

**AFRICAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL JOURNAL
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
IMO STATE UNIVERSITY
NIGERIA**

VOL. 7 NO. 2 MARCH 2018

FEMINISM VS CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper treats feminism as a perspective which sought to understand human behaviour by centering women and issues that women face in the society. Feminist theory was seen as attempt to explain difference between men and women, call for centering gender and consideration for how gender differences affect human behaviour in the context of historical, political, social and cultural concerns, as well as oppressions that are gender based. Also the paper sees feminism as a call for assess anent of concepts, theories and methods employed within and across the academic discipline. Feminist sociology was treated as a conflict theory which observes gender in its relation to power, emphasizing sexual orientation, race, economic status and nationality. In addition the paper argued that feminist sociology is a response to the missing gender in classical sociology, setting forth an agenda for academic and social change.

Introduction

Feminist theory has developed as a small part of a very large feminist movement striving to challenge traditions, methodologies, and priorities in all aspect of life. The movement "began as widespread call for a major reassessment of concepts, theories, and methods employed within and across the academic discipline. Hesse-Biber, (2002: 57) and colleagues assert that, "research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004:3).

Many authors have focused on feminist theory and how the conceptualization of the feminist perspective evolved (e.g., Duran, 1998; Donovan, 2000; Evans, 1995) and some authors have emphasized the methodology of feminist theory (e.g., Fonow & cook, 1991; Hesse-Biber, Gilmanton, & Lydenberg, 1999; Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). As noted by Lay and Daley (2007) , an explosion of articles, books, and conferences has produced a very credible area of scholarship. However, this present paper seeks to explain the meaning of feminism and understand why feminist theorists are critical of the forerunners of sociological thought.

What is Feminism?

Feminist theory offers a perspective for understanding human behaviour in the social environment by centering women and issues that women face in contemporary society.

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Feminism reflects “a world view that values women and that confronts systematic injustices based on gender” (Chinn & Wheeler, 1985: 74). A feminist lens asks us to see individuals, group, family, and organizations in their social, political, economic, ethnic, and cultural contexts. The intersection of these contexts produces the potential for oppression that is rooted in gendered relationships (Lay and Daley, 2007).

Feminist theory is most often associated with the right of women. This is both simplistic and reductionist. Many of the human behaviour texts offer a precursory review of feminist theory; however, for a comprehensive understanding and application, a broader study is required. There are encompassing concern inclusive of the discipline’s particular epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions; however, there is no one monolithic feminist perspective; instead, there are many perspectives, with various theoretical groundings (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997).

There are several assumptions with feminist theory. Flax (1999:10) delineated three, with the first being that “men and women have different experiences” in that their worlds are not the same. Some see the goals of feminism as equality, which would include having the same choice and opportunities as men. Feminist theories attempt to explain differences between men and women, call for centering gender and consideration for how gender differences affect human behaviour in the context of historical, political, social, and cultural concerns, as well as oppressions that are gender based. The oppression of the women is not simply related to some other social relationship such as a class system. Flax (1999) explained that instead, feminist theory views women’s oppression as “a unique constellation of social problems and has to be understood in it . . .” (p. 10). Oppression is seen as part of the way the world is structured and is not due to pockets of “bad attitudes” (p. 10) or backward traditions, but oppression is embedded in the very socio-economic and political organization of our society. The structure is the patriarchy, which has deep roots in the culture at large (Flax, 1999).

Flax also associated specific goals with feminist theory. These goals include understanding “power differentials between men and women” (p. 10) and power in relationship to the evolution of oppression as well as to bring about social change to end oppression. A central purpose of feminist theory is a “commitment to change oppressive structures and to connect abstract ideas with concrete problems for political action” (p. 10). Oppression has been defined as the “absence of choices” (Hooks, 1984:5). Women in Western society have choice with regard to everyday human experiences, which include production of resources, reproduction, and the merger of the biological and psychological (Flax, 1999). It is for this reason some do not name oppression as a concern or identify as feminists. As noted by Hooks (1984:5), “ the absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed”.

