

Many sociologists, many feminisms

What counts as 'sociology' nowadays is different from the time when I – and probably most of your teachers – began doing sociology. In Britain, there have been attempts at a national level, in the quality assurance and benchmarking exercises, to specify what is part of a core with which all students should be familiar, but a different college and university departments approach it in a wide variety of ways. There is even less consensus about where boundaries might be drawn, with history or philosophy for example. Particular historical and cultural influences have also produced different sociological traditions in different countries, where there may be more or less emphasis on, for example, gender studies. Students and other readers should therefore be aware that topics they encounter in the following chapters are just one view of what constitutes 'sociology'. Although I have tried to make it a reasonably typical overview, there will undoubtedly be readers who will identify (in their view) crucial omissions and/or eccentric inclusions.

If it is hard to speak of sociology in the singular, feminism has always been multiple (though it is often more convenient to write of it in the singular). At different moments, one strand, one approach, one issue has been or seemed to be dominant, but there have always been alternatives and challenges. I have tried to represent what have been sociologically and politically significant ways of thinking and acting at different moments over the past thirty years or so while not losing sight of other approaches. Sometimes the changes have been called 'waves', where the First signifies the nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century movements, for the vote, for nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century movements, for the vote, for rights to education and for reforms to property, marriage and divorce laws among many. Typically, Second Wave feminism refers to the reappearance of a widespread movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is associated (in the UK) with various demands, for equal pay, for 24-hour nursery care, for access to contraception and abortion, and to the end of discrimination against lesbians. More controversially, some commentators (Arnell 1999) have identified a Third Wave, consisting of the 'daughters' of Second Wave feminism and who have moved on (as they may see it) from older demands. Many Third Wavers are careful, however, to distance themselves from conservative 'post-feminists' who claim that Second Wavers have achieved these demands, and even gone too far.

This model of waves signifies different generations of feminists with different priorities *and* between whom there was a certain tension. Sheila Rowbotham remembers growing up in the 1950s and 1960s when:

From dim childhood memories I had a stereotype of emancipated women: frightening people in tweed suits and horn-rimmed glasses with stern buns at the back of their heads. Feminism was completely asexual. It didn't occur to me that it was anything to do with the double standard of sexual morality that hurt and humiliated me. Feminism seemed the very antithesis of the freedom I connected with getting away from home and school. My recognition of women as a group was as creatures sunk into the deadening circumstances from which I was determined to escape.

(Rowbotham 1973: 12)

Part of the tension is caused by a misunderstanding, or even ignorance of what earlier generations had written and done. Rowbotham imagined that hers was the first generation to rebel against that double standard and to seek sexual freedom. At the time, she knew nothing of the campaigns around what we would now call sexual politics that date back to the early nineteenth century (Taylor 1983), and nothing about the men and women, sometimes called 'sex reformers' at the time, who attempted to live out their ideas about free love, including Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor (Hall 2000). We cannot suppose, either, that once a history of feminism has been written, the task is complete; memories have to be kept alive, actively, and different generations will find different parts of that history more and less relevant.

Kimberley Springer, however, argues that this model of waves is one that effectively obliterates the contribution of Black feminists in America who came to consciousness at different times and through different routes. In particular, the model neglects the role of race-based activism through which many Black women became politically active and which served as a model for gender activism (Springer 2002).

The varieties of feminism have often also been described by a prefix such as 'liberal', 'anarcho', 'eco' or 'Marxist/socialist' that obviously refer to wider political allegiances or affinities. 'Radical' or 'revolutionary' feminism marked itself off from the others as placing its feminism first and unqualified. Later, feminism multiplied again into forms that emphasised the identity of its formulators, as lesbian, as Black or Generation X. In the 1990s,

theoretical qualifiers became more common: postmodern, post-structuralist, postcolonial and even postfeminist. The latest, that seems to have gained widespread currency, is 'transnational'.

In certain respects, it is this varied nature of feminism that contributes to its vitality and relevance: it is not a single thing; either as a movement or an ideology. It adapts and responds to local conditions and changing times, it is the creation of generations of (largely) women and (occasionally) men, and sometimes it contributes to changing those conditions and times.

Feminism in sociology: influences

While reviewing the contribution that feminism has made to sociology is the central purpose of this book, it is also necessary to acknowledge four factors that have, in turn, shaped the development of feminism in sociology. First, when feminism is considered in relation to an academic discipline such as sociology, one aspect of the local conditions mentioned above is the (changing) dominant sociological paradigm. Feminism has, I will be arguing, considerably altered the sociological landscape but sociology has also affected the form of feminist inquiry and research. In Britain from the late 1970s, for example, sociology was profoundly affected by the revival of interest in Marxism and much feminist work could, in turn, be loosely categorised as 'socialist feminist', if not Marxist feminist.

Second, feminist studies have been interdisciplinary studies. This has partly been a matter of historical accident. The 1960s were a time both of higher education expansion and experimentation. Non-standard ways of teaching were on the agenda, and a range of interdisciplinary courses began to appear, although Women's Studies were a relatively late beneficiary in Britain and Europe compared with North America. Nevertheless, collaboration across disciplines was encouraged and this was especially important for feminists, relatively few in number across colleges and universities. Exposure to the work that historians, anthropologists and political scientists, for example, were doing was often very influential for

possible to keep up with developments in one's own, let alone other, disciplines. Feminists, then, were often the means by which the concerns of and approaches from other subjects leaked into sociology. The current fuzziness of sociological borders may partly, then, be a consequence of this feminist inventiveness.

The third factor relates to profound changes in gender relations over the past thirty or so years. In a feedback loop, one of the contributory factors was the women's movement of the 1970s. It provided a new vocabulary to think about roles and relations as gendered, to identify certain forms of behaviour as sexist and/or discriminatory, and to formulate visions of alternative, less oppressive ways of living. On a practical level, it contributed to changes in the law, changes in policies in schools and workplaces, and changes to practices in the media and healthcare. There was not one area of public life that was untouched by feminist campaigns, though not all were by any means successful. By the 1980s, although feminism was pronounced 'dead' in the media and unpopular with 'ordinary' women, it was beginning to form a taken-for-granted background consciousness. The popular disclaimer 'I'm not a feminist but...' often prefaced sentiments, both against discrimination, and for equal treatment. Such opinions, although disavowing their feminist origins, indicated how far what one might call the basics of feminism had transformed consciousness.

Finally, sociological feminism has been profoundly affected by developments in the wider feminist movements that have, in turn, drawn inspiration from other social justice movements. Feminism – like Marxism – is also a collection of political movements that occupy a ground outside the academy where not only campaigns go on, but thinking and research do too. This face of feminism refreshes and invigorates the academic side of feminism, it provides an inspiration for students, teachers and researchers who can come to see that these are all activities that can go on in many places, and in which many people can engage. It also tends to make feminism a democratic movement – although it has had distinctly authoritarian and elitist tendencies – since there is no vanguard and no centre who elaborate the 'correct' line.

Probably more than any other sociological perspective including Marxism, feminist sociology is open to influences from beyond the traditional academic community of scholars. The studies paradigm

Not only does feminist work have a wider readership, it also has a highly critical readership, and most feminist writers and researchers will feel at least as concerned about the way this readership responds to it as the way non-feminist sociologist colleagues do. In certain areas, the critical mass of this collectivity lies outside the academy. Black feminists, for example, have had to spend time in justifying their research and political commitments to Black communities who may see this as a *lack* of commitment to antiracist struggles (Springer 2002). This critical non-academic readership has, however, made recurrent accusations of elitism, of inaccessible language and a detachment of 'academic' from 'activist' feminists. This, I would argue, generally provides a healthy deflation of intellectual pride, a reminder that writing clearly and concisely is often harder than not writing in that way – especially after many years of academic training and of reading typical academic prose.

