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ACADEMIC TOPIC OVERVIEWS

# Feminist Theory

Sociological Theory > Feminist Theory

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## Abstract

This article provides an overview of feminist theory in sociology, including its early themes, contributions to the discipline, and areas that pose the most resistance. The central focus of the feminist critique of sociology is that the discipline is incomplete, biased, and patriarchal. From a historical perspective, early themes of feminist thought in sociology centered on criticisms of sociology's dominant frameworks, the distinction between sex and gender, and criticisms of fundamentalism. As feminist theory made its way into mainstream sociology, it transformed discipline-based knowledge. For example, feminist scholars reworked prevailing sociology theories such as Marxist class theory and macrostructural theories. Both Marxist-inspired feminist theory and macrostructural-inspired feminist theory provide important insights into the linkages between gender and class relationships, and gender stratification and other macrolevel structures, respectively. Indeed, virtually all dimensions of sociological theory have been reevaluated through the lens of feminist theory.

## Overview

Feminist theory in sociology emerged out of the political struggles of the 1960s and 70s, and in many ways it parallels the women's movement. A fundamental charge of feminist scholarship in general is to emphasize the validity of women's experience in the social world (Sydie, 1987). The early themes of feminist thought in sociology centered on criticisms of the discipline's dominant frameworks, the distinction between sex and gender, and criticisms of fundamentalism (Andersen, 2005). Virtually all dimensions of sociological theory have been reevaluated through the lens of feminist theory. Hence, feminist thought has made significant contributions to sociology. It has reduced the discipline's reliance on and acceptance of male experiences and perspectives as human experience, added to the discipline's existing knowledge base on social institutions and processes, introduced new topics and concepts, redirected explorations into previously overlooked areas of the social world, and actively fostered interdisciplinary linkages with a variety of other disciplines (Alway, 1995).

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## Keywords

**Epistemology**

**Feminist Theory**

**Functionalism**

**Gender**

**Marxism**

**Paradigm**

**Patriarchy**

**Sex**

### Feminist Theory Defined

The term feminist theory is used to refer to a multitude of types of works, produced by a movement of activists and scholars in a variety of disciplines (Chafetz, 1997). Feminist theory first developed in the 1970s as result of profound changes in women's experiences and situations that led to a political movement that challenged prevailing explanations of women's subordinate positions in society (Alway, 1995).

Feminist theory differs from general theories of inequality. Generally speaking, feminist theory refers to a set of theories that are concerned with explaining the relative position of women in society. While there is no one form of feminist theory, sociologist Janet Saltzman Chafetz in Feminist Sociology: An Overview of Contemporary Theories (1988), argues that a theory is feminist if it contains three elements:

- Gender is the central focus of the theory,
- Gender relations are considered to be problematic, and
- Gender relations in society are considered changeable.

Lengermann and Neibrugge-Brantley (1990) state that feminist theory "implicitly or formally presents a generalized, wide-ranging system of ideas about the world from a woman-centered perspective" (p. 317). Of central importance to feminist theory is the focus not just on women's issues but how the theory deals with these issues in a way to challenge, counteract, or change a societal gender system that disadvantages or devalues women (Ransdell, 1991).

Within sociology, feminist theory has emerged through challenging and revising the discipline's dominant theoretical traditions. Indeed, feminist theorists have had a great deal to say about many issues central to sociological theory, such as the dynamics of social relations, power, and a wide range of social institutions (Thorne, 2006).

### Feminist Sociological Theory Defined

According to Lengermann and Neibrugge-Brantley (1990), "feminist sociological theory attempts a systematic and critical reevaluation of sociology's core assumptions in the light of discoveries being made within another community of discourse—the community of those creating feminist theory" (p. 316). A good portion of the scholarship that is identified as "feminist theory" within the discipline consists of epistemology and epistemological critiques of mainstream or "malestream" sociology (Chafetz, 1997).

Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne's (1985) paper titled *The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology* is a classic article in the field of feminist sociology. In this piece of scholarship, Stacey and Thorne define the parameters of a feminist sociology, such that it involves

> placing women at the center, as subjects of inquiry and as active agents in the gathering of knowledge. This strategy makes women's experiences visible, reveals the sexist biases and tacitly male assumptions of traditional knowledge, and...opens the way to gendered understanding (p. 302).

