CHANGING WOMEN, UNCHANGED MEN?
Sociological perspectives on gender in a post-industrial society

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# Contents

Series editor's preface  \( \text{vii} \)
Preface and acknowledgements  \( \text{ix} \)

**Part one  INTRODUCTORY ISSUES**  \( \text{1} \)
1 Introduction  \( \text{3} \)
2 Theoretical dilemmas  \( \text{9} \)

**Part two  SOCIALIZATION in a POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY**  \( \text{21} \)
3 Gender and the post-industrial child  \( \text{23} \)
4 Gender and the post-industrial adolescent  \( \text{32} \)
5 Gender and young adulthood  \( \text{45} \)

**Part three  ADULTHOOD: the RECEIVED WISDOM QUERIED**  \( \text{57} \)
6 Stigma, deviance, bodies and identity  \( \text{61} \)
7 Consumption, locality and identity  \( \text{72} \)
8 Work and identity: the indignities of labour  \( \text{84} \)
9 Homelife and identity: domestic bliss?  \( \text{94} \)
10 Conclusions: the verdict  \( \text{110} \)

References  \( \text{112} \)
Index  \( \text{123} \)
In response to perceived major transformations, social theorists have offered forceful, appealing, but contrasting accounts of the predicament of contemporary western societies and the implications for social life and personal well-being. The speculative and general theses proposed by social theorists must be subjected to evaluation in the light of the best available evidence if they are to serve as guides to understanding and modifying social arrangements. One purpose of sociology, among other social sciences, is to marshal the information necessary to estimate the extent and direction of social change. This series is designed to make such information, and debates about social change, accessible.

The focus of the series is the critical appraisal of general, substantive theories through examination of their applicability to different institutional areas of contemporary societies. Each book introduces key current debates and surveys of existing sociological argument and research about institutional complexes in advanced societies. The integrating theme of the series is the evaluation of the extent of social change. Each author offers explicit and extended evaluation of the pace and direction of social change in a chosen area.

Sara Delamont examines changing gender relations. Her book sticks steadfastly to its primary objective, to try to judge whether, over the last century, women’s attitudes, circumstances and behaviours have changed more than those of men. This provides a structure which nicely allows for detailed exposition of studies about gender differences and for a cumulative argument about the significance of changing social institutions. The book explores topics of great contemporary relevance. It expresses strong opinions, some of which are contentious and which will no doubt be considered controversial. This book will be useful not only as a student text but also, because of its strong and distinctive position, as a stimulus to reflection and debate.

Alan Warde
In 1893, George Gissing published *The Odd Women*, a novel about the roles of women and men as Britain faced the end of the nineteenth century. As Margaret Walters (1980: 4) points out, 'a surprising number of issues raised in *The Odd Women* – the relationship between working-class and middle-class feminism, the difficulty of living out theory, the way sexual feeling may undermine deeply held convictions – are as urgent today'. The novel has been chosen as the leitmotif of this book because, in it, 'the men are fearful and old-fashioned; hope lies in the women, who are prepared to confront anarchy and change' (ibid.).

The quotes at the heads of the chapters all come from *The Odd Women*. In the analysis of some topics, the question 'Have women changed while men have not?' is addressed against the century that has elapsed since Gissing wrote that novel. Topics such as life expectancy and the birth rate need to be seen over a long period. However, most of the topics analysed are considered over a 50-year time-scale, that is, since the end of the Second World War in 1945. That is the period for which we have empirical sociological research on Britain, and it is long enough for changes in social structure and the experience of everyday life to manifest themselves.

Good, solid empirical sociology is at the heart of the book, but the text is enlivened with two non-sociological types of material: letters to the problem pages of popular magazines and fictional episodes. Neither of these types of text should be seen as 'the same' as the social science data. Popular magazines carry readers' problems to make an attractive 'read' for their audience, and the problems cannot be seen as 'true' in the same ways social science data are 'true'. However, there is a long history (since the 1920s at least) of their use by social scientists. We must treat them as social products, carefully chosen by the magazines to interest their readers, but they do also dramatize topics that may not surface in orthodox research.

Many of the chapters contain short fictional episodes: one of the freedoms of scholarly work in the social sciences is the tolerance for new forms of text (Wolf 1992; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Where I have used fictional characters, they are closely based on the findings of sociology: researchers have reported such events, opinions and situations from their investigations.
I have ‘fictionalized’ them here to make the book more fun to read, to encourage the reader to identify with the core issues and to demonstrate how apparently abstract ideas (such as ‘identity’ or ‘culture’) are experienced in everyday life by non-sociologists. To carry through these three aims, I have invented a set of people living in and around a university in a city in the north-east of England, big enough and multicultural enough to embody the sociological themes of the book. To demonstrate the continuing relevance of the questions about sex, gender, sexuality and class raised by Gissing in *The Odd Women*, I have set the fictional episodes in the city and university of Kingsport. Kingsport is the setting for a novel published in 1936 – Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* – which deals with the same themes as Gissing, but about 40 years later in the depression of the inter-war (1929–39) period.

