

# Notes on the Discipline/Notes sociologiques

## Feminist scholarship in sociology: Transformation from within?\*

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Few revolutions, epistemological or otherwise, begin in academia. And yet, knowledge producers always play some role in revolutions of any kind, including epistemological revolutions. This paper is in the spirit of recent debates in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* about the end of modern sociology (Cheal, 1990), the “twilight of positivism” (Baldus, 1990), “intellectual terrorism” of social thought which refuses reference to the material world (Brym, 1990: 331), and the crisis in sociology manifested by rewards to data manipulators while ignoring world events and trends (Fox, 1990).

The prevailing image seems to be that fundamental changes are occurring in social reality and that the discourse of sociology, indeed most social science, has been slow to catch up with new ways of seeing or analyzing the changed reality. Sociology, in recent years, has been forced to look at what had been previously there, but invisible — family violence, that incest is *not* taboo, links between the family and the economy, the power of patriarchy (a previously unacknowledged social force), and perhaps most importantly, that many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about society and everyday life are not valid (Eichler, 1985; Fox, 1988; Smith, 1987; 1990).

While still not a revolution perhaps, sociology has been transformed by new ways of seeing the social landscape (Belenky et al., 1986; Oakley, 1980; Smith, 1987; 1990). A feminist standpoint on the social, coming largely from outside sociology, has produced this transformation. It is, without doubt, nothing short

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of audacious not only to put women clearly into the sociological picture, but to acknowledge that every aspect of society, and of observing society, is gendered. Pink and blue threads run through everything.<sup>1</sup>

### **Challenges to sociology: From outside academia**

Challenges to existing paradigms and ways of thinking seldom start within a discipline. This is true not only of sociology, but of all the natural and social sciences. There is a kind of self-sealing character to disciplinary traditions. Ways of doing a particular brand of science become entrenched quickly with alternative ways of proceeding further delineating the boundaries of the discipline rather than challenging those boundaries. Existing rules within disciplines are like “concrete aspic” (Oakley, 1984: 9).

Those who are paid to produce knowledge have never had a monopoly on knowledge production or truth, even though some may like to believe differently. People come to their own truths and understandings, as do those who push for social change in social movements. These truths may not be universal and are sometimes myths, misconceptions, or views based on self-serving values. But they also can add to sociology a different kind of truth — one that emanates from people’s lived experiences in social context, rather than spread out for the analytical eyes of sociologists.

There is nothing particularly new in seeing challenges to sociology as coming from the “real world.” In fact, the very roots of sociology itself can be traced to concerns about social problems and social policy. This is not limited to the well-known Chicago school, but can be traced back to the early works of Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. Sociology, in its inception, was a rational and methodical discourse which could offer enlightenment on social problems and suggest practical solutions (Shore, 1987).

Many problems in society were studied by others first, and then, once shown to be important, “taken on” by sociology. A prime historical example is that of the so-called muck-rakers of the early part of the twentieth century who exposed industrial problems and exploitation. These were journalists whose work, although not often acknowledged as such by sociologists, contributed to the development of industrial sociology. A more recent example is the study of single parent families, undertaken first by journalists and the women’s movement, long before sociologists recognized the existence or importance of single parent families. Journalists and feminists also initiated research on family violence, making it clear that here was a problem of enormous magnitude, overlooked by sociologists who maintained (as some still do) concepts of the family as functional and incest as taboo.

Sociology, in many ways, is a bootlegger on societal changes and social problems (Shore, 1987). This may be a function of the structure of academic

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1. I am indebted to Barb Marshall, Trent University, for this delightful image.

research — done largely by white, middle-class men with the less white, the less privileged, and females as objects of research. It is also, as Dorothy Smith has pointed out, the result of disembodied knowledge, where men (as knowers) walk out of their bodies and their material circumstances, and into a “head space” where the material conditions enabling thinking to take place become invisible (Smith in a lecture at the University of Alberta, 10 February 1989).

