Reading Critically: Feminist Theory
Feminism

- Belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.
- The name given to the movement organized around this belief.
Feminism

• Feminist Theory is an outgrowth of the general movement to empower women worldwide.

• Feminism can be defined as a recognition and critique of male supremacy combined with efforts to change it.
Feminism

• The **goals of feminism** are:
  1. To demonstrate the importance of women.
  2. To reveal that historically women have been subordinate to men.
  3. To bring about gender equity.
History

- The origins of the feminist movement are found in the abolitionist movement of the 1830's - notion that "all men are created equally".
History

• Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott spearheaded the **first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848.**
• The convention brought in more than 300 people.
• The discussion was focused on the social, civil, and religious condition of women.
• Was soon followed by a number of other conventions of the type.
History

• The convention lead to the Declaration of Sentiments.
  – Modeled after the Declaration of Independence.
  – All men and women created equal.
  – Spoke of the supremacy of man in regards to divorce and education
The convention marked a 22 year battle to gain women the right to vote in the United States.

In 1920 women won the right to vote.
History

• In Germany the feminists were fighting for the **right of women to engage in sexual relations regardless of marital and legal consideration**.

• Marianne Weber (the wife of Max Weber) was a feminist.
History

- Weber thought that women should be treated equally in the social institution of marriage, along with all the other social institutions.
- She made it clear that marriage was between a man and a woman.
History

• The contemporary feminism movement began in the 1960’s.
  – Free love helped escape the sexual double standard.
  – Divorce became commonplace
  – Women were “happy housewives” no more
  – Higher level employment and fulfillment outside the home were becoming the norm
Liberal Feminism

• All people are created equal and should not be denied equality of opportunity because of gender
• Liberal Feminists focus their efforts on social change through the construction of legislation and regulation of employment practices
Liberal Feminism

• Inequality stems from the denial of equal rights.
• The primary obstacle to equality is sexism.
Marxist Feminism

- Based on the writings of Karl Marx, who wrote on division of labour and the need for equality, pending revolution.

- **Division of labor is related to gender role expectations.**

- Females give birth. Males left to support family
  - Bourgeoisie => Men
  - Proletariat => Women
Radical Feminism

• Male power and privilege is the basis of social relations.

• Sexism is the ultimate tool used by men to keep women oppressed.
Radical Feminism

• The **oppression of women** is the major issue in play:
  – Women are the first oppressed group.
  – Women's oppression is the most widespread.
  – Women’s oppression is the deepest.
Radical Feminism

• Women’s oppression causes the most suffering.

• Women’s oppression provides a conceptual model for understanding all other forms of oppression.
Radical Feminism

• Men control the norms of acceptable sexual behavior.
• Refusing to reproduce is the most effective way to escape the snares.
• Speak out against all social structures because they are created by men.
Socialist Feminism

• Views women’s oppression as stemming from their work in the family and the economy.

• **Women’s inferior position is the result of class-based capitalism.** Here we see similarity to Marxist Feminism.

• Socialists believe that history can be made in the private sphere (home) not just the public sphere (work).
Socialist Feminism

• Arguments:
  – An increased emphasis on the private sphere and the role of women in the household.
  – Equal opportunities for women in the public sphere.
Postmodern Feminism

- Attempts to **criticize the dominant order**.
- All theory is socially constructed.
- Rejects claim that only rational, abstract thought and scientific methodology can lead to valid knowledge.
Postmodern Feminism

- The basic idea is that looking to the past is no longer the way to go.
- We are a global economic world highlighted by technology.
- Looking to the past no longer applies.
Many feminist theorists believe that an individual is labeled at birth as a member of a sex category, either male or female, and from that point on, is held to acting accordingly.

Gender is not something that one has or something that one is; rather, it is something that one does.
Feminist Theory
Philosophy

• **Realism v. Idealism** – Idealism – not one reality, but possibly multiples to be discovered

• **Realism v. Nominalism** – Realist – feminist movements and actions to reform are real in their consequences of change

• **Idealism v. Materialism** – Idealism – gaining power and voice through movements
Relevance

• Feminist sociological theory represents an attempt to give a voice to women and female perspective.
• Feminist sociological theory is generally critical of the traditional scientific sociological approach that stresses a commitment to neutrality, objectivity, and empirical research.
• There are many criticisms of feminists.
Criticisms

• One is that they leave themselves wide open to attack because they themselves are very biased in their approach.

• Second, although a commitment to empirical research is not a must in designs of social theory; relying on such techniques as oral testimony and the analysis of such content a diaries risk a lack of objectivity and bias. When an individual is asked for his or her story, it is always biased from his or her perspective.
Criticisms

- Third, most feminists claim that all sociological theories are gender-biased but fail to provide any proof of this claim.

- Fourth, **gender is just one variable in human interaction.** Many feminist believe that interactions are based solely on gender distinction.
Fifth criticism of the feminism comes from within feminist sociological theory itself. The fact that there is such a great variety of sociological feminist theories represents a clear lack of consensus among feminists as to the best means to go about fighting sexism, discrimination, and oppression.
Summary

• Sexism and discrimination exists in nearly all social institutions.

