

Feminism

Feminism's answer to the key question is in the negative and overlaps with aspects of Hermeneutics, Interpretivism and Critical Theory. While feminists may not wish to renounce the aims of science to 'describe, explain, and understand the regularities, underlying causal tendencies, and meanings of the natural and social worlds' (Harding 1986: 10), they have been critical of the view of the natural and social worlds, and the methods of the dominant approaches in the natural and social sciences. The core feminist criticism is that all science is based on a masculine way of viewing the world; it is androcentric. It omits or distorts women's experiences (Oakley 1974; Smart 1976; Stanley and Wise 1983). The argument has been presented as follows.

What counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience. Human experience differs according to the kinds of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women's experience systematically differs from the male experience upon which knowledge claims have been grounded. Thus the experience on which the prevailing claims to social and natural knowledge are founded is, first of all, only partial human experience only partially understood: namely, masculine experience as understood by men. However, when this experience is presumed to be gender-free – when the male experience is taken to be the human experience – the resulting theories, concepts, methodologies, inquiry goals and knowledge-claims distort human social life and human thought. (Harding and Hintikka 1983b: x)

Feminist critiques of androcentric science have ranged from liberal to radical (Keller 1987; Harding 1986). At the liberal end of the continuum, the charge concerns unfair employment practices which has led to most scientists being men: the sciences have attracted and retained more men than women; and men dominate the positions of leadership and power in scientific organizations. This is a political criticism and does not challenge traditional conceptions of science. The next, slightly more radical criticism, concerns the bias in the choice and definition of research problems; male definitions of problems and male forms of explanation have dominated allegedly value-neutral and objective science. This is particularly the case in the health sciences where, it is argued, biological technologies have been used in the service of sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and classist) social projects. The third criticism claims that there is bias in the design and interpretation of experiments. An example cited is that rats used in animal learning experiments are always male.³ Claims are also made that the interpretation of observations and experiments can also be biased, particularly in the social sciences. A fourth criticism relates to a series of rigid dualisms (such as objective/subjective, reason/emotion, mind/body, fact/value, public/private, individual/collective, self/other) which have been

³ For a detailed critique of androcentricism in psychology, see Sherif (1987).

perpetuated and used to distinguish between 'fundamental' masculine and feminine characteristics. And, finally, the most radical criticism is to question the assumptions of objectivity and rationality that underlie science.

Over the past thirty years, Feminism has challenged the notion of neutrality in science by addressing the areas of psychiatry and mental health, childbirth, contraception and abortion. These arguments have included concerns that women lack access to the benefits of science, that research does not take women's problems seriously and that science has contributed to women's oppression. It is argued that medical knowledge serves male interests and legitimates inequalities between the sexes. By exposing the ideological nature of medical science, as misrepresenting the reality of women's health and illness and as serving the interests of the medical profession, feminists have sought to reclaim control of their bodies from the profession (Dugdale 1990).

Many feminist theorists have argued that women have different conceptions of the basic constituents of reality, different assumptions about their own relationships to the natural world, different views of the importance and connectedness of other people, more ready access to their own emotions and feelings, and distinct ways of assessing moral responsibility, based on a context of human relationships rather than abstract rights of isolated individuals. (Fee 1986: 47)

It has been suggested that the preconditions of a feminist science would be

one in which no rigid boundary separates the subject of knowledge (the knower) and the natural object of that knowledge; where the subject/object split is not used to legitimize the domination of nature; where nature itself is conceptualized as active rather than passive, a dynamic complex totality requiring human cooperation and understanding rather than a dead mechanism, requiring only manipulation and control. In such feminist imaginings, the scientist is not seen as an impersonal authority standing outside and above nature and human concerns, but simply a person whose thoughts and feelings, logical capacities, and intuitions are all relevant and involved in the process of discovery. Such scientists would actively seek ways of negotiating the distances now established between knowledge and its uses, between thought and feeling, between objectivity and subjectivity, between expert and nonexpert, and would seek to use knowledge as a tool of liberation rather than domination. (Fee 1986: 47)

The issue of the impact on women of the many dualisms which have dominated Western thought, and have pervaded everyday life, is a recurring theme in feminist writings (in addition to Harding 1986, see, for example, Glennon 1979, 1983; Fee 1981, 1986; Harstock 1983; Salleh 1984; and Rose 1986). Glennon has placed this theme at the centre of women's oppression, with the 'masculine/feminine' dualism being but one more variation. The media portray women as emotional, passionate and

intuitive, but also illogical and fickle, while men are seen to be rational, analytical and productive, but also insensitive and impersonal. Mothers are viewed as providing expressive relationships with children, while fathers are left with instrumental relationships. The danger here, argued Glennon, is that, by accepting these features of modern life as law-like, we remove possible alternatives from our consciousness.

