Concepts in the Social Sciences

Feminism

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Introduction:
Feminism or Feminisms?

The title of this book should, perhaps, more properly have been Feminisms, because, as soon as you attempt to analyse all that has been spoken and written in the name of feminism, it becomes clear that this is not one unitary concept, but instead a diverse and multifaceted grouping of ideas, and indeed actions. Although many attempts have been made to answer the question ‘What is feminism?’ with a set of core propositions and beliefs central to all feminist theories, the task is made extremely difficult because many of the different strands of feminism seem to be not only divergent but sometimes forcefully opposed. So, perhaps we should start from the assumption that we cannot define what ‘feminism’ is, but only try to pick out common characteristics of all the many different ‘feminisms’. Any attempt to provide a baseline definition of a common basis of all feminisms may start with the assertion that feminisms concern themselves with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, one could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women. Beyond these general assertions, however, it is difficult to come up with any other ‘common ground’ between the different strands of feminism, and as Delmar (1986) argues, one cannot assume that agreement or feminist unity underlies the extreme fragmentation of contemporary feminism. Indeed, such an assumption of underlying unity or coherence of different feminisms may have the unlooked-for effect
of marginalizing different groups of women whose concerns fall outside this definition of feminist unity.

If it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to define feminism in terms of a set of core concepts then can feminism be defined better or further in terms of its historical origins and development? The term feminism is a relatively modern one – there are debates over when and where it was first used, but the term ‘feminist’ seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from ‘feminization’ of their bodies (Fraisse 1995). The term was then picked up by Alexandre Dumas fils, a French writer, republican and antifeminist, who used it in a pamphlet published in 1872 entitled l’homme-femme, on the subject of adultery, to describe women behaving in a supposedly masculine way. Thus, as Fraisse (1995: 316) points out, although in medical terminology feminism was used to signify a feminization of men, in political terms it was first used to describe a virilization of women. This type of gender confusion was something that was clearly feared in the nineteenth century, and it can be argued that it is still present in a modified form in today’s societies where feminists are sometimes perceived as challenging natural differences between men and women. It is interesting to note, though, that feminist was not at first an adjective used by women to describe themselves or their actions, and one can certainly say that there was what we today would call ‘feminist’ thought and activity long before the term itself was adopted. In the 1840s the women’s rights movement had started to emerge in the United States with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the resulting Declaration of Sentiments, which claimed for women the principles of liberty and equality expounded in the American Declaration of Independence. This was followed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s founding of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In Britain, too, the 1840s onwards saw the emergence of women’s suffrage movements. But even before the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in women’s social condition and campaigning to change it. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had published A Vindication of the Rights of Women and at the same time in France women such as Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt were fighting for the extension of the rights promised by the French Revolution to women. So, although we can...
trace the development of women’s rights movements from the mid-nineteenth century, this was not the starting point for women’s concern about their social and political condition.

Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position. Even after the word feminism was coined, it was still not adopted as a term of identification by many of those who campaigned for women’s rights. Even many of the women’s rights organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not call themselves feminist: the term feminism had a restricted use in relation to specific concerns and specific groups (Delmar 1986). It is only more recently that the label feminist has been applied to all women’s rights groups indiscriminately, and this non-coincidence between these groups’ self-identification and subsequent labelling as feminist clearly relates to the problem of what criteria are to be used in deciding whether a person, group or action is ‘feminist’. Should all theories, actions and campaigns that improve women’s social position, whether intentionally or not, be classified as feminist? Or must there be a conscious intent to undertake a ‘feminist’ activity? If the first position is adopted, then it can be argued that the meaning of feminism becomes almost impossibly diffuse. Similarly, there is a query over whether different types of women’s political organizing which do not have as a specific goal the furtherance of women’s rights – for example, women’s peace movements – should be called feminist. A gain a positive answer may lead to a diffusion of the meaning of feminist beyond the bounds of what is theoretically or politically helpful. On the other hand, there are those who argue for a much tighter definition of feminism, and, as Delmar (1986: 13) points out:

There are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about women, specific to or emanating from feminists. This means that it should be possible to separate out feminism and feminists from the multiplicity of those concerned with women’s issues. It is by no means absurd to suggest that you don’t have to be a feminist to support women’s rights to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of women’s demands are feminists. In this light feminism can claim its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism can thus be established as a field (and this even if scepticism is still needed in the face of claims or demands for a unified feminism), but cannot claim women as its domain.
In seeking to describe feminism, this book clearly tends towards the position that feminism can claim to be a field with its own ideas, history and practice. It will be stressed throughout the book, however, that these ideas, history and practice are far from unified, and are indeed subject to continuing debate. For practical as well as political purposes, the limits of what feminism is must be drawn at some point, but again we should stress the contested and evolving nature of these boundaries. Thus the ideas and practices described in this book should in no way be understood as a complete and fixed definition of what feminism has meant historically or what it means today.

