

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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PART 3 GENDER

3.3. Ann Oakley—*Sociology of Housework*

3.3.1 Introduction

Ann Oakley's (1974a) *The Sociology of Housework* is an early example of critical research that analyses gender oppression.⁴ She regards as axiomatic that women are discriminated against; that gender differences are cultural; and that it is desirable that changes in women's position should be brought about (Oakley, 1974a, p. 190). She takes up the issue of the invisibility of women and women's concerns in both society at large and the discipline of sociology in particular. The sexism of society, she maintains, is reflected in the sexism of sociology.

Oakley's study is indicative of the dynamic nature of critical social research. Feminist theory and analysis was much more sophisticated in the 1990s [when *Critical Social Research* was published] than when Oakley did her study. Her analysis of the sexist nature of sociology and its indifference to women's work was, as she admits, naïve. This does not deflect from the fact that they were apposite comments in the early 1970s. Indeed, fifteen years on from publication, sociology was only then seriously addressing its sexist (and racist) bias; and the reality of women's domestic labour has hardly changed, even if feminist interest in the debate has waned. That Oakley would research and report the topic differently if she were to do it again (Oakley, 1985, p. xii) does not detract from the critical nature of the study. The critical aspect of any work has to be judged in relation to the context of its time. Although somewhat imprecise about her feminist epistemology and reticent in her critique of positivism *The Sociology of Housework*, nonetheless, illustrates the critical process at work and provides a useful historically situated example of the development of gender-based critical social research. A view attested to by the re-publication of the book in 1985 with a new preface.

The social, political and academic context in which the work was undertaken inhibited a forceful assertion of her critique. Indeed, the research took place at a time when sexism was not a widely recognised concept outside the women's movement. Feminists employed the term but in society in general there was a low level of critique of sexism. In the academic sphere of sociology it was a term neither widely used nor understood, indeed it was actively resisted in many quarters.

Oakley's empirical analysis of housework differed from prior work in two respects. First, it treated housework as a job in its own right and not an extension of the woman's role as wife or mother. As such it disputes the biological determinist presupposition that women are reproducers and nurturers for whom housework is a natural extension of their maternal role. Second, it addressed housework from the point of view of those who did it, in this case, housewives with young children. It thus provided a woman's perspective on

housework and offered a correction to the distorted male-oriented perspective. As such it opposed the compliant approach of previous research by women on housework that, while arguing that housework is work, also accepted that to analyse it as such would mean a fundamental critique of patriarchal ideology.

3.3.2 Subject group and approach

The Sociology of Housework is based on tape-recorded two-hour-long interviews conducted in 1971. The sample, selected from the medical records of two general practices, consisted of forty London housewives, born in Britain or Ireland, and aged between 20 and 30 all of whom were mothers of at least one child under five. The sample came from two different areas of London: one a predominantly working-class area, the other a middle-class area; and the sample was divided into two equal halves according to class, the designation of which was based essentially on the husband's occupation.⁵

There is an apparent ambivalence in Oakley's approach to her research topic. She was restrained by the academic rigours of doctoral research in the early 1970s while also wanting to develop a feminist perspective on research. The preponderant approach to social research in Britain at the time emphasised the 'scientific' collection of standardised, statistically analysable, objective data. Validity, reliability and representativeness were the watchwords of this scientific approach in which the researcher/interviewer was to be a neutral data-collecting instrument sucking in information from a compliant and willing subject/interviewee. Researchers were expected to be unbiased and 'value free'. The interpretation of data was supposedly not to be influenced by the researcher's own perspective.