Glennon has identified four ideal types of feminism: *instrumentalism*, which proposes that humans are at their most authentic when they are rational, productive and individualistic, and that the expressive and private spheres must be eliminated; *expressivism*, the opposite to instrumentalism, which elevates the emotional, expressive, spontaneous and communal to a superior rather than inferior position; *polarism*, which posits essential differences between males and females and proclaims that individuals must find their true gender essence rather than adopt what passes for femaleness and maleness in sexist society; and, *synthesism*, which assumes that all human beings are a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities. In the latter,

the ideal human is a dialectical fusion of reason and emotion and that any division of self into roles is dehumanising. It [synthesism] advocates the total reorganization of society to eliminate division of labor as we know it, requiring change of both females and males, each having to integrate within the orientation that was thought of as the preserve of the 'opposite' sex. (Glennon 1983: 263-4)

Millman and Kanter (1975) have presented (and Harding 1986 has reviewed) an early feminist critique of the social sciences in which problematic assumptions that have directed sociological research have been identified.

- 1 Important areas of social enquiry have been overlooked. For example, by emphasizing a Weberian means/end model of motivation, the role of emotion in social life has largely been ignored.
- 2 Sociology has focused on the visible, dramatic, public and official spheres of social life largely to the exclusion of the invisible, less dramatic, private and informal spheres. This tends to make invisible the ways in which women have gained informal power and has hidden the informal systems of sponsorship and patronage that facilitate career paths for men.
- 3 There is a tendency to assume a 'single society' and to ignore the possibility that men and women may inhabit different social worlds, in spite of living in the same physical location (Bernard 1973). Women are likely to have different and broader views about what constitutes social interaction, and to regard much of what men count as nature as being part of culture.
- 4 In several areas of research, gender is not taken into account and analysed as a possible explanatory variable.

- 5 Social science frequently explains the status quo rather than exploring alternatives for a more just and humane society.
- 6 The use of certain methods, particularly quantitative, can prevent the discovery of information that may be crucial for understanding the phenomenon under consideration. The preference for dealing with variables, as is the case with quantitative methods, rather than people, as in qualitative methods, may be related to a masculine need to manipulate and control, and an inability to relate to all types of people in an empathetic way, particularly in relatively unstructured and ambiguous natural situations.

Recognition of the androcentric features of science has led feminists to search for an appropriate epistemology for both the natural and social sciences. Harding (1987c: 182-4) has identified two main responses to this problem; *feminist empiricism* and the *feminist standpoint*. *Feminist empiricism* has challenged three related aspects of traditional empiricism (incorporated in Positivism and Critical Rationalism).

First, it questions the assumption that the social identity of the observer is irrelevant to the 'goodness' of the results of research, asserting that the androcentricism of science is both highly visible and damaging... It argues that women as a social group are more likely than men as a social group to select problems for inquiry that do not distort human social experience. Second, feminist empiricism questions the potency of science's methodological and sociological norms to eliminate androcentric biases; the norms themselves appear to be biased insofar as they have been incapable of detecting androcentricism. Third, it challenges the belief that science must be protected from politics. It argues that some politics - the politics of movements for emancipatory social change - can increase the objectivity of science. (Harding 1986: 162)

Feminist empiricism has argued that the deficiencies in the existing dominant forms of science - the masculine bias in problem formulation, concepts, theories, methods of enquiry and interpretation of results - can be overcome by a rigorous adherence to the rules of (this kind of) scientific method; it is 'bad science' which is responsible for these biases in research.

Unfortunately, while feminist empiricism undercuts the assumptions of traditional science, it appears to be internally inconsistent. As Feminism is a political movement, feminist researchers clearly have strong commitments to bring about a particular kind of society. Science, however, is supposed to be value-neutral and dispassionate; the norms of science are intended to eliminate or at least control the goals, interests and values of the researcher. The fact that feminist empiricism has argued that women (or feminists, either men or women) as a group are more likely to produce objective results than men (or non-feminists) as a group, tends to undermine their central claim that adherence to scientific rules is the solution. Ultimately, the problem with this solution is that it is left with the inherent

deficiencies of these historically dominant forms of natural science and the 'orthodox consensus' in the social sciences.

