features of the fourth edition. Graphics, where appropriate, illustrate the empirical data discussed and break up the visual presentation of text to capture students' attention. At the end of each chapter is a list of Key Terms to highlight major concepts. A glossary of all key terms, with brief definitions, is included at the end of the book.

There is also a list of Suggested Readings at the end of each chapter, with annotations to catch students' interest. The books included were selected particularly for their significance in the literature and for their accessibility to undergraduate readers. These lists of readings are intended to provide students with materials that can be useful in class projects or research papers or to simply give them additional readings on subjects they find fascinating.

Finally, I have included several Discussion Questions/Projects for Thought at the conclusion of each chapter to stimulate student interest and provide the basis for classroom projects, exercises, or group discussions. The questions and projects synthesize and highlight major topics from each chapter.

Acknowledgments

I am fortunate to work in a community of scholars who take seriously the study of gender and its relationship to race and class. Over the years, my work has been enriched by collaborating with many faculty in colleges and universities across the United States who are working to incorporate more on gender, race, and class into their teaching and thinking. There are many people to thank for sharing ideas, research literature, teaching practices, and citations with me. I especially thank Maxine Baca Zinn, Anne Bowler, Patricia Hill Collins, Ken Haas, Valerie Hans, Sandra Harding, Elizabeth Higginbotham, Lionel Maldonado, Carole Marks, Patricia Yancey Martin, Joanne Nigg, Harry Shipman, Ronnie Steinberg, Howard Taylor, and Lynn Weber for their friendship and support. Discussions with them have helped me think about many of the questions this book raises.

I also wish to acknowledge those individuals who reviewed the fourth edition of this book for Allyn and Bacon and provided useful comments: Pearl Green, University of Southern Colorado; Lin Huff-Corzine, University of Central Florida; Ricki Ann Kaplan, East Tennessee State University; Amy Lee Oliver, Bluefield State College; and Susan Ostrander, Tufts University. In addition, I would like to acknowledge those individuals who reviewed earlier editions: Nancy R. Kelley, Fitchburg State College; Nancy L. Meymand, Bridgewater State College; Brent S. Steel, Washington State University at Vancouver; and Anne Szopa, Indiana University East.

I also thank the students at the University of Delaware who have discussed this book with me in a variety of contexts—both in and out of classrooms; their curiosity and willingness to learn more makes writing this book for them a real

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I have completed this edition of *Thinking About Women* while serving in an administrative post at the University of Delaware, which has made finding the time to write (indeed, the time to think!) a serious challenge. I would find my administrative work far less satisfying, however, if I had not found a way to keep working as a scholar/teacher, too. All this would be impossible to do alone, even though managing a full-time administrative job and several writing projects means I spend many weekends and early morning hours alone in my study. I could not have accomplished all this without the help of those who support my work. I thank Melvyn D. Schiavelli, Provost at the University of Delaware, for helping me keep my work as a sociologist going while I work as an academic administrator. My very special thanks go to Ann Draper, Lisa Huber, Jeffrey Quirico, Donna Goldman, and Cindy Sterling for all they do to support my work; I simply could not have done this without their help.

My gratitude also goes to Richard Rosenfeld for understanding and supporting my work—now through five editions and numerous other projects. His love and the extra care he provides marshal my energy and keep me on an even keel.

M. L. A.



About the Author

Margaret L. Andersen (B.A., Georgia State University; M.A., Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, Amherst) is Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Delaware, where she has also served as Dean of the College of Arts and Science and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. In addition to the sociology of gender, her research and teaching interests include race and ethnic relations; she has consulted nationally on the integration of race, class, and gender studies into educational curricula. She has served as editor of *Gender & Society* and is the author of *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (Wadsworth, 1998; coedited with Patricia Hill Collins), *Social Problems* (Addison Wesley Longman, 1997; coauthored with Frank R. Scarpitti and Laura L. O'Toole), and *Sociology: Understanding a Diverse Society* (Wadsworth, 2000; co-authored with Howard F. Taylor). Andersen is a recipient of the University of Delaware's Excellence-in-Teaching Award and is former president of the Eastern Sociological Society.