In an attempt at some kind of classification, histories of feminism have talked about the historical appearance of strong feminist movements at different moments as a series of ‘waves’. Thus ‘first-wave’ feminism is used to refer to the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century feminist movements that were concerned (although not exclusively) with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right of suffrage. ‘Second-wave’ feminism refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, when protest again centred around women’s inequality, although this time not only in terms of women’s lack of equal political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work. This classification is a useful historical summary, but may lead to the false impression that outside these two ‘waves’ there has been no feminist activity. Certainly, there was less activity that could be called feminist before the suffrage movements at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, but, as argued above, the question of women’s social position had been a topic of thought and action well before the word ‘feminist’ was used. And between the suffrage movement and the reinvigoration of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, the issue of women’s inequality did not just die away and feminism did not lie dormant, although feminists may have been less visible and their voices heard less during this period. Similarly, the grouping together of feminist movements under a general description of ‘first wave’ and ‘second wave’ may act to mask the diversity of feminist thought that has existed both within the two waves and between them, by attempting to give one label to a whole series of different theories and actions. There is thus, for example, a tendency to reduce ‘first-wave’ feminism to the struggle for suffrage, even though there was a wide divergence of feminist views on women’s political rights at the time (as will be discussed...
further in Chapter 2). So, although it may be true that feminist movements have been more active and have recruited more members at certain historical periods, it would perhaps be more accurate to see feminism not as emerging in ‘waves’ but as a continuum of thought and action. During the course of this book, therefore, it may be useful to occasionally refer to ‘first-wave’ and ‘second-wave’ feminism as terms of description, but it must be remembered that these are used only as terms of convenience and do not intend to convey the idea that feminisms can be easily historically classified into these two periods of activity, or that outside of these periods there was no feminist struggle.

Another problem regarding the classification of feminisms comes where some studies of feminism and feminist theory, rather than take a strictly historical approach, attempt to provide a neat classification of feminism into different theoretical families. A basic version of this categorization would divide feminisms and feminists into three loose groups: liberal feminism, Marxist or socialist feminism, and radical feminism. A brief and rough summary of this typology could be stated as follows: liberal feminists include all those who campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state, arguing that the theoretical basis on which this state is built is sound but that the rights and privileges it confers must be extended to women to give them equal citizenship with men; Marxist and socialist feminists link gender inequality and women’s oppression to the capitalist system of production and the division of labour consistent with this system; and radical feminists see men’s domination of women as the result of the system of patriarchy, which is independent of all other social structures – that is, it is not a product of capitalism. Variations may be introduced depending on how far these classifications consider Marxist and socialist feminism as closely related or separate groupings, or by the introduction of a group of ‘dual-systems’ feminists, who combine elements of Marxist and radical feminist thinking. More recent surveys have also added on the categories of psychoanalytical feminism, postmodern or poststructuralist feminism, black feminism, and so on. These classifications are undoubtedly useful in providing an intelligible understanding of the positioning of major feminist theorists in relation to each other, and the lucid analyses of feminist theorists and movements provided by writers such as Jaggar (1983), Tong (1992) or Walby (1990), among others, should not be underestimated as an important resource both for students of feminism and for feminists.
themselves. As with all attempts at classification, however, there seems to be a tendency inherent in this approach to gloss over differences and to prioritize elements of commonality in the various categories of feminism on the one hand, and to emphasize the differences between the categories on the other. Moreover, labels such as liberal, socialist or radical feminist, although adopted by some feminists to describe themselves and their theoretical and practical positions, do not do justice to the complexity of feminism, which is perhaps more aptly described by Nye (1989: 1) as a ‘tangled and forbidding web’. This book attempts to untangle this complexity not through a rigid classification of the different feminisms, but through an examination of different issues and problems to which feminists have brought their attentions. This focus on issues and debates may be seen as a more fruitful way of addressing the fragmentation and multiplicity of contemporary feminist debate and of moving beyond a simple oppositional positioning of different strands of feminist thought (Hirsch and Fox Keller 1990). This is, therefore, the approach that this book will adopt, focusing not on the different strands of feminism and feminist thought as such, but exploring the different analyses that various feminists have brought to issues of relevance to women. Again, the nature of this work means that there will not be space in the book to treat all the issues on which feminists have written (ranging from politics, to science, to literature and art and beyond), nor to represent all the multiple feminist voices which have spoken on each issue – to do so would be a mammoth undertaking well beyond the scope of a book such as this. Instead this book aims to tackle some of the major issues that have preoccupied feminists, and to convey some of the principal viewpoints and debates that have arisen in connection with these issues in order to provide the reader with an introduction to some of the key elements of feminist thought. We will thus tackle the issues of women’s political participation and citizenship (Chapter 2), their economic situation and their relation to the labour market both nationally and globally (Chapter 3), and issues of sexuality and reproduction (Chapter 4). There is, however, one central question that emerges from feminist debates in all these areas, and that is the question of the meaning of equality for feminism, and more precisely the opposition between ‘equality’ and ‘difference’. A s sexual difference has been a constitutive factor in our societies for as long as we can remember, feminists struggling to redefine women’s place in society must come up against the problem of how to theorize this
difference and how to deal with its consequences in practice. As we will see in Chapter 1, this question has proved central to all the different strands of feminist thought, and the way in which different feminisms have attempted to explain and define sexual difference has had an important impact on their practical applications. With regard to welfare, for example, feminists must ask whether women and men should be treated in exactly the same way, or whether differences should be taken into account when deciding benefits. Furthermore, the question of difference does not just occur in relation to the difference between men and women, but also between women themselves. An assumption among some feminists was that they were speaking about and for all women. However, this assumption is at best optimistic, and at worst an arrogant hegemonic understanding of ‘womanhood’ – if we take into account the many factors that divide women (factors such as class, race or ethnic identity, age, sexual orientation and so on). When examining feminist theories, we must look carefully, therefore, at what they mean by the use of the category ‘women’, and at how useful this category may be as a tool of analysis. These issues will be highlighted throughout the book, with Chapter 5 devoted to a discussion of charges of feminist ‘essentialism’ with regard to the category of women, and the neglect of very real differences among women. In this chapter we will also examine the postmodern and poststructuralist feminist critique of identity politics, and ask if these types of feminist theories provide a way forward for our understanding of difference. The aim of the book is to examine the multiplicity of feminisms and to analyse how their varied approaches can have an impact on the varied lives of women. In doing so, we will seek to be as inclusive as possible of all the feminisms that exist worldwide, but again, the necessarily limited nature of the coverage in this book means that the main focus will be on Western feminisms. Within these limitations, however, the book will attempt to argue that despite the many divergences and conflicts within these feminisms, they all have an important and worthwhile goal which is highly relevant to contemporary society, despite some claims that we have now entered an era of ‘post-feminism’. As Lynne Segal (1999: 232) concludes in answer to the question ‘why feminism?’: ‘Because its most radical goal, both personal and collective, has yet to be realized: a world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women.’ And, as she goes on to add, that world would be better not just for women, but for men as well.
Equal or Different?
The Perennial Feminist Problematic