The *feminist standpoint* offers a different view on how politicized research can produce preferable research results. It builds a distinctive feminist science on the social experiences of women and gives women, or feminists, a privileged position in their ability to understand the social world. It also claims to overcome the dualisms characteristic of Western thought. The feminist standpoint is based, particularly, on Hegel, Marx and Freud, and focuses on the consequences of the experiences of women in the division of labour, including production and reproduction, and the differential experiences of boys and girls in their relationships to their mothers in the sexual division of labour in child rearing (Smith 1974, 1979; Flax 1983; Harstock 1983; Rose 1983)⁴. 'Women and men ... grow up with personalities affected by different boundary experiences, differently constructed and experienced inner and outer worlds, and preoccupations with different relational issues' (Harstock 1983: 295). It is argued that 'men's dominant position in social life results in partial and perverse understandings, whereas women's subjugated position provides the possibility of more complete and less perverse understandings' (Harding 1986: 26). In the same way that Marx argued that the proletariat potentially has a superior capacity to know the world, derived from their particular subjugated experiences, feminists have argued that there is a feminine standpoint on the world which is 'a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations and explanations of nature and social life' (Harding 1986: 26).

Standpoint feminists like Rose and Keller have argued that the androcentric character of science is not inevitable; rather than rejecting science entirely, or trying to achieve the hopeless task of neutralizing it, women can reconstitute it. According to Rose, it is the division of labour which has been responsible for the distortion of science; the alienating effects of the division between mental and manual labour in the production of things has led to a concern to unite hand and brain. It is now necessary to recognize caring labour as being critical in the production of people; the heart now has to be included. 'Bringing caring labor and the knowledge that stems from participation in it to the analysis becomes critical for the transformative program equally within science and within society' (Rose 1983: 90).

Keller (1978, 1987) has suggested that the concern with rationality, objectivity and technical tinkering, characteristic of the dominant view of science, is a consequence of the precariousness male infants experience in developing their identity as they distance themselves from their mothers. She has regarded these masculine traits as potentially pathological. It is therefore necessary to reconceptualize objectivity as a dialectical process

⁴ The work of these four contributors to the feminist standpoint has been reviewed by Harding (1986).

which breaks down the objectivity/subjectivity dualism; it also requires the application of critical reflection to scientific activities.

Keller has defined objectivity as 'the pursuit of a maximally authentic, and hence maximally reliable, understanding of the world around oneself' (1985: 116). She has distinguished two types of objectivity, 'dynamic' and 'static'.

Dynamic objectivity aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed relies on, our connectivity with that world. In this, dynamic objectivity is not unlike empathy, a form of knowledge of other persons that draws explicitly on the commonality of feelings and experiences in order to enrich one's understanding of another in his or her own right. By contrast, I call static objectivity the pursuit of knowledge that begins with the severance of subject from object rather than aiming at the disentanglement of one from the other. For both static and dynamic objectivity, the ambition appears the same, but the starting assumptions one makes about the nature of the pursuit bear critically on the outcome ... Dynamic objectivity is thus a pursuit of knowledge that makes use of subjective experience ... in the interests of a more effective objectivity. (Keller 1985: 117)

Salleh has captured the essence of this different approach to objectivity.

An empathic, cyclic, *reflexive logic* is supposed, without incisive categorical boundaries between the knowing subject-in-process, object, and its representation. The artificial dualisms of masculine and feminine, history and nature, signifier and signified would be replaced by a *metabolism* of the subject and field ... [F]or a new 'definition' [of objectivity] is offered [involving] ... a communion with the object rather than its penetration by the diverse agency of instrumental reason. (Salleh 1984: 33)

While standpoint feminism may avoid the problems of feminist empiricism, it has its own difficulties. According to Dugdale (1990), it leaves uncontested the dualisms which structure sexual differences and current scientific practices. Rose (1986) has acknowledged that this continues to be a problem but has suggested that the tensions within these dualisms can provide a creative framework for struggle. However, Harding has argued that it is not possible to establish a feminist method as women's social experiences are cross-cut by class, race and culture. A single standpoint could only be achieved by the undesirable dominance of a group with one combination of these experiences. Therefore, as it is not possible to transcend the boundaries of class, race and culture, there must be many feminisms. However, there is 'a feminist perspective on science that shows the ways in which gender-based dominance relations have been programmed into the production, scope, and structure of natural knowledge, distorting the content, meaning, and uses of that knowledge' (Fee 1986: 54). Perhaps, as Fee has suggested, a truly feminist science will only be possible when society is fully transformed by the feminist project.