



# Sociology

## Key issues in this chapter:

- ▶ An historical critique of Sociology as gender blinkered.
- ▶ The influence of feminism on Sociology and Sociology on feminism in the development of a gendered Sociology.
- ▶ The sociological relationship between gender and other forms of stratification.
- ▶ Sociology, gender and politics and practice.

## At the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- ▶ Critique mainstream Sociology from a gendered perspective.
- ▶ Show how feminism has influenced Sociology and been influenced by Sociology.
- ▶ Identify the relationship between gender and other forms of stratification such as class, age, 'race' and ethnicity.
- ▶ Reflect on whether Sociology is or should be a (gendered) political discipline.

In 1993 Stanley and Wise suggested that Sociology remained a male-dominated discipline, and this had implications for its theories, methods, research and teaching. Despite thirty years' criticism of the discipline for its male orientation and bias, little has changed. But in 2003 they argued:

with regard to some sub-areas of sociological work . . . feminist thinking has in fact become central, and some feminist theorists have achieved canonical status in some aspects of social theory.

(Wise and Stanley, 2003: 27)

### Stop and think 4.1

Sociology as a discipline is often thought to be forward-thinking in terms of its receptiveness to feminist ideas and its sensitivity to gender. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise seem to be suggesting a particular shift in the last decade. Look through past copies of the journal *Sociology* (or other Sociology journals), which in 2007 celebrates its 40th year of publication, and try to identify any differences over time with respect to the consideration or not of gender.

## Introduction

Sociology is the study of individuals and groups within society. It involves thinking beyond what is thought to be 'obvious' and/or 'just common sense'; it involves looking at the world in which we live our lives in a different way and moving beyond individual experiences for social explanations (Mills, 1959; Berger, 1967; Bauman, 1990). In explaining their work sociologists aim to use 'responsible' speech (which includes supporting arguments with appropriate evidence, acknowledging other relevant evidence and making transparent the research and presentation process) (see for example Bauman, 1990); similar to what Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993) call 'accountable knowledge'. So Sociology involves us in:

- thinking a bit differently about things;
- challenging beliefs that we have always taken for granted;

- being accountable for the knowledge we produce.

In doing this Sociologists can:

- widen the boundaries of knowledge by showing why individuals and groups act as they do, and;
- help us to understand the social structure in which we exist – i.e. in relation to social norms and patterns (what is expected of us) and the role of key institutions (such as the family, the education system, government, the criminal justice system and so on).

In addition some would also argue that Sociology is also useful for people who have a strong concern about social issues and social problems. Thus, Sociology can provide us with evidence to challenge existing norms and structures and argue for new ones.

Historically Sociology was a sexist discipline. It began at a time when there was a separation of industry from home and sociological attention was on the factory, the marketplace, the state – the public domain – the 'sphere where history is made' (Stacey, 1981: 6). Thus, as Ann Oakley (1974) argues, the theories and methods of Sociology were built upon, and from, men's view of and relationship to the social world. This she argues was because of the sexist interests and personalities of the 'founding fathers', the dominance of men in academic life and the unquestioning adoption of western societies' stereotypical views regarding gender roles. However, there have been many changes to the discipline since its conception in the nineteenth century and feminist sociologists have been particularly influential in challenging the male bias and in the development of a gender sensitive Sociology.

In this chapter we consider further – both historically and to date – the male bias within the concerns and practices of the discipline and the relationship between feminism and Sociology in the development of a gendered Sociology. The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. First, we consider 'The sexist history' of the discipline before going on to consider various aspects that have been relevant to 'Developing a gendered sociological imagination'. Having focused on the problem of sexism in Sociology and on the gender debate within the discipline we then

## Sociology

go on to consider issues of 'Politics and practice' within Sociology with a particular emphasis on the significance of a taking a gendered approach.

## The sexist history

### In the beginning

In 1981 Margaret Stacey argued that because traditionally Sociology was focused – both in terms of empirical research and theoretical deliberation – on the public domain (the place where men dominated) this led to a 'conceptual straitjacket of understanding within which attempts to understand the total society are severely constrained' (Stacey, 1981: 189). The quotation in A Critical Look 4.1 shows us why.

So, focus on the public sphere led to Sociology being mainly concerned with areas and issues of concern to men and mainly concerned with research on

men and thus with theories of men. Even worse the research findings based on all-male samples were often generalised to the whole of the population resulting in women's experience being ignored or distorted and their subordination and exploitation justified (Abbott *et al.*, 2005). In summary then, Sociology has been seen as at best gender-blinkered, at worst sexist, leading some feminist sociologists to write and talk about malestream (rather than mainstream) Sociology. See for example, Abbott and colleagues (2005) who, alongside the large number of introduction to Sociology type texts, have produced one of the only texts which provides an overall feminist critique of the discipline at an introductory level (*An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*).

When writing about the history of Sociology most authors – both male and female – refer to the 'founding fathers' – or the 'Grand Old Men' (Delamont, 2003: 99) or the 'good ol' boys' (Wise and Stanley, 2003) of the discipline. Karl Marx (who was born in Germany in 1818 and died in London 1883), Max Weber (who lived in Germany and was born in 1864 and died in 1920) and Emile Durkheim (who was born in France in 1858 and died, also in France in 1917) are generally referred to as the founders of Sociology. Other key (male) figures in the development of the discipline as we know it today include Friedrich Engels, Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Georg Simmel, and Charles Wright Mills (although of course there are others).

However, there has always been a feminist challenge to 'malestream' Sociology as the origins of feminism date back to the same era as the origins of Sociology (Delamont, 2003). Furthermore, as Sara Delamont (2003) notes, just as we speak of 'founding fathers' it is possible to speak of 'founding mothers' such as, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft (1757–1797), Beatrice Webb (1858–1943) and Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Yet, the work of these, and other women, is often hidden from the history of the discipline and the orthodox histories of Sociology give a partial account (as A Closer Look 4.1 demonstrates), focusing on what has been called 'The Grand Narrative'; the concern with the public (male) sphere.

