

Epilogue

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It is impossible to write a genuine concluding chapter to a handbook comprising 27 chapters that, collectively, examine nearly every social process, structure, and institution of interest to sociologists, through a feminist lens that focuses on the gendered nature of all aspects of social life. Instead, this brief epilogue constitutes my reflections about the state of gender sociology at century's end after 30 years of concentrated scholarship on the topic.

The 30-year-old history of vigorous feminist scholarship overlaps entirely the period of my postdoctoral professional life. I emerged from graduate school in 1968, as a specialist in sociological theory, social stratification, and political sociology, just as feminism awoke from an almost 40-year slumber in the "doldrums" (Rupp & Taylor, 1987). The Women's Movement immediately and permanently altered my career direction, eventually converting my attention specifically to gender theory, gender stratification, and the examination of women's sociopolitical movements. In this conversion process I was very typical of my cohort of female sociologists. Later cohorts could begin to focus on gender during their graduate (even undergraduate) education, but for those of us educated before the early 1970s, our first tasks were to remove our own androcentric blinders, to legitimate this new sociological specialty to our still overwhelmingly male colleagues, and to try to develop new lenses through which to examine social life as a thoroughly gendered phenomenon. The chapter authors in this book represent both the "pioneer" cohort which came of professional age before, or just about the same time as, the flowering of second wave feminism, and younger cohorts who have entered gender sociology after it was established as a (quasi-) legitimate field of inquiry. Indeed, several of the chapters are

coauthored by members of different professional cohorts, and some authors are still graduate students, which augers well for the future of feminist scholarship in sociology.

During the last 30 years, sociology as a general discipline has changed remarkably in ways that have influenced and been influenced by feminist/gender sociology. Trained in the heyday of Parsonian hegemony, many of the pioneer cohort began from a sex roles perspective, albeit one revised in ideological flavor from an emphasis on the “functional utility”—even “necessity”—of existing gender arrangements, to a thorough critique of the system. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical sociology students (and some faculty) were resurrecting a Marxist analysis of capitalism, a development paralleled by the development of a Marxist–feminist perspective among some gender sociologists (as discussed in Chapter 1). The 1970s also witnessed a resurgence of interest in the broader sociological community, one paralleled by other branches of feminist scholarship, in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, and in the use of qualitative research methods. This, and related theoretical developments in the United States and Europe, developed into an increasing attack on “positivism” by many sociologists, an attack whose feminist variant is represented most clearly by standpoint epistemology (cf. Chapter 2). More recently still, general sociological interest in cultural studies and knowledge production has increased, again paralleled by feminist versions (cf. Chapter 10). The past three decades have also witnessed the burgeoning of new substantive specialty areas, in many of which feminist sociologists have played crucial developmental roles (e.g., the Sociologies of Emotion and of Childhood, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender). Alongside of these changes, “traditional” theories, topics, and quantitative methodologies continued to flourish in our discipline and among yet other groups of feminist sociologists. It has been, and still is the case that “mainstream” (i.e., male) versions of these various theoretical, topical, and epistemological developments too often ignore their feminist variants (Alway, 1995; Seidman, 1994, p. 304; Stacey & Thorne, 1985; Ward & Grant, 1991), a reality that is beginning to change in recent years, however (Chafetz, 1997, pp. 98–99).

At century’s end, with women constituting nearly half of all professional sociologists, and the Sex and Gender Section of the American Sociological Association constituting the single largest specialty section, one cannot understand the state of our discipline without understanding gender sociology, just as one cannot understand the evolution of our specialty without understanding that of our discipline. The days when half of all humans—females—were all but invisible to most sociologists are now gone, but the reverberations of their inclusion are still being assimilated into the discipline’s many and varied subspecialties and perspectives. Considerable numbers of feminist sociologists now specialize in virtually every subfield of sociology, challenging traditional theories, research traditions, and interpretations as they create new ones. This handbook demonstrates that fact with regard to a wide array of different topics, although no one volume, including this rather lengthy one, can include all of the myriad ways in which feminist scholarship has contributed to a more robust understanding of social life. Indeed, as I write this, I can easily think of several chapter topics that could (some may say should) have been included. Textbooks for a wide variety of different sociology courses are beginning to reflect gender issues and feminist scholarship. However, they vary widely in the extent to which they do so and, with some exceptions (e.g., many texts in the area of the Sociology of the Family), most still have a long way to go in incorporating both gender as a fundamental component in their analyses (as opposed to the now frequent practice of adding sex as a “control variable”) and specifically feminist approaches to understanding

the processes, structures, and institutions on which they focus. In short, the ghettoization within sociology of feminist scholarship and the topic of gender is breaking down, but only slowly. Hopefully, this volume can serve to expedite that process.

I see this volume as a celebration of a third of a century of energetic, insightful, and outstanding scholarship by an ever-expanding community of sociologists who share a primary focus on gender and a commitment to feminist values. It is also a celebration of the healthy diversity of methodological, theoretical, and substantive differences among us that contribute to making our field an exciting intellectual enterprise. I have learned an enormous amount from reading these chapters as I edited them. Hopefully, other gender scholars will also broaden their understanding, and their appreciation for the breadth of our field and for the myriad of different ways by which feminist sociologists contribute to our collective enterprise.

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