Sociology too has regularly been attacked on similar grounds, that it is little more than common sense dressed up in impenetrable jargon in order to pose as a difficult, and therefore 'real' subject. Criticisms by feminists, however, have an extra edge; if only a highly educated elite minority can understand and engage with the debates going on in colleges and universities, feminism is the loser. This is not to say that certain topics, or forms of language, or references to, say, dead German philosophers should be avoided, but it is to recognise that there is a politics to communication. Different styles are more and less appropriate to and effective for different contexts, media and audiences. I would further suggest that this means there is a particular affinity between feminism and sociology since this is a social science discipline that takes the stuff of everyday life as its subject matter, that directs students' attention to the world around, and that presents itself as a way of cultivating a critical gaze on that world. Learning about sociology, like learning about feminism, often means students never see the world in the same way again.

Feminism and sociology: developments and directions

or crime. There is, though, a case to be made for making feminist approaches the central focus and using these to consider their impact on sociology more generally. Feminism has had an enormous impact on sociology, possibly more than on any other social science discipline, and this book aims to review the contributions of feminism not simply to the various sociologies of the sub areas, but to the discipline itself.

The survey that follows concentrates on developments since the late 1960s and early 1970s, largely in Britain and America since that is the field I know best. Readers should not assume that nothing much of interest happened elsewhere but should look to feminist sociologists in their countries and continents to provide better commentaries than I could attempt. They should not assume either that the chronologies, trajectories and interweavings of sociology and feminism will match those I outline here. Indeed, the term 'feminism' in any of its forms might not make sense in certain places, though 'women's movement' might.

Finally, I intend to show that feminism's perspectives on and contributions to sociology have been twofold. First, feminists have provided alternative and illuminating criticisms of existing areas and, perhaps more significantly, have opened up new areas within sociology, transforming the area it occupies.

The first thing that struck feminists looking at sociological research, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the absence of women in accounts of the social world. Although in certain areas such as crime or employment, for example, there were significantly fewer women than men to be found and studied, this could not explain the lack of attention to women in areas such as schooling. Furthermore, feminists began to see that the relative *absence* of women could be an interesting question in itself. Why were there so few women in prison, or in boardrooms? And, on the other hand, why so few men working as secretaries, or at home looking after children? These questions were both sociological and political; they were about the adequacy of sociology's claims to document and explain the social world, and about the structures that might discriminate against women.

Related to this awareness of the invisibility of women was another move, to enlarge sociology to include areas where women were present and to pose questions that were relevant to women's lives

from feminism. Two well-established British sociologists who engaged in seriously rethinking work in their respective areas were Ronald Frankenberg (community studies) and Richard Brown (industrial sociology). Frankenberg also criticised his own earlier work as incomplete because of its blindness to gender relations (Frankenberg 1976).

Richard Brown pointed out that where women had not been ignored altogether, industrial sociologists had treated them in one of two ways: either as indistinguishable from men in their attitudes and behaviour, or as a special problem, for their employers or their families (Brown 1976). He identified a very common approach, which was by no means confined to industrial sociology alone, and that was 'an assumption that one can safely generalise and "theorise" about organisations without giving any significance to the sex of their members' (Brown 1976: 22).

Examining progress five years later, Helen Roberts (1981) concluded that although there were some changes in sociology, the core high-status areas of study, of power, class conflict and order, had been relatively untouched, although there was a very good case for regarding gender differentiation as crucial to their full analysis. Roberts did point out though that in assessing progress, it was important also to look at the organisation of social relations in the sociology profession, and here there were more positive changes. Not only were more women studying the subject, and university and colleges including issues of gender in their courses, but were organising in their professional associations and places of employment to ensure that gender issues were taken seriously in very practical ways too, such as implementing equal opportunities policies (Roberts 1981).

But as well as criticising and revising already established fields of sociology, feminists were also opening up new ones, most notably in areas of 'private' life, in sexuality, the domestic division of labour – motherhood and housework – and crimes of violence against women. These will be examined further in later chapters.

Summary

- Sociology has changed significantly over the past forty years, partly under the impact of feminists working both inside and outside universities and colleges.

- Feminist approaches to sociology have developed alongside feminist political movements.
- They have contributed to shifting sociology away from a preoccupation with men's experiences and lives to a more inclusive picture of the social world.

Further reading

- Delamont, S. (2001) *Changing Women, Unchanged Men?: Sociological Perspectives on Gender in a Post-industrial Society*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Evans, M. (1997) *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Oakley, A. (1981a) *Subject Women*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Oakley, A. (2002) *Gender on Planet Earth*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Chapter 2

The epistemological challenge

- Questions of 'useful knowledge': What should feminist research be about? How should it be communicated? Should it have links with 'useful' projects and campaigns?

Introduction

There have been a number of stages in the development of the feminist critique, beginning with the 'feminist archaeology' stage (finding the hidden women). The limitations of this in turn led to a critique of conventional sociological methodologies and the development of alternative 'feminist standpoint' epistemologies. This was also a moment of intense feminist political activism and debate, both in the sense of establishing what were the 'demands of the women's movement' and initiating and campaigning for appropriate policies and provisions (such as women's aid refuges). The significance of feminist standpoint(s) can be understood in this political context, as an 'academic' response to the centrality that was being given to women's experiences in the wider movement.

The relations, however, between 'academic' and 'activist' feminists were not always easy, and a gap also appeared to be opening up between 'feminists' and 'ordinary' women. These divisions led to a new interest in the 'politics of research', a concern not only with the ethics of research practices and the academic division of labour, but also profound questions about the purpose of research, what 'useful knowledge' might be, and who are the producers and consumers of knowledge. These issues are still under debate, but feminists have been at the forefront of opening them up for sociology.

In the 1960s, the 'classic' sociological perspectives of functionalist and conflict theories largely shaped sociological debate and research, and can be examined for what they offered (and failed to offer) to feminism.

The theoretical background: functionalism and conflict theory

When any sociologist begins to investigate any area of social life, they approach it from a particular theoretical perspective. This not

Chapter outline

Feminists have, inevitably, had to challenge existing views in society regarding women's (and men's) proper place. They have had to question dominant views and practices and to elaborate an alternative knowledge. These views are not only found in the wider society but in academic subjects of all kinds. These can be particularly influential, and can present themselves as objective fact backed up by impartial research. In the process of criticising the flaws and omissions in sociological knowledge, feminists began to develop more extensive critiques of knowledge **construction** more generally, and formulate alternative ways of validating knowledge. In this, they have often been inspired by currents and campaigns in the women's and other emancipatory movements, and have felt accountable to these as much as to an academic audience.

The chapter will examine:

- The nature of dominant sociological models and their approaches to knowledge.
- Stages in the development of feminist critiques, explaining the significance of 'feminist empiricism', 'feminist standpoint' and postmodern epistemologies.
- The relations between activist and academic feminists: how campaigns originating outside the academy came to inspire feminist researchers.
- Issues surrounding the politics of research: how researchers should behave towards each other, their subjects and their audiences.

only guides the questions and issues that sociologists research, what topics they find interesting, but also contains an epistemology. This is a theory of knowledge that establishes conventions by which valid knowledge is produced. In sociology, epistemological questions can be divided into debates about fairly abstract issues, and about more practical issues, the methods and methodology sociologists should adopt. Sociology has been subject to epistemological debates for a long time, especially arguments between those who favour an approach based on a model of the natural sciences and those who argue for a different, an interpretivist, approach.

In 1970s sociology, two main perspectives dominated debate and argument. In both Britain and North America, the dominant perspective, which had been the basis for most postwar sociology, was structural functionalism, but was increasingly being challenged by an alternative. The alternative was different in Britain and North America; in the former it was conflict theory, especially in its New Left Marxist version, while in America it was interactionism. All were able to point to ideas drawn from the various founding fathers of the discipline, though some such as Karl Marx had not called themselves sociologists.

Structural functionalism largely drew on the ideas of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim who emphasised the system-like nature of society. In this case, 'system' signifies both the ways society is organised, as a unity, rather like an organic system, and it also signifies the systematic nature of this organisation. Society, like an organism in the natural world, is more than the sum of its parts. The structure of this system consists of sets of norms, values and expectations some of which cohere into institutions such as the family, religions and educational institutions. The functionalism consists of the manner in which the structure works to meet certain needs of society, as the heart functions to pump blood around. This view has largely been associated with a positivist epistemology, an investigation of social facts using specific research techniques that are based, as far as possible, on scientific methods. This, it is claimed, is the way sociological knowledge is produced. Such knowledge is true because it is value-free and objective: the values and beliefs of the researcher do not enter into it.