The debate over equality, its meaning and how or if it may be achieved, and its relevance to women’s liberation - a debate that is often referred to in feminist writings as the equality-difference debate - is, as was argued in the introduction, central to feminist analysis and discussion. This equality-difference debate is all the more difficult to overcome as it is a debate whose terms are not easily defined. Put crudely, it is a debate over whether women should struggle to be equal to men or whether they should valorize their differences from men. But the terms equality and difference are themselves contested terms with a multitude of meanings, and so the equality-difference debate is a highly complex one. If women are claiming equality with men, then with which men should they be claiming equality? And on what issues? Should they claim equality of opportunity or equality of outcome? And if women want to valorize their differences, then are these natural, biological differences or differences that are the result of particular social and economic conditions?

These are just a few of the many questions that are provoked by the equality-difference debate and they illustrate why it is such a difficult debate for feminists and why it has led, at times, to a seeming impasse between feminists on opposite sides of the divide. Some have tried to overcome this divide by using postmodernist or
poststructuralist critiques to argue that the binary division between equality and difference should itself be deconstructed. This idea (which will be discussed further later in this chapter), or that of a ‘third way’ between equality and difference, may seem to be attractive in that it promises to rid feminism of one of its perennial conflicts. However, other feminists maintain that the division between equality and difference is one that is here to stay and that in any practical discussion of women’s position in society there is no escaping the divide. In discussions on how to treat women’s claims for maternity rights, for example, feminists are divided between those who think that maternity benefits should be special rights granted to women on the basis of their specific biological capacity to have children and the particular social role of maternity that they have been assigned in Western societies, whereas others argue that maternity benefits should be subsumed under the general category of sickness benefits so that pregnant women are treated the same as men who have an illness which prevents them from working for a period of time (Bacchi 1991; Bock and Thane 1991).

It is this type of question that leads feminists to argue again over the existence of women’s biological and social differences from men and about the best strategies for ending women’s subordinate position in society, either through claiming equality or stating their difference. Clearly, this debate is also complicated by differences among women themselves (a question that we will return to in Chapter 5), differences of class, race, age, sexual orientation and so on. An additional complicating factor in this debate is the fact that women’s supposed differences from men have been used over the centuries to justify discrimination against women and their exclusion from full social and political citizenship. Thus, those feminists who argue for difference risk seeming to support the theoretical tools of patriarchal exclusion. As Segal (1987: xii) contends: ‘There has always been a danger that in re-valuing our notions of the female and appealing to the experiences of women, we are reinforcing the ideas of sexual polarity which feminism originally aimed to challenge.’

So, what is meant by sexual difference? Feminists have pointed to the way in which, historically, a natural difference between men and women was assumed, and have analysed the ways in which this difference was given various social, political and economic meanings in different societies and civilizations. They argue that one
constant of this differentiation, however, has been that women have been given an inferior or secondary status in societies because of this assumed natural sexual difference. As Sherry Ortner (1998: 21) argues: ‘The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.’ And as she goes on to explain, this secondary status of women can be explained by the fact that within the multiplicity of cultural conceptions and symbolizations of women that exist and that have existed in different societies, there is a constant in that women are seen as being ‘closer to nature’ in their physiology, their social role and their psyche. Whereas women have been seen as ‘closer to nature’, men have been perceived as ‘closer to culture’, more suited for public roles and political association. For this reason, women have been relegated to a secondary status in society, often confined to roles in the home rather than able to accede to powerful public positions. It is understandable, then, that, as soon as feminists began to campaign against women’s secondary social status, they began to question the assumed natural differences between men and women, and the consequences of these assumed differences on social organization. The question then arose of how to challenge this assumption of difference. Should women deny sexual difference and claim equal rights on the basis that they are the same as men? Or should they, on the other hand, argue that they are equal but different, and that their specific ‘feminine’ qualities are as valuable and as important as ‘masculine’ attributes. This equality–difference debate is one that has remained central to feminism, and has become even more complex and varied with modern social and scientific developments. The development of effective means of contraception and of new reproductive technologies, for example, has meant that women are no longer tied to the biological function of reproduction in the same way as they once were, and for some this may signify the opening up of new possibilities for the attainment of ‘equality’.

