THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER
AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY AND RESEARCH

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SECOND EDITION
The Sociology of Gender
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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Sociology of Gender

Chapter Objectives

- Provide an overview of the book’s general aims.
- Explain how sociologists approach the study of social life and gender, in particular.
- Define gender and other key terms, and understand the debates over their use.
- Identify the three frameworks sociologists use to examine this concept.
- Provide examples of the ways that gender shapes individuals, social interaction, and institutions.
- Explain the importance of considering gender from a cross-national and comparative perspective.
Introduction

Last summer at a family gathering, my mother asked what I would be working on during my sabbatical. “Gender,” I responded. “You mean gender bias?” she asked helpfully. “No, gender,” I said. There ensued an awkward silence, then my sixteen-year-old nephew quipped, “There are men and there are women. What more is there to say? Short book.”

From “Confounding Gender” by Mary Hawkesworth

Introduction

I identify with the narrator in this story. Like her, I have often found myself having to explain my interest in the topic of gender. Many people share – at least implicitly, anyway – the teenage nephew’s belief that gender is something unproblematic, self-evident, and uncontested. Is there anything more to say?

My belief that there is, indeed, more to say on the topic of gender is the motivation for this book. In it, I hope to achieve two goals: First, I aim to convince readers that understanding gender requires us to go beyond the obvious and to reconsider issues we may think are self-evident and already well understood. Challenging the taken-for-granted is one essential component of the sociological perspective. In fact, sociologists argue that what people view as unproblematic and accept as “the way things are” may be most in need of close, systematic scrutiny. A second goal of the book is to demonstrate the ways that gender matters in social life. Though complex and ever-changing, the social world is ordered and, at some level, knowable. As a principle of social relations and organization, gender is one of the forces that contribute to this patterning of social life. By understanding gender, we understand more about the social world.

Meeting these goals is more challenging than ever before. Virtually all of the social sciences have produced a staggering amount of empirical research on gender. Further, gender research has proliferated across the globe, and the ability of scholars to communicate with and learn from one another across geographical and disciplinary boundaries has expanded exponentially. This multi-
plicity of views and perspectives does not have to result in chaos and confusion, however. The field’s conceptual and theoretical diversity can be a source of enrichment rather than fragmentation. In order to receive the benefits of this diversity, however, students of gender must be skilled at communicating across perspectives, identifying points of overlap, convergence, and opposition. Demonstrating how this can be accomplished while, at the same time, doing justice to the range and variety of the ever-expanding theory and research on gender presents challenges I hope to meet in the following pages.

Sociological Vantage Points

There are many ways to gather information and produce knowledge, including knowledge about gender. This book, however, is premised on my belief that sociology (and the social sciences) offers the most useful vantage points from which this topic can be understood. Sociology does not provide the only access to the social world, of course. Fiction, music, and art, for example, all may provide people with meaningful insights about their lives. As a scientific discipline, sociology values systematic, theoretically informed analyses of the empirical world. While personal narratives and experiences are undeniably important, relying exclusively on these sources of information may lead to the “fundamental attribution error” – the tendency to explain behavior by invoking personal dispositions while ignoring the roles of social structure and context (Aries 1996; Ross 1977). Only by moving away from the purely subjective can we understand the broader social forces that shape our lives. Sociologists employ a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather the information that informs their empirical claims. They use these methods as means to insure that data are gathered and analyzed systematically, with the aim of explaining and extending knowledge.

Though embracing the assumptions and methods of science as it has traditionally been conceived, sociologists have – out of necessity
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also broadened these traditions. We recognize that the social world we study is complex and that this demands multiple forms of knowledge-gathering, some of which may be unique to the social (as opposed to the other) sciences. Models of science that work well for those studying the natural or physical world are not always applicable or desirable for studying the social world. As numerous social scientists have pointed out, humans – unlike other species – have tremendous capacities for reflection, creativity, and agency. People are neither programmable machines nor are they prisoners of their instincts. As a result, sociologists must contend with the fact that all people know something of the circumstances in which they act and thereby possess a degree of “sociological competence” (Lemert 1997, p. x). As sociologists, we are at our best when we can communicate with and learn from those we study. The sociological enterprise is further strengthened by its practitioners’ capacities to critically reflect on the circumstances through which their knowledge is produced. The ability to engage in self-reflection and critique one’s assumptions, methods, and conceptual orientations contributes vitally to the growth of sociological knowledge.

There are several, more specific characteristics of sociological knowledge – including knowledge about gender. Most important, this knowledge emanates from diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Because they focus attention on different aspects of the social world and ask different kinds of questions, the interplay of diverse perspectives and methods helps facilitate the production of knowledge. I believe that the most useful sociological knowledge is produced collectively, through dialogue and debate, rather than in self-contained isolation. Sociological knowledge is not complete, seamless, or monolithic, however. Rather, like all knowledge grounded in the practices of science, this knowledge is incomplete, contingent, and often inconsistent.

These disciplinary characteristics have shaped what we know about gender and how we have come to know it. What follows thus draws on these characteristics. In my view, the tools of social science and sociology, in particular – while not flawless or complete – have been and continue to be the most useful in providing people with
the means to challenge the taken-for-granted, understand their own lives and the world around them, and create possibilities for change.

A Brief History of the Sociological Study of Gender

Beginnings

I took my first course on gender as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon in 1975. As I recall, the course had only been in existence for a few years prior. “Gender” appeared nowhere in the course title: It was called “the sociology of women.” My experience of being introduced to the study of gender through the sociology of women was fairly typical for sociology students of my generation. The study of gender in sociology grew out of the second wave of the women’s movement. One expression of this movement in colleges and universities was its critique of academic disciplines, like sociology, for ignoring women. Women were rarely the subjects of research and activities heavily dominated by women (e.g., housework) received little attention. Critics thus claimed that sociology reflected a “male bias,” generating knowledge most applicable to men’s lives rather than to the lives of women and to society defined more broadly. The challenge for sociology at that time was best captured in the question posed by the late sociologist, Jessie Bernard (1973a, p. 781): “Can [sociology] become a science of society rather than a science of male society?”

While the term “gender” gradually began to enter the sociological literature, gender scholars for many years devoted considerably more attention to women – and topics related to femininity – than to men and topics related to masculinity. In addition, much more was written about differences between women and men than was written about variations among women and among men. Perhaps more fundamental was the persistent, often implicit, assumption that sociology as a discipline could accommodate new knowledge about gender without having to rethink some of its own key assumptions.