### **Challenges from other disciplines**

The walls of a discipline are not so high that people inside cannot see what is going on in other disciplines, although it is truly remarkable that within the modern academy we often do not know what is going on in disciplines on neighbouring corridors of the same building! Loyalty and adherence to disciplinary bounds is strong and almost all-encompassing. Perhaps three factors have contributed to greater understanding, or at least visibility, across disciplines recently. The first is the growth of interdisciplinary programs of various sorts where people are required to talk to each other, and even team-teach courses. Women’s studies and Canadian studies programs, now institutionalized at most Canadian universities, are but two examples. The second is the recent proliferation of semi-popular books which cross disciplinary bounds. Interestingly, and significantly, many of these are written by physical scientists who attempt to apply their knowledge of atoms or chemicals directly or indirectly to societal changes (Balduş, 1990). One notable example of this kind of book is *Order Out of Chaos*, whose authors state: “The ideas to which we have devoted much space in this book — the ideas of instability, of fluctuation — *diffuse* into the social sciences” (Prigogine and Stengers, 1983: 312, emphasis added). The diffusion is seen to go only one way, despite the fact that Darwin actually borrowed the term evolution from sociologist Herbert Spencer. There are many other similar examples.

The third factor is the way in which links some academics have outside the academy bring us together inside. A primary example of this is the women’s movement which has not only prompted many women academics to become interdisciplinary in their teaching and research, but has built strong links, both personal and professional, among women in and out of academia. Academics involved in the peace movement have a similar experience.

Richard Easterlin, as both a demographer and an economist, said in the preface to one of his books (1968) that the best kind of interdisciplinary work is that which is done within one head. John Polanyi, in accepting the Nobel prize for his work in “reaction-dynamic” chemistry, remarked:

It was as if chemists were sociologists, dealing with the behavior of societies, and the physicists were psychologists recognizing only the rules of behavior for individuals. It was evident in the early 1950’s that the time was ripe for a melding of these viewpoints: if each constituted such a powerful system of thought alone, they would still be more powerful in conjunction. (Quote from Polanyi in Strauss, *Globe and Mail*, 16 October 1986).

Clearly, there is power in crossing disciplinary bounds to gain insights into phenomena. Yet the power of those insights is sometimes as much metaphorical as real. For example, sociology, in the U.S. post-World War II era, was very much caught up in what some feminist sociologists have called “physics envy.” The “hard sciences” were seen as possessing a methodological rigour and capacity for control of variables which proved elusive to sociologists. Sociology, in its early days, suffered from a “second best” syndrome, envious of the hardness of “real” science. Debates were common about how scientific sociology could be, and whether lawfulness of social phenomena was possible.

Sociology, thankfully, has matured sufficiently now that such debates, so revealing of collective insecurity about the enterprise of sociology, are at least less frequently heard. We still debate the legitimacy of paradigms, but with an increased pride in the fact that sociological paradigms, unlike those in other disciplines which have tended to become rigidified with time, are flexible lenses through which multiple aspects of the social world are revealed. For sociology, multiple paradigms and theoretical pluralism seem preferable to the linear simplicity of the natural sciences, in the face of arguments that a post-modern science “embraces empirical discontinuities and paradoxes” (Cheal, 1990: 137). What was previously a source of embarrassment to sociology has become, to many sociologists, a source of strength, and perhaps even, in some circles, the envy of the physical sciences.

At the same time that sociology was maturing, changes were occurring in other disciplines which opened up to sociology heretofore unacknowledged possibilities. For example, nuclear physicists, in examining the internal workings of the atom, discovered that super-atomic laws did not hold at the sub-atomic level. Suddenly, the previously clear and unequivocal paradigms of the “king” of the sciences were being called into question. Some nuclear physicists turned to Zen Buddhism for answers to the riddles that challenged their existent paradigms!

In molecular biology, genes were found to behave in what was thought to be a “bizarre” fashion (Keller, 1983: 171-95). The idea of transposition of genes, worked out by Barbara McClintock (for which she eventually won a Nobel prize), was heretical and “beyond the range of acceptability” (Keller, 1983: 178), because it did not fit the prevailing “tacit assumptions that impose unconscious boundaries between what is thinkable and what is not” (Keller, 1983: 178).

Lynn Margolies’ research in evolutionary biology has found that parts of organisms become incorporated into other organisms as evolution proceeds. This, too, is indigestible to the prevailing paradigms of evolutionary biology because it means not only that evolution may not be as linear as previously thought, but that organisms may be the embodiment of their own evolutionary experiences.

These discoveries, along with many others, have had several unexpected implications for sociology. Sociologists have learned that we are not the only ones who must struggle with the realization that existing paradigms are inadequate to new knowledge. We have been shown that on the edges of what is new, in any science, heretical questions arise and dissent can result. Natural science has been revealed as less immune to dissension than sociologists had perceived. New discoveries have made contradictions, disallowed by earlier paradigms of science, permissible. Sociology and the natural sciences may be less different than we had supposed!