### A critical look 4.1

#### Concerns of early sociologists

As Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace and Melissa Tyler (2005) note:

Sociology as a discipline developed in the nineteenth century, and early or 'classical' sociologists were primarily concerned with understanding political and economic changes relating to the development of industrial capitalism. These changes included the growth of factory production, new class divisions and relationships, the growth of a politically conscious (male) working class and the extension of political participation of the adult (male) population. A central aspect of this process [the development of industrial capitalism] was the increased separation of home from work, the separation of production from consumption and reproduction, and the development of an ideology that 'a woman's place is in the home'. Women became increasingly associated with the domestic (private) sphere of the home and with domestic relationships, and men with the public sphere of politics and the marketplace.

(Abbott *et al.*, 2005: 10)

## A closer look 4.1

### Re-reading the founding fathers

Sara Delamont (2003) suggests that whilst it is unreasonable and unscholarly to expect eighteenth- and nineteenth-century people to have a twenty-first-century position on gender it is reasonable and scholarly to expect contemporary texts about founding fathers to alert us to historically relevant sex-roles. This she says does not often happen. In addition Delamont notes that a re-reading of classic work and of less well-known work by the founding fathers indicates that they did think, write and theorise about issues of gender (although often in a stereotypical way) but this has been ignored in all of the well-known modern accounts (written by men) of their work.

One consequence of the lack of attention to gender within Sociology has been the identification of social class as the most fundamental form of stratification (hierarchically defined difference). Thus, class has been and is seen by many sociologists as the indicator and predictor of a wide range of individual and group social attitudes and attributes as well as an indicator and predictor of lifestyles and life-chances. Interestingly though until the feminist challenge from the 1970s onwards, social class was assumed to be defined for *all* members of a household by the occupation of the male who was defined as ‘head-of-household’ (Glass, 1954; Parkin, 1972; Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1980; cited by Jackson and Scott, 2002).

## Further examples of sexist sociology

One early consideration of gender differences by a sociologist was the work of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons [Hotlink → Gendered Perspectives – Theoretical Issues (Chapter 1)]. Writing in the 1950s Parsons was concerned with age and sex in the social structure of the USA and he argued that there were natural differences between women and men which mean they are suited for particular roles in society (Parsons and Bales, 1956, Delamont, 2003). This sex-role theory, particularly dominant in the years from the Second World War until the (re)emergence of feminism in the 1970s, asserted that women have an instinct to nurture

which suits them for an ‘expressive’ (caring) role in the family; whereas male biology, which leads men to be more aggressive and competitive, means that men are suited to an ‘instrumental’ role in the family; providing economic support and links with the outside world. As such, biological differences were seen to constitute a practical and ‘natural’ basis for the sexual division of labour. Biological theories also often present heterosexuality as the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ expression of human sexuality, and identify women and men as having different sexual needs and desires [Hotlink → Gendered Perspectives – Theoretical Perspectives (Chapter 1; Hotlink → Family (Chapter 11); Hotlink → Sex and Sexuality (Chapter 15)].

From this perspective then sex-roles were both associated with a certain status within society – in that men’s roles were seen as more significant and important – and simultaneously provided a text, a script, for that role. Girls and boys, learn their script and their ‘appropriate’ roles through the process of socialisation. Girls and boys experience gender socialisation in different ways, learning appropriate behaviours, personalities and gender roles and developing their own gender identification (own feelings and consciousness) [Hotlink → Psychology (Chapter 7)]. More recently the ways girls and boys learn gender roles have been subject to much critique as highlighted in A Critical Look 4.2.



Figure 4.1

Source: © Jackie Fleming

## Sociology

## A critical look 4.2

## Gender development

Sociological (and psychological) research has paid attention to various components and stages of gender development. In the 1970s and early 1980s especially there was a considerable amount of research which examined the differential learning processes of boys and girls. This included studies of such things as pre- and post-natal care, schooling, books, magazines and other media, clothing and toys. Many researchers have reported that there are different practices or expectations in relation to girls and boys which encouraged or reinforced 'feminine' behaviour in girls and 'masculine' behaviour in boys. A whole range of social processes have been identified as sites where gendered categories of femininity and masculinity are constructed. Sociologists have explored the diverse meanings attached to femininity and masculinity (see for example Oakley, 1981; Connell, 1987; Hearn, 1987; Seidler, 1989; Skeggs, 1997), so much so that there has been a shift towards talking about femininities and masculinities. Much of the sociological work on femininity and masculinity has adopted a socialisation perspective, in which the main concern has been how people learned gender stereotypes and internalised them. Although many sociologists accept that gender is learned and that socialisation plays a key role, an increasing number have pointed to the problems with taking a straightforward learning approach. Sylvia Walby (1990) argues that this approach still implies a static and unitary conception of gender differences: femininity is one set of characteristics that girls and women learn and masculinity another set that boys and men learn. She argues that this takes insufficient account of the different forms that femininity and masculinity can take and hence it does not account for diversity among women and men. This approach implies that each person is equally conforming to gender ideology and does not explore how masculinity and femininity vary according to a whole range of social factors such as class, age, 'race' and ethnicity. It treats people as relatively passive in their acquisition of gender identity. The emphasis on the passive learning of dominant ideology does not adequately recognise that people may resist, reject or subvert dominant meanings about gender (adapted from Chapter 7, Gender, in Marsh and Keating 2005).

## Stop and think 4.2

Read the following and then consider the questions below:

John and Elizabeth Newson's (1978) UK based longitudinal study of the upbringing of children found that:

The mothers in the . . . survey expressed a great deal of concern with traditional gender-role stereotypes. They were self-conscious or defensive about any deviation from the characterization of boys as rough, outdoor types, often grubby and careless of their physical appearance, interested in building, carpentry or mechanical model-making or in pursuing technological hobbies. And of girls as: Following indoor pursuits, interested in making and exchanging gifts, writing stories and letters, buying or making clothes, keen on acting, dancing and so on.

(from Newson *et al.*, 1978, cited by Oakley 1981: 104–5)

The Newson's work was carried out nearly 30 years ago. Think about your own socialisation – was it gendered in the same way as children in the 1970s; if not what gender socialisation was there? What different types of femininities and masculinities can you think of?

