

Theory, Feminism, and Feminist Theory

As we begin to consider feminist theory, we must examine a number of important and central issues, including:

- What is “theory”? What does it mean to theorize?
- What is specifically feminist about feminist theory?
- Are there specific methods for feminist theorizing?
- What is the relation of theory to everyday experience and practice?
- What are the implications of the diversity of feminist theories?

The editors of *Feminist Frameworks* suggest the following regarding theory:

A theory offers a general account of how a range of phenomena are systematically connected; by placing individual items in a larger context, it increases our understanding both of the whole and of the parts constituting the whole. Theory is a systematic, analytic approach to everyday experience....

Feminist theory, they suggest,

- attempts to develop a comprehensive account of the subordination of women, including its supposed essence and origin;
- is a prerequisite for developing effective strategies to liberate women;
- identifies the underlying causes of women’s subordination.

Rosemarie Tong suggests that feminist theory attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation. In “Women Do Theory,” Jane Flax suggests that theory is a systematic, analytic approach to everyday experience. Flax argues that everybody does this unconsciously and that to theorize is to bring this unconscious process to a conscious level so that it can be developed and refined. As Flax explains:

All of operate on theories, though most of them are implicit. We screen out certain things; we allow others to affect us; we make choices and we don’t always understand why. Implicit theory-making includes our assumptions about the way the world works. Theory makes those choices conscious, and enables us to use them more efficiently.

According to Flax, feminist theory has several purposes:

1. to understand the power differential between men and women
2. to understand women’s oppression—how it evolved, how it changes over time, how it is related to other forms of oppression
3. how to overcome oppression

Flax suggests that feminist theory is intimately related to action: “Feminist theory is the foundation of action and there is no pretense that theory can be neutral. Within feminist theory is a commitment to change oppressive structures and to connect abstract ideas with concrete problems for political action. There has to be a commitment to do something about the situation of women.”

Marilyn Frye addresses the theme of feminist theory in her essay “The Possibility of Feminist Theory,” where she notes that the dominant approach to theory in Western philosophy has focused on generalization: enumerative, statistical, and metaphysical generalization, none of which is kind to particulars. Metaphysical generalization especially, she notes, declares this or that to be the what-it-is of a thing, threatening the annihilation of that which does not fit its prescription. Frye seems suspicious of humanism and “speaking as a human being” for this reason. But you have to have some sort of genuinely general generality to have theory. “Our project is theoretical, philosophical, political. You have to have some sort of genuinely general generality to have theory, philosophy, politics.”

Feminism, Frye observes, has been going at generality in another way from the start. Frye argues that the generalizing movement of feminist was not toward metaphysical, statistical, or universal generalization. She connects feminist generalizing to “hearing each other into speech.” The experiences of each woman and of the women collectively generate a new web of meaning. As she notes, “Our process has been one of discovering, recognizing, and creating patterns—patterns within which experience made a new kind of sense. Instead of bringing a phase of enquiry to closure by summing up what is known, as other ways of generalizing do, pattern recognition/construction opens fields of meaning and generates new interpretive possibilities. Instead of drawing conclusions from observations, it generates observations.” Her feminist method is recognizing and naming patterns, identifying schemas. She mentions, for instance, the pattern of male dominance in conversations. Naming patterns is not reductive or totalitarian. What we do is sketch a schema within which certain meanings are sustained.

In “Tapestries of Life,” Bettina Aptheker recommends a “bottom-up” approach, a search for the meanings that can be found in the daily activities of women’s lives. Discovering and connecting these meanings, she contends, will help feminists develop what she calls a “map” of women’s reality from women’s point of view, a view that she refers to a “women’s standpoint.” Aptheker argues that women’s lives are fragmented, dispersed, episodic. They are often determined by events outside of women’s control. She focuses on the dailiness of women’s lives: the patterns women create and the meanings women invent each day and over time as a result of their labors and in the context of their subordinated status to men. The point is to suggest a way of knowing from the meanings women give to their labors.

As Aptheker writes, “The search for dailiness is a method of work that allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. If we map out what we learn, connecting one meaning or invention to another, we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality. This way of seeing is what I refer to as women’s

standpoint. This standpoint pivots depending upon the class, cultural, or racial locations of its subjects, and upon their age, sexual preference, physical abilities, the nature of their work and personal relationships. What is proposed is a mapping of that which has been traditionally erased or hidden.”