Despite the huge social changes that have taken place in the past century, however, the concept of difference between men and women still prevails in society. A key problem that feminists identify in this continuing perception of difference is that it is almost impossible to escape the formation of social hierarchies based on these perceptions and representations of difference. In fact, feminists argue, the idea of difference is never neutral in its effects on social structures. Contemporary social policy and the
structuring of welfare, for example, involve discussions about
whether men and women should be treated identically with respect
to benefits or whether relevant differences should be taken into
account. Although some people argue that men and women are
equal but different, it seems impossible to argue for difference
without creating some kind of hierarchy. Feminists have, therefore,
had to develop different strategies to cope with this question of
difference: either denying it, or emphasizing it and giving it a posi-
tive value. As Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine remark in the
introduction to their book *The Future of Difference* (1988: xxv, orig-
inal emphasis):

Western culture has proven to be incapable of thinking not-the-same
without assigning one of the terms a positive value and the other, a
negative. The response to difference on the part of women varies:
there are those who exalt it by embracing a certain biology – and a cer-
tain eroticism. There are also those who deny it, or, rather, who seek
to defuse the power of difference by minimising biology and empha-
sising cultural coding: on some level, these responses are saying,
‘Woman would be the same as . . . if only.’ A third strand states, like
the first group, that women are indeed different from men, but for
feminist reasons they add: women are also better than men. This
group’s reasons would not be biological but sociocultural: as outsiders
and nurturers, women do things differently from, and better than,
men.

This debate over equality and difference has been couched in vari-
ous terms over the history of feminist activism. Ann Snitow poses
the question as a tension between ‘needing to act as a woman and
needing an identity not overdetermined by gender’ (1990: 9). She
then goes on to describe the way this tension has been theorized as
a divide between ‘minimizers’ and ‘maximizers’ (where the mini-
mizers are those who wish to undermine the category of women by
minimizing the difference between men and women, and the maxi-
mizers are those who wish to reclaim the category of women and
revalue it in order to empower women); between radical feminists
and cultural feminists; between essentialists and social construc-
tionists; between cultural feminists and poststructuralists; and
between motherists and feminists. What is clear in all this is that
although the labels used to define the two sides of the debate may
have changed over time and in different societies, the basic tension
remains. Moreover, this divide does not cut neatly between differ-
ent feminist groupings, with the split reappearing in the categories
of radical feminism, cultural feminism, poststructuralist feminism
and so on. As Snitow (1990: 17) argues, this divide is fundamental
at various levels of analysis – material, psychological, linguistic:
For example, US feminist theorists don’t agree about whether post-
structuralism tends more often toward its own version of essentialism
(strengthening the arguments of maximizers by recognizing an endur-
ing position of female Other) or whether poststructuralism is instead
the best tool minimalists have (weakening any universalized, perma-
nent concept such as Woman). Certainly poststructuralists disagree
among themselves, and this debate around and inside poststructural-
ism should be no surprise. In feminist discourse a tension keeps form-
ing between finding a useful lever in female identity and seeing that
identity as hopelessly compromised.

Here we find the heart of the problem for feminists: in trying to fight
for women’s emancipation and for ‘equality’ for women (however
that equality is defined), feminists identify women as a specific
social group with a collective identity that forms a basis for struggle.
In pointing to a collective identity among women, however – an
identity that is different from that of men – feminists risk repro-
ducing, albeit in differing forms, the definitions of difference that
have kept women subordinated for so long.

**The biology debate: sex and gender**

One central factor in this equality–difference debate is the question
of the relevance of biological differences between men and women.
For centuries, biological difference has been the starting point and
justification for the creation of different social roles for women and
men. Not only was women’s biological capacity for childbirth and
breastfeeding and their generally lesser physical strength seen as
determining their social role in the home, occupying themselves
with domestic chores and bringing up children, but it was also
claimed that these biological differences made them unfit to partici-
pathe in the public sphere. Women were judged to be less reason-
able than men, more ruled by emotion, and thus incapable of
political decision-making, for example. These types of assertions by
philosophers and political theorists were supported by anatomists
and biologists who, as scientific knowledge of the human body
advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, began to use
data such as measurements of brain size to establish a difference in
intelligence between men and women. Although this crude type of
scientific differentiation between men and women is now almost universally acknowledged as worthless, there is a continuing attempt to provide empirical scientific data to support the idea of innate biological differences between men and women. As Lynne Segal (1999) points out, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a resurgence of social Darwinism, scientific theories that seek to explain male and female behaviour in terms of the demands of human evolution and survival, and that therefore dismiss the idea that masculinity and femininity are social constructs in favour of purely biological explanations. Segal (1999: 82) quotes, for example, the scientist Robert Wright, who she says:

throughout the 1990s has consistently ridiculed feminists seeking equality with men as doomed by their deliberate ignorance or foolish denial of the ‘harsh Darwinian truths’ about human nature . . . A s Wright likes to reassure himself and the many readers of his best-seller *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*, feminists have managed to procure legislation against sexual harassment, and even elements of affirmative action for women, but they will never share power with men because they lack men’s genes for competitiveness and risk-taking behaviour.