Although feminist sociologists had been quick to challenge or at

on the perspectives of Marx and Weber, though 'Weberian feminism' has never become a label for a strand of analysis, in the way in which 'Marxist feminism' has. Weberian conflict theory is a major example of interpretative sociology. In distinction from positivism, the epistemology often associated with this argues that sociologists should be producing knowledge about the meaning of human action and interaction whether on a large or small scale.

Conflict theory emphasises divisions, power and inequalities, rather than consensus and cohesion. The concept of 'class' is fundamental, although defined in different ways by different schools of sociology. Conflict theorists hold certain basic ideas in common, however: we can usefully note three main ones.

- First, groups (such as classes) are formed through differential access to scarce and desired resources, and through the unevenly distributed possession of these resources. They struggle for access to them, they struggle to gain a greater share of them, and they struggle to maintain their hold over them.
- Second, those groups which have the greatest access to the important resources in society, also have more power over those who have the least resources, although this power is often contested; hence, conflict.
- Finally, there is an emphasis on 'interests' rather than 'needs'. 'Interests' stem from the social location of a group, whereas 'needs' implies an almost biological reductionism. 'Needs' must be met if any society is to survive, whereas 'interests' may only have to be met in a particular type of society. They exist only in relation to one group and, typically, are in conflict with the interests of another, subordinate, group. The bourgeoisie in a capitalist society, for example, have an interest in maintaining current property and inheritance laws. Many of the institutions in society reflect the ideas and interests of the dominant group; they do not, after all, reflect 'society's' needs, but the interests of the dominant group. The law, for example, which punishes crimes against property, embodies and maintains the interests of the group that owns most property.

well-paid careers. The 'needs' of a society (which structural functionalists listed) for a division and specialisation of gender roles and labour turned out to embody *men's* interests, and their power was manifest in many of society's institutions, which continued to reproduce that dominance. For example, in the past, trade unions have attempted to maintain control over jobs, to the detriment not only of women but also ethnic minority groups, and those others whose labour might be seen as less skilled, and therefore cheaper.

Conflict theory, knowledge and ideology

Conflict theories of all kinds, including feminist ones, also have a distinctive view on issues about knowledge and therefore implications for the way we do sociology. Sociology, in common with many other academic disciplines, aims for a better view of and account of the world than that provided by unreflective common sense. It aims to tease out the things below the surface, to identify patterns and regularities that are not apparent at first. But although many of the classical theorists supposed they could come up with objective claims about society, identified and investigated *facts*, and provided true explanations, the conflict theorists were far less sure that there was only one kind of true, disinterested knowledge. Many held what we can call a theory of **ideology**, that much of what passes as knowledge actually reflects not only the social location of the knower, but his/her interests. Ideology literally means the science of ideas, the study of beliefs, but is more particularly understood to refer to false or mistaken ideas that get a grip on people, including those who promote them. Those who do not believe in them often call both religious and political beliefs 'ideological'.

The contemporary sociological analysis of ideology owes much to Marx's writings on ideology, and here it is closely tied to bourgeois interests. He attacked not only religion for being an ideological system which served to pacify the proletariat by promising them rewards in the afterlife, but also political economy which mystified people about the real workings of economics and politics. Part of this mystification derives from the claim that ideology is simply objective knowledge, and a critique of ideology suggests we should therefore be particularly wary of any knowledge that claims to be objective and true. Ideologies often present their claims in terms

of human nature, timeless truths about the human condition, that we are naturally competitive and acquisitive, for example. Such appeals imply that a social system that encourages competition is just allowing our natures to flourish and that attempts to alter the system will be doomed to failure. This example demonstrates how these claims serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, who are the ones benefiting from competition, how their ideas are the dominant ones and even often accepted by those who suffer from competition. There are, however, divisions between the theorists over whether there ever can be objective knowledge (as opposed to ideology).

One significant feature of analyses of ideology is that they reverse normal assumptions about many forms of knowledge and expertise. As well as appearing in many common-sense views, ideology is also to be found in expert knowledge, as Marx's analysis of 'bourgeois' political economy illustrates. So, rather than the professionals and experts producing valid and objective knowledge about the world and our place within it, they are actually producing politically interested ideology that serves the dominant class. The real experts and knowledge producers are actually located in the exploited class: they not only have a clearer view of the workings of society, but have an objective interest in producing real knowledge that will emancipate them. This is a crucial aspect of theories of ideology, one that appealed to feminists who added that the dominant group was also male. Ideologies they identified were patriarchal (as well as capitalist and racist). Women, many feminists wanted to argue, were in a position analogous to that of Marx's proletariat: they were in a position to see through patriarchal ideologies (though many women did not), and they had an interest in producing an alternative, better and emancipatory knowledge.

Feminist critiques of sociological knowledge

The feminist critique of knowledge began by making two basic points: first, that sociology does not offer an analysis of women's lives. Existing sociological knowledge was excluding half the population – women – and was concentrating on men and men's lives (often under the guise of analysing the experiences of 'people' in general). The answer to this was a simple injunction to include women. But this turned out to be not so simple after all, and part of the difficulty relates to the second critique, that sociology as it

stands *cannot* provide an adequate analysis of women's lives. Both of these contained a claim that current sociological knowledge has been written from a male perspective, is riddled with unexamined bias, and marginalises women's lives and experiences.

Feminists also pointed out that the work of many of the classic theories of sociology were masculinist theories, written from a male perspective. Not only did both Durkheim and Weber concentrate on men's lives, they also assumed the sexual division of labour to be natural and inevitable, so not worthy of analysis (Sydie 1987). Although Marx (and Engels) did acknowledge inequalities between men and women, the emphasis was on exploitative class and not gender relations, which has the effect of relegating women's oppression to a by-product of class inequalities (Delmar 1976).

However, the first 'include women' approach did do much to remedy some of the existing gaps in sociological knowledge. As well as studies of (male) factory workers (Beynon 1973), we began to get studies of female factory workers (Pollert 1981; Cavendish 1982) and secretaries (McNally 1979), and the first studies directed to the broader division of labour in employment were also starting to emerge (Hakim 1979). This last was a very important breakthrough enabling sociologists to chart men's and women's places in the occupational structure, a necessary first step for assessing changes and identifying key factors which explained that division.

The first problem with the 'include women' approach was that there were not necessarily 'women' *there* to be researched. Although, up to a point, it was possible to 'include' women in studies of schools, offices and factories, it became harder in sociological areas such as crime. Women were *not* in courts and prisons to nearly the same extent as men, were not causing the same problems as boys in gangs, had not been there all the time though somehow overlooked by sociologists. Feminist researchers therefore had to approach such an area from a different perspective, to ask about their *absence*, to examine their status as victims rather than as perpetrators, and perhaps as Frances Heidensohn (1985) argued to explain their conformity rather than their deviance. Indeed, this early interest on women's experiences as victims of crime was to lead into one of the most significant new areas of sociological research, of violence (though feminists often now prefer to use the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim').

The second, more radical point was that both the content of and the nature of conventional sociological inquiry made it impossible to ask meaningful questions or get proper answers about

women's lives. A good example of this critique was Helen Roberts' article 'Do Her Answers Fit His Questions?' (Roberts 1983). Roberts argues that the standard, survey based, sociological method was particularly inappropriate for researching women's lives. The researcher using surveys and questionnaires begins with a set of assumptions or a hypothesis, devises questions into which people must fit their answers, and which will enable him/her to draw conclusions and make statistically reliable generalisations. But Roberts argues that not only might women's experiences not fit with the researcher's assumptions and categories, but that the whole interviewing process is based on a 'masculine' approach, of distance and neutrality which is unlikely to elicit knowledge about women's lives. An even stronger criticism was that the whole nature of scientific inquiry (of which much of sociology was a part) was highly **gendered**.