In addition to a critique of traditional sex-role theory, as noted above, sociological work has been challenged both for its misrepresentation of girls and women and for its treatment of boys and men as the norm and as essentially without 'gender'. Thus, work in the areas of education, work and leisure, deviance and criminal behaviour and so on have all been criticised for being gender blinkered. Just a couple of examples follow. From Delamont (2003: 132):

Sociology of education was almost devoid of research on gender, and of feminist perspectives, before 1980. Acker 1981 demonstrated the absence of gender as a topic and an analytic device by coding all the 184 articles published on education in the three generic Sociology journals [in Britain] (*Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology*) between 1960 and 1979. She concluded that a Martian arriving in Britain: 'would conclude



that numerous boys but few girls go to secondary modern schools . . . that most students in higher education study science and engineering; that women rarely make the ritual transition called “from school to work” and never go into further education colleges. Although some women go to university, most probably enter directly into motherhood . . . and except for a small number of teachers, social workers and nurses, there are almost no adult women workers in the labour market.’

(Acker 1994: 30–31). [**Hotlink** → **Education (Chapter 13)**]

From Abbott *et al.* (2005: 231):

Most of the classical sociological studies of paid work were of men – of coal miners, affluent assembly line workers, male clerks, or salesmen for instance – and, until relatively recently, the findings of these studies formed the empirical data on which sociological theories about all workers’ attitudes and experiences were based. Even when women were included in samples, it was (and sometimes still is) assumed that their attitudes and behaviours differed little from men’s or married women were seen as working for ‘pin money’: paid employment being seen as relatively secondary to their domestic roles.

[**Hotlink** → **Work and Leisure (Chapter 14)**]

Even in areas more recently defined as being of sociological importance (often not least from the influence of feminism – see below for further explanation), such as the body and emotion, there is evidence of a one-dimensional view of gender. As David Morgan (1993: 70) notes:

where issues of men and their bodies do come under sociological examination, the consequences are often limited and disappointing. Thus accounts with strong sociobiological overtones of body language or bodily abuse in discussion of young men and agro, for example (March 1978), tend to present a relatively unproblematic and depoliticised equation of masculinity and violence. These kinds of emphasis are, or were, sometimes to be found in writing associated with men’s studies or more critical accounts of men and masculinity. Here, a somewhat one-dimensional picture of men and their bodies

emerges, one over-concerned with hardness, aggression and heterosexual performance, a kind of ‘over-phallusised picture of man’.

Historically, and sometimes to date, then, Sociology paid less attention to women and girls and their experiences and presented boys and men’s experience as unproblematic. Thus, it failed to consider both girls and women’s subordination and oppression – both outside of the discipline and inside of it – and when the gender order worked for and against boys and men. It also focused on areas of social life (the public sphere) to the detriment of others (the home and the private lives and experiences of individuals). [**Hotlink** → **History** → **History and Masculinity (Chapter 3)**]

Before we go on to consider in more detail some of the challenges to this sexist/ungendered approach and reflect on the development of a gendered Sociology it is interesting to reflect on the work of Charles Wright Mills (1959) who argued that the sociologist must be able to look at the familiar in social life and see it afresh. To do this (he argues) it is necessary to develop a sociological imagination which must include:

- a sense of biography
- an awareness of history
- an awareness of the social structure.

Thus, for Mills (1970[1959]: 12):

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst . . . No social study that does not come back to the problem of biography, of history, and of the intersections within a society, has completed its intellectual journey

So, the sociological imagination is a tool that enables those who use it to understand individual experience with reference to time and place. It also enables us to understand and explain the relationship between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. In other words, it enables us to question whether those problems and experience that are sometimes defined as private and thus the responsibility of the

## Sociology

individual are really the result of wider issues relating to society and societal norms and values. Despite the sexist terminology (Mills uses the generic 'he' and terms such as 'intellectual craftsmanship' and 'his' for 'his own low level of awareness' of the male-dominated nature of Sociology at that time; (Oakley, 1974: 24) feminist sociologists, and others who take a political approach to the discipline have been influenced by his work as will become evident in the remainder of this chapter.

## Developing a gendered sociological imagination

In a recent debate in the journal *Sociological Research Online* concerned with the 'Future of Sociology' John Scott, reflecting on recent influences and changes within Sociology, wrote that: 'The most striking transformation of professional Sociology has been in its relation with cultural studies' (Scott, 2005: 5.1). To this Liz Stanley responded: 'A better case can surely be made for the more fundamentally transformative impact of a combination of feminism, gender and women's studies, in a world-wide context and also in the UK, on the domain ideas and working practices of Sociology and most other disciplines' (Stanley, 2005: 4.1). In this section we show how we support Stanley's pronouncement through a case-study consideration of the professional organisation of Sociology and sociologists and a brief overview of key developments in the discipline over the last 30 years or so, including the attention paid to the relationship between gender and other forms of stratification.

## The British Sociological Association tackles gender

When I started in Sociology as a career [in the early 1950s] there was an awful lot of hostility to women, really a lot. [A male colleague] took me to one side and said 'You'll be much happier if you give up the idea of a career and stay at home and have a family' . . . it was accepted that women just had to fit in, and must not raise gender issues.

(interview in Platt, 2003: 89)

A Closer Look 2 begins to show how things have changed in British Sociology since the 1950s.

### A closer look 4.2

#### British Sociological Association – Golden Jubilee

In 2001, the British Sociological Association (BSA) celebrated its Golden Jubilee. In *Network* – the professional newsletter of the organisation – several past presidents of the association wrote about their views of the highlights and lowpoints in British Society over the previous 50 years. Here are some examples:

#### Sheila Allen, BSA President, 1975–77

A major breakthrough of the mid-1970s was made by those who took seriously the need to develop a Sociology which included both women and men as integral to a more adequate conceptualisation of society and so enabled many who followed to address more fully the realities of social life.

#### Margaret Stacey, BSA President, 1981–83

As a sociologist qualified in 1943, my first highlight was a meeting, half a century ago, which led to the foundation of the BSA. I recall a largely male gathering, made up of people from diverse backgrounds but with a common interest in the social. Living then as a 'College wife' in Swansea, I was academically isolated and without (paid) work, so it was great to meet with others in that action mode.