Faced with this supposedly scientific justification for women’s exclusion from large areas of social participation, feminists began to question the link between different physiological characteristics and a ‘natural’ differentiation in social roles for men and women, and began to formulate ways of overcoming it. For many feminists this has involved a denial of the relevance of biological differences between men and women for the organization of society. This has led to a distinction in much feminist theory between physiological ‘sex’ and social ‘gender’. This distinction can also be expressed by the terms ‘female’ and ‘feminine’, ‘female’ being the biological category to which women belong and ‘feminine’ behaviour and roles being the social constructions based on this biological category. Thus, many feminists have argued that whereas biological sex is a ‘naturally’ occurring difference, all the roles and forms of behaviour associated with being a woman have been created historically by different societies.

This distinction between biological sex and social gender is clearly present, although it is not made explicitly in those terms, in a book that has had an important influence on feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) (1949). De Beauvoir’s famous assertion that ‘one is not born a woman: one
becomes one’ encapsulates an argument that women’s inferior position is not a ‘natural’ or biological fact but one that is created by society. One may be born as a ‘female’ of the human race but it is civilization which creates ‘woman’, which defines what is ‘feminine’, and proscribes how women should and do behave. And what is important is that this social construction of ‘woman’ has meant a continued oppression of women. The social roles and modes of behaviour that civilizations have assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. This means that women are not like the working classes in Marxist ideology: they have not emerged as an oppressed group because of particular historical circumstances, but have always been oppressed in all forms of social organization. De Beauvoir does not, however, argue that there is no biological distinction to be made between men and women. Although she maintains that the psychological and behavioural aspects of ‘sex’ are the products of patriarchal cultures and not the inevitable products of biological differences, she argues that there is an irreducible biological difference between men and women. Woman is a biological and not a socio-historical category, even though all the behaviour associated with femininity is clearly a social construction. The liberation of women thus depends on freeing women from this social construct of the ‘eternal feminine’, which has reduced them to a position of social and economic inferiority, but it does not depend on the denial of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as biologically distinct categories. As she argues (1949: 13):

To refuse the notions of the eternal feminine, the Black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that there are today Jews, Blacks, women: such a denial does not represent for the interested parties a liberation, but rather an inauthentic flight. It is clear that no woman can claim, without bad faith, to be above her sex.

De Beauvoir’s distinction between biological sex and the social creation of the ‘eternal feminine’ is a precursor of the distinction between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory. As Ann Oakley (1997) explains, the term gender originated in medical and psychiatric usage where, from the 1930s, psychologists used the word gender to describe people’s psychological attributes without linking these to men and women. In 1968, Robert Stoller, a psychiatrist, published Sex and Gender – a book about how children who were biologically (according to chromosomes) of one sex seemed to belong to the other sex. Most commonly found were babies who
were genetically female but who were born with male external genitalia – these babies could be brought up as either male or female and would develop the ‘appropriate gender identity’. Gender was thus used by Stoller to refer to behaviour, feelings, thoughts and fantasies that were related to the sexes but that did not have primary biological connotations (cited in Oakley 1997: 31). This use of gender to refer to attributes that are related to the division between the sexes but are not primarily biologically determined was adopted by feminists to separate innate biological differences between men and women, and socially constructed differences. Oakley, for example, made a distinction between sex and gender in her book Sex, Gender and Society, first published in 1972, and argued that:

‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’, however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

(Oakley 1972: 16)

The use of gender, and more specifically the distinction between sex and gender, as a tool of analysis has clearly helped feminist theory to advance on the question of difference, separating the biological from the social and arguing that the two are distinct categories. This has enabled feminists to argue against biological determinism of all kinds and to move the emphasis away from physiological differences between men and women and on to the social processes that shape masculinity and femininity. This process of social construction was a principal focus for many classic feminist texts of the 1970s and 1980s, as Oakley (1997: 33) explains:

Many classics of feminist writing during this period are hard-hitting elaborations on the basic theme of social construction; society, psychology, sociology, literature, medicine, science, all ‘construct’ women differently, slipping cultural rhetoric in under the heading of biological fact. It is cultural prescription – gender, not sex – which explains why women fail to have proper orgasms, are ill-fitted to be brain surgeons, suffer from depressive illness, cannot reach the literary heights of Shakespeare, and so on and so forth . . . During this period, even/especially influential theories such as Freud’s about the origins of ‘sexual’ difference came to be restated in the language of ‘gender development’.

Thus the concept of gender seemed to open up whole new avenues of thought and analysis for feminists, bringing with it the hope of
huge theoretical advances in the analysis of women’s oppression. As Christine Delphy (1996: 33) argues, the arrival of the concept of gender made possible three linked advances: all the differences between the sexes which seemed to be social and arbitrary, whether they actually varied from one society to another or were just held to be susceptible to change, were gathered together in one concept; the use of the singular term (gender) rather than the plural (sexes) meant that the accent was moved from the two divided parts to the principle of partition itself, and feminists could focus on the way in which this partition was constructed and enforced; and finally, the concept of gender allowed room for an idea of hierarchy and power relations, which meant that the division could be considered from another angle.