Accordingly, Oakley described her work as an exploratory pilot study, which is a prelude to the development of precise hypotheses for examination or for the testing of theory derived inductively from empirical data (Oakley, 1974a, p. 30). The reported aims of her research are to describe the housewife's situation and the housewife's attitude to housework; to examine patterns of satisfaction; and to suggest possible hypotheses to *explain* differences between housewives' attitudes to housework and the housework situation. She construes her empirical data in scientific terms arguing, somewhat tenuously, that her sample is unlikely to be unrepresentative. She concentrates on 'factual' questions susceptible to incorporation into rating scales (of satisfaction with housework), which 'minimizes the task of interpretation' and regrets the lack of additional judges to validate her scales (Oakley, 1974a, p. 36). Oakley presents her material both qualitatively and quantitatively. The discussion includes direct quotes from respondents alongside tables of sample percentages. She relies heavily on the construction of cross-tabulations usually of dichotomized or trichotomized variables, which are subjected to chi-square tests of statistical significance.⁶ These simple categories are based on her judgement of responses to specific questions, sometimes supported by additional material that emerged in the interview. She provides illustrative material, often lengthy quotes from respondents, as examples of how she classified respondents. Analysis of aggregate data is also augmented by quotes from her respondents and is usually set in the context of other published work from related fields.

The following excerpt, which considers the monotony of housework tasks, is an example of the kind of quantitative/qualitative analysis Oakley undertakes:

Dissatisfaction is higher among those who report monotony. Eighty per cent of the women who said 'yes' to the monotony question are dissatisfied with housework, compared to forty per cent of those who said 'no'. (This difference is significant at the five per cent level). The conclusion to be drawn is that monotony is clearly associated with work dissatisfaction, and this is supported by the large number of housewives who mentioned monotony *spontaneously* at various points in the interview. A cinema manager's wife and a toolmaker's wife provide examples.

I like cooking and I like playing with the children, doing things for them—I don't like the basic cleaning. *It's boring, it's monotonous.*

It's the monotony I don't like—*it's repetitive and you have to do the same things each day.* I suppose it's really just like factory work—just as boring. (Oakley, 1974a, p. 81)

Oakley concludes that when the percentage of housewives in her sample experiencing monotony, fragmentation of work tasks, and pressures of speed is compared with assembly workers (from Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968a) there is a close match between the inherent frustrations of assembly-line work and housework, which gives substance to feminist claims that housework is alienating.

3.3.3 The 'male' paradigm

Although Oakley adheres to conventional reporting for much of the study she is sceptical of the positivist approach and the 'male-paradigm' of scientific research. From the outset there was a tension between the scientific context and the feminist critique of sexism embodied in the societal and sociological view of housework.⁷

In *The Sociology of Housework* Oakley (1974a) voices two concerns about the taken-for-granted scientific paradigm. First, an internal critique, which suggests that concerns with reliability and, more particularly, representativeness of the research are emphasised to the possible detriment of the validity. While large size samples reduce sampling error and therefore provide a more substantial basis for statistical generalisations, this does not in any way guarantee valid conclusions and many factors mediate against unbiased results from large samples: notably non-response; incomplete sampling frames; lack of 'rapport'; and 'hired hand effect' (as Roth (1966) called it). Oakley (1974a, p. 33) argues that studies should be assessed on the basis of the objectives they set themselves and not some standardised ideals of statistical generalisability.

Second, and more importantly, Oakley (1974a) questions the whole idea of collecting comparable and statistically analysable objective data from her interviewees. Developing this point, Oakley (1981) sees 'objective data gathering' as part of a 'male paradigm' of science, which is concerned much more with 'objectivity, detachment, and hierarchy' than individual's concerns. The 'male paradigm' proposes 'science' as an important cultural activity and this reflects 'a masculine social and sociological vantage point' rather than to a feminine one (Oakley, 1981, p. 38).

The research procedure of the 'male paradigm' is encapsulated in the paradox of the 'perfect interview'. Conventional wisdom (Goode & Hatt, 1952; Kahn & Cannell, 1957; Moser, 1958; Sellitz *et al.*, 1965; Galtung, 1967; Sjoberg & Nett, 1968; Benney & Hughes, 1970; Shipman, 1972) demands that the interview should be a data-collecting

instrument that works unidirectionally (interviewee to interviewer) and in which the interviewer is in control and the interviewee socialised into the role of information provider. The interview should be conducted dispassionately in order that 'objective' and statistically analysable data can be collected. The success of the interview depends on good 'rapport' between interviewer and interviewee, in which the interviewee is manipulated in a kindly and sympathetic way to provide the desired information. 'Rapport', then, is not about an interrelationship between the interviewer and interviewee but about manipulation of the interviewee. The interviewer must, however, avoid 'overrapport' as this might jeopardise the 'objectivity' of the process. The balance between intimacy and objectivity is not just a fine line but, argues Oakley, is contradictory.