Looking back on the following years, the brightest light shines on the revolt of the women at the 1974 Aberdeen conference: a most exhilarating experience. The outburst undoubtedly shocked the men (and possibly some of the women). The BSA has never been the same since: for the first time serious attention was paid to the institutional masculinist bias and the empirical and theoretical neglect of gender. We still have some way to go.

#### David Morgan, BSA President, 1997–99

I did not attend the 1974 Aberdeen Conference which took as its theme 'Sexual Divisions and Society'. However, subsequent accounts suggest that this was a significant watershed in the development of British Sociology. Here, it seemed,

we were dealing with something of a paradigm shift rather than simply the raising of a set of equal-opportunities issues. A critical gendered perspective within Sociology went well beyond well-established, if limited, discussions of 'the changing roles of men and women' to consider all areas of sociological enquiry including the higher reaches of theorizing, methodology and epistemology.

Source: *Network*: Newsletter of the British Sociological Association (2001: 80: 1–4).

The 1974 conference mentioned in A Closer Look 4.2 is a significant landmark in the development of a gendered Sociology in Britain. As Jennifer Platt (2003), in her authorised history of the BSA notes, it seems possible that the conference topic, and the resultant political activity, was accidental rather than a planned political event. Originally the conference topic was to be 'Europe' but the BSA could not afford the expenses of the speakers from Europe that it was felt the topic required. The Association's Executive Committee's (EC) discussion of alternative themes resulted in the choice of 'Family', a topic on which there had not been any previous conference, and somewhere along the line this became 'Sexual Divisions and Society', a title reflecting ideas becoming current in the women's liberation movement.

At the conference a Women's Caucus was founded and Platt (2003) suggests that this appears to have been a spontaneous response amongst women attending the conference although a similar Caucus had been operating in the American Sociological Association (ASA) since 1969 and some women members of the BSA had spoken with American women at the International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress of Sociology in Bulgaria in 1970. The formation of the Caucus was announced formally to the BSA after the conference and a related BSA study group on Sexual Divisions and Society was also formed.

Following the conference two volumes of papers were published: *Sexual Divisions: Process and Change* (Barker and Allen, 1976a) and *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage* (Barker and Allen, 1976b). As Miriam David (2003: 65) notes these high-lighted feminist concerns with traditional Sociology and attempted to open up debate on gender relations:

### Developing a gendered sociological imagination

The papers in this volume thus deal with aspects of social relationships consistently neglected by sociologists, and ridiculed or denigrated by some. But in so far as sexism constitutes unproblematic, commonsense behaviour in contemporary British culture, it should not surprise us that it appears in Sociology.

(Barker and Allen, 1976a: 2)

At the Annual General Meeting of the BSA at the annual conference in 1975 the newly established Working Party of the Position of Women in the Profession put forward recommendations which were referred to the EC for 'urgent consideration'. The recommendations were that:

- (i) The BSA should ask sociologists to eliminate all enquiries, both overt and covert, relating to the applicant's personal life, particularly marital status and child care, when interviewing potential students or staff.
- (ii) Sociology department heads should be asked to review their staffing position and if they find a sex imbalance, they should consider how this came about. Particularly, they are asked to review their appointing and promotion policies.
- (iii) The BSA should encourage systematic research into the position of women in general and in the profession in particular.
- (iv) The EC (Executive Committee) should seek appropriate machinery to ensure that close attention continues to be paid to research, and action taken to eliminate the present inequalities between men and women sociologists.

(Platt, 2003: 92)

Further work by this group and the associated Working Party on Social Relations Associated with Sex and Gender in Sociology and Social Policy courses in Higher Education led to the formation of a subcommittee of the EC. The mandate of the Equality of the Sexes Subcommittee was:

to investigate and advise the BSA on policies which contribute towards the equality of access to, and equal treatment of, women sociologists within the profession, to advise the BSA on making



## Sociology

recommendations for non-sexist teaching and research in Sociology and which contribute positively towards the position of women in society; to investigate, in conjunction with the Professional Ethics Committee complaints alleging discrimination against women and allied matters . . . [and] also deal with cases of discrimination against individual men, should it ever become a problem.  
(Platt, 2003: 93)

This raised the question of the role (if any) for men in developing a gendered Sociology. Tensions emerged at the 1975 BSA conference when some men wanted to attend Caucus. The response to this was:

as ours is in essence a political struggle, we think it important that members of this disadvantaged minority should work together, without outsiders, however sympathetic, be they men or non-sociologists, to share common experiences, define our objectives, forge our policies and consolidate our achievements.  
(*Network 1976*, cited by Platt, 2003: 101)

However, despite the support that many women have received from Caucus (it met at, and outside of, the conference until the late 1990s), its help in the promotion of a more egalitarian community of sociologists, we acknowledge that there are problems with this type of separatism:

I had difficulty with certain aspects, maybe because I didn't understand well enough. There seemed to be a thread running through the debate in the BSA which said we must have private meetings and debates, and I think I, with one or two other men, felt that was all very well but why didn't they engage back with us? For those women we the men were the problem, so tell us about it, let's have it out, what were the issues.  
(Interview with pro-feminist man in Platt, 2003: 101)

In practice the epithet 'feminist' has been hijacked for a subjectivist position within Sociology that some of us rejected back in the 70s . . . As an academic strategy . . . it requires no change from men . . . it simply sets up an alternative channel of work for women, and principally about women.  
(Barrett, 1986: 20, in Platt, 2003: 101)

Yet, it is important not to negate the very positive influence of feminism and the women's movement on the BSA and on professional Sociology in Britain. As Platt (2003: 102) notes, outcomes include:

- ▶ *Sociology* (one of the official journals of the BSA) is now normally edited jointly by a man and a woman, and women have become the majority among authors of its articles.
- ▶ Two annual conferences since the 1974 have had a gender theme, and those which did not have almost invariably had a gender stream, whatever the theme topic.
- ▶ Female plenary speakers have become much more frequent at conferences, and the proportion of women non-plenary speakers has risen (with variations by conference topic) until at half of the conferences from 1991 to 2000 they were in the majority.
- ▶ Several study groups have been founded which deal with gender and women's issues.
- ▶ Women have become the majority of executive members, and the sexes have, while not alternating mechanically, been very evenly represented among the officers (Chair, Vice-Chair and Treasurer).