There is, in the West, a long-standing opposition between reason and emotion (often called irrationality), and these categories are also associated with masculinity and femininity respectively. Insofar as the ideal stance for the researcher is taken to be one of separation, objectivity and the application of disinterested reason, then science can be described as a masculine activity. Emotion is also normally relatively devalued as a means of producing knowledge. But it has not always been so. In Chapter 3 we look at the argument of some of the early women social scientists, accepted also by many men at the time, that both reason and emotion were necessary to the advancement of science.

There is, though, some confusion about whether this claim about the opposition and association relates to differences between 'real' men and women's ways of knowing, or to the labelling of ways of thinking as 'masculine' and 'feminine' (see the discussion in Hekman 1990). However, all agree that the consequence is that women, unless they adopt 'masculine' ways of knowing, have typically been excluded from the category of knower. For liberal feminists, the answer is straightforward: dispel the associations between women and irrationality, admit that women can be as 'rational' as men and include women as full members of the category of knower. For other feminists, the answer is not so simple. Harding (1984), for example, insists that our conception of 'reason' is a distorted one and is not a standard that feminists should emulate. Other radical feminists argue that feminine ways of knowing *are* different but better, and the categories of reason and emotion should be revalued in order to privilege the latter (Daly 1978; Griffin

1978). For their critics, this comes dangerously close to antifeminist arguments about women's essential natures, and leaves the dichotomy intact: 'Only a move that dissolves the dichotomy can successfully remove the prescribed inferiority' (Hekman 1990: 42). It still remains the case, though, that women's *experiences* of the world are different from men's.

Related to this was an observation that sociology, though it typically claims to investigate social life, relations and institutions, actually investigates only some of these, typically the public world. It is no accident that women are largely excluded but is related to the development of sociology as discipline, as a mode of understanding and analysing the social changes precipitated by **capitalism**. These were numerous, but as the early founders of sociology were by and large men, they focused on the changes that seemed, most dramatically and profoundly, to have affected the lives of men, such as changes in employment and **production** relations. The legacy of that focus is that 'sociology is oriented not simply to men, but the social arenas to which men have privileged access' (Roberts 1983: 135). Although many women (and children) had been employed in the mines, fields and textile factories of the early nineteenth century, by the time the early sociologists were writing employment had come to be seen as the proper preserve of men. In contrast, women's place was, equally properly, the home (which, until recently, we could imagine was without a history).

We now know that women's lives have been as dramatically changed as men's have, but in different ways. They may not have become the main wage earners of families, but neither – ever – have their lives been confined to the private realm of families and households. The ideas about men and women's proper places, however, were so strong that sociologists could imagine that women had no 'public' life and men had no 'private' one. The sociology of employment for example, has usually treated male workers as if they had no 'private' life, or no private life that has consequences for their lives as workers. Furthermore, as the Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (1974) explained, some very basic sociological categories such as 'work' and 'leisure' rest on men's experiences where such divisions make sense to them. They do not make sense to many women where the work they do in the house and caring for children is not counted *as* work, and where 'leisure' is meaningless when being a housewife and mother is a '24/7' kind of job. Through the 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of campaigns around issues of housework and childcare. They included

campaigns for nurseries, for maternity and paternity leave, and a Wages for Housework campaign. Many of the actions, however, took place in 'private', between couples and partners, as women attempted to renegotiate the domestic division of labour to share tasks more equitably (Coote and Campbell 1987). These campaigns and actions had a number of motivations: not only did women object to assumptions that these tasks 'naturally' fell to them to perform, this division of labour had consequences for men's wage bargaining. The idea that men had to earn a 'family wage', enough to 'keep' his wife and children, has a long history within trade unions (Lewis 1984). Feminists argued that this was actually a means of justifying women's lower pay that kept them dependent on a male earner. In addition, some feminists were arguing that women's maternal role has profound effects on women's lives:

Women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates a basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres. . . . Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women.

(Chodorow 1978: 10)

With so much attention focused on family life, feminist sociologists felt it was time to investigate just what was going on there, to ask just what women (and men) were and were not doing in and around the home. Indeed, it was a couple of early studies of housewives that were to break open the confines of 1970s functionalist sociology of the family.

Case study 2.1 Feminist studies of housework

At this time, the women's movement in Europe and North America was much concerned to put the question of housework on the political agenda. Some feminist researchers such as Ann Oakley in England and Meg Luxton in Canada took up the challenge to put it also on the sociological agenda. As Oakley explained:

The conventional sociological approach to housework could be termed 'sexist': it has treated housework merely as an aspect of the feminine role in the family – as part of women's role in marriage, or as a dimension of child-rearing – not as a work role. The study of housework as *work* is a topic entirely missing from sociology.

(Oakley 1974: 2)

One of the implications of this is that to examine housework as work puts it in the context of the sociology of occupations and employment, and takes it out of the sociology of the family. It means you ask different questions, about job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, for example. Industrial sociologists have typically found that certain patterns of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are associated with particular kinds of jobs and conditions of employment.

Treating housework as work means both a reconceptualisation of the term 'work' in sociology, and a different method of investigating it. Indeed, a more common formulation now is 'paid' and 'unpaid' work to deal with employment and housework/childcare respectively. On the issue of methods, Oakley insists that one consequence of the mystification of housework as non-work is 'a failure to represent the meaning of housework to the actors (actresses) themselves' (1974: 27).

To correct this 'involves going back to the women themselves and looking through their eyes at the occupation of housewife' (Oakley 1974: 28). This observation introduces what was to become a central preoccupation of feminist sociology, documenting and drawing on women's experiences.

Another major study of housewives also began in the 1970s, though the author, Meg Luxton (1980), adopted a rather different approach. Basing her study in a small mining town, Luxton interviewed three different generations of housewives not only about their attitudes to housework, but she put this in the wider context of the occupational division of labour. (Flin Flon was largely a single industry town where very few mothers of small children were employed.) She returned to the town five years later to see whether any changes had occurred to what was a very traditional set of attitudes and division of labour. The decline in the mining industry where most men were employed had precipitated a significant increase in the employment of women, including those with young children. But if women were entering or returning to jobs, what was happening to the domestic division of labour? Luxton found three basic patterns in the households. The smallest group of her respondents tried valiantly to maintain a traditional division of labour, insisting they were only taking jobs because of a crisis in mining. They held onto their beliefs that a married woman's place was in the home, and that housework and childcare were entirely their responsibility.

As Luxton comments:

As a result, these women set themselves up in a never-ending vicious circle and ran themselves ragged. Their fatigue and resulting irritability and occasional illnesses only served to

convince them that their original prognosis was correct: paid employment is bad for women and harmful to their families. (Luxton 1990: 43)

About a third of Luxton's sample *had* changed both in their attitudes and actions. While arguing that a traditional division of labour was desirable, they recognised that they could not do it all by themselves. They could not be superwomen. In the same way that they were 'helping out' with wage earning, their husbands and children should 'help out' with domestic labour.

Just over half, however, had changed dramatically. They now regarded wives and husbands as partners who should share the responsibilities of both domestic labour and wage earning. They were putting increasing pressure on their husbands and children to share the burdens of domestic labour. However, Luxton makes quite clear that their husbands often fiercely resist these demands:

At some point a man's increasing involvement in domestic labour starts eroding his ability to engage in other activities he values highly. There is a substantial difference between washing dishes and watching TV, and in coming home early to cook dinner or staying with one's mates in the pub. (Luxton 1990: 50)

Luxton's study also illustrates that not all women are happy to give up their responsibilities in the home. Housework is not uniformly regarded as a burden: 'For most women, the kitchen is the closest they ever have to having a "room of one's own".' (Luxton 1990: 47). The jobs they took on and the wages they earned did not necessarily compensate for this loss.