At root, the 'male paradigm' denies the relevance of the personal. Subjectivity is derided. Emotions and feelings are treated with scorn. The personal is not a constituent of knowledge according to this scientific paradigm. Oakley argues against the 'male paradigm' that feminist research, in taking the personal seriously, must not only be unafraid of a more intimate relationship with subjects but must be prepared to become involved with respondents in a non-hierarchical way. The interviewer must be prepared to 'invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship' (Oakley, 1981, p. 41).⁸

The 'use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible' (Oakley, 1981, p. 41) because it undermines the feminist reassessment of the interrelationship of women with one another that are encapsulated in what Oakley describes as the nebulous but important concept of 'sisterhood'. Thus she could not adopt an exploitative attitude to interviewees as sources of data.

She suggests that the, 'general and irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of the textbook paradigm' (Oakley, 1981, p. 41) are exposed when matched against her own experiences (chiefly Oakley, 1979), which showed that, in repeated interviewing, being asked questions by subjects was a frequent occurrence and it would have been impossible not to provide information, pass opinions, and so on, as the women involved wanted information (about childbirth) they did not have, nor felt they could seek elsewhere. To remain detached and non-committal would have undermined the 'rapport'. The contradiction of the 'male paradigm' is also apparent in the comments made by people who recount research experience (Bell & Newby, 1977; Bell & Encel, 1978). They show that there is a disjunction between the reality and the textbook prescriptions that fail to engage the political contexts of research.

More specifically, Oakley argued that depth interviews that explored an area of concern were far better than standardised interviews that used single item indicators. She noted, for example, that in a reply to a simple question 'Do you like housework?' middle-class women were far more likely to give a negative answer than working-class women. On probing, however, Oakley's interviewees clearly undermine the view that the 'unhappy housewife is a purely middle-class phenomenon'. The attitudes of working-class women to the different tasks that make up housework are very similar to the middle-class group. Oakley suggests that this apparent contradiction is illustrative of a 'methodological moral', that simple questions produce simple answers.

This dissatisfaction with direct questioning is also manifested in her inclusion of an adapted 'Twenty Statements Test' (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954; McPartland & Cumming 1958; Kuhn, 1960) as a research tool. About half way through the interview the forty

women were given a test of 'self-attitudes'. Oakley asked her respondents for ten (rather than twenty) written statements beginning 'I am ...' which she wanted them to write as quickly as possible 'as though describing themselves *to* themselves rather than to anybody else' (Oakley, 1974a, p. 121). Kuhn and McPartland's idea was that such a technique, contrary to direct questioning, allowed the salience of an attitude to become apparent. Oakley uses the responses to show that working-class women are more likely to refer to themselves by reference to a domestic role than are the middle-class women, the latter tending more to refer to their personality traits. The use of this device, although firmly underpinned by the intention to provide objective measurable criteria, is indicative of Oakley's desire to discover what is central to the women's own perspective. The interpretive-objectivist tension inherent in the Twenty Statements Test (Meltzer *et al.*, 1975; Couch *et al.*, 1986) is indicative of the methodological ambiguity in the book as a whole.

The Sociology of Housework represented the first approximation to a research style more fully discussed and developed by Oakley some years later. The approach, which was evident 'between the lines' (Oakley, 1985, p. xi), sets aside the prevailing objectivism of standard empirical enquiry. Oakley abandoned conventional interviewing ethics and did not treat the women interviewed simply as data providers. She adopted the view that the subjectivity of the subject is intrinsic to feminist analysis of social experience. Her approach gave more prominence to the subjective situation of women in both sociology and in society in general. Interviewing women was a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives with the interviewer providing a vehicle for promoting a sociology for women. Thus the interviewer is no longer a data-collecting instrument for researchers but has become 'a data-collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched' (Oakley, 1981, p. 49).