Feminist sociology is a conflict theory and theoretical perspective which observes gender in its relation to power, both at the level of face-to-face interaction and reflexivity within a social structure at large. Focuses include sexual orientation, race, economic status, and nationality. At the core of feminist sociology is the idea of the systematic oppression of women and the historical dominance of men within most societies: ‘patriarchy’. Feminist thought has a rich history, however, which may be categorized into three ‘waves’. The current, ‘third wave’, emphasizes the concepts of globalization, post colonialism, post-structuralism, and post

humanism. Contemporary feminist thought has frequently tended to do-away with all generalizations regarding sex and gender, closely linked with ant humanism, post humanism, queer theory and the work of Michel Foucault (Mahony and Zmroczek. (1997); Ritzer and Goodman, 2004).

Feminist theory is a way of looking at the social world through the lens of gender inequality. The focus is on male and female power. Feminist theory addresses the roles women have in society and the on-going battles women face. Most importantly, this way of thinking about the social world focuses on the rights of women, including: economic, sexual, reproductive, property, and voting rights. Riley (1999) lists three assumptions of feminist theory thus: gender is an organizing principle of all societies; gender is a social construction; gender theory necessarily involves the politics of inequality. Chafetz (1997) adds a fourth assumption: men and women think differently. Scientific assumptions, according to Chafetz (1978), are taken-for-granted truths about the world that do not need to be confirmed. Assumption serves as the building blocks of theories.

Feminist sociological theory is both an academic and political approach to the study of society. It is critical and didactic; it analyses and informs. It is inseparable from method. Feminist sociology emerged as a response to the missing gender in classical sociology, setting forth an agenda for academic and social change. Because feminism is interdisciplinary in nature, feminist sociological theory has pulled in observation and approaches from political science, literature, geography, anthropology, and probably most importantly, philosophy. It has been excluded and marginalized, and probably never really understood by most sociologists.

Feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender and roles and inequalities. Conflict theory posits that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Radical feminism, in particular, evaluates the role of the patriarchy in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, the male's perspective and contributions are considered more valuable, resulting in the silencing and marginalization of the woman. Feminism focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion of male supremacy.

The feminist perspective of gender stratification more recently takes into account Intersectionality, a feminist sociological theory was first highlighted by feminist-sociologist Kimberle Crenshaw. Intersectionality suggests that various biological, social and cultural categories, including gender, race, class and ethnicity, interact and contribute towards systematic social inequality. Therefore, various forms of oppression, such as racism or sexism, do not act independently of one another; instead these forms of oppression are interrelated, forming a system of oppression that reflects the "intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination. In light of this theory, the oppression and marginalization of women is thus shaped not only by gender but by other factors such as race and class.

Mary Ann Weathers demonstrates Intersectionality in the action in "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force." In this publication, Weathers reveals that in the twentieth century, working-class women of color embodied the notion of Intersectionality. The first and second waves of the feminist movement were primarily driven by white women, who did not adequately represent the feminist movement as a whole. It was –and continues to be – important to recognize that white women faced a different form of

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discrimination than working class women of color, which not only had to deal with sexism but also fought against racism and class oppression.

Types of Feminism

The understanding and analysis of oppression are central to feminist theories. Much of the work in the second wave of feminism focused on attempts to identify the nature of women's oppression. Theories may identify the lack of education, economic dependence, unequal political right, or the need for control over sexuality as related to the nature of oppression. Theories address the causes of oppression as the cultural order, labor and economic relations, biological differences, political institutions, and women's own self-understanding. Feminist theory requires us to critically analyse what is happening in our social world from multiple contexts and provide strategies for the amelioration of adverse conditions that affect the lives of women (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2002). Though one central feminist theory has not evolved, basic principles are commonly given when describing feminism, including such concepts as valuing women and their experience, identifying conditions that oppress women, changing society through advocacy, and recognizing that many factors, not just gender, impact a woman's action and view (McCormick & Bunging, 2002). The progress in feminism has been more focused on different types of feminism.