However, despite the many advantages that the use of the concept of gender and the theoretical separation between gender and biological sex have provided for feminists, gender is still a problematic term that seems to have lost some of the ‘revolutionary’ potential it once possessed as it has become accepted into common usage: ‘Today, gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and being a contested political term’ (Oakley 1997: 30). One of the difficulties has been that, although, as Delphy (1996) argued, the concept of gender opens up the possibility of an analysis of hierarchy, gender analysis may lead to the neglect of the power inequalities that exist between men and women. Talking about men and women as ‘engendered’, with the implication that both masculinity and femininity are social constructs, may in fact suggest difference rather than power inequality (Oakley 1997). Furthermore, gender is sometimes seen as something that is relevant only to women – because gender was so readily adopted by feminists to explain women’s subordinate position in society, it may be perceived as a term that applies only to women and the social construction of femininity (although there seems to have been a recent upturn in academic studies of masculinity). Oakley points out that gender is a term that has been used by academic feminists to bring respectability to their work – talking about ‘gender’ rather than about ‘women’ – because the study of women is not really respectable. She comments (1997: 30) that: ‘Such a strategy only works because gender was invented to help explain women’s position: men neither wonder about theirs nor need to explain it.’ The fact that only women seem to have gender clearly demonstrates the operation of power inequalities,
but these inequalities are sometimes overlooked, or their operation is not fully explained merely by an analysis of how gender is constructed.

Perhaps even more importantly, the very distinction between sex and gender, and the relationship between the two terms, have been called into question. Critics argue that the distinction between sex and gender often leads to a failure to interrogate the nature of sex itself. Gender is seen as the content, with sex as the container (Delphy 1996: 33), and although gender is perceived as variable, the ‘container’ of sex is perceived to be universal and unchanging because it is ‘natural’. In other words, the distinction between sex and gender means that there is a failure to call into question the ways in which society constructs ‘sex’ – that is, the ‘natural’ body itself. Sex is seen as a primary division on which gender is predicated. In response, some feminists have argued against this seemingly natural precedence of sex before gender and have argued that biological sex itself is a social construct – that biology is not ‘natural’ and universal, but is also, like gender, socially mediated.

In his historical study of the construction and representation of sex, Thomas Laqueur (1990) points out the way in which up until the end of the seventeenth century male and female bodies were not conceptualized in terms of difference; instead, testicles and ovaries, for example, were seen as equivalent and indeed shared the same name. It was only in the eighteenth century that sexual difference was ‘discovered’. Similarly, it has been pointed out that, for biologists, sex is composed of a number of different indicators which all have a varying correlation with one another, and the reduction of these various elements to one indicator of division (such as the possession or non-possession of a penis) is clearly a social act (Hurtig and Pichevin 1986). This type of analysis clearly destabilizes the division between sex and gender and has led some feminists such as Delphy (1996) to argue that in fact gender precedes sex. From another angle, Judith Butler (1990) has attempted to deconstruct the sex/gender distinction along with other binary distinctions such as that between nature and culture, and so on.

For some feminists, the need to emphasize the social construction of sex has led to a rejection of gender as a term that is not only unnecessary but that also leads to confusion because the use of gender to describe something that is socially constructed implies that biological sex itself is natural. Monique Wittig, for example, maintains that sex is nothing more than a social construct and that
the division between men and women is merely a product of social power relations with no basis in nature or human biology.

There is no sex. There is but a sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes pre-existing (or outside of) society.

(Wittig 1996: 25)

According to Wittig, therefore, women are nothing more than an oppressed social class. The disappearance of oppression and therefore of the dominant and the dominated (the ‘sex class’ of men and that of women) will see the elimination of women and of men as distinct groups of human beings. In this world where sex classes will no longer exist, freedom for all human beings will be attained ‘beyond the categories of sex’, and both the concept and the real existence of men and women will give way to the ‘advent of individual subjects’ (Wittig 1996: 20).

These criticisms of gender and of the binary divide between gender and sex do seem to have some foundation. The use of gender can mean that power is evacuated from the analysis of relationships between men and women, and that agency is denied both to women and men (if masculinity and femininity, dominance and oppression are social constructs, then what place is left for the individual agent?). Moreover, as various feminist writers have emphasized, any binary division that sees sex as natural and gender as socially constructed must be avoided. Having said this, however, it may be argued that there is still some power in the use of gender as a term of analysis and that one of the tasks of contemporary feminism should be to try to clarify the complex relationships between gender, sex and power that pervade our society.

Returning to difference: morality, mothering and an ethic of care

The distinction between sex and gender was first used by feminists to move the focus away from supposedly ‘natural’ and universal differences between men and women and to put the emphasis on the way in which society created these differences. Whether talking in terms of sex or gender, however, differences do still clearly exist and there have been a variety of feminist responses to deal with
this: whether to minimize the relevance of difference and to claim that men and women should be treated alike, or to insist that differences do matter and even to valorize these differences.