3.3.4 Sexism in sociology and consciousness raising

A fundamental element of Oakley's work is a critique of the sexism of sociology. This is evident not only in the 'male paradigm' of knowledge⁹ but also in the substantive issues explored by sociology. The academic sexism she reveals owes much to three factors: the traditional concerns of sociology encapsulated in the perspectives of the aptly named 'founding *fathers*'; the sex of the majority of sociologists [at the time]; and the tendency of functionalist sociology (dominant in the USA and UK in the 1960s) to reproduce the *status quo*, especially the ideology of gender roles, which it assimilates uncritically from the wider society. Sociology is male-oriented. It focuses on the interests and activities of men in a gender-differentiated society. Women are rendered invisible.

What little work has been directed to housework has invariably been done in the context of the family and it has tended to a view that suggests that there is more equality in the marriage relationship than hitherto (Blood & Wolf, 1960; Fletcher, 1962; Bott, 1971; Young & Willmott, 1973). Oakley's empirical work denies this presumption. Her respondents show that a fundamental separation remains within the family unit with home and children remaining the woman's primary responsibility (Oakley, 1974a, p. 165).

Essentially, Oakley argues that sociologists bring to their data their own values that repeat the popular theme of gender difference. There has been little interest in researching housework as such and even less concern with women's views of housework. This lack

of interest taken in housework by the sociological establishment she sees as indicative of its intrinsic sexism.^{9A}

Sociology, despite its studies of the socialization of girls (Hartley, 1966; Joffe, 1971; Weitzman *et al.*, 1972) has failed, Oakley argues, to critically transcend mere commentary on the long period of apprenticeship of girls to the housewife role. Her interviewees provide substance for the view that girls are socialised to a feminine role in which housewifery and self-determination are blended together. The pervasive sexist ideology encumbers women's awareness of their subservient and exploited role by coalescing their labour with their self-perception as wives and mothers. Thus, 'housekeeping behaviours' tend to be developed as 'personality functions' (Oakley, 1974a, p. 114). This ideology is manifested in the self-discipline that many of her sample imposed upon themselves through routines and standards 'inherited' from mothers.

Oakley uses her material not simply to provide a female perspective on housework, which hitherto had been more or less ignored, but also to present a political case, guided by feminist principles, to 'liberate' women from the structural oppression that the pervasive concept of domesticity consigns them to. The presentation and examination of women's feelings and attitudes about housework is used to cast doubt on the dominant and pervasive notion and to suggest a strategy for action. She is concerned to explore the extent of anti-sexist consciousness among women and thus suggest the most suitable tactics for liberation. She sees a goal of feminist research the fostering among women of 'an understanding of the social and economic forces that mould their role in society, and the ways in which this role is potentially open to change' (Oakley, 1974a, p. 190).

She found that her interviewees held conservative views, preferring to retain differences between men and women, particularly the retention of what they saw as the traditional privileges of femininity (such as priority over a seat on a crowded bus). They tended to hold contradictory views about their role as housewives. One apparent contradiction was the general dislike of housework but not a denial of the housework role. More profoundly, there were marked contradictions in respect of their work contribution and their status. Women who clearly ran the home talked of their husbands as the natural head of the household; those who complained about their husbands' lack of involvement in domestic tasks referred to women liking housework; those who complained of greater freedom for men in marriage regarded their own restriction to the home as natural.

The acceptance of these contradictions encumbered any acceptance of feminist perspectives, as resolving the contradictions required a fundamental critique of their existence and of the position of women. As a response to this, Oakley argued for the need for consciousness raising among women. She suggested her own survey had inevitably sparked off such consciousness raising simply by getting the housewives in her sample to talk about what they did.

There was, however, another political lesson for feminists to learn. Her respondents were unsympathetic to the Women's Liberation Movement (which they tended to see as represented in banal media images and stereotypes) and unresponsive to feminist concerns because they felt that activists were scornful of housework and only concerned with paid work. There was no point of contact, no empathy, between housewives and feminists. Oakley found this disappointing given that 'at the present time there is an increasing vogue for seeing housewives at the centre of women's revolutionary potential'

(Oakley, 1974a, p. 193). She argues that it is optimistic to expect 'total liberation from a divisively feminine upbringing in a decidedly sexist culture'. This should not, however, deter a striving for liberation a major tool of which is a 'comprehensive understanding' of the way in which women 'internalize their own oppression'. Structures that oppress women 'cannot be altered unless there is a prior awareness among women of the need for change' (Oakley, 1974a, p. 195).