Feminism has evolved in different arenas rather than as one unified concept. The labels that define those arenas have varied. The most commonly used are eight separate feminist theories: black feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, materialist feminism, and social feminism (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997; Evans, 1995). Some theories can be grouped due to similarities, but distinctions offer a border critical lens of a myriad of political, social, economic, ethnic, and cultural contexts.

Black feminism focuses not only on women, but specifically on the struggles of black women (Kanneh, 1998). Collins (2000) saw the concern of black feminism as resisting oppression through empowerment, which entails understanding the intersection of racism and sexism. Black feminism thought insists "that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change" (Collins, 1991, p. 221). Black women face social practices within a historical context that represent a "unique Black women of domination characterized by intersecting oppression" (Collins, 2000, p. 23).

Individual transformation involves acknowledging the historical structure of institutions domination. The result of this understanding is a changed consciousness, which Collins (1991) believed is necessary for social change. Black feminist analysis insists on understanding what it means to be a black woman in a racist patriarchy (Johnson, 1983). Difference due to race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion are of distinct importance in many cultures and are "visible and palpable" (Collins, 1991, p. 23) for black woman. Knowledge and consciousness as to how race, class, and gender represent interlocking systems and a sociohistorical context for that analysis is seen as absent in other feminism (Collins, 1991).

Radical feminism attributes the oppression of women to men. Male power must be analysed and understood and not reduced to other explanations, such as labor relations. Culture feminism has been critiqued, because it provides moral grounding for men to make

claims that they cannot help being oppressive. The logic takes a further turn, in that it is then likewise natural for women to be submissive (Ferguson, 1996).

Lesbian feminism focuses on establishing lesbian as a distinct group. Much like radical feminism, lesbian feminism sees the male agenda as dominant in the culture at large (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997). Compulsory heterosexuality is challenged by lesbian feminism (Rich, 1986). It must be challenged, because compulsory heterosexuality is linked to the oppression of all women. Heterosexuality benefit men, in that it reflects male needs and fantasies, it controls women, and is linked to capitalism.

Liberal feminism focuses on right for women, as in access to education, the right to vote, and economic dependence, citizenship, and other issues of equality (Saulnier, 1996). Prescribed roles are challenged in that prescriptions lead to inequality. Many women benefit from the strategies of liberal feminism and its focus on the public lives of women; however, it has been critiqued for this very reason, in that it does not adequately address private issues, such a child care and poverty, to name a few (Saulnier).

Marxist feminism is focused on the emancipation of women via a concern for the production of labor in family life, as it is concerned with capitalism (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997). MacKinnon (1997) stated that, "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most take away" (p. 65). Marxist theory sees work as creating our social lives and creating what is of value: work creates who we are.

Material feminism relies on Marxist theory. The focus is on the material conditions of women's lives and their transformation. A central concern is for women to maintain a socialized and professional household. This could include adequate pay for professional labor related childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic labors that are often relegated to women (Donovan, 1993).

Socialist feminism is closely related to Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and material feminism (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997). Perhaps a distinguishing point is that socialism distinguishes between groups with regard to oppression and acknowledges that it takes different forms, depending on the context and particulars. Socialist feminism in the extreme demands the end of capitalism, property ownership, the emancipation of workers, and the ending of all forms of oppression (Evans, 1995).

Feminists seem to have a love or hate relationship with postmodernism. Postmodern feminism is perhaps the most difficult to characterize or define, because it is a story that is incomplete. Because postmodernism claims the end of grand narratives and totalizing truths, it is seen as problematic in that it appears blind to the effects of gender in relationship to oppression and the totalizing of women (Evans, 1995). At the same time, the rejection of grand narratives opens space for women to redefine "woman."