In conclusion, Luxton notes that her study suggests that changing patterns of paid employment are provoking a crisis in the way labour, both in and outside the home, is divided by gender. Each household feels it is facing and negotiating these changes in isolation. When women (and men) try to change the divisions of labour in employment, they have collective organisations, such as trade unions and sometimes the law, to back them up, but no such practical support for changing the domestic division of labour. Ideas about men's and women's proper places are undoubtedly changing, but no single dominant idea has emerged. As a result, 'The current situation is thereby generating a great deal of confusion and often pain and interpersonal conflict, especially between women and men' (Luxton 1990: 54).

Both of these studies relate to a significant claim made by feminists around this time: that the family, and especially

women's major responsibility for domestic work, is at the heart of women's oppression. As long as women retain overall responsibility for domestic work, they are not 'free' to compete with men on equal terms when it comes to paid work. They are the ones expected to take time out to have and raise children, and to take time off when children are ill. These expectations contribute to a perception of women as less career oriented than men, which in turn makes them poorer promotion prospects. We will be looking at these claims in more detail in Chapter 3.

Metaphors of silencing or, alternatively, giving women a voice run through both studies discussed in Case Study 2.1 and combine to indicate that women have a different set of experiences, a different form of knowledge about the world from men. Typically, qualitative research methods are better at exploratory research, when the researcher is either less sure of just what it is she/he wants to investigate, or is committed to tapping into the subject's own understanding of her/himself and her/his life.

These methods, face-to-face in-depth interviews with a small sample, observation, and the recording of life histories were those favoured by feminist researchers in the 1970s. But there were two other reasons why they were adopted. First, they are (relatively) cheap, at least compared with large-scale surveys, and questionnaires that need teams of assistants to administer and code them. In the first stages of feminist research, when the women often only had the limited budgets of postgraduate grants and scholarships, this was an important factor. Second, other sociologists in Britain and America, especially in the areas of crime and deviance were also adopting these more ethnographic and naturalistic methods in their research (Becker 1963; Young 1971). In the 1960s and 1970s, these fields of sociology appeared to be at the cutting edge of radical sociology, and the use of their methods seemed to guarantee radical answers. This methodological preference also characterised the emerging field of (sub)cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson 1976). Subsequently, feminists have drawn on a wider range of methods and now no single type can be seen as particularly 'feminist'.

The emphasis on beginning with women's experiences rather than researchers' categories led to the development of a distinctive feminist epistemology, an approach to acquiring adequate knowledge of women's lives and/or viewing the world from the

point of view of a woman. Sandra Harding (1986) has identified two major variants, feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemologies.

Feminist empiricism

Feminist empiricism underpins some of those earlier 'include women' studies, and may proceed from the assumption that there is nothing inherently wrong about sociology, that it only needs correction, to include women, document their experiences, and to study them in an open-minded manner. The sexism that Oakley, for example, identified is, from this perspective, just a bias that can be eliminated. But also as we saw in the case of the sociology of crime and deviance, bias lies not just in how things are studied, but in what is studied (and not studied) too. Sociology identifies key aspects of society for investigation, such as its structures of ownership and wealth and the unequal distribution of life chances. But feminist critics of sociology have argued that things are not just problems in isolation, they are problems for someone, and in this they are following one of the basic precepts of sociological analysis. As C. Wright Mills (1959) pointed out many years before, people have many problems and troubles that they may see as personal – unemployment, divorce, being a victim of crime – but which are also public issues rooted in the structures of society. Making connections between personal problems and public issues is what sociology is about and requires the exercise of what he called the sociological imagination.

Even on the same issue, different things might be problematic. To take examples from various areas of sociology, the 'problem' of 'race relations' appears very differently depending on whether we examine it from the perspective of many politicians, police and immigration officers or from the perspective of those experiencing racist attacks or harassment. The problem of strikes is different for employers and for workers (and their wives might have a different view again). What feminists add to this is that because of the socially and historically constructed differences between men and women, different things matter, different things are problematic for them (though there are overlapping interests and problems too). As Harding notes, feminist research takes its cue from the issues that women regard as problematic (Harding 1987). Another study

by Ann Oakley illustrates well this approach, her study of childbirth from the point of view of first time mothers that is discussed in Chapter 4, *Body Politics*.

This term 'experience', however, is not a simple one. Many feminists concerned to eradicate sexist bias, wanted to begin with documenting women's experiences, to set these against their neglect and/or their dismissal in mainstream sociology. But experiences are not infallible guides to how things 'really' are. They are not immediately given to us, but are shaped by our understandings of social reality. Many women as they learn the language of feminism, for example, come to see certain interactions and relationships in different ways. When a man makes a remark about their bodies, whether they see this as 'sexual harassment' or not will depend on the context and the language they have available to make sense of the situation. This is not only a point about feminism however.

All kinds of political discourses enable us to see things differently, and hence to experience the world differently. Sociology itself enables us to reinterpret the world and our places within it, to break down common sense assumptions about why people do things. Sociologists also learn to identify certain explanations as instances of dominant ideologies that basically serve as justifications of the status quo. Another problem with feminist empiricism is that there was no single category of 'women' with the same set of experiences. By the 1970s, this point was being forcefully made by Black, working-class women and by lesbians. Their experiences are often different from those of the predominantly White middle-class women who were carrying out most of the academic research in sociology and other disciplines. Black women, for example, were criticising the emerging feminist research and theories, arguing forcefully that both were profoundly ethnocentric (produced from an unexamined perspective of White women), and limited. While still situating their analyses within feminism, they argued that neglect of the structures of racism seriously compromised 'White' feminist theory's claims to analyse all women's situation. Valerie Amos and Prathha Parmar (1984), for example, focused their critique on a number of central issues in White feminism (or as they called it 'imperial feminism'), including sexuality and the family. The problem, they pointed out, was not simply one of Black women's absence (which could be remedied by another filling in of the gaps). Rather, the way analyses had been constructed, to examine the intertwined development of capitalist and patriarchal

relationships, neglected how they were also intertwined with racism and imperialism. Both capitalist and patriarchal relations have positioned women (and men) differently, depending on their 'racial' categorisation. If we remember this, then we can see that Black women do not always share experiences with White women, and that they share others with Black men (which are different from those of White men). The same year, in America, bell hooks (1984) also attacked the implicit racism of much American feminism, or that which had official recognition as 'feminism'. She pointed out that White women, even when victimised by sexism, were always in a position of dominance over Blacks, and that their lack of consciousness of this power undermined their attempts to understand class and gender relationships.

Feminists, though, were reluctant to leave the matter here, simply recognising the existence of a multitude of different experiences, different knowledges. In common with other sociologists, feminists wanted to argue that some knowledge is better than others are – feminist knowledge is better than malestream knowledge. Many sociology students learn in the first year to deconstruct 'common sense' explanations about the world, such as 'it's only natural for women to want babies', or 'poor race relations are caused by too many immigrants'. But the common sense that sociologists learn to unpack is usually other people's. But they (we) too, privileged intellectuals, future professionals, and members of the dominant class in the world order, also operate with common sense assumptions, ways of *not* seeing which are intimately bound up in power relations. We tend to assume that our superior education gives us an edge over other, less privileged, people's vision of the world who have only a partial understanding of those links between personal troubles and public issues which Wright Mills talks of. But privilege as well as domination also produces partial ways of knowing. If feminism has shown many people how far the ways of knowing of the dominant male group are limited by position in gender relations, other critiques, especially from Black women, can show how White women's ways of seeing are not necessarily impartial either. Comprehending our (relative) privilege requires wrenching ourselves out of our own common sense.

In addition, not all (or even most) women are feminists and so not all accounts of the world from women's perspectives will look like the accounts feminists want to offer. In the early stages of feminist research, there was a tendency to select topics that lent themselves to an excavation of a kind of submerged or muted

feminist worldview which feminist researchers would articulate. This tended to elide a feminist and a woman's perspective, avoiding the problem of multiple perspectives and their relative validity.