Thus consciousness raising should focus on housework and not motherhood or sexuality. It should not simply ridicule media stereotypes of the housewife, rather it should uncover and analyse 'the need to *be* a housewife which is at the heart of the female predicament'. The unintended collusion of women in their own subordination, Oakley suggests, would be realized by this means and the 'deconditioned' wife would become a potential revolutionary (Oakley, 1974a, p. 196).

3.3.5 Conclusion

The critical nature of Oakley's work is evident in a number of ways. She clearly objects to the spurious objectivity of the positivistic scientific method, which she refers to as the 'male paradigm' of research. Her focus is a critique of conventional interviewing techniques but underpinning it is a severe doubt about the nature of the knowledge so generated and the ethics of a male-oriented exploitative process. Her intention is to go beyond an account of housework as the work of housewives and to locate it in the context of the patriarchal family. She reconceptualises housework, on the one hand, in the same terms as any other paid work, and, on the other, as a series of tasks. Although the deconstruction of the concept of housework could have been developed further,¹⁰ she does provide a basis for examining the contradiction between the role and the work.

Oakley locates housework in the wider context of economic, social and political structures, pointing to the socialisation of girls to the role of housewife and the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology that coalesces femininity with housewifery. Although using statistical techniques her concern is not to draw cause-and-effect relations but to provide some insights to the world of domestic labour from the point of view of the women who do it. Her aggregate material is thus always supplemented by qualitative excerpts.

The work is not pitched 'objectively' (except in as far as was necessary for academic recognition) but is geared to political ends that are predicated upon a feminist view of women's oppression. Her analysis of housework is in direct conflict with others who have looked at family relations without transcending taken-for-granted views of the permanence of patriarchal relations.

⁴ Oakley also used her research for a less sociological book on domestic work called *Housewife* (Oakley, 1974b).

⁵ Oakley did this for comparative reasons with previously published studies and because her objection to this classificatory device was only at its embryonic stage at the time of the fieldwork.

⁶ One critic accused her of burying her substantive material under a mountain of chi-square tables (Hurstfield, 1975).

⁷ Indeed reviewers of the book have attacked her lack of ‘objectivity’ because she was quite open about being a feminist (for example, Barker, 1974) (see Oakley, 1985).

⁸ Oakley became ‘involved’ with her interviewees, where necessary helping out with domestic tasks whilst interviewing and usually enjoyed hospitality ranging from tea or coffee to a meal (Oakley, 1979). In short she broke down the idea of hierarchical relationship of data-gatherer to informant and substituted a two-way interchange of equals. ‘The attitude I conveyed could have had some influence in encouraging the women to regard me as a friend rather than purely as a data gatherer’ (Oakley, 1981, p. 47). Indeed, four years after the final interview used in her study, she was still in touch with a third of the sample and four had become close friends. She notes that such features of repeated interviewing are not unknown (Laslett & Rapoport, 1975; Rapoport & Rapoport; 1976) but are under-reported.

⁹ This tends to categorise qualitative methods such as participant observation and small-sample depth-interviewing as ‘feminine’ and academically less prestigious than ‘masculine’ quantitative techniques. (Oakley, 1974a, p. 21).

^{9A} For example, a belief that the family is the only important vehicle of reward and realization for women has led to a distortion of their role in the stratification system. Similarly, and an unspoken devaluation of female types of power as trivial and insignificant has led political sociology towards a one-sided examination of formal constraint-and authority systems (Oakley, 1974a, p. 25).

¹⁰ As Oakley acknowledges when she points to ‘the rather poor differentiation between key concepts such as “identification” and “involvement” with the housewife role, the enormously important underlying assumption that there *is* a single phenomenon called the housewife role rather than—a distinctly more interesting but difficult possibility—many interpretations in different social groups of what it means to be a housewife.’ (Oakley, 1985, p. ix).