## Further Insights

### Early Themes of Feminist Thought in Sociology

The early feminist literature in sociology focused on identifying the consequences of excluding women from the knowledge of the discipline (Andersen, 2005). In doing so, early feminist scholarship tended to criticize and call into question the conventional and dominant assumptions, categories, and methods within sociology (Alway, 1995). A central target of this criticism was the (male) standpoint from which sociology is written. Emerging from the political struggles of the 1970s, feminist scholars exposed the discipline's almost exclusive focus on white men, and the phenomenal world it created from their viewpoint (Smith, 1989), and thus, feminist sociology was formed.

There are three main themes of early feminist thought in sociology:

#### Criticisms of Sociology's Dominant Frameworks

Because feminist scholars devoted a good deal of their early work on criticism of the discipline's concepts and theories, the central question focused on where women fit in the dominant framework (Andersen, 2005). Marxist theory, as just one example, became a target of early feminist criticism for ignoring the importance of gender in systems of production.

#### The Sex & Gender Distinction

Early feminist scholars in sociology emphasized the important distinction between gender and sex. The objective of this distinc tion was to emphasize the social basis of gender and gender roles. This effort became the major avenue within feminist sociology

toward debunking the prevailing explanations of sex differences, which rested on biological determinants rather than principles of social organization (Anderson, 2005).

#### Criticisms of Functionalism

Early feminist scholar's criticisms of functionalism centered on its interpretations of the family. The fundamentalist idea that expressive and instrumental roles in the family were divided between the genders was fiercely challenged (Anderson, 2005).

## Feminist Contributions to Sociological Theory

During the twenty year period spanning the early 1970s to 1990s, feminist thought swept through sociology and the percentage of women in the field grew dramatically (Thorne, 2006). Feminist theory has continued to flourish since the 1970s; the section on sex and gender has become the largest research division of the American Sociological Association (Thorne, 2006). Consequently, there is much theoretical work in sociology that has been produced as a result of feminism and the women's movement, and these contributions have transformed thinking in the discipline.

Indeed, feminist scholarship has offered an abundance and variety of valuable theoretical insights, critiques, and concepts that have contributed to the understanding of the social world (Alway, 1995; Chafetz, 1997). Wallace (1989) identified four main theoretical contributions of feminism on sociology:

- Critique and reevaluation of existing sociological theories,
- Discovery of new concepts and topics,
- Interdisciplinary linkages, and
- A new sociological paradigm.

The following paragraphs elaborate on each of these contributions.

#### Critique & Reevaluation of Existing Sociological Theories

The main target of feminist criticism has been sociology's prevailing functionalist theory, and, in particular, Talcott Parsons's work on the family. At the center of this critique are Parsons's categorization of role expectations and the structure of relationships, which tended to view women's roles as predominately expressive, and men's as instrumental. Feminists also generally criticized Parsons's theory of gender socialization as oppressive for both genders, but particularly so for women.

Marxist class theory was also met with feminist criticism. Sociologist Joan Acker (1989), for example, criticized Marx for defining the economy from the perspective of the male-dominated ruling system. Chafetz (1997) adds that male domination or patriarchy is fostered by the capitalist system, which supports and sustains female oppression within the household and in the labor market. Marxist-inspired feminist theory, often referred to today as socialist-feminist theory, differs from traditional Marxism by insisting that nonwaged labor, which is done overwhelmingly by women, is just as important as waged labor (Chafetz, 1997). Chafetz argues that socialist-feminists demonstrate that gender is as fundamental as class in understanding oppression and exploitation in capitalist systems and that for women, oppression/exploitation results equally from patriarchy and from class structure, not simply as a consequence of class relationships.

Feminist scholars also critiqued sociology's macrostructural theories. As a result, most of the macrostructural-inspired feminist theories focus on the central role of the gender division of labor within the economy. The more responsibility women have in the private or domestic domain, the less equal their opportunities in the economic system, whereas the more equal the access of women to economic roles in the public domain, the lower the amount of gender inequality (Chafetz, 1997). Important insights from macrostructural feminist theories demonstrate that the gender system has implications for nearly all aspects of sociocultural structure.