The worlds of Gissing and Holtby span the past, against which the central question of the book, ‘Have women changed while men have stayed the same?’, has to be judged.

### The structure of the book

There are two introductory chapters, the first of which sets out the central question, ‘How do we know if women have changed and men have not?’ The second explores the theoretical context of the book. Readers who dislike ‘theory’ can read it last of all, or skip it altogether, without losing the thread of the rest of the book. From Chapter 3 onwards, the structure of this book is biographical, the same basic organizational principle used for *The Sociology of Women* (Delamont 1980). There are three chapters on growing up in the UK, from childhood to adolescence and into young adulthood (where the impact of class on gender is sharpest), before addressing the central topics in adulthood. The adulthood section of the volume contains four empirical chapters and the conclusions. The four empirical chapters deal with ‘Stigma, deviance, bodies and identity’, ‘Consumption, locality and identity’, ‘Work and identity’ and ‘Homelife and identity’.

### The feminist perspective of the book

For the purposes of this book, I use a feminist perspective that draws mainly on liberal and radical feminism rather than Marxist or socialist feminism (for good definitions of those schools of feminism, see Humm 1992). I focus on imbalances between males and females in Britain (a classic liberal feminist tactic) and critique the knowledge base of research on gender (a classic radical feminist tactic). I share a definition of feminism with Donna Haraway (1989: 290): ‘Feminist theory and practice . . . seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby “men” and “women” are socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism’.
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Part one
INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

Part one contains two introductory chapters. The first sets out the central question, ‘Have women changed while men have not?’ The second introduces key theoretical issues about contemporary sociological approaches to the study of gender.
1 Introduction

With a fluttering heart Virginia made what haste she could homewards. The interview had filled her with a turmoil of strange new thoughts. It was the first time in her life that she had spoken with a woman daring enough to think and act for herself.

(Gissing 1893/1980: 24)

Virginia is a central character in The Odd Women. She is living through the changes in sex roles that convulsed Britain in the 1880s and 1890s. In the extract she is confused because she has met a pair of feminists, the heroines of the novel, who are training women to earn their own living and exist without male breadwinners. The heady mix of economic independence and revolutionary ideas about sex roles is the central focus of the novel. Contemporary thinking on women’s economic roles, ideas about sex roles and ‘fluttering hearts’ is the subject of this book.

What was life like for males and females in the 1890s, in the early 1950s, and has it changed in the new century? Are females today more changed from their great-grandmothers and their great-great-grandmothers than males are from their great-grandfathers and their great-great-grandfathers? This is the question that is revisited in each chapter of the book.

This introductory chapter deals with three topics:
1 The received wisdom that women have changed and men have not.
2 The place of men and women in modernity and the impact of postmodernity.
3 The structure of the book.

It sets up the central intellectual issue addressed, explains the concepts of gender, modernity and postmodernity, and outlines the purpose and structure of the book. The central issue explored throughout the book is, ‘Have women changed while men have failed to change?’

The central issue

A consistent motif in much of the social science of the past 15 years is that women’s expectations and behaviours have changed while those of men have
4 Introductory issues

Researchers have reported that female respondents to surveys and interview questions have expressed views that are strikingly unlike those of girls and women in earlier generations, and that their behaviour is also different from that of their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. These researchers have argued that the girls and women they have studied have adapted to changing economic conditions, such as the decline of traditional heavy industries like mining and steelmaking, and to ideas such as individualism and self-determination better than the boys and men they live and work with. They claim that women were responding to, and coping with, the social changes in their neighbourhoods and regions ‘better’ than men were.

Such claims were advanced in, for example, Working Class without Work (Weis 1989), Making the Difference (Connell et al. 1982), the Women Risk and Aids Project (WRAP) and the Men Risk and Aids Project (MRAP)(Holland et al. 1991, 1993). Weis studied adolescents in an American city where the steelworks had closed, destroying the main source of male employment after a century of prosperity. She argued that the adolescent girls had recognized the end of the old order and were planning for a post-industrial way of life, while the adolescent boys had not. They still wanted traditional manual jobs for themselves with wives who did not work outside the home and showed deference to the male wage earner.

Connell and his team reported similar divergences among Australian adolescents, especially in working-class families, where the disappearance of traditional male manual work was poorly understood by parents or adolescent boys. Working-class girls and the middle classes were abandoning the ideal of a traditional division of labour in favour of more flexible working and domestic arrangements. In the UK, Holland and her collaborators reported young women struggling to escape from the sexual double standard in the face of young men enforcing and reinforcing it.