Case study 2.2 Right-wing women and feminism

A study, by the American feminist researcher, Andrea Dworkin (1983), even managed to uncover this submerged feminist perspective from apparently very unpromising material, right-wing women. Dworkin's basic argument is that the right-wing women she interviewed had, like radical feminists, seen the truth about gender relations, about male dominance and female submission. These women, unlike liberals who, to the extent they even recognised gender discrimination, saw it as a problem of individual bias or prejudice, recognised it as a deep-seated problem which structured the whole world. This is what made them, in effect, sisters under the skin to radical feminists. The right-wing women felt that, for women, the world was a dangerous place, violent, unpredictable, and unforgiving of women who fail or refuse to conform. The Right, Dworkin claims, manipulates these fears, promising to reveal the rules of the game on which women's lives depend, and promising to make men too abide by their side of the bargain:

A woman is loved for fulfilling her female functions: obedience is an expression of love and so are sexual submission and childbearing. In return, the man is supposed to be responsible for the material and emotional well-being of the woman.

As long as the sex-class system is intact, huge numbers of women will believe that the Right offers them the best deal. (Dworkin 1983: 22, 234)

The difference between right-wing and feminist women is that the former believes the world is unchangeable, and the latter sees that the bargain right-wing women make will not keep them from harm:

The home is the most dangerous place for a woman to be, the place where she is most likely to be murdered, raped, beaten, certainly the place where she is robbed of the value of her labor.

(Dworkin 1983: 232)

The problems with simply grounding feminist sociology in 'women's experiences' lead us on to the second version: feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist standpoint

Standpoint feminists generally want to distinguish between 'experience' and 'standpoint'. Nancy Hartsock's account clarifies what is meant by 'standpoint', which here she calls 'vision', and its relation to experience (Hartsock 1998). Drawing on a Marxist influenced epistemology she argues that:

- Material life structures and sets limits to our understandings.
- If material life is structured in opposing ways, the visions of each party will be different and/or opposed.
- The vision of the ruling group structures material relations which are shared by all, so they are not false.
- The vision of the oppressed must be struggled for.
- This engaged vision exposes real relations, and is emancipatory.

Hartsock draws a parallel with Marx's view that it is through the labour we perform that our visions emerge. But in societies such as ours where there is a sexual division of labour, there are epistemological consequences of the different labour that, typically, men and women perform. The reproductive labour (housework and childcare) which women in capitalist societies perform (though not to the exclusion of productive labour) produces a distinctive vision, which enables them to formulate a distinctive standpoint. By this, Hartsock means a knowledge that is achieved through engagement, through the struggles women wage with their oppressors. A standpoint, therefore, is a second stage of knowledge, based on a distinctive set of experiences.

Another important point to recognise about feminist standpoint epistemologies, also parallel with a Marxist view of the proletarian standpoint, is that this standpoint is not simply another way of looking at the world, it is a better means of generating knowledge. As Hartsock explains, in a later reflection on her original formulation of standpoint epistemology:

I argued . . . that for [White] women in Western industrial society, the experience of life under patriarchy allows for the possibility of developing an understanding both of the falseness and partiality of the dominant view and a vision of reality that is deeper and more complex than that view.

(Hartsock 1998: 243)

In the case of women, it is their experiences of performing reproductive labour that allows for a new understanding of the world. Their labour is dismissed as non-work, something they perform for love, or because of instincts. But this invisible, de-valued labour is essential. The vision does not come automatically, however:

The difficulty of the problem faced by feminist theory can be illustrated by the fact that it required a struggle even to define household labor, if not done for wages, as work, to argue that what are held to be acts of love instead must be recognised as work whether or not wages are paid.

(Hartsock 1998: 124)

Feminist theory, therefore, is based on women's experiences, but is mediated through a feminist standpoint. Hartsock, however, assumes here that women have enough experiences in common to generate a single standpoint, distinct from that of men.

Although Hartsock was aware that there were certain perils in generalising about women, that 'it contains the danger of making invisible the experience of lesbians or women of color' (1998: 112), she believed that women in Western class societies do have enough in common to justify a general claim. She implies that we can somehow abstract their shared 'womanness' from any other aspect of their identities, presumably based on the reproductive labour they all perform. This is still problematic. **Reproduction** is a social, not a biological fact (and Hartsock recognises this with her qualification that she is analysing women's position under capitalism), and so Black and White women, heterosexual women and lesbians are positioned very differently in relation to reproduction. Heterosexual women, for example, are expected to have a 'natural' desire to become mothers, and if they find they are infertile will have a sympathetic hearing if they want to consider adoption, or use one of the various means of assisted conception. They may have some problems but these are very different from the problems infertile lesbians who want to have a child routinely face. Again, Black women not only perform reproductive labour within their own households but also often within the households of others, 'freeing'

White women from these chores. The assumption that Hartsock makes, therefore, is highly suspect. Does this plunge us into relativism? Does this mean we can never use the term 'women' or without following it with a long list of specifications about **sexuality**, (dis)ability, age, religion, ethnicity and so on? Alessandra Tanesini (1999) warns of the opposite error, of putting too much emphasis on **differences** between women and neglecting what they have in common. It may also imply people can only talk about *their* experiences which consequently means everybody else can ignore what they have to say.

The African American writer Patricia Hill Collins (2000) offers a clear and helpful way through this problem by a focus on Black women and the production of what she calls Black feminist thought. Hill Collins distinguishes three levels of consciousness:

- First, there is a distinctive Afrocentric worldview, though it may not be fully articulated. It is produced not by 'race', but by the experience of living in a **racist** world.
- Second, there is a conscious and collective articulated worldview or standpoint, which is arrived at through struggle. More women than men develop a feminist standpoint since women have more negative experiences of gender **oppression**, and more Blacks than Whites develop an Afrocentric standpoint.
- Third, there is Black feminist thought that reflects on and articulates these standpoints: 'One key role for Black women intellectuals is to . . . investigate all dimensions of a Black woman's standpoint with and for African American women . . . the consciousness of Black women may be transformed by such thought (Collins 2000: 30).

She acknowledges that there are different forms of experience, and different standpoints generated by oppressed groups. Black feminist thought draws on a number of such standpoints including what she calls Afrocentric, Black women's and feminist standpoints, though it is not a simple addition of them. By Black women's standpoint she refers to those ideas and experiences shared by African American women, while Black feminist thought refers to the theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it. Collins recognises that not all African American women generate such thought, manage to articulate this alternative standpoint, and that other groups may contribute to Black feminist thought.

Collins also notes that Black feminist epistemology has a different set of criteria for producing valid knowledge, different from the normal sociological criteria. The criteria include.

- Lived experience. This is a claim that those who have lived through particular experiences are more credible than those who have simply read or thought about them.
- Use of dialogue. New knowledge claims are developed through dialogues with other community members.
- Connectedness rather than separation is an essential part of the validation process.
- Ethics of caring. Value is placed on individual expressiveness, on emotional connectedness, and a capacity for empathy.
- Ethic of personal responsibility.

There are also, often, different ways of coming to and expressing knowledge:

Traditionally, the suppression of Black women's ideas within White-male-controlled social institutions led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations and everyday behaviour as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness.

(Collins 2000: 251)

Black church services have been one paradigmatic location for this epistemology where all four elements interact:

Neither emotion nor ethics is subordinated to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics and caring are used as interconnected, essential elements in assessing knowledge claims. . . . Moreover, when these four dimensions become politicised and attached to a social justice project, they can form the framework for Black feminist thought and practice.

(Collins 2000: 266)

A further important element in Collins' account is that each group with a distinctive standpoint should recognise that its knowledge, though true for them, is also partial. They should be open to recognising the validity of other standpoints. Although Collins concentrates on Black women and Black feminist thought, this does not imply that their experiences, their thought, have a particularly privileged or central position. Instead, as she says, 'Black women's experiences serve as one specific location for examining points of

connection among multiple epistemologies' (Collins 2000: 270). It is open to members of other oppressed groups to formulate their equivalents to Black feminist thought, learning from and in turn enriching what Collins calls a transversal knowledge in which no single standpoint, no single version of the truth is recognised. From this point of view, knowledge is not a fixed body of truth, but is forever in process, always emerging.