## A gendered sociology for women and men

So what of the changes in the writings and teaching of Sociology? Referring to two specific areas – the Sociology of the family and of sexuality – in 1976 Diane Barker and Sheila Allen wrote:

It might be expected that work on gender relationships would be most advanced and the theory the most critical. However, it suffers from a marked lack of status in British Sociology, deriving from its lack of 'theory' – except for Parsonian functionalism, its concern with the so-called non-work/non-market area of social activity, and its attention to women and children . . .

There is an even more marked lack of sociological interest in sexuality (human sexual conduct).

(Barker and Allen, 1976a: 2)

With these types of omission in mind, Abbott and colleagues (2005) note that the feminist challenge to mainstream/malestream Sociology is one that requires more than an ‘add on’ approach but a radical rethink of the content and methodology of the whole discipline. Thus, it is important not to just see society from the position of women as well as from the standpoint of men, but to see the world as fundamentally gendered. This they say has had implications for not only the areas that sociologists study but the theories they develop.

In addition to the changes in the BSA and other professional Sociological Associations the 1970s was a decade of importance in relation to the publishing of feminist Sociology. For example, Ann Oakley published three texts in the 1970s that were challenging and controversial in gender terms. The first – *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) – offered a critique of traditional sociological concepts and set out new approaches to considering differences between men and women. As David (2003) notes, a number of feminist writers have hailed this as innovative in introducing the term ‘gender’ into social sciences. Oakley followed *Sex, Gender and Society* with *Sociology of Housework* (1974) and *Housewife* (1976) which drew on her material from her doctoral studies on the lives of mothers with pre-school children – not concerned with motherhood but with women’s household work:

The two studies and their particular focus were, interestingly, very much products of their time and the key conceptual notions about women’s lives in families in the 1960s and early 1970s. They may also have been influenced by American approaches, in particular that of Betty Friedan’s (1963) notion of the ‘problem without a name’ addressed about the concerns of American middle class housewives. They focused . . . on women’s lives as wives, and drew on the traditional or then conventional sociological views about work and how to understand and analyse work as an economic activity.

(David, 2003: 77)

Oakley’s work challenged the myths and stereotypes surrounding gendered behaviour in general and housework in particular. In A Closer Look 3 we provide a little more detail on Oakley’s groundbreaking work and its relationship to more recent work in the social sciences:

## Developing a gendered sociological imagination

### A closer look 4.3

Oakley (1974) undertook empirical work with 40 London housewives. She found that on average women spent 77 hours a week doing housework and that working-class women liked the housewife role but disliked the tasks whereas middle-class women disliked the label ‘housewife’ but did not mind the tasks. Not surprisingly the middle-class respondents had better working conditions and more resources (everything from running hot water to freezers and fitted carpets).

Since the 1970s there has been much more research on the gendered experience of housework and both men and women have been studied. In addition attention has been paid to other aspects of difference such as families with children and not; families where there are two wage earners, families from different cultural and ethnic groups and so on (Delamont, 2003). The research in this area has also broadened beyond looking at who does what and how. For example the work of Judy Wajcman (1991) who reflects on whether developments in domestic technology are liberating or oppressive and Sarah Pink (2004) who considers the relationship between how homes are defined by smells, sounds, textures and objects and what this tells us about gender roles and relationships.

Oakley later went on to consider several other issues including childbirth, miscarriage and motherhood, all issues previously taken for granted and considered not necessary of sociological attention. Overall her work demonstrated in her own words the ‘sociological unimagination’ (Oakley, 1980: Ch. 3) of mainstream sociologists for ignoring these issues. In 1980 Oakley wrote: ‘The trouble with Sociology (as with many other academic subjects) is that it is not merely sexist on the surface, but deeply and pervasively so’ (Oakley, 1980: 2). A cursory look through any Sociology book catalogue or in any library will demonstrate a significant amount of work challenging traditional sociological perspectives on work, education, the family and so on, work which demonstrates how gender shapes the experiences of women and men differently in many areas of social life and remains a source of inequality in society. It is not only women sociologists who are interested in these topics and Jeff Hearn (and colleagues), who along with other male

## Sociology

sociologists such as David Morgan and Robert Connell, has always focused on gender in his work, reminds us that there is still more to do:

Further exploration of the complex dynamics surrounding negotiations between women and men in relationships . . . would be welcome. It would be interesting to see how and when, if ever, women and men form coalitions through a politics of reconciliation, and how gender constellations at 'work' and in the private 'sphere' influence each other.  
(Hearn, 2002: 399)

In addition to the gendering of traditional sociology, under pro/feminist influence new topics, new intellectual spaces and new definitions of 'knowledge' have arisen. Pro/feminist sociologists have highlighted, amongst other things, the importance of turning our (gendered) sociological imagination to the study of ethics, caring, bodies, emotions, science and technology, violence against women and children including domestic violence, food and drink and travel [**Hotlink** → **ISSUES – Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Part 3)**]. Some of these issues are the subject of whole chapters in the third part of this book; for now we provide a few further examples of thinking sociologically about gender, gender roles and gender relations in A Closer Look 4.4.

### A closer look 4.4

#### Gender is everywhere

##### Talk . . .

. . . the uses women make of the telephone are not taken very seriously. Jokes about women gossiping on the telephone are familiar to everyone . . . Women's talk has no high social prestige: it is mostly described in rather negative terms such as 'chatting', 'visiting' or 'gossiping', and is often considered to be idle and a waste of time . . . All these familiar negative connotations related to women's talk and women's sphere are also recognisable in discourses surrounding women's uses of the telephone.