These three projects, all focusing on young men and women, together with others discussed later in this book, meant that by the late 1980s there was some consensus that a gap was growing between the sexes regarding expectations about adult sex roles in employment and at home. Young men were, just like their counterparts in the 1880s, fearful of the future, whereas women looked forward to greater change. Secondary sources, such as my own Sex Roles and the School (Delamont 1990), began to generalize on the basis of such studies. Once proposed by social scientists using research on young, child-free women, the idea of women changing and men remaining the same quickly spread far beyond its evidential base and became a generalization, a cliché and a myth. The myth was then promulgated in popular books (Harman 1993; Coward 1999) and spread into journalism.

Once the idea of one sex changing while the other did not was around, a backlash began. Some social scientists and some popular commentators argued that the evidential base was not there: that the social scientists had not shown that women had changed. The work of Catherine Hakim (1995, 1996) is a typical example of such an argument. Other writers, especially the exponents of the ‘new’ evolutionary psychology, claimed that men cannot change because of their biological and evolutionary drives to compete, fight and have sex with as many partners as possible to spread their genes at the
expense of those of other men (Ridley 1993). These writers argue either that women have not and cannot change because of their biology, or that women must not be allowed to change because the social damage caused by the unnecessary, displaced men will destroy the social system (Dench 1994, 1996; Fukuyama 1999). These latter groups of commentators blame feminism for either making false claims that women have changed when the vast majority have not, or for encouraging women to change and abandon old-fashioned men. Leading biologists reject evolutionary psychology (see Rose 1998; Rose and Rose 2000) and it does not feature in the argument of this book.

So, while the 1980s saw a number of studies in several different formerly industrialized, capitalist countries, suggesting that as traditional heavy industry declined the sexes responded in different ways to that de-industrialization, in the 1990s a debate took place in the quality newspapers and on radio and television about sex roles that moved far beyond any evidence available. The need for carefully conducted research was acute. However, three factors impeded the progress of carefully conducted research in general and that on sex roles in particular. First, in Britain and America, government funds for social research were reduced by right-wing regimes and there was political inference with the research agenda. (The most famous example in Britain was Mrs. Thatcher vetoing a survey on sexual behaviour that was needed to inform health education to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.) Second, the very processes of de-industrialization were breaking down the basic categories formerly used by researchers. For example, as co-habitation becomes more and more common, the simple distinctions between ‘single, married, divorced, widowed’ are simply unusable in research. Third, trends in sociology were moving away from careful empirical research on social structures and institutions towards studies of the media and cultural studies, fuelled by a theoretical shift to ‘postmodernism’.

The popular media attention to the claim that women had changed and men had not was relevant to feminist social scientists because it drew on their research and it encouraged debate about the feminist ‘political’ agenda. For example, how does a society prevent rape or reduce the percentage of old women living in poverty? However, the same mass media in the past 20 years has also claimed that ‘feminism is dead’ and that the new evolutionary psychology proves that sex differences are biological and so men ‘cannot’ do the ironing or change a baby’s nappies. At exactly the point where feminist social scientists needed both to defend their research base and marshal their arguments about the ‘problem of men’, their own theoretical position was assailed by a new intellectual fashion, postmodernism, which threatened the very existence of a feminist social science. The purpose of this book is to explore the contested terrain on which these disputes are taking place. This chapter explores the proposition that women have changed and men have not and the two main criticisms of that proposition. The impact of postmodernism on feminist sociology is explored in Chapter 2.

Harriet Harman has been a Labour MP since 1983, and was briefly a minister in the 1997–2001 Blair administration. In 1993, while in Opposition, she published a popular book called The Century Gap, subtitled ‘20th Century Man. 21st Century Woman: How both Sexes can Bridge the Century Gap’.
6 Introductory issues

Harman argued that ‘women have left the twentieth century behind’ and ‘Twenty-first century women have arrived, a century ahead of time’ (p. 1). In contrast, men were still ‘a century behind’ (p. 3) – that is, trying to live in the same ways as their ancestors of the industrial era in the post-industrial world. Harman is a politician, not a sociologist. Her hypothesis needs to be tested using the research evidence. At the same time, Harman’s hypothesis also has to be tested against the claims of the ‘biological’ determinists (Rose and Rose 2000). This would be hard to do even in an era when there was consensus about what good ‘malestream’ research looked like and what good feminist research looked like. However, in the twenty-first century, there is no longer any consensus about what good research looks like. There is, therefore, no consensus about what counts as research evidence to test Harman’s hypothesis, or to challenge the position of Fukuyama (1999) and Dench (1996), which is similar to Harman’s about women but demands that women must change back to where men are, or indeed about whether there can be any future for feminist research at all.