### **Toward a feminist sociology? Or is it here?**

Sociologists, as well as sociology as a body of thought and an enterprise, have been challenged by societal changes, by developments in other disciplines, and by an increasing frustration at our inadequacies in explaining important social phenomena. The door has been opened to a new way of seeing the social world. Jessica Benjamin, a feminist psychoanalyst, has suggested that “a truly critical analysis of society always presupposes or implies an image of revolt, a vision of a different way of life” (Benjamin, 1988: 200).

In sociology, unlike our sister disciplines of history, anthropology, and literature, for example, the feminist “revolution” came late (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). We have had time to observe its possibilities in other disciplines, to learn that women’s voices and women’s realities were missing from history, literature, and many anthropological studies. A full-fledged feminist theoretic has developed in science which allows us to reclaim for women what is rightfully ours (such as the invention of agriculture, among many other achievements), and to legitimate those aspects of scientific culture denied because they are female (Stacey and Thorne, 1985: 312; McDaniel, Cummins, and Beauchamp, 1988). Perhaps most importantly, we have “cut our teeth” on the dissension that can result from calling into question paradigms that are the “sacred cows” of scientific (including social scientific) enterprise.

In spite of all these advantages, sociologists doing feminist research have only recently been able to acknowledge that we are creating an epistemological revolution in sociology (Smith, 1987). Prior to that time, even the most courageous among us went about our work with caution and a certain degree of temerity (although opponents may not have called it this). For decades, we talked about moving “toward” a sociology of/for women or “toward” a feminist sociology. One feminist sociologist once mused that the Wright brothers, had they been us, might have yelled from their plane in the air that they were moving towards flying! We, like the Wright brothers, *were* flying as soon as we moved into the realm of envisioning a new approach to sociology. Feminist sociologists are becoming less willing to carry around rigid abstract models either materially or figuratively. We are removing ourselves proudly from a system of logic that

is self-perpetuating, self-justifying, and hollow unless it moves to the material level.

### **Exposing, revealing, peeling back, finding the invisible**

Sociological perceptions of reality have been profoundly altered over the past decade or so by feminist insights, perhaps more so than the social reality itself, although the public perception is that society has experienced large-scale changes, while sociological perceptions have altered little. Altered sociological perception has occurred in multiple ways and on multiple levels — only a few of the changes can be mentioned here.

As McGill anthropologist and winner of the 1988 John Porter prize, Bruce Trigger, puts it, old-fashioned positivist certainty has been called into question (Trigger's 1988 address to the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association upon receipt of the Porter prize). The always narrow line between truth and falsehood has narrowed further. Biases in our understanding of truth have been revealed. It has been "discovered" that male realities have been the basis for learning to think sociologically. Questions have emerged which so fundamentally challenge the philosophical underpinnings of society that they cannot be understood as questions by those working within the traditional paradigms of sociology. One example is the question of why women have been systematically overlooked as sources of creativity in our society and why women's accomplishments have been demeaned and undermined once recognized.

That sociological understandings have been based largely on the experiences of the dominant groups in society, male and privileged, has also become apparent. Smith (1987) notes that women have learned to practice a "nihilistic retreat" relative to our own consciousness. She argues that we have become "honourary males" — we are exiled from our own experiences and have had our subjective insights substituted by male understandings of the world. Women in sociology, suggests Smith, proceed as if "split in half" — one half male and acceptable, the other half female and repressed (but bound to emerge since we can never be fully accepted as males, no matter how fully we internalize the viewpoint). A crucial part of this "nihilistic retreat" is that it can be a source of great creativity too — insights are possible from the margins that are not as likely from insiders (Hubbard and Randall, 1988). As well, alienation can be a source of creativity, as eloquently pointed out by Jill Vickers (1982).

What was previously invisible has become manifest. Rowbotham's (1973) comment, that one cannot begin to find one's power until sources of non-power are known, is apt here. Feminist sociology has revealed both sources of non-power and power among women and other disadvantaged groups. As part of the process of making the invisible visible, feminist sociology has begun to make observable (and sometimes questionable) many of the assumptions built into

sociology, both in discourse and practice. It has become apparent, although obviously resisted, that the way back to reality may be to destroy and recreate our perception of it.