One facet of sexual difference that has been explored by feminists is that of women’s different moral stance. Much of this work was undertaken in response to Freud’s claims of a biologically determined sexual difference in morality. Freud’s claims about women’s weaker moral development have led feminist psychologists and psychoanalysts to explore this area of difference and to ask whether women and men do have a differentiated moral development and if so what causes this and what are its consequences. A famous example of this type of analysis is Carol Gilligan’s study *In a Differ-ent Voice* (1982), in which she challenges the sexism implicit in many psychological studies of moral development – a sexism that takes male moral development as the norm for human moral development and thus does not recognize women’s conceptions of morality as equally valid. More specifically, Gilligan argues against the notion that women have a less developed sense of morality and claims instead that women have a different sense of morality from men. In other words, whereas men’s moral thinking depends more on notions of justice, women’s morality is more relational and focused more around an ethic of care. Gilligan’s study was based primarily on the moral views of women who were deciding whether to have an abortion, and she discovered that these women had a conception of the self that was different from that of most men. Women saw themselves as connected to others and dependent on others for their identity rather than autonomous and separate, as men tend to see themselves. This differing conception of self leads, Gilligan argues, to differences in the ways in which women and men make moral decisions. Women, she claims, tend to emphasize relationships to others and to give these priority over abstract rights; they are more mindful of the consequences of an action rather than just the principles by which the action may be judged right or wrong; and women tend to interpret moral choices in the particular context in which they are made rather than judging them hypothetically or in an abstract fashion. Women’s moral ‘voice’ has gone unheard for so long because their way of making moral judgements is deemed inferior to that of men, whose ‘voice’ is taken as the norm.

Gilligan has been accused of essentialism in her work – in other words, of positing a natural, universal and essential difference between men and women. She does, however, stress that she sees
the difference in men and women’s moral stance as a product not of some innate biological essence, but as arising in a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experiences of men and women and the relationships between the sexes. The criticism of essentialism often comes from those who are fearful that any work claiming to have discovered a difference between men and women in moral terms risks providing ammunition for those who wish to claim that natural and essential differences mean that men and women can never be ‘equal’. Critics also argue that the female ‘ethic of care’ that Gilligan describes is something that has been developed as a strategy for coping and survival in male-dominated societies; why should this ‘survival strategy’ be celebrated as an achievement of female character and values? On the other hand, there are many feminists who have found Gilligan’s work inspiring in the way that it undermines the assumptions not only of traditional psychology and psychoanalytic theory, but also of classic moral and political philosophy. Seyla Benhabib (1988), for example, argues in Gilligan’s favour and states that her work forms part of a vital feminist challenge to the presuppositions of traditional moral philosophy, which makes universalist claims on the basis of what she calls the ‘generalized other’ – the citizen or individual of traditional moral and political thought, who is supposedly an individual with no specific defining characteristics. This ‘generalized other’ is meant to be gender neutral, but because the philosophies and modes of thought based on this universal generalized other have been formulated by men, they are often alien to women. For Benhabib, Gilligan’s work has highlighted the ways in which women have been left out and alienated by male ways of posing moral dilemmas, and has emphasized the need to take account of the ‘concrete’ other (the other who has specific characteristics and relationships) when making moral judgements:

What Carol Gilligan has heard are those mutterings, protestations and objections that women, confronted with ways of posing moral dilemmas that seemed alien to them, have voiced. Only if we can understand why their voice has been silenced, and how the dominant ideals of moral autonomy in our culture, as well as the privileged definition of the moral sphere, continue to silence women’s voices, do we have a hope of moving to a more integrated vision of ourselves and of our fellow humans as generalized as well as ‘concrete’ others.

(Benhabib 1988: 95)
Thus, feminist psychologists such as Gilligan have argued that women do have different moral standpoints, and that acknowledging these differences and incorporating women’s different approach into our moral and political schemata is important. This argument in favour of difference is perceived by some feminists as dangerous, as it reinforces the idea of a separation between the sexes and so hampers women’s quest for equality. Others believe that it is important to express such differences and to give back value to the ‘feminine’ values that have been denied their true place by the male definition of the norms of morality. However, for those who agree that women do have a different moral standpoint, a further question is how this difference develops. Although some feminists have suggested that innate biological differences between men and women lead to differing moral viewpoints, others point to social factors that influence men and women’s development in varying ways. One of the key issues discussed in this regard is women’s role as mothers.

Most feminists have pointed to the ways in which women’s physical ability to produce children has had some influence on their social position. Although for some, like Shulamith Firestone (1979), it is this biological capacity to reproduce that is the key to women’s oppression; for others, this capacity and the social roles and skills which it entails contain some valuable elements that constitute the core of women’s difference from men. Mothering is not only about biological reproduction but about a set of attitudes, skills and values that accompany it, and some feminists argue that it is these attitudes, values and skills which constitute the distinctness of femininity and which should be given a more central place in our societies.

