

Dorothy Smith (b. 1926)

Native of Great Britain, earned bachelor's degree from U of London

Ph.D. from UC-Berkeley (1963)

Has taught in U.S., England and Canada

Credits personal experiences—such as moving between academic world and being a single parent—for influencing her sociological theorizing

Key books:

The Everyday World as Problematic (1987)

The Conceptual Practice of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge (1990)

Texts, Facts and Femininity (1990)

Key concept:

Bifurcation: “distinction between the world as we experience it and the world as we come to know it through the conceptual frameworks that science invents.”

Feminist Sociology

Feminist sociology is “woman centered” in three ways (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 2000):

1. Its major object is the situations and experience of women
2. It seeks to see the world from the standpoint of women
3. It is critical and activist on behalf of women

However, the varieties of feminist theory vary in their approaches to gender. Types of feminism include:

Liberal feminism focuses on the sexist division of labor and sexism, an ideology that legitimates gender inequality by rooting gender differences in biology and socializes women into submissive gender roles.

Marxist feminism argues that gender inequality is a result of capitalism.

Radical feminism focuses on the domination and submission that are integral to all institutions in patriarchal societies.

Smith's Critique of Sociology

“Sociology, then, I conceive as much more than a gloss on the enterprise [of governing society] that justifies and rationalizes it, and at the same time as much less than ‘science.’ The governing of our kind of society is done in abstract concepts and symbols, and sociology helps create them by transposing the actualities of people’s lives and experience into the conceptual currency with which they can be governed.” (p. 372)

Sociology looks at the world “top-down,” focusing on issues because they are relevant for the governing of society, not because they are “significant first in the experience of those who live them.” This is called “objectivity.”

Sociological training produces a bifurcation of consciousness—two ways of knowing—“one located in the body and in the space it occupies and moves in, the other passing beyond it.” In other words, one is local and particular; the other is conceptual.

Bifurcation is organized by gender. Women’s experience is considered local and particular. Women’s housework allows men to escape from the local and particular, and her clerical work mediates between conceptual work and “the actual concrete forms in which it is and must be realized.”

Female sociologists experience this bifurcation in their lives: “Thus, the relation between ourselves as practicing sociologists and ourselves as working women is always there for us as a practical matter, an ordinary, unremarked, yet pervasive aspect of our experience of the world. The bifurcation of consciousness becomes for us a daily chasm to be crossed, on the one side of which is this special conceptual activity of thought, research, teaching, and administration, and on the other the world of localized activities oriented toward particular others, keeping things clean, managing somehow the house and household and the children—a world in which the particularities of persons in their full organic immediacy (feeding, cleaning up the vomit, changing the diapers) are inescapable.” (p. 375)

“Women’s standpoint, as I am analyzing it here, discredits sociology’s claim to constitute objective knowledge independent of the sociologist’s situation.... The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within.”