Feminist Theorists

Most importantly, feminism is a consciousness and a way of life. To put it simply, it is the struggle to challenge or transform patriarchies that shrink women's human capabilities and potential. Like sociology, feminism also seeks to explain society and suggest solutions. Sociology puts common sense and popular belief about the social world to the test. It is a systematic study of society that values critical thinking and questions that place of power and inequality in the social experience.

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The 18th and 19th century in Europe was a time of great social change on a scale never before witnessed. The industrial Revolution led to the transformation of the society from agrarian and rural to industrial and urban based. The idea that sociology could provide theories of the past, present and future, that it could explain the new social relations became accepted. Embedded in modernist ideas of modernity sociology went in different directions, set by three major sociologists or forerunners Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Gender did not take its rightful and deserved place within sociological thought until the 1970s. Prior to this, mainstream sociology did not see merit of organizing gender divisions. Sociologists studied society as if it was constituted by men alone. Women were not only invisible but the gendered character of social life in general was not considered. Feminism set out to change this impression. The concept of gender was adopted at this juncture to point out that masculinity and femininity are in fact social constructions. The feminist challenge to male stream sociology is to rethink the discipline as a whole; its content and methodology. Sociology has always been dominated by the work of able-bodied white males from the middle class. When the feminist discourse began to change this male stream view, the women who did so were also western, white women from the middle class.

All sociologists agree that societies are organized into some social order and that all societies change or are dynamic and not static. But feminists most naturally gravitate towards conflict theories of order and change rather than those of consensus. Therefore feminists have built a critique of the social determinism inherent in, for instance, the theories of structure functionalism, whether on the division of labour or on the family.

Feminists have argued that the ontological assumption made by the determinists was based on the idea of a biological and natural division of labour between men and women, a sexual division of labour (men as bread earners and women as home makers). Feminists argue that social order is not maintained through consensus or through a natural ordering of nature, but through an exercise of power and control upon women's lives and opportunities. Further, feminists critique mainstream sociology for paying little attention to the role of human agency in social transformation. In a sense that, feminists ontologies towards a dynamic view of the social world.

Dorothy E. Smith was interested in the impact that the feminist movement could have on the field of sociology. It gave women's interest a space in an atmosphere in which the traditionally authoritative interests in sociology were those put together by men. The problem was two-fold. The way sociology was thought was itself a problem. Its theories, methodologies and paradigms were all built into an all-male universe and even the women in the field were working with this very sociology. The second problem was that men and women lived in what seemed like two separate worlds, and the knowledge and experience of each group were not accorded the same importance. It is the superiority of male experience that imposes the concepts and terms through which women are then forced to understand their experience, leading to women's alienation from their experience. As long as these conditions persist, women will remain in oppressive situations. This change can be brought about only by introducing new ways of understanding our experience.

Feminism and Classical Sociology

Society was basically an all-male world and this male stream society was never questioned by sociologists. It was only in the 1970's that the gendered character of society was acknowledged by sociologists. Masculinity and femininity was in fact, a social construction drawing attention to the hierarchy that exists between men and women in society. The changes that took place in the 19th century, when sociology was born, probably had a profound impact

on family life and relations between men and women. While gender was not a topic of discussion for the first sociologists, their assumptions about gender are worth exploring because that is what later spurred the feminist analysis of sociology.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx did not have much to say regarding gender and yet, his ideas have been popular among feminist thinkers who use his analysis to further their cause. Marx seemed to have believed that while the man was working at the factory, it was a woman's work to feed, clothe and look after any other of his needs. Marx believed that his solution for society in general would also solve the problem of women's inequality. For men and women to be equal, he said, private property would need to be abolished in favour of a socialist society with its basis in equality. In other words, class equality would come first, followed by equality between men and women.

Friedrich Engels believed that at some point in the past, men and women were different but equal, even though the division of labor that made men the earning members and women the home-makers had always existed. To Engels, descent in human societies was traced through the female line which he called "mother right". This meant that fathers had no right over their children. Engels, though he raised some questions regarding gender, still assumed that the gender differences were natural and based in biology.