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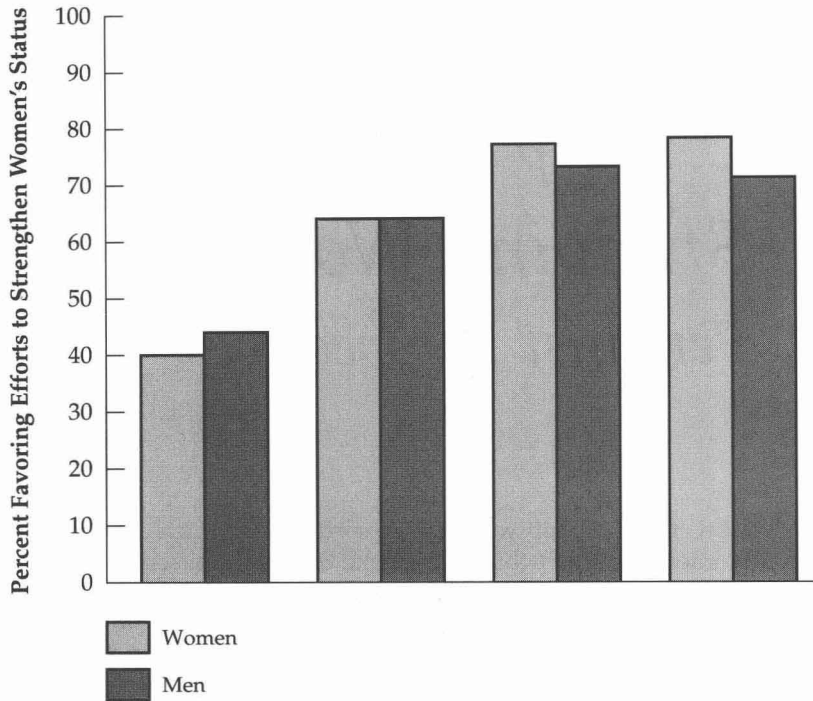


FIGURE 1.1 Changing Attitudes: 1970-1995

Source: Data from Roper Organization. 1995. *The 1995 Virginia Slims Opinion Poll*. Storrs, CT: Roper Search Worldwide.

- One-third of all households headed by women are poor; the rates are higher for African American women, Latinas, and Native American women (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996).
- Each year, 5 million women experience some form of violence, two-thirds of it committed by someone they know (Craven, 1997).
- Despite the fact that they are the most likely to be employed, women of color are concentrated in the least-paid, lowest-status jobs in the labor market (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998).
- Employed women work, on average, an additional 33 hours per week on household tasks, not including child care; the average for employed men is 20 hours (Shelton, 1992).

These facts indicate that although women may have come a long way, there is still a long way to go. Look around, and you will see many signs of the status of women in society. In the grocery store, for example, women are clustered in those departments (deli and bakery) that are least likely to lead to promotion; men, on the other hand, predominate in departments such as produce and groceries, where the majority of store managers begin (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). In schools, women constitute a large majority of elementary school teachers, but

through the higher grades and into college, women become a smaller proportion of the faculty. Despite the recent movement of more women into political office, the vast majority of those who make and enforce laws are men, particularly among those holding the most influential positions. Women can now be ordained in some religious faiths, but many religions still hold that women's proper place is in the home, reproducing and rearing children.

Even in interpersonal interaction, the difference in status between women and men can be observed. Watch the behavior of men and women around you—how they act with each other and with those of the same sex. In public places, men touch women more often than women touch men. Men also touch women in more places on the body than women touch men. Despite stereotypes to the contrary, men also talk more than women and interrupt women more than women interrupt men or men interrupt each other. Women are more likely than men to smile when interacting with others (especially with men), even when they are not necessarily happy. Men, in general, are less restricted in their demeanor than women and use more personal space. Although these patterns do not hold for all men and all women, nor necessarily for people from different cultural backgrounds, in general, they reflect the different ways that women and men have learned to interact (Basow, 1992).