(Frissen, 1995: 80 and 87)

#### Private parts and secret places . . .

How hard one 'looks' at genitals and what one 'sees' is not constrained by the optic nerve but by ideology. Given gender socialization, boys probably look at each others' genitals more than girls do. This is not because boys' genitals are objectively more obvious than girls' but because 'male' genitals have a different sociological import.

(Kessler originally 1998 in Jackson and Scott, 2002: 452)

#### Caring . . .

There is a clear relationship between gender and caring. While elderly and disabled married women may get care from husbands . . . the vast majority of carers are female, and bear the double burden of the physical labour and the guilt. The caring that starts with motherhood extends far into the future, while the duties of being a daughter loom on the horizon.

(Delamont, 2003: 45) [**Hotlink** → **Social Policy (Chapter 5)**]

#### Friends . . .

. . . girls and boys . . . sometimes use different rhetorics to describe their same-gender relationships: boys talk about 'buddies', 'teams', and 'being tough', whereas girls more often use a language of 'best friends' and 'being nice'.

(Thorne originally 1993 in Jackson and Scott, 2002: 292)

### Stop and think 4.3

Take one of the following topics – emotion, technology, body, sport, food and food preparation. How might a gender sensitive Sociology challenge stereotypical views of your chosen area?

Such work has led to both a challenge to the traditional sociological curriculum and a challenge to what should count as knowledge, what is worthy of study [**Hotlink** → **Psychology (Chapter 7)**]. Feminists insist that not only is the 'personal is political' but 'the personal is also theoretical'. Recognition of this includes

valuing reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of research (Okley, 1992).

Sociology then, is no longer gender-blinkered and includes the critical study of women's and men's lives – see Chapters 1 and 2 for discussions on why and how a gender sensitive approach includes a focus on female and male experience. However, the debt that Sociology owes to feminism in terms of these intellectual achievements is not always acknowledged/recognised, as A Critical Look 4.3 demonstrates.

In addition, it is possible to argue that the influences and challenges of feminism and of a gender sensitive Sociology remain ghettoised and marginalised. Abbott *et al.* (2005) suggest that this is particularly relevant in terms of sociological theory which remains heavily dominated by male thinkers and writers. Furthermore, in the 1990s we experienced a backlash to feminist ideas, both in the academy and outside of it (Coppock *et al.*, 1995; Delamont, 2003). All of this leaves some feminist sociologists concerned to continue to challenge the mainstream/the malestream. Others though are keen to shake off the label of lesser, of secondary. For example:

### A critical look 4.3

#### The Reith Lectures\*

In 1967, Professor Sir Edmund Leach, a social anthropologist was invited to present an analysis of family change and family life in the post-Second World War period. This was the subject of his Reith Lectures. Thirty-two years later Professor Anthony Giddens (now Lord Giddens), a sociologist, also spoke about the family in his Reith Lectures. In the period between the two presentations sociological analysis of the family had developed considerably [**Hotlink** → **Family (Chapter 11)**] not least because of the influence of feminist concepts and theories and the associated recognition of recognising the relationship between the personal and the political. Thus, although he did not focus on feminist contributions, Giddens considered questions of the family and the 'personal' in ways that many social scientists had chosen not to before, foregrounding an agenda set by feminists.

Source: Adapted from David, 2003: 40–1.

\* Reith Lectures are an annual series on radio given by leading figures of the day. Broadcast by the BBC they began in 1948 in honour of the first Director-General of the BBC, John Reith.

### Developing a gendered sociological imagination

National sociologies are frequently very different from each other and it is difficult to generalise across (using examples we are familiar with) ex-Soviet now Russian Sociology, Finnish Sociology, South African Sociology, US Sociology, and UK Sociology. Moreover, these differences multiply depending on where people are positioned in the hierarchies of any national Sociology, as well as concerning the particular sub-areas or specialisms they are involved with . . . Given the proliferation of sub-areas, specialisms and national differences, the idea that there is 'a mainstream' becomes difficult to sustain, for it is more a matter of centres and peripheries in each of these areas of activity, with their own key texts, dominant ideas, gurus, preferred ways of working, journals, book series and so forth. Consequently any claim that feminist Sociology is 'other' makes little sense to us – it all depends on which national Sociology, the specific feminist Sociology or sociologist, where people are organisationally located, and what sub-area of specialism is being referred to.

Here for instance (and again with regard to UK Sociology in particular), ideas about the work/leisure relationship and domestic divisions of labour, or concerning reflexivity and the grounded nature of sociological modes of inquiry, have gained wide currency but are not seen as particularly feminist in character. However, those of us with 30 year involvement in the discipline can note that the emphasis given them in feminist teaching, debate and publications have played an important role in ensuring their wider sociological currency.

(Wise and Stanley, 2003: 25–6)

Putting a different twist on the argument, rather than insisting that Sociology needs feminism, Stevi Jackson (1999: 2.4) argues that feminism *also* needs Sociology. Jackson is concerned that the turn away from issues of structure and material in/equality to issues of culture in the social sciences is detrimental to the critical study of gender. Thus:

That non-sociological accounts of feminist theory are so pervasive is a result of shifting disciplinary hierarchies and changing intellectual fashions. It has been argued that the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s

## Sociology

led feminists to shift their focus from ‘things’ such as housework, inequalities in the labour market or male violence – to ‘words’, to an emphasis on language, representations and subjectivity (Barrett 1992) . . . While there have been theoretical gains as a result of these shifts, much has been left out, in particular the older emphasis on the material underpinnings of gender inequality. Neither sociologists nor feminists can afford to lose sight of the materiality of social relations but this does not mean ignoring issues of language, culture and representation.

(Jackson, 1999: 24)

## Gender and other differences

The opening up of new areas of study within Sociology has been accompanied by the challenge of difference and diversity. Thus, just as feminist influence has led to the consideration of new topics so the recognition of the importance of gender as a marker of difference between people has led to similar considerations in terms of other differences. Differences such as, for example, ‘race’ and ethnicity, sexuality, age, (dis)ability and differences related to places i.e. local, national and global location. As noted above, Sociologists label the social and cultural differences between people and the associated differences in terms of power (or lack of it) and opportunity (or lack of it) stratification. Stratification is a feature of all societies but varies between and within societies and a lower place on the hierarchy leads to social exclusion, exploita-

tion and powerlessness (Macionis and Plummer, 2002; Abbott *et al.*, 2005). Consider the relationship between gender, age and community in World in Focus 4.1.

