

# CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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## PART 3 GENDER

### 3.1. Introduction

In this part of the book five critical research studies that concentrate on gender oppression are examined in detail. The examination is focused on the methodology rather than the substantive issues; however, methodology and substance are interrelated and the following analyses show how methodic practices are combined with underlying presuppositions in order to generate a critical investigation of substantive issues relating to gender.

A central concern of much research analysing gender oppression is the representation of women's views and perspectives. A widely adopted mode is to undertake and present research in which women speak for themselves about women's realms. An early 'classic' of this type was Ann Oakley's (1974a) research into housework that addresses domestic labour from the point of view of housewives.

Oakley explicitly adopted a feminist approach. To propose an academic research endeavour premised on a feminist perspective was, at that time, a radical step in itself. As will be shown, her feminist methodology was of necessity entwined with a more conventional positivistic analysis. For Oakley, feminism was an alternative perspective to the scientific 'male paradigm'. Although noting alternative prescriptions for women's liberation (Myrdal & Klein, 1956; Firestone, 1972; Rowbotham, 1973), she felt no need to address the differences in feminist perspectives that were to become so hotly debated for the best part of a decade.

For Oakley (1973, p. 3), feminism is not a set of values but a perspective on social analysis that 'consists of keeping in the forefront of one's mind the life-styles, activities and interests of more than one half of humanity—women.' The detailed analysis of her methodology reveals her concern with reaching the real feelings of her interviewees. Guided by a notion of sisterhood, Oakley deliberately sets aside the manipulative approach embodied in the conventional interviewer–interviewee relationship.

Cynthia Cockburn's (1983) *Brothers* also used ethnographic interviewing. Hers was a feminist study of a male realm that examined the processes by which men excluded women from craft unions and thus high-paid skilled employment and how they identified their exclusivity with their maleness. Her account lets the men talk about how they see their world and how they legitimate the exclusion of women as a function of the engagement with capital. She situates her ethnographic material in a historical context that addresses the particular history of the print trade from which her subjects are drawn and the wider history of women's employment. Her study is thus firmly located in a broad socio-economic and political context. Ethnographic material provides details of actual experiences. These serve as insights into the structural and historical processes. While the reported experiences are located in a specific milieu they also inform the

understanding of the nature of the oppressive structure and its historical genesis. In reporting the ethnography, the spoken accounts are included both to illustrate the text and as a basis of an analysis of the structural forms. The methodological tactic Cockburn used to deconstruct social relations was to reveal and analyse contradictions that were evident in both what respondents did and in what they said. The contradictions were examined to see how they related to the ideological forms legitimating the oppressive structures. Cockburn argues that her empirical material only makes sense when examined as a dual system of oppression: capitalism and patriarchy.

Letting women speak for themselves was a research technique used by Sally Westwood (1984) in her study of the role of work in the making of women's lives. In *All Day Every Day*, Westwood adopts a participant observation role, rather than depth interviews, in her analysis of the interrelationship between oppression of women at home and at work. Like Willis (1977) she reveals how the participants collude in their own oppression. Like Cockburn, she focuses on contradictions and like Oakley she regards the women she talks about as friends to be treated sympathetically, not subjects to be engaged and exploited. Ethnographic study, then, reveals women's lived experience of patriarchal oppression (Oakley, 1973; Westwood, 1984). The ethnographic strategy of letting women talk for themselves makes women and women's concerns visible.

An alternative strategy for making women visible is the reconstruction of history from a feminist perspective. Historical reconstruction is a key to both reversing the marginalisation of women in dominant 'male history'; cataloguing the nature and extent of male oppression; and as a means of exploring the evolution of oppressive structures. This is achieved by either re-constructing the conventional concerns of history showing the role of women or the impact of events on women, or by writing the history of women's realms hitherto ignored. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed (1987) in writing about the women's movement in Pakistan reconstruct an historical account of the role of women in the struggle for the independence of Pakistan and their subsequent oppression under the new Islamic conservatism initiated during the Zia régime.

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi combined an ethnographic approach that let women speak for themselves with an historical analysis, which involved the historical reconstruction of a neglected realm, the history of female power in Asia. Their socialist feminist analysis of women in India sets the ethnographic study, based on unstructured interviews, in a historical context. The experiences of women professionals is set against a background of the struggle for Indian Independence and the subsequent attempts of the new capitalism mixed with traditional patriarchy to restrict and exclude women from economic and social power through seclusion. In an approach similar to Cockburn (1983), Liddle and Joshi suggest a dual system of oppression of women. However, they adopted an alternative to Cockburn's tactic for deconstruction. Instead of focusing on contradictions they addressed prevailing myths in order to suggest the ideologically constituted interests that are encapsulated in these uncritically accepted myths.