• Religion is a long time perpetuator of gender inequality—like Catholic Church forbids females from being priests.

• Giving a voice to women remains feminist sociological theory’s greatest contribution to the field of sociology specifically and society in general.
Key Feminist Theorists
Dorothy E. Smith  
(1926- )

- Earned BA from London School of Economics.
- Earned PhD in sociology from University of California at Berkeley.
- Husband left her with two children.
- Worked at Berkeley (where most professors were male) and in England as a lecturer.
Dorothy E. Smith
Methods

• Concept of **bifurcation**
  – “conceptual distinction between the world as we experience it and the world as we know it through he conceptual frameworks that science invents”

• **Believes mainstream sociology has not touched on women’s experiences.**
Dorothy E. Smith
Methods

• Suggested a reorganization that is a sociology for, rather than about, women
  – Leads to a bifurcated consciousness or an actual representation

• States that a subjective reality is the only way to know human behavior [post-modern approach]
  – Interviewing, recollection of work experience, use of archives, observation, etc.
Dorothy E. Smith
Family

• North American family – legally married couple sharing a household
• Male earns the primary income and female cares for family and household
  – Ideals reinforced by Martha Stewart, Home and Gardens, etc.
• Today’s family presents many variations
• Found that many women get caught up in the role that society expects of them.
Dorothy E. Smith
Schooling

- Found a lack of interest in issues concerning girls and women in schooling
- Universities and colleges have incorporated successful programs, but public schools have not
- Would like to see a change to allow girls a larger say in school dynamics
Sandra Harding (1935- )

• Professor of women’s studies at UCLA
• Directs Center for the Study of Women
• Author or editor of ten books
• Given over 200 lectures at universities and conferences
• Written in such areas as feminist theory, sociology of knowledge, and methodological issues related to objectivity and neutrality
Sandra Harding
Feminist Theory

- Criticizes all sociological theories claiming they are all gender-biased
- Criticizes feminist theory as well
  - Western, bourgeois, heterosexual, white women
- Does not believe in a universal theory
- Theory is possible so long as “normal” science is not used (i.e. patriarchal)
  - Promotes “good science” instead of that produced by a masculine bias – “science as usual”
Sandra Harding
Feminist Theory

• Ignores empirical data
• Believes all males and whites benefit from ascribed status
  – Invisible knapsack (something possessed)
• No man can renounce gender privilege as no white can renounce racist privilege
• Social theory must be created by women and include issues central to women
Sandra Harding
Sociology of Knowledge

• Knowledge was created from a male’s standpoint and is biased
• Sexist distortions must be rooted out if an accurate sociology of knowledge is to exist
• History should be *herstory* to reflect ignored and trivialized women’s contributions to science
• Lack of women in academia does not exist today – sign of growing power
Sandra Harding
Neutrality and Objectivity

- Sciences confronted with demise of objectivism and threat of relativism
- **Objectivist methods encouraged to eliminate social and political values**
  - Academia is affected by subjectivity interfering with “good science”
- Encourages women to stop disagreeing among themselves and enter science
Patricia Hill Collins (1948- )

- BA from Brandeis, MA from Harvard, and PhD from Brandeis
- Associate professor of sociology and African American studies at University of Cincinnati
- Outsider within – one is part of a group but feels distant from that group
Patricia Hill Collins
Feminist Theory and Methodology

• Focus of sociological theory should be the “outsider” groups
  – Especially those that lack a “voice”
• Promotes using subjective analysis of the concrete experiences
• Agrees with Harding on white/male interest
• Believes emotional concepts are important
• Individuals have their own reality constructs that are linked to the groups to which they belong
Patricia Hill Collins
Black Feminism

- Outside within status of black slaves
- Black feminist consists of ideas produced by black women clarifying standpoint for and of black women
Patricia Hill Collins
Black Feminism

• Identified **three key themes** in black feminism

1. The Meaning of Self-Definition and Self-Valuation
   – Self-Definition – Challenging the political knowledge validation process bringing stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood
   – Self-Valuation – stresses the content of Black women’s self-definitions
2. The Interlocking Nature of Oppression

- Gender, race, and class are interconnected
- Society has attempted to teach black women that racism, sexism, and poverty are inevitable
  - Keep black women oppressed
- Awareness will help black women unite their fight against oppression and discrimination
3. The Importance of African-American Women’s Culture

- Efforts to redefine and explain importance of Black women’s culture
  - Uncovered new Black female experience
  - Identified social relations where Afro-American women pass on essentials to coping with oppression
Patricia Hill Collins
Black Feminism

• Sociological significance in two areas:
  – Content of ideas has been influenced by on-going dialogue in many sociological societies
  – Process by which these ideas were produced

• Women are gaining more of a “voice”
  – Black women are still more accepted as authors in the classroom, than as teachers
Carol Gilligan
Carol Gilligan (1936- )

