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Gender, "Social" Science, and the Structure/Agency Dialectic: My Web of Influences*

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My general sociological orientation, the "road map" of my thinking if you will, is characterised by three principal themes. The first is a focus on issues of gender and an allegiance to the feminist project. The second is a concern with the social enterprise of science and to the complexities and challenges this brings. The third is inquiry that attempts to grasp the problematic of structure and agency; the intersection of subjectivity and behaviour with ideologies, discourses and the like. Rather than compartmentalised specialisation areas, these themes represent modes of inquiring into the social world that organise the way I "think" and "do" sociology. This orientation has been nurtured through an interaction with a web of influences, composed of key texts and select scholars. There are both feminist and non-feminist contributions, influences from both Canada and abroad, and texts spanning from near W.W.II to the present.

Of the many influences that make up this web, I am probably most indebted to Dorothy Smith for shaping my sociological imagination. Whether gauged by the number of peer nominations (Hiller and Langlois, 2001) or scholarly citations (Nock, 2001), Dorothy Smith is one of Canada's most widely known and respected sociologists. A female pioneer of the discipline (Eichler, 2001), her award winning *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987) is one of the most significant texts of our time. While the longer term impact of her work to the sociological landscape remains to be seen, her particular influence on my development has been profound.

Given the constituents of my above-described sociological road map, it is easy to see why I find Dorothy Smith's research so useful. Indeed, her work reflects a similar orientation to the craft of sociology and, particularly in *The Everyday World as Problematic*, she weaves the "gender, micro/macro, sociology of knowledge" themes into an extraordinarily perspicacious text which I have returned to time and time again. Beyond *Everyday World*, I've relied on other concepts of hers in helping me to shape my own thoughts. I share, for instance, her concern with "textually-mediated discourse" (1990), and have incorporated her notions of "SNAF" (standard North American family) and "ideological code" (1993) into recent writing on breastfeeding and motherhood.[\[1\]](#)

In addition to Smith, another important influence has been Margrit Eichler, whose *Non-Sexist Research Methods* (1988) was perhaps my first realisation that science was a social enterprise. It was this text that began my journey into an epistemological quagmire regarding "how tos," "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" of sociological inquiry.

My concerns about knowledge and science have also been shaped by Horkheimer and Adorno of the early Frankfurt School. Their key texts (e.g., *Critical Theory*, 1992; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1993 [1944]; *Eclipse of Reason*, 1992 [1947]) represented, for me, highly cogent analyses of modern

scientific thought and the state of reason. Unfortunately, their dire pessimism and ironic distaste for the intelligentsia left me short on ways to make active use of their work. I have, however, gleaned from them a better understanding of, and commitment to, the idea of praxis.

The late Pierre Bourdieu is another key figure whose work I find both stimulating and compelling. I learned from him about the pitfall of "spontaneous sociology" and the need for epistemological vigilance, not only in analysis and verification, but also in defining one's object of study (1991). Further, my research on bulimia—particularly my interest in understanding the interconnections between contemporary female embodiment and vulnerability to the bulimic symptom—relied heavily on his notions of cultural and physical capital (1986), and habitus and field. (1989).^[2]

It simply would not suffice to conclude this commentary without mention of Michel Foucault. Many sociologists of my generation spend a lot of their training reading Foucault, reading about Foucault, or reading scholars who appropriate his work. My development has been no exception. Much like a melody against which I improvise, his work is continually being used in some form in my own thinking.

Without question, Foucault's influence and postmodernist turn of the academy more generally have implications for the future of sociology. While at this early stage of my development I feel much too naïve to predict what the outcomes of postmodernism will be, I do believe its influence forces us—rather positively—to think in different ways about how we can understand our social world. As agents of the scientific enterprise, for instance, it enables us to explore newly provocative questions about the creation of knowledge and the broader impacts of the truths we, as sociologists, generate. Assuredly, this is an area I remain committed to as I develop my craft into the future.

In addition to the crisis of positivism, I believe the decline of the meta-narrative has important implications for the future of sociology. While the postmodern denial of totality should not be embraced uncritically, I feel that postmodern theories nevertheless provide for different ways of thinking about the organisation of society, and for inquiring into the juncture of the particular and the structural. The sociology I envision examines the intersections between classical and Foucauldian/postmodern influences in order to develop new (and hopefully better) methods/modes of theorising, measuring and analysing. In so doing, and to enable us to better grasp the complexities of our ever-changing—and increasingly globalised—social world, I hope to see a greater degree of intradisciplinary scholarship and blurrier boundaries between the specialisations in sociology.^[3]

I would like to close this piece with a brief note about feminist influences in sociology. There is little question that such scholarship has profoundly shaped my own development. More broadly speaking, the critical methods and subject area definitive of the feminist project have enlivened many recondite issues within sociology over the past few decades. The future of the discipline—in my opinion and optimism—would be well served in continuing to nurture feminist sociology; not simply to advance the study of gender, but because its contributions inform *all* facets of the discipline in unique and important ways.

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Notes

[1] This work has been focussed on analysing the socio-medical discourse of breastfeeding by examining the ways it intersects with, and is shaped by, contemporary mothering ideology.

[2] I must confess that my accordance with Bourdieu's work often takes somewhat of a troubled stance, particularly when compared to my affinity with Smith. For instance, attempts to use Bourdieu to capture the intersection of the individual and the broader social-structural environment (through use of his concepts habitus and field) have been critiqued as being too deterministic.

[3] I recognise that the more common plea is for greater *interdisciplinarity*. While I certainly support this appeal, I feel that attention must first be directed within. There is an inherent "interdisciplinarity" within sociology already; the study of society, by definition, requires knowledge of the individual, the global, and everything in between. The breadth of specialties that exist within the discipline indicates this understanding. It is my view, however, that the capabilities and scope of sociology as a comprehensive field of study become limited when its specialties are overly compartmentalised. There is enormous potential to be fulfilled in promoting greater intradisciplinary integration.

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