Traditionally sociologists have tended to argue that in capitalist societies class is the primary form of stratification but if we consider women’s experience worldwide we can see the importance of recognising gender as a form of stratification (for example, see World in Focus 4.1 and 4.2).

As noted elsewhere in this book, although feminists were the first to ‘take gender seriously’ they have been criticised for lack of attention to other differences. bell hooks (in Marsh 1988, originally 1984) encourages us to reflect on the disadvantages of focusing on one form of difference (measure of stratification) to the exclusion of others:

As a black woman interested in the feminist movement, I am often asked whether being black is more important than being a woman; whether feminist struggle to end sexist oppression is more important than the struggle to end racism and vice-versa. All such questions are rooted in competitive either/or thinking, the belief that the self is formed in opposition rather than compatibility. Rather than see anti-racist work as totally compatible with working to end sexist oppression, they are often seen as two movements competing for first place . . . Given the fear of being misunderstood, it has been difficult for black women and women in exploited and oppressed ethnic groups to give expression to their interest in feminist concerns.

### World in focus 4.1

#### Boys and girls and exclusion

Research by Russian sociologists has highlighted that ‘street children’ have begun to be recognised as a prominent social problem in post-communist Russia . . . children aged

under 13 comprise about 50–60 per cent of the total number of street children . . . most working street children in Russia are boys; the same is true of children involved in criminal activities. Girls on the other hand are over-represented in underage prostitution and some

1,000,000 girls and young women in Russia are thought to be working as street prostitutes, as call girls, or as prostitutes in parlours or bars or clubs. (p. 119)

. . .

Source: From Abbott *et al.*, (2005).



## World in focus 4.2

### Gender and stratification

We know that the material conditions of women's lives worldwide are worse than those of men. Worldwide, women are poorly represented in ranks of power, policy and decision making. Women work more and their labour is of less value and care work and emotion work are also gendered

with women more likely to bear multiple burdens both at home and at work. . . . heterosexual relationships and the patriarchal family are supported by all social institutions . . . violence against women is often not taken seriously by the criminal justice system and often sanctioned, even promoted by the media, by culture and/or religion as in foot-binding and female genital

mutilation and some would argue internalized by women themselves in attempting to meet the so-called ideal. Thus, as C.F. Blake (1994: 678) argues: 'Gender differences are not only biologically determined, culturally constructed, or politically imposed, but also ways of living in a body and thus of being in the world.'

Source: Adapted from Letherby 2003a: 55

Thus, a focus on class or gender, or indeed any other form of difference/stratification, to the exclusion of others leads to narrow definitions and overgeneralisations (Maynard, 1994a). The feminist critique of class analysis within Sociology demonstrates this and 30 years of debate surrounding the ways in which class is categorised in terms of the household as the unit of assessment and in terms of occupational status and the value of treating women as having their own occupationally based class identity has led to a much more sophisticated analysis of the relevance of class to everyone's life-experience and life-chances (see for example Roberts, 1993; Abbott *et al.*, 2005). And of course the sociological study of class and gender focuses on much more than occupational boundaries and opportunities as Bev Skeggs' work on working-class women demonstrates:

The media turn to the unhealthy eating habits of the nation [the UK] places specific emphasis on fat people, for example Health of the Nation (BBC2) and You Are What you Eat (Channel 4). These 'fat' programmes predominantly expose working-class families, especially mothers, as incapable of knowing how to look after themselves and others, as irresponsible . . . [also] it is women's 'binge' drinking that has been highlighted as a significant threat, not only to the state of the nation, but also to herself. To smoke, drink, be fat and publicly fight and/or participate in loud hen parties is a national sin.

(Skeggs, 2005: 967)

**Hotlink → Culture and Mass Media**

## Stop and think 4.4

Make a list of the forms of stratification that are most relevant to your own life-experience and life-changes. Do you think this list is different than it would have been 10 years ago? Do you think it might be different in 10 years' time? Why?

## Politics and practice

### Making a difference?

In addition to the challenge to the gender-blinkered theories and empirical focus within mainstream/malestream Sociology, feminists and pro/feminist men have also challenged the traditional use of methods and methodological approaches within the discipline [**Hotlink → Methods, Methodology and Epistemology (Chapter 2)**]. For many feminists, feminist research is feminist theory in action: the aim being to understand the world and change it. Thus, feminist research and ultimately feminist theory has political aims in that it celebrates and is grounded in the daily experiences of women (and men), and by focusing on experience it is able to challenge mainstream/malestream knowledge. Analysis is grounded in the experience of respondents and research informed by feminist principles has the 'desire' and the 'goal to 'create useful knowledge which can be used by ourselves and others to make a difference' [**Hotlink → Methods, Methodology and**

## Sociology

**Epistemology (Chapter 2)].** With reference to this particular challenge the work of Ann Oakley, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, and Helen Roberts (amongst others) has been influential in Britain, and in North America. Sandra Harding, Shulamit Reinharz and Judith Stacey and others have also contributed much to the debate.

However, it is not just feminists who are interested in politics and practice. Think back to the call for a 'sociological imagination' (Mills 1959 [1970]) mentioned earlier. Following on from Mills the work of Alvin Gouldner and Howard Becker in the 1960s and 1970s led to reflection on the political potential or not of Sociology. This debate has continued more recently amongst sociologists in America, Canada and Britain who have been particularly concerned with the presentation of academic work beyond the academy. Michael Burawoy, in his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, argued for 'public Sociology' thus:

The bulk of public Sociology is indeed of an organic kind – sociologists working with a labor movement, neighbourhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organisations. Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education. The recognition of public Sociology must extend to the organic kind which often remains invisible, private and is often considered to be apart from our professional lives. The project of such public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life.