- Psychologist and feminist thinker
- Influenced by Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg
- AB in English Lit from Swarthmore College
- AM in Clinical Psych from Radcliffe College
- PhD from Harvard University
- Taught at University of Chicago, and Harvard University
Carol Gilligan
Developmental Theory

- Masculine bias is prevalent
- Human moral development comes in stages
directly influenced by Piaget:
  - Sensorimotor Stage (birth to 2yrs) – physical contact, out of sight, out of mind
  - Preoperational Stage (2 to 7) – object permanence, egocentrism
  - Concrete Operational Stage (7-12) – intellectual development, lacks skills of abstractness
  - Formal Operation Stage (12+) – think abstractly and perceive analogies, uses complex language
Carol Gilligan
Developmental Theory

• Work with Kohlberg
  – Noticed males were reluctant to discuss feelings
    • Assessed as morally undeveloped

• **Men and women do have differences in moral reasoning**

• Justice v. Care orientation
  – Justice – attention to problems of inequality and holds equal respect
  – Care – attention to problems of detachment and holds response to need
  – Moral injustices – do not treat others unfairly or turn on those in need
Carol Gilligan
Stages of Moral Development for Women

• Orientation to Individual Survival (Preconventional Morality)
  – Individual survival – no feeling of should

• Goodness as Self-Sacrifice (Conventional Morality)
  – Defined by ability to care for others

• Responsibility for Consequences of Choice (Postconventional Morality)
  – Choice and willingness to take responsibility for that choice = moral decision
Carol Gilligan
Giving Voice to Women

• Freud and Piaget’s theories treat women like men
  – **Different voice needs to be heard**
• Adolescent girls’ voices
  – When quiet in relationships, depression and eating disorders enter
  – When outspoken in relationships, others find it difficult to remain in the relationship
Joan Jacob Brumberg

- Brumberg was born and raised in Ithaca, New York, where she continued to live and work as a professor at Cornell University.
- Brumberg teaches in the areas of history, human development, and women’s studies.
Joan Jacob Brumberg

• One of the major influences on Brumberg’s life is Margaret Mead’s research in Somoa.
• Brumberg decided to trace female plight of self consciousness in American and European societies, where women have experienced a great deal of concern about their body image and physical changes that occur during the natural development.
Females Bodies and Self-image

• In contemporary Western society there is an obsession with female body.
• The mass media, as an agent of culture, has reinforced an ideal image that girls are to strive for and attain; therefore placing more emphasis on good looks than on good works.
• Women today enjoy greater freedom and more opportunities than their counterparts of the past, they are under more cultural pressure to look good.
Gender Differences

• Girls begin to suffer bouts of clinical depression from the frustration they experience when their bodies change. Beyond depression and thoughts of suicide, girls are more vulnerable to eating disorders, substance abuse, and dropping out of school.

• Body is at heart of the crisis of confidence for adolescent girls.

• By the age thirteen, 53 percent of American girls are unhappy with their bodies; by the age of seventeen, 78 percent are dissatisfied.
Society’s Influence

• Women found in their body image a sense of self definition and a way to announce who they are to the world.

• Today many young girls worry about the contours of the bodies especially shape, size, and muscle tone because they believe that the body is the ultimate expression of the self.
Society’s Influence

• Fashion and the film industry are two huge influences on societal expectations that women display their bodies sexually.

• The sexual revolution liberated women from the Victorian of modesty but also demanded a commitment to diet and beauty.
Barbara Risman
Barbara Risman

• Risman was born in 1956 in Lynn, Massachusetts. She was raised in an extended family.
• Risman attended college at Northwestern University during the height of the feminist movement.
• She earned her B.A. in sociology in 1976 and her Ph.D. in 1986 from the University of Washington.
Barbara Risman

• Risman eventually became a professor of sociology at North Carolina State University and currently holds the administrative position of Director of Graduate Studies at NCSU.

• She has conducted a great deal of her own research in the area of single parenthood.

• She believes that men are capable of being single parents and that parent-child attachment, households organization, and child development can all occur successfully in both single-mother and single-father homes.
Gender as Social Structure

• Risman does not accept the criteria of nature as a way to distinguish behavior expectations.
• She is especially upset by the field of sociobiology.
Gender as Social Structure

• By assigning people to one or two categories—male or female—society has created difference between them.
• Risman feels that genders strongest influence is found at the interactional level, and therein lies the deepest liability for the continuation of inequality in American family life.
Gender Vertigo

- Gender vertigo is a term coined by Robert Connell.
- Risman asked, and was granted permission, by Connell to use the term for the title of her book.
- Risman chose the term gender vertigo because it is indicative of the profound effect the elimination of gender would have on every person's psyche.
Gender Vertigo

• Doing gender determines how one walks, talks, dresses, eats, and socializes and nearly all other aspects of everyday life.
• Gender often plays a significant role in the definition of the self.
• Risman concluded that in order to move fully toward justice for women and men, we must dare a moment of gender vertigo.