This position has certain similarities with what Harding (1986) calls a **postmodern** epistemology. This is an epistemology sceptical of any claims about a universal and singular truth, or about any one group's special claim to produce *the* truth. In so far as all kinds of feminism have been sceptical about the superiority of mainstream knowledge, there may appear to be an affinity between feminism and **postmodernism**, but many feminists feel postmodernism is too close to relativism to be politically useful. We will be examining the affinities and tensions between postmodernism and feminism in more detail in a later chapter.

So far, much of the discussion about feminist epistemology, what constitutes good and reliable feminist knowledge, has been carried out at an abstract level. We have seen how some feminists have tried to put this into practice, but there are many problems in translating these arguments into the everyday practicalities of carrying out research. One area where these problems surfaced was in the arguments between 'activists' and academic feminists.

Academics and activists: the politics of research

The 1970s, when many of these questions were first being aired, were a time of intense feminist political activism. We have seen how one issue, housework, was translated into an effective and novel programme of feminist sociological research, and there were several others, including issues around violence. Conferences and discussions in local and national groups were often devoted to establishing what were the demands of the women's movement, and initiating and campaigning for appropriate policies and provisions. Women's refuges and rape crisis centres were just two of the achievements of these years, services initiated by women for women. Although many local authorities have since provided some funding for them, the services have never been able to meet the needs of all the women who apply to them.

In a very straightforward way, campaigns and services like these began with women's experiences, experiences that had previously been neglected or explained away, and proceeded to build an alternative. This alternative was both material – a place to live when escaping from a violent man – and political, in the sense that women's aid workers campaigned for changes in the law, and in attitudes that saw domestic violence as a private matter between a man and his wife. If starting with women's experiences could lead to such improvements in women's lives, it was obviously a powerful tool and provided the rationale for feminist research in the academy which also began with these experiences. The significance of feminist standpoint(s) can be understood in this political context, as an 'academic' response to the centrality that was being given to women's experiences in the wider movement.

Although feminist sociologists often saw their work as a contribution to feminist politics, documenting hitherto neglected experiences, their work was not always received as such by all feminists. Mary Evans (1981), for example, recounts the problems in establishing what was the first Women's Studies course as part of an academic degree in Britain. Prepared to face considerable hostility from academic colleagues, she was less prepared for the criticisms from 'sisters', some of whom could not see its relevance to 'real' women and their 'real' problems. A gap seemed to be opening up between activists and academics, with the former accusing the latter of only analysing the world instead of changing it. Academics, of course, replied that doing theory was necessary to effective political action, and was not divorced from the real world at all.

But what the arguments did do was open up another angle on research, a new interest in the 'politics of research'. This meant a concern not only with the ethics of research practices and the academic division of labour, but also profound questions about the purpose of research, what 'useful knowledge' might be, and who are the producers and consumers of knowledge. These issues are still under debate, but feminists have been at the forefront of opening them up for sociology.

Another feature of feminist research was reflexivity. This means a critical reflection on the process of research, and/or locating the 'knower' in the production of knowledge. To an extent, it is a part of standpoint and constructivist epistemologies that insists on the relevance of the social production of knowledge. As Mary Maynard (1994) points out, there are two ways in which this

reflexivity has been incorporated in feminist research. It may refer to critically examining the research process to reveal assumptions about gender that are built into the process. It may also refer to reflecting on the 'intellectual' autobiography of the researcher. Stanley and Wise (1993), for example, discussing their research on obscene telephone calls argue that their personal histories and experiences of receiving them informed their analyses. In both cases 'gender is seen, not just as something to be studied, but as an integral dimension of the research process and therefore also to be studied' (Maynard 1994: 16). This is obviously at odds with the standard injunction that the best, most scientific, knowledge is produced by a detachment of the researcher from the subject being studied.

As Glucksmann explains, reflexivity is part of a constructivist epistemology. It is a 'principled response to the belief that researchers together with their research subjects construct a negotiated reality, on the premise that there is no one reality... The researcher's own responses and understandings, and the meanings it has for her, thus become integral components of the final product' (Glucksmann 1994: 159).

Originally, feminist research was defined as research by, on and for women, but this soon proved too simple a formulation (Kelly et al., 1994). Each of these three terms was questioned. In what sense could historical research be called 'for' women when the women were dead? Could and should not men's lives and experiences also be a topic for feminist research? And if men could not, perhaps, carry out *feminist* research, could they at least carry out non-sexist research? Might they not, also, have an advantage when it came to researching men's lives? The varying answers to these questions relate to the theoretical perspective adopted. To answer 'feminist' is not enough, as there are several varieties of feminism.

Without necessarily reaching agreement on these questions, researchers began to scrutinise various stages of the research process and their roles within it. They tried to break down hierarchical relations within research teams, and between the researchers and their subjects, attempting to treat all as active participants in the production of knowledge. Not all feminists believe this is possible, however. Miriam Glucksmann, for example, reflecting both on writings on feminist research and on her own experiences of conducting empirical research, says 'I want to suggest that it is impossible to overcome within the research context the inequalities

of knowledge between researcher and researched' (Glucksmann 1994: 159). What Glucksmann highlights is that there are:

real social divisions of knowledge that are created between people in contemporary society [that] represent a central contradiction that inevitably characterizes academic feminist research. No amount of sensitivity or reciprocity can alter the fact that while the task of the researcher is to produce knowledge, those being researched have a quite different interest in and relation to their situation.

(Glucksmann 1994: 150)

Glucksmann goes on to illustrate what she means by these social divisions of knowledge, in the context of her research on women factory workers and the dynamics of gender subordination (Cavendish 1982; note that Cavendish is former name of Glucksmann). She could not rely entirely on the women's testimonies, she explains:

precisely because a central aspect of their subordination was that they acquired only a fragmented and partial knowledge of the assembly line process as a whole. . . . Thus one clear instance of gender inequality on the shop floor was knowledge: men controlled the machinery, which included knowing more about the production process, while women operated it.

(Glucksmann 1994: 157)

Glucksmann's work also returns us to the question of a feminist standpoint discussed above. The 'standpoint' nature of different knowledges is clearly evident, and not only women's standpoints. Not only do different groups, of men and women, of workers and managers, have different standpoints, these are related to their objectively different interests deriving from their places in the division of labour. 'For example, the supervisors had an interest in assemblers working as fast as possible since the size of their wage was linked to output' (Glucksmann 1994: 157). Glucksmann also reflects on her own position, her standpoint and *her* interests. Her education, her status as a researcher put her in a relatively privileged position. She was able to add data deriving from interviews with managers and supervisors, company archive material, official statistics and so on to the women assemblers' accounts. The final account not only recounts the different views, but explains why they experienced things differently.

Glucksmann's work is also a good example of the way that the concerns of the women's movement fed into academic feminist

sociology. She took a job working on an assembly line in a factory in order to try and understand why feminism seemed to be irrelevant for many working-class women. This was not just a matter of interviewing such women, but trying to gain direct experience into what it was like to be an unskilled manual worker. Although this and other projects she later undertook depended on the co-operation of working-class women, these were not collective productions of knowledge. She and the women had quite different interests and she recognised that the study she produced would be of little interest to the women it was about. She also recognised that it would be of greater benefit to her, in the short term, in spite of her political commitment to feminism.

The politics and ethics of feminist research contain a commitment to non-exploitative relations between the researcher and her/his subjects. In her research on first-time mothers, Ann Oakley argued that she had to abandon the textbook recommendation to remain neutral and detached, not to offer comment or reveal personal details and opinions when conducting interviews. She also found that this also meant she got better information from the women she interviewed (Oakley 1981b). Subsequently, however, other feminists have pointed out that establishing friendly relations with women subjects may lead to them revealing more about their lives than they might, on reflection, have wished (McRobbie 1982; Finch 1984; Glucksmann 1994). Other feminists pointed out that, in addition, the ease with which some researchers established good relationships was a matter of shared class or ethnicity. Simply being a woman was not in itself enough (Phoenix 1994).