Women, and the way we as sociologists perceive women, have been altered immeasurably. Previously, women were either *categories* for analysis (the famous “sex as variable” school); *objects* of research, with no views of our own except those that fit prescribed categories; or *abstractions* such as patients, elders, mothers, or prostitutes. Women as researchers, of course, could only endure this distancing from women, by becoming more methodologically “male.” Conflicts inevitably result for women who feel alienated both from the sociological perception of women as objects of study, and the women being studied with whom they may have little in common. The alienation goes full circle to a lack of identification with male colleagues who cannot fully understand women’s feelings of alienation. The unfortunate consequence, and one which we have all seen, is that very competent women leave sociology, while men, even those who may be less competent, continue.

Another aspect of the feminist epistemological revolution is that women are assumed, in both personal realms and in the ways that we implicitly structure sociological research and discourse, to be the ones who do the physical labour (from laundry to having and raising babies), to technical work (survey work, lab technicians, typists, etc.), in order to free men to do the “more important” intellectual work. Women thus have been silenced not only by ideology and the structure of sociological discourse, but by our everyday work as well.

In exposing, revealing, peeling back, and finding the invisible, feminist sociology has engaged in a kind of scavenger hunt in which the most obvious everyday experiences become data of importance. A few simple examples. A senior male academic comments repeatedly, with a look of profound displeasure, on how a woman graduate student’s bangs cover her face, made worse by her use of what he calls “bright-red lipstick.” In this example, repeated so many times a day that it is virtually routine, what Smith terms “the relations of ruling” become apparent. Not only is the woman, who, regardless of status, is generally subordinate to the man as a function of the largely invisible working of gender, required to smile and endure, but she cannot respond easily that this comment puts her in the place of a slave or a fief, to be judged as acceptable by the “lord of the manor.” Turn it around for a moment: Would a woman, regardless of status, be as likely to take the liberty of telling a man, with whom she was not a very close friend, that his hair was too short or his mustache scruffy? Taking liberties is an assertion of the relations of ruling.

Additional examples: It has long been recognized that women generally outlive men, and yet remarkably little attention has been paid in the sociology of aging literature to how women’s different life experiences may either produce or aggravate the poverty, isolation, or deprivation many women experience in

their older years (McDaniel, 1989a). Although the different life opportunities and experiences of women relate closely to birth rates and desires for children, most sociological studies so far have incorporated women's real life experiences only superficially (McDaniel, 1989b). One Canadian demographer remarked once at a meeting of fertility scholars that a Martian visiting the room would never conclude that fertility among earthlings had anything to do with sexual or gender relations, so remote was the discussion from people's lived experiences!

## **Conclusion**

I opened with the statement that revolutions seldom begin in the academy, but that academics always are involved in one way or another. There is a complex interplay between social challenges outside and inside the academy, and outside and inside sociology. Attention to the issues and realities of women's lives first came not from sociologists, for whom much of women's lived reality was invisible, but from the women's movement, the reality of social change, and from developments in other disciplines. Sociology has followed, not led. And yet, sociology is now being transformed from inside and outside by feminism, as well as other social movements such as the environmental and peace movements.

The audacious project a feminist sociology sets for itself and for sociology generally, is to acknowledge the disconnections between life as lived by women, men, and children, and social life as examined by sociology. It is, further, a process of asking questions either previously not thought worthy of asking, or never thought of before. It is a means of connecting the private and the public, but without dichotomizing as so many have done in the past with so little benefit and so much harm. It is the construction of a new means of social enquiry — one which does not exclude truths of those who are not dominant, and one which puts human faces back into the enquiry.

Most importantly, a feminist sociology is a new way of seeing what is familiar and yet strange. The vantage point is different, closer up and more responsive to the ways people themselves situate their experiences. The Archimedean point, so often used in sociology, where one watches from an impossible distance a social situation that must be rendered unreal by the vantage point of the observer, is brought closer to our faces. We observe what we also experience and in doing so, gain potentially greater insights than we might with more distance. In particular, we can feel the oppression of authority by being closer, as well as the human joy and pain we had previously not noticed in our heroic efforts to remain distant and objective. Feminist sociology is the "other side of silence," a framework to explain and understand what was previously explainable only in terms of individual pathology or idiosyncrasy. It is, as Polyani suggests, in the melding of viewpoints that powerful systems of thought can be found.

To put some reality to this new way of seeing and to the melding of viewpoints, I conclude with a quote from Stephen W. Hawking, the brilliant

astrophysicist who has had to overcome his own serious physical limitations to contribute to knowledge. Could this perhaps have added a sharpness to his insight?

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said, "What you have told is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady, "But it's turtles all the way down." (Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*)

Old deeply held beliefs, like turtles, are slow to move.

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