Chodorow (1978) incorporated object relations theory into her revisions of Freudian thought to account for gender differences and inequality. Chodorow contends that because women are overwhelmingly responsible for early childrearing, children of both sexes have a female as their primary love object. However, the Oedipal stage experiences of boys' and girls' are very different because only girls share the sex of their primary love object. Another scholar, Carol Gilligan (1982), countered Kohlberg's prevailing theory of moral development using Chodorow's theory. Gilligan argued that women's morality is different from, but not inferior to, men's morality because it is based on personal relationships rather than abstract principles. These two works are widely cited by feminist sociologists.

#### Discovery of New Concepts & Topics

Chodorow's (1978) groundbreaking work, The Reproduction of Mothering, provided new insight on male socialization. Chodorow argues that boys view themselves as different from their mothers with whom they have had their first emotional relationships, and thus, repress their emotions and female qualities in order to achieve their individuated male identities. Girls, in contrast, strongly and continuously identify with their mothers and thus, accept their emotions and female qualities. As a result, males tend to see the feminine as inferior. Another example is the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977). Kanter's observations and immersion in the daily lives of women working in small numbers in corporations led to the concept of tokenism.

#### Interdisciplinary Linkages

Feminist scholars have a keen interest in interdisciplinary linkages. Feminist sociological theorists tend to actively reach across discipline boundaries to engage scholars from such diverse fields as economics, political science, history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology (Wallace, 1989).

#### A New Sociological Paradigm

Though still in its infancy, feminist thought served as a catalyst for the formation of a "new sociological paradigm" (Wallace, 1989). According to Stacey and Thorne (1985), a paradigm con-

sists of the "orienting assumptions and conceptual frameworks which are basic to a discipline" (p. 302). Acker (1989) described emerging paradigm alternatives as follows:

> A new feminist paradigm would place women and their lives, and gender, in a central place in understanding social relations as a whole...A feminist paradigm would also contain a methodology that produces knowledge for rather that of women in their many varieties and situations (p. 67).

Sociologist Raka Ray's (2006) work describes two important shifts in the past thirty years of feminist theory in sociology. First is the shift from what she refers to as the "universalizing to particularizing and contextualizing" of women's experiences. This shift was based on the assumption made about women's shared experiences, which were not in fact shared by all women, especially women of color and working class women. Consequently, the first theoretical shift was the rejection of the middle class white womanhood as the universal norm of women's experiences, and acceptance that it was a particular category. The second major shift, according to Ray, occurred in the object of study as women to questioning that category and shifting exploration to gendered practices where masculinity and femininity exist in relation to one another. In other words, the ways gender difference is socially constructed.

**The Sociology of Gender**

Another noteworthy contribution of feminism in sociology is the new subfield called the sociology of gender, which has produced an enormous amount of scholarship, primarily quantitative research of differences between women and men (Acker, 2006). This subfield has brought the role of gender in the creation of inequality and its consequences to the attention of mainstream sociology. Chafetz (1997) concurs, stating that the "most fundamental contributions of feminist theories have been to demonstrate the thoroughly sociocultural nature of all aspects of the gender system and the omnirelevance of gender to social life" (p. 116).

## Viewpoints

### Resistance & the State of Feminist Theory in Sociology

Alway (1995) claims that sociological theory has failed to recognize feminist theory. According to Alway, gender—the conceptual centerpiece of feminist thought—was the basis for this resistance because it challenged the dichotomous sexual categories that frame traditional sociological thought. A decade earlier, Stacey and Thorne (1985) argued that feminist theory had made little impact on the central theoretical perspectives of sociology. They claimed that despite substantial research on gender, sociology lagged behind other disciplines such as anthropology, literature, and history, in the extent to which feminist scholarship had stimulated a paradigm shift in the discipline as a whole. In their opinion, sociology made the least progress in transforming the discipline's theoretical and conceptual frameworks because of

- The legacy of functionalism, which suggested that current gender arrangements were normal, and ultimately, the best for society (Williams, 2006),
- The use of gender as a variable rather than as a central theoretical concept in quantitative analyses, and
- Sexism within Marxist scholarship, which privileged class analysis above consideration of gender or race (Acker,1989; Williams, 2006).