Ann Phoenix uses her experiences of research, and the impact of 'racial' identity, to clarify the difference between realist and constructionist epistemologies. Realist or reflectionist epistemology asserts or assumes there is one truth to be uncovered and that interviews aim at uncovering it. Matching Black interviewees with Black subjects when studying 'race' for example is more likely to produce this 'truth', and it has been established that Black people are more likely to express more radical opinions than when White people interview them. By contrast, constructionist epistemology treats accounts as constructions of knowledge, not as repositories of a single 'truth': 'This necessitates analysis of the interview situation as the site where specific accounts are produced, rather than the taking for granted of interviews as productive of "truths"' (Phoenix 1994: 66). For the constructionist, the very fact that matching or not matching by 'race' produces different results is

not an indication that one strategy is inferior to the other as a truth producing formula. The difference is in itself important data. Phoenix also notes that the matching strategy can contribute to the marginalisation of Black interviewers who, it is assumed, can research only 'Black' topics and subjects. Remember Tanesini's warning above.

Useful knowledge

One important aspect of feminist research that, as yet, has not been explored, is the question of useful knowledge. Many feminists such as Harsock and Collins have insisted that feminist knowledge is or should be emancipatory, although others such as Glucksmann have worried that is hard in practice to achieve.

The material base of research matters, and different countries have different practices. In Britain, sociological research has largely been carried out in higher education institutions and this can lead to resentments and hostilities between feminists inside and outside these institutions. Our society has a division of labour in which some skills, especially academically validated ones, are more highly regarded and rewarded than others. Feminists in colleges and universities seem to have privileged access to the means of funding, conducting research and communicating their findings, although many inside would also point out that feminist research in universities has its own problems of recognition (McRobbie 1982).

Many feminists are concerned to see their ideas communicated beyond a closed circle of other academics, not least to introduce younger generations to feminism. Alternative publishing companies, film co-operatives and resource centres provide some of the means of doing so. Such enterprises also begin to challenge male domination of the conventional media and forms of education and can offer women the chance to acquire new skills.

The positive side of the location of feminist research in academia stems from the growth in numbers of women there since the 1960s, and more recently the growth of young women registering for a higher degree. This has allowed for the beginnings of a feminist 'intellectual' culture around the research projects such higher degrees entail. Feminist research networks have been established, both academically based ones and also ones open to a wider community of feminist activists. The resources of universities and

colleges can, though not without a struggle, be put to instrumental ends. One might think, since the early 1980s when both McRobbie and Evans were writing, that matters have progressed. But women's, feminist and gender studies, both as independent modules and as part of existing courses, have a chequered history, at least in Britain. The sociology option that was largely the inspiration for this book took more than a year to get approval at Glasgow University.

For many students now, it is in the context of academic courses that they encounter a serious consideration of feminism for the first time. Feminists have made some gains in shifting the academic curriculum while, paradoxically, it sometimes seems the world outside has decided that feminism is old hat:

In today's cultural climate feminism is at one and the same time credited with furthering women's independence and dismissed as irrelevant to a new generation of women who no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already arrived.

(Whelehan 2000: 3)

Although the academic context may be one important way that feminism now gets circulated and 'consumed' (even reluctantly, simply because it's 'on' the curriculum), it does not necessarily remain there. Students who learn about feminism as part of degree courses may well take it out of universities and colleges and into the jobs they take. Jobs in local government and authorities, in private companies and in the commercial media can all provide ways in which feminist ideas circulate more widely (McRobbie 1999).

There is, then, no single way of doing or communicating feminist research, no guaranteed way of validating or defining it, and feminists have to be flexible in making judgements on the most appropriate and effective strategy in different contexts. It must be emphasised that research is collaborative and feminist research has benefited enormously from the links made between feminists inside and outside academic locations. Academic feminist researchers answer to at least two audiences and this is not always easy, but it is a socially responsible and democratic view of the research process. The forms of knowledge it produces aim to contribute to (rather than cause) the transformation of sociology and also to empowering lives.

Since both McRobbie and Evans were writing, another gap has been opening up between academic feminists and others, related

to the development of 'high' feminist theory in the academy. Many of the arguments now assume a familiarity with philosophy, psychoanalysis and relatively abstract literary and linguistic theory. The literature may be rich and stimulating for readers versed in these areas, but is often inaccessible for readers without this background. The American literary critic, Barbara Christian (1989), deplored what she called 'the race for theory' especially in studies of Black and 'minority' literature. This 'race' consists not in critical, close readings of Black literature, but in the elaboration of a theory: 'Critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer' (Christian 1989: 225). Christian deplores the language that is not only ugly, but mystifies all but a select few readers. She finds it significant that it dates from a time when the literature of minorities began to gain attention, and thus high theory also serves to control the critical scene, limiting access to those who can reproduce it.

Christian concludes her essay with a reflection on the usefulness of literary criticism. She acknowledges that expertise in Theory can be useful – to a small number of people. It has become a major factor in getting published, finding a job or getting promotion in a university, but this is not what she understands by 'useful':

But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is* . . . My readings do suppose a need, a desire among folk like me also want to save their own lives. My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of cooptation, not because we do not theorize, but because what we can imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures. For me, literary criticism is promotion as well as understanding; a response to a writer to whom there is often no response . . . I know, from literary history, that writing disappears unless there is a response to it.

(Christian 1989: 235)

One final issue relating to the question of useful knowledge is that of the relations between feminist and policy-related research. Obviously, all sorts of people as well as feminists, not least funding bodies, government departments and charities, want sociologists to do useful research. And funding often brings with it constraints.

Feminists have often preferred to use more qualitative research methods, but the 'hard' statistical evidence of surveys may be what impresses others. It can therefore be an important device of persuasion when, for example, it documents the extent of pay gaps between men and women. Many feminists now co-operate with all the above bodies and more, in the interests of bringing a feminist perspective to research, in recording the prevalence of a phenomenon (such as domestic violence) and also in order to influence policy-making decisions. It is another way of communicating findings, as well, to an audience perhaps in need of convincing of feminism's relevance. We will be looking at one instance of the effectiveness of feminist research and campaigns in relation to violence in a later chapter, on Patriarchy.

Summary

- All sociologists begin from the claim that knowledge is a social **construction**. Feminists further argue that sociological knowledge is inadequate unless it properly reflects the lives of women as well as men.
- The two major approaches, feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint, insist that we will see the world differently if we look at it from women's perspective. The knowledge women have about the world is a different knowledge, though there are also differences between women that will affect this.
- Feminist standpoint epistemology shares some features with Marxist epistemology. What passes for expert knowledge is not neutral, objective truth but a form of a dominant ideology that legitimizes the status quo. For feminists, this dominant ideology actually reflects a masculine standpoint. Both Marxists and feminists agree that the subordinate group (the proletariat, women) is in a position to produce knowledge that challenges the existing order.
- Feminist sociologists are also committed to producing knowledge that is, in some sense, empowering for women. Their work stems from a base not only in feminist theories but has often taken its inspiration from the wider feminist movement and its campaigns.

- In the process of criticising and revising sociological theories and practices, feminists have been at the forefront of opening up a whole host of important questions, particularly about the politics and ethics of research.

Further reading

- Harding, S. (ed.) (1987) *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press and Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Maynard, M. and Purvis, J. (eds) (1994) *Researching Women's Lives From a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Tanesini, A. (1999) *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Chapter 3

Divisions of labour

Chapter outline

This chapter and the following one will be concerned to contextualise feminist sociology by examining trends and tendencies from the 1970s on. Feminist sociology advanced on a number of fronts, and this advance will be addressed through a more detailed analysis of the key concepts of production and reproduction. These concepts were both reworked within established areas of sociological analysis, such as education and employment, and also led to the development of new areas of analysis, such as motherhood and housework.

Both chapters will point out some of the links between 'private' and 'public' worlds; this one will concentrate on paid and unpaid work, in the home and outside, and the next will focus on education and the family, including motherhood.

The major contributions of this stage of feminist sociology have been:

- To establish that the conventional analysis of the social division of labour (in the sense of paid employment) cannot be understood without an analysis of the sexual and domestic division of labour (particularly in the sense of unpaid work).
- To establish that 'the housewife' is a socially and historically constructed role.
- To assess the relative importance of capitalist and/or patriarchal structures and practices in explaining both divisions of labour.