(Burawoy, 2005: 8–9)

Burawoy, and others in America and Britain, argue for a special place for Sociology and sociologists within the social sciences as 'public intellectuals'. For example, in Britain John Scott (2005: 7.2), drawing on Mill's ideas, argues:

The core concerns of the sociological imagination have to be sustained within the Sociology curriculum. There is a general framework of ideas about social relations that may be the *common*

concern of the social sciences but is the *particular* concern of Sociology. Professional Sociology is the specific guardian of these intellectual concerns . . . This intellectual task centres on the idea of what it is to talk about human 'society' in all its complexity. (See also other articles in the 'Future Trends' debate in *Sociological Research Online* 2005 Vol. 10.)

Whilst in Canada, Caelie Frampton and colleagues (2006) in their edited collection of essays on political activist ethnography, credit their approach to the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith:

As an approach to producing a reliable knowledge of the social in order to facilitate transformative aims, political activist ethnography finds its roots in the work of Dorothy E. Smith. Contrary to the premises of official Sociology, which aims to explain people using categorical abstractions like 'socialisation', 'social roles and norms' or 'dysfunctionality', D. Smith developed what she called institutional ethnography as a Sociology for women, for the oppressed and – ultimately – for people (D. Smith 1987, 1999, 2005) . . . institutional ethnography show how the practices of ethnography can be turned against the ruling institutions in our own society.

(Frampton *et al.*, 2006: 6)

This debate then, and the wider concern of Sociology making a difference, is closely linked to broader feminist concerns of praxis (an active connection between theory and research and real-world experience).

## Facing the challenge

Researching and writing in a different and challenging way can of course attract criticism. Taking gender seriously and exploring the associated new topics, new methods and new approaches to writing and presentation has been criticised within Sociology as within other academic disciplines. Take for example the work of Eric Mykhalovskiy (1996) whose auto/biographical sociological writing has been described as 'self-indulgent' by an academic orthodoxy which stands by its view that there is one correct way to write academically (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Temple, 1997). As

Mykhalovskiy himself notes, auto/biographical Sociology gives offence to the masculine academic discourse of Sociology:

the criteria of sociological orthodoxy as expressed by a masculine academic discourse or voice, itself propped up by forms of thinking, writing, doing research and so on. As sociologists, this is a voice with which many of us are familiar; which we listen to and often reproduce as part of our apprenticeship. Authoritative, at times arrogant, it is a voice that speaks unitarily with confidence . . .

Autobiographical Sociology gives offence to this voice. As Sociology, it comes to 'not' speak in that it does not rely on standard ways of being sociologically meaningful to readers.

(1996: 139)

So although academic pro/feminism can both articulate and challenge dominant ideologies there is always the threat of dismissal and the labelling of this type of work as lesser, as maverick (Morley, 1995). Liz Stanley and Sue Wise admonish that: 'all feminists [and like-minded others] who are involved in writing and research should be more adventurous, more daring, and less concerned with being respectable and publishable' (1993: 137).

We agree that it is morally and politically, as well as academically, important to keep working in this way but would also suggest that it is not always easy for academics who want to have their work published. Yet, supporting Audre Lorde's (1984) view that you cannot 'dismantle the master's house using the master's tools' pro/feminist sociologists continue to challenge the jargon and over-complication of some of the sociological mainstream.

## Conclusion

Although feminism has had more of an impact in Sociology than in some other disciplines and although sociologists on the whole 'take gender seriously' there are some areas of sociological thought where a gendered analysis is still ignored or marginalised. New

challenges, approaches and topics are still at times treated with suspicion and, probably even worse, there are times when the approaches and methods of feminist academics are adopted by mainstream writers with no acknowledgement of the debt to feminism.

### Further reading

Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace and Melissa Tyler (2005), *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, London, Routledge (third edition). A comprehensive introduction to feminist Sociology that considers theory and method and covers a broad range of topics and areas: stratification and inequality, education, the life course, the family and household, health, illness and caring, sexuality, work and organisation, crime, violence and criminal justice, politics, mass media and popular culture. (The first edition (1990) and the second edition (1997) were written by Abbott and Wallace.)

Sara Delamont, (2003), *Feminist Sociology*, London, Sage. A detailed, historical consideration of the relationship between feminism and Sociology. Delamont highlights the contribution of feminist to thinking sociologically.

Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds) (2002), *Gender: A Sociological Reader*, London, Routledge. A book containing 50 short readings that clearly demonstrate the 'gendering of Sociology'.

John Macionis and Ken Plummer, (2002) *Sociology: A Global Introduction*, London, Prentice Hall (second edition). A mainstream Sociology text that takes a global perspective incorporating a consideration of feminism and gender throughout.

### Websites

[www.britisoc.org.uk/specialisms](http://www.britisoc.org.uk/specialisms) – links to various BSA Study Groups including: Family, Race and Ethnicity, lesbian, Sexual Divisions Study Groups.

A Sociological Tour Through Cyberspace –  
<http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/gender.html>

A beautifully illustrated site based at Trinity University in Texas. It covers a wide range of relevant topics such as work, family, education, media, militarisation, globalisation, men's studies with links to other sites.

Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities – an overview essay covering recent sociological work on men and masculinities – by R.W. Connell at <http://toolkit.endabuse.org/Resources/UnderstandingMen>.

## Sociology

## End of chapter activity

Read the first chapter of C. Wright Mills (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Harmondsworth, Penguin. There have been several reprints since 1959 so it will be easy to find a copy of the book. Once you have read the chapter answer the following questions:

1. According to C. Wright Mills what is the task and promise of the sociological imagination?
2. Using the example of unemployment Mills demonstrates the relationship between the 'personal troubles of milieu' and 'public issues of social structure'. Taking a gendered and cross-national perspective consider interpersonal violence, cigarette production and smoking or debt and do the same.
3. Reflect on your own educational and career choices with references to issues of history and structure and biography. How relevant is gender to your consideration.
4. You will be aware that at times Mills uses the generic he to refer to both men and women. For the last 30 years or so sociologists have been more aware of the negative consequences of excluding women and other minority groups through language. Look at the website of the British Sociological Association [www.britisoc.org.uk](http://www.britisoc.org.uk) for guidelines on a more inclusive approach to language.