

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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PART 3 GENDER

3.8 Conclusion

These critical studies of gender oppression have involved a wide variety of data-collection techniques including structured questioning, in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Once again, however, it is not the method but the methodology that is crucial to the critical process. The authors held varying views on patriarchy and its relationship with the class structure and, to a lesser degree, with racial oppression. In each case, though, the material practices underpinning patriarchal oppression was analysed rather than an idealisation of patriarchal domination. The historically specific manifestations of sexist oppression were related to broader social structures: Westwood, for example, located the shopfloor rituals as part of the collusive process that reproduces female domestic labour; and Mumtaz and Shaheed addressed the repression of women in Pakistan as a function of the right wing's appropriation of the Qur'an to legitimate its grasp of political power.

These empirical studies embodied three projects. First, they set the practices in stark relief and revealed them as clearly sexist. Oakley, in the early 1970s, had to expend considerable effort revealing the continuing sexism inherent in the process of domestic labour. Her analysis of housework and her critique of sociology were both attacked because of her 'biased' feminist views. Although the situation had changed somewhat by the 1980s, neither Cockburn nor Westwood in Britain, nor Mumtaz and Shaheed or Liddle and Joshi discussing the Indian subcontinent, could take sexist practices for granted.

The second project of these studies was to relate specific practices to much wider structures of oppression. Sexist practices do not stand in isolation but are part of a broader process of oppression and only have meaning within the totality. This involved various constructions of the relationship between production and reproduction: between class and patriarchy (Oakley, Cockburn, Mumtaz and Shaheed); between patriarchy, class and race (Westwood); and between patriarchy class and caste (Liddle and Joshi); and the way they were legitimated ideologically. While women are oppressed by men they are not oppressed in isolation from other social structures. The historical primacy of one form of oppression or another is not the issue. These studies were not concerned with establishing the mythological past of female oppression or constructing idealisations of the oppressive process. Rather, where they addressed history it examined the particular ways in which women became oppressed, how the oppressive practices were developed and legitimated. For example, Liddle and Joshi explored the way the Brahmins incorporated goddess cults; and Cockburn looked at the techniques employed by the composers to exclude women. The success of these practices historically, and the

continued employment of sexist practices could not be seen as somehow internal to specific institutions but only as sustainable through the broader legitimations encapsulated in patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal ideology was seen not as a transhistorical form but as interlinked with class (and racist) ideologies.

The third project of the studies was, in revealing the nature of the practices and their structural significance, to provide a basis for challenging sexism and undermining patriarchal oppression. Oakley, for example, called on the Women's Liberation Movement to change emphasis to incorporate the interests of housewives; Westwood proposed support for local anti-sexist anti-racist initiatives; and Mumtaz and Shaheed set out, in the first place, to document the history of the women's movement in Pakistan.

In all these studies, then, the intention was to get beneath the surface and reveal the true nature of patriarchal oppression. It meant deconstructing historically specific forms of patriarchy by analysing particular practices, a process confounded by the parallel operation of class (and racial) oppression. The observed practices were given new meaning through the reconstruction that dissolved taken-for-granted sexist practices and male priorities.

Patriarchy oppresses women by rendering them invisible and their views trivial. Making women visible and re-presenting women's perspectives are a major part of feminist critical research. Oakley pioneered in addressing housework as work and investigating it from the point of view of the women who do it. She developed a sympathetic ethnography that countered the spurious 'scientism' of the male paradigm. Critical ethnography has emerged as one of two widely used methods for feminist critical research. Cockburn, for example, concentrated on in-depth interviews while Westwood preferred participant observation.

The other major approach is the development of women's history and Mumtaz and Shaheed's study is one among many examples. Women's history counters the marginalisation of women in dominant history. This is done by recasting history to take account of women's roles: reconstructing it to address women's rather than men's concerns; or by writing the history of women's realms.

Ethnographic approaches are often combined with historical analysis as in Liddle and Joshi's *Daughters of Independence* and Cockburn's *Brothers*. Ethnographic material, detailing actual practice, serves as insights into the operation of oppressive structural and historical processes.

Unravelling myths and exposing contradictions provides the major ways through which feminist critical social research enables the dialectical deconstructive process. Stereotypes and anomalies are located structurally and this provides the basis for revealing the operation of patriarchal ideology. Detailed analysis of the operation of legitimating practices reveals the nature of the oppressive mechanism.

The next part undertakes a similar examination of how racial oppression has been approached by critical empirical analysts.