Emile Durkheim

French sociologist, Emile Durkheim was a structural-functionalist. He saw human society as a complex system in which numerous functioning parts work together to ensure society's stability. Durkheim believed that the roles of men and women became more and more specialized and unequal. He felt women a better fit in domestic and aesthetic roles. Men, on the other hand, had better developed mental capacities and could differentiate between the natural and the moral which is why they were a better fit for social life. Durkheim untimely fell prey to the biological argument that women and men are inherently different in terms of biology and this difference extends to social world. Durkheim's study on suicide may have come a bit closer to admitting that women were subordinated in society. His research showed that married women were more likely to commit suicide than both, married men or single women.

Max Weber

Max Weber came up with the concept of patriarchy which he says is the oldest, socially legitimate form of authority. In pre-capitalist societies generally power is vested in the oldest male member, giving him authority over all other family members both male and female as well as servants, slaves and other dependents. Weber did not see the relationship between mother and child as worthy of sociological study. Weber did not have much to say about male-female relationships. He understood them as natural and biological and therefore unworthy of sociological study. His model of power and authority is understood as male models.

Classical sociology is generally criticized for the fact that women have been excluded from its social analysis. The analyses are largely of an all-male world, basically the public sphere, which was considered the domain of man. Marx, Weber and Durkheim did not consider the private sphere worth analysing. They studied political economy, religion etc. but did not consider the domain of family or community within which women performed her activities

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worthy of study. Classical sociologists considered the differences between women and men to be based in biology and hence believed them to be natural.

Overview of Feminist Critique

Feminist sociologists are critical of classical sociologists because of the following issues raised and briefly discussed below.

A. Women are ignored. One general line of criticism of feminists is that women are absent from the social analyses and social world of classical sociology. While some women were involved in more public activities, there were movements to restrict the participation of women in public life – for example, factory legislation and the family wage.

B. Definitions of Sociology and the Social World. Many of the excluded portion of the social world are those that were typically occupied by women and children, with classical writers showing little interest in or analysis of institutions such as the household, family, and community where women's experience have often been cantered. The emphasis on labour and the commodity for Marx, and the division of labour for Marx and Durkheim, provide an example of this. Family, household, reproduction, the supply of labour, and the survival of labourers outside the formal labour market are generally taken for granted by Marx. In essence, then, Marx's social world is the commodity, commodity exchange, the labour market, and accumulation. Durkheim, concentrating on the division of labour, and its implications for social development and social solidarity, develops a similar approach.

C. Biology. Classical sociologists appear to have thought that there were natural differences between men and women. While all people may have been regarded as rational human being, with no difference between men and women, most of the classical sociologists thought of men and women as being somewhat different in their natures.

D. Inequalities. Classical sociologists generally focused on differences and inequality, Marx was most explicit in this, but Durkheim and Weber also developed various ways of examining difference and inequality. Issues such as the division of labour, exploitation, and power, domination, and authority emphasize difference and inequality. Yet male/female inequalities, or racial and ethnic inequalities, form little part of classical sociology. Feminists have identified patriarchy as a social system of inequality, but classical sociology had only limited analysis of this. Marx and Engels did not have a model of male/female inequality, but it derives from property and economic considerations. Weber analysed patriarchy, but male/female inequalities were not his primary concern in such analysis.

Conclusion

The emergence of the women's movement in the 1960s presents two challenges to sociology. The more obvious task is the analysis of a social movement: How did private problems get transformed into a collective protest at that particular historical moment? This article, however, addressed itself to the contribution of a social movement to the sociology of sociology. Feminist sociologists, in representing a disadvantaged group, claim to look at society from a new angle of vision.

Feminist criticism of mainstream sociology revealed not only vast lacunae in our knowledge but flawed interpretations of social phenomena. Feminist theoreticians have extended their criticism to some epistemological positions of contemporary American sociology. The purpose of this article is two-fold. It illustrates some contributions to sociology

by feminist scholars (including a few precursors). Secondly, some changing trends in feminist orientations are discerned and analysed from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge.

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