The year 2000 is a hard time to write a feminist critique of the literature on women and men because feminism is under attack, both as a political movement and as a variety of theory in social science. Apart from the routine hostility and abuse that feminism has always attracted because it challenges the male-dominated, patriarchal status quo, there are serious claims that feminism is dead. Many pundits say feminism is dead because modern Britain has gender equality. Others argue feminism is outmoded because young women are not interested in feminism, seeing it as a sad ideology espoused by their mothers, lesbians and ugly women in dungarees who cannot attract men (Skeggs 1997; Pilcher 1998).

Scholars who believe feminist social science is dead argue on more academic grounds. The most successful and high-profile of these scholars argue that feminist social science is dead because of postmodernism. Among scholars who argue for feminist analyses believing they are not outmoded (e.g. Oakley 1998, 2000), there are many disputes about what topics to study, what methods to use, how to analyse the data and which theoretical schools within feminism (Humm 1992) to acclaim. This book does not attempt to adjudicate between these feuding sisterhoods. It is important to recognize that there are differences between the types of research that feminists do and the uses to which they may be put (Rosenal 1995). There are also arguments as to whether 30 years of feminist sociology have actually made any difference to the mainstream of the discipline (Delamont, forthcoming). These are important, but this book focuses on a practical question about the everyday lives of women and men.

The ‘women have changed, men have not’ claim

The scholars who first proposed that women had changed their ideas about how men and women should organize work and the division of labour in the home because of the disappearance of the old heavy industries, while men had not, mainly drew on data gathered from young people. Weis (1989)
conducted a study of adolescents in Rochester, a city in North America, where the steel-based industries had collapsed and the highly paid, safe jobs for men bashing metal had vanished. She found that the young women had ‘written-off’ Rochester and traditional marriage, in which a man is the breadwinner, and planned to go to college, get qualifications for new jobs and follow employment to other cities. The young men, in contrast, yearned for the good old days to return, in which they could work in the steel industry and support full-time housewives who would greet them with home-made food when they came off their shifts. In Australia, Connell and his co-workers (1982) argued something similar, reporting that these tensions were more acute in some ethnic groups than others, and more problematic for working-class Australians than for the professional classes. Around the same time, a study of British couples who had just got married (Mansfield and Collard 1988) found that, when their behaviour was investigated, their division of labour was very traditional. Women cooked, men did the DIY and both sexes felt this was ‘natural’. However, the women wanted a different kind of emotional relationship from the marriage than the men and were unhappy because it had not materialized (this study is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 9).

A few studies of people under 30 in the 1980s are not sufficient to make claims about all ages, classes and countries. However, statistical evidence, such as the increased proportion of women petitioning for divorce, allowed Harman (1993) to set out her thesis in The Century Gap, outlined earlier in the chapter. Harman believes women have already entered the twenty-first century, in which both sexes are in parent-friendly paid employment and both take equal parts in the physical and emotional work of raising children and running a home. For this to be achieved, Harman argues, men have to change:

> clearly things cannot go on as they are. It is neither possible nor desirable to turn the clock back. The emancipation of women cannot be reversed; and even if it was [sic], the result would be total economic collapse.

(Harman 1993: 8)

Harman’s is a popular book, like Dench’s (1994, 1996) twice published volume. Dench argues that it is desirable, possible and even essential for social order that Britain returns to the traditional division of labour in the home and the workplace. Both have in common a belief that there is a century gap. In the rest of this book, that belief will be tested, using evidence, especially recent sociology and official statistics as published in Social Trends (1989, 1999). Throughout the book, differences other than sex are also stressed. Class, region and ethnicity are important divisions in the UK, and many generalizations about ‘women’ or ‘men’ have to be qualified. Women with degrees in Essex are not living in ‘the same’ Britain as unskilled catholic women in Northern Ireland, unskilled Sikh women in Cardiff or unskilled Muslim women in Bradford. These differences are as important as any between that graduate in Essex and a male graduate in Wrexham, Inverness or Carlisle. Class divisions are deep and wide in Britain, and differences based on region, religion and ethnicity also matter.
8 Introductory issues

There has been such an explosion of research on men and women in the past 20 years that a small book could easily be swamped. Every sentence could have a dozen references and lead to half a dozen tables. To make this book readable, I have illustrated the main points with exemplary studies and left out many other good, interesting, relevant and thought-provoking investigations. Each chapter gives particular prominence to a project, which, for me, captures the central issue of that chapter: studies which I would have been proud to have done myself, which are landmarks. The ‘further reading’ at the end of each chapter provides a reference on each topic which has an excellent bibliography. Please use that reference to go into the literature that interests you. With these points in mind, let me end this chapter with a comment on gender equality from Beck (1994: 27), which addresses both our central themes: ‘A society in which men and women were really equal . . . would without doubt be a new modernity’.

Verdict

The claim that women have changed while men have not is worth investigating, although the intellectual climate is not an ideal one for testing such a claim.

Further reading

The first two books set out the claim. The third is a serious work of sociology, offering an alternative view from mine.