The gender-as-variable issue noted above has arguably faced the most resistance in mainstream sociology. The enormous body of feminist sociological research continues to analyze gender as a variable, or it adds women to the sampling population, just as it did two decades ago. Stacey and Thorne (1985) criticize this approach because it treats gender as a property of individuals and not as a principle of social organization. Thus, the central feminist idea of gender as a social institution and the role of gender in the maintenance of male dominance remain unused (Lorber, 2006). Lorber argues that "it has been very difficult, if not impossible, to get mainstream sociology to use the concept of gender as a building block and organizational principle of social orders and social institutions..." (p. 449). She attributes this resistance to the persistent belief in mainstream sociology that gender is biologically determined. In other words, efforts to transform the field's theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been undermined by biologically based explanations of behavior (e.g., hormones, genes), and thus, the social construction of gender has not been easily incorporated into mainstream sociological thinking. The following example from Lorber (2006) illustrates this claim:

> Everyone knows that women and men of the corporation are treated differently, but the implication is that this occurs because women and men are biologically different, not because the corporation is organized around the production and maintenance of gender difference in order to have a subordinate group of workers who can be paid less and do the dirty work (Lorber, 2006, p. 449).

### Conclusion

In the over 30 years since publication of Stacey and Thorne's classic article, feminist scholarship has influenced sociology, primarily by exposing the discipline as one of male discourse, that is, "written by men about men for men" (Smith, 1987). Yet, the response to this criticism has been to "add women" in, both by including gender as a variable to be analyzed, and by creating new subfields within the discipline such as the sociology of gender (Alway, 1995). According to Alway, these responses have allowed sociology to circumvent some of the more radical challenges of feminism. Merely adding women in also falls short of addressing a central claim of feminist theory, that is, that the social world is deeply "gendered."

Despite the resistance that feminist ideas have faced in sociology, there has been considerable progress made in the last two decades (Thorne, 2006). There has been profound attention to intersection

ality, or the intersections of gender with the categories of race and class, and the discipline is in the beginnings of theorizing about how these various categories relate to one another.

The three major ways that feminism's growth in sociology was stymied decades ago according to Stacey and Thorne (1985)—the legacy of functionalism, the use of gender as a variable, and sexism within Marxist scholarship—are, according to Williams (2006), future avenues for important work in feminist sociology. Ray (2006) states that it may be impossible for the discipline to fully understand gender within the United States without an understanding of connections and influences in other parts of the world. Comparative studies are increasingly important to feminist sociology, argues Acker (2006), to understand transnational processes, especially in the areas of power and subordination. Acker also pushes feminist sociologists to revisit capitalism and class. Stacey (2006) and Williams agree, noting the serious problems that exist with Marxist class analysis and its absence in feminist analyses of exploitation and class domination, respectively.

Feminist scholars have used mostly all theoretical traditions in sociology as a means to understand the gendered nature of the social world. In the process, they have presented important critiques of the inadequacies of traditional sociological theories (Chafetz, 1997), and thus, reduced the discipline's reliance on and acceptance of male experiences and perspectives as human experience, added to the discipline's existing knowledge base, introduced new topics and concepts, redirected explorations into previously overlooked areas, and actively fostered interdisciplinary linkages (Alway, 1995). However, persistent and pressing contemporary social issues such as the high rates of violence against women, the exclusionary practices directed against gays and lesbians, and the millions of impoverished women, men and children, are reminders of the benefit of and need for further feminist thought and action (Andersen, 2005).

## Terms & Concepts

**Epistemology**: An area of philosophical study that deals with the study of the nature, origins, and extent of knowledge.

**Feminist Theory**: Encompasses a set of ideas and scholarship in a variety of disciplines as a result of the feminist movement. Focuses on women's issues and the liberation of women from positions of disadvantage within various social, political, and economic systems.

**Functionalism**: A sociological paradigm that seeks to examine social and cultural phenomena in terms of the functions they serve in a sociocultural system. It is associated with Émile Durkheim and, in contemporary sociology, Talcott Parsons.

**Gender**: Refers to the social differences between women and men. While often used synonymously with sex, in feminist theory, gender is considered a social construction, and thus, is distinguished from biological sex.

**Marxism**: Refers the body of ideas associated with German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, based on their writings such as Das Kapital and The Communist Manifesto.

**Paradigm**: Refers to a conceptual framework or specific points of view within the social sciences. A feminist paradigm places women and their experiences at the center of understanding social and cultural phenomena.

**Patriarchy**: Refers to the structuring of society in which men have primary responsibility for the family unit. In feminism, the concept is often extended to include male responsibility for the community or public sphere as a whole.

**Sex**: Refers to the biological classification of women and men. Feminists distinguish biological sex from gender, with the latter based on social differences in women and men's roles that are socially constructed.

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