Many current social problems also call attention to the status of women in society. Violence against women—in the form of rape, sexual harassment, incest, and wife beating—is common. Changes in U.S. families mean that more families are headed by women. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with such arrangements, the low wages of many women mean that female-headed households have an increased chance of being poor. As a consequence, the rate of poverty among children in such households has increased dramatically in recent years. As a final example, the national controversy over health care also has particular implications for women. Although women live longer than men, they report more ill health than men do, spend their later years with more disabling conditions, and tend to take primary responsibility for the health of others in their families (Horton, 1995).

Thinking about women helps us understand why these things occur. For many years, very few people thought seriously about women. Patterns affecting the lives of women were taken for granted as natural or to be expected. Few people questioned the status of women in society, presuming instead that studying women was trivial, something done only by a radical fringe or by frivolous thinkers. Even now, studying women is often ridiculed or treated with contempt. For example, conservative talk-show hosts portray feminism as “leftist extremism,” “out of touch with the mainstream,” and “an attempt to transport unpopular liberalism into the mainstream society” (Limbaugh, 1992:186–187). Attacks on new multicultural studies, of which women's studies has been a strong part, have accused such studies of only striving for “political correctness” and weakening the traditional “standards” of higher education. Despite these claims, women's studies has opened new areas for questioning, has corrected many of the omissions and distortions of the past, and has generated new knowledge—much of which has important implications for social policy.

Women's studies, as a field of study, is relatively new, having been established in the late 1960s and early 1970s to correct the inattention given to women in most academic fields. Because of the influence of the feminist movement, scholars in most fields have begun thinking seriously about women. Whereas 25 years ago the study of women's lives and gender relations had barely begun, now women's studies is a thriving field of study. It has grown as scholars have thought seriously about women's lives and, in so doing, have reconsidered their understanding of men, too. This process has often required challenging some of the basic assumptions in existing knowledge—both in popular conceptions and in academic studies. Scholars have found that thinking about women changes how we think about human history and society, and it revises how social institutions are understood. Thinking about women also reveals deep patterns of gender relations in contemporary society. Much of the time, these patterns go unnoticed, but they influence us nonetheless. Often, we take these patterns of everyday life for granted. They are part of the social world that surrounds us and that influences who we are, what we think, and which opportunities are available to us. Women's studies scholarship is transformative; it informs our understanding of women's experiences and changes our thinking about society and the assumptions that different academic fields use to understand the social and cultural world.

The purpose of this book is twofold: to show how the sociological perspective explains women's lives and to show how sociology itself has been transformed through thinking about women. A single book cannot discuss all of the research and theory that has been developed to understand women's experiences, but it can show how knowledge has been reconceptualized as the result of thinking seriously about women's lives. This chapter introduces you to some of the basic premises of sociology and how it has been informed by feminist scholarship. The feminist movement has been the basis for the emergent field of women's studies and, as such, it has influenced how scholars in all fields think about women. Feminist scholars within sociology, like their counterparts in other disciplines, have asked how gender is constructed, how it is organized in social institutions, and how social change is possible. The influence of feminism on sociological thinking has been considerable, as you will see.

The Sociological Imagination

As already noted, patterns in gender relations are found throughout society, although much of the time these patterns remain invisible to us. At some point, however, you may start to notice them. Perhaps at school you see that most of the professors are men and that, among students, men tend to be more outspoken in class, or perhaps at work you notice that women are concentrated in the lowest-level jobs and are sometimes treated as if they were not even there. It may occur to you one night as you are walking through city streets that the bright lights shining in the night skyline represent the thousands of women—many of them African American, Latina, or Asian American—who clean the corporate suites and offices for organizations that are dominated by White men.