We will discuss feminist arguments over reproduction and mothering further in Chapter 4, but it is important to mention the debate over mothering in any discussion of difference because, for many, mothering is the key to men and women’s difference. If mothering is seen as central to the difference between men and women, it is then vital to explain why women mother. This is the subject tackled by Nancy Chodorow in her book The Reproduction of Mothering (1978). Chodorow sets out to explore why women choose to mother. She rejects the idea that mothering is an innate, natural instinct, and equally the idea that it is merely the result of social conditioning, for, as she argues, this would imply that women had a free choice in the matter of whether to mother.
Instead, by the time people are old enough to make any kind of rational choice, there is already a clear gender difference and a splitting of roles between women who mother and men who do not. Chodorow argues that the desire to mother is part of the desire to be feminine, which girls pick up at an early age. In fact, this happens so young that it cannot be part of a conscious choice but must be mainly an unconscious choice. The sexual and familial division of labour in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal and affective relationships than men are, leads to a division of psychological capacities in daughters and sons. Because of this division of psychological capacities, these daughters and sons then go on to reproduce the sexual and familial division of labour of their parents. The reproduction of mothering begins from the earliest mother/infant relationship in the pre-Oedipal stage of development. The daughter’s sense of self and of gender is identified with her mother, whereas the son feels the need to break the attachment to his mother. This differing psychosexual development means that boys grow up with an ability to relate deeply to others but with more of the single-minded, competitive values that are necessary for success in public life, whereas girls grow up to reproduce their mother’s capacity to relate to others, to nurture, and to mother. These qualities of mothering have been undervalued in the public sphere, but Chodorow argues that if both men and women mothered equally, then girls and boys would not grow up with these different qualities; men would be more loving and connected to others, and women would be more autonomous and competitive.

This solution of ‘dual-parenting’ and for sharing the roles and values of mothering between men and women has, like Gilligan’s argument for promoting an ethic of care, been criticized by other feminists. Those who disagree with Chodorow argue that, apart from focusing on white middle-class families and thus falling into the trap of ethnocentrism, her theory centres too closely on the psychosexual workings of the family and ignores or underestimates wider social forces. But as Rosemarie Tong argues, despite the drawbacks evident in both Chodorow and Gilligan’s analyses, they, like other feminists who have looked for the roots of difference in women and men’s psychological development, have picked out issues which ‘mesh with many of our ordinary intuitions about sexual behaviour, mothering and moral conduct’ (1992: 171).
Beyond the equality–difference debate?

This chapter has highlighted some of the many ways in which feminists have talked about difference, and the means with which they have tried to overcome traditional views of sexual difference in order to promote women’s emancipation. For some, the whole equality–difference debate is now one that does more harm than good to the feminist cause. Joan Scott, for example, argues that the two opposing poles of equality and difference have been fixed in a binary opposition and that this opposition is one of those that feminists must deconstruct:

Instead of framing analyses and strategies as if such binary pairs were timeless and true, we need to ask how the dichotomous pairing of equality and difference itself works. Instead of remaining within the terms of existing political discourse, we need to subject those terms to critical examination. Until we understand how the concepts work to constrain and construct specific meanings, we cannot make them work for us.

(1990: 139)

Scott’s argument for the deconstruction of the binary opposition between equality and difference is convincing if we understand this division as that between an argument that women are the same as men and an argument that they are different. This type of crudely formulated opposition works to suppress the recognition of differences within the categories of women and men and to gloss over the ways that the differences between men and women have been perceived and represented over time and in various societies. It seems, though, that, however hard feminists try to move beyond equality and difference, the questions raised by this debate recur time and again, albeit in varying formulations. For example, I have previously mentioned the debate over maternity provision and whether this should be considered as a different and specific benefit for women or as the same as any other sickness benefit for men and women. This perhaps is what makes the equality–difference debate so resistant – its continually changing formulation. Moreover, it seems that, over time, those who were on one side of the debate may move to the other, and vice versa. Feminists may even find themselves split between varying positions when debating different issues. And although Scott and others see the ongoing debate as somehow harmful to the feminist cause, diverting attention away from the real issues, perhaps it is time to view this debate
as something which is in fact valuable and which forces feminists to interrogate themselves as to where they stand in relation to particular issues. Equality–difference must not be perceived as a debate whose terms are fixed in stone, and a debate on which one has always to take the same side; I would argue that feminists will always, in one way or another, be talking about issues in terms of equality and difference, and that this debate may in fact prove positive in many cases. A s A nne Snitow (1990: 31) remarks:

If the divide is central to feminist history, feminists need to recognize it with more suppleness, but this enlarged perspective doesn’t let one out of having to choose a position in the divide. On the contrary, by arguing that there is no imminent resolution, I hope to throw each reader back on the necessity of finding where her own work falls and of assessing how powerful that political decision is as a tool for undermining the dense, deeply embedded oppression of women. By writing of the varied vocabularies and constructions feminists have used to describe the divide, I do not mean to intimate that they are all one, but to emphasize their difference. Each issue calls forth a new configuration, a new version of the spectrum of feminist opinion, and most require an internal as well as external struggle about goals and tactics. Though it is understandable that we dream of peace among feminists, that we resist in sisterhood the factionalism that has so often disappointed us in brotherhood, still we must carry on the argument among ourselves. Better, we must actively embrace it. The tension in the divide, far from being our enemy, is a dynamic force that links very different women. Feminism encompasses central dilemmas in modern experience, mysteries of identity that get full expression in its debates. The electricity of its internal disagreements is part of feminism’s continuing power to shock and involve large numbers of people in a public conversation far beyond the movement itself. The dynamic feminist divide is about difference; it dramatizes women’s differences from each other – and the necessity of our sometimes making common cause.

In the following chapters we will aim to demonstrate the way feminists have been divided over issues relating to equality and difference, and also the ways in which their unity has brought change in some areas which are vital to women’s lives.