In this “mapping” Aptheker pays particular attention to stories, as it is from stories that we learn about the reality of women’s lives, about the suffering, the failure, the struggle to nurture well. Cultures shape stories in different ways, and stories pass on women’s consciousness as it has been shaped by specific cultural, racial, and class experience. Women’s stories locate women’s cultures, women’s ways of seeing; they designate meaning, make women’s consciousness visible to us. Stories transform our experiences into ways of knowing—about ourselves as women and about ourselves as women looking at the world. A women’s standpoint emerges from scenes and stories suggesting ideas, feelings, and sensibilities about the nature of beauty, about personal and social change, about the conditions necessary for life and growth, about the importance of interpersonal communication and friendship. These ideas, and certainly the feeling of dailiness from which they emanate, contrast sharply with those of the dominant culture.

Aptheker’s article suggests the manner in which we can theorize about women’s lives from the standpoint of their dailiness. Beginning with the stories women tell and the dailiness of their lives, Aptheker constructs a systematic and coherent account of women’s lives.

Some representative accounts of feminist theory:

Charlotte Bunch: “Feminism and Education: Not By Degrees”

Theory enables us to see immediate needs in terms of long-range goals and an overall perspective on the world. It thus gives us a framework for evaluating various strategies in both the long and the short run and for seeing the types of changes that they are likely to produce. Theory is not just a body of facts or a set of personal opinions. It involves explanations and hypotheses that are based on available knowledge and experience. It is also dependent on conjecture and insight about how to interpret those facts and experiences and their significance.

Marilyn Frye: “The Possibility of Feminist Theory”

The project of feminist theory is to write a new encyclopedia. Its title: *The World, According to Women*....What ‘feminist theory’ is about, to a great extent, is identifying those forces...which maintain the subordination of women to men....Our game is pattern recognition. Patterns sketched in broad strokes make sense of experience, but it is not a single or uniform sense. They make our different experiences intelligible in different ways....Our epistemological issues have to do with the strategies of discovering patterns and articulating them effectively, judging the strength and scope of patterns, properly locating the

particulars of experience with reference to patterns, understanding the variance of experience from what we take to be a pattern.

bell hooks: *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires....A commitment to feminism so defined would demand that each individual participant acquire a critical political consciousness based on ideas and beliefs. (24)...Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. (24-25)

bell hooks: *Feminism is for Everybody*

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. I love this definition, which I first offered more than 10 years ago...I love it because it so clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-male. It makes it clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action....To end patriarchy (another way of naming the institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts, until we let go sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action.

Before women's studies classes, before feminist literature, individual women learned about feminism in groups. The women in those groups were the first to begin to create feminist theory which included both an analysis of sexism, strategies for challenging patriarchy, and new models of social interaction. Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice. In its earliest inception feminist theory had as its primary goal explaining to women and men how sexist thinking worked and how we could challenge and change it.

Susan Bordo: *Unbearable Weight*

...[I]n my view, feminist cultural criticism is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life (or political action, for that matter) and does not empower (or require) individuals to "rise above" their culture or to become martyrs to feminist ideals. It does not tell us what to *do*...Its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning. It is up to the reader to decide how,

when, and where (or whether) to put that understanding to further use, in the particular, complicated, and ever-changing context that is his or her life and no one else's. (30)

Jane Flax: *Thinking Fragments*

A fundamental goal of feminist theorists is to analyze gender: how gender is constituted and experienced and how we think—or equally important—do not think about it. The study of gender includes but is not limited to what are often considered the distinctively feminist issues: the situation of women and the analysis of male domination (patriarchy)...Because within contemporary Western societies gender relations have been ones of domination, feminist theories have compensatory as well as critical aspects. Feminist theories recover and explore the aspects of societies that have been suppressed, unarticulated, or denied within male-dominant viewpoints. The histories of women and our activities have to be written into the accounts and self-understandings of entire cultures...Feminist theories call for a transvaluation of values—a rethinking of our ideas about what is just, humanly excellent, worthy of praise, moral, and so forth. (20)

Jean Grimshaw: *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*

Now I think it is right to say that for any viewpoint to count as feminist it must believe that women have been oppressed and unjustly treated and that something needs to be done about this. But it does not follow from this that any consensus is available as to the precise forms this oppression or injustice takes, or as to how they should be remedied...Feminism is, therefore, a response to a belief that women have been oppressed and unjustly treated, and sometimes also to a belief that they have available to them more than to men certain resources for developing a critique of the damaging and destructive aspects of human institutions and social relationships, and for tracing the links between these things and the subordination of women to men. But the nature of this response varies, and cannot be delineated in an ahistorical or consensual way...The tensions in feminist thinking reflect the tensions in women's lives and the changing and varied nature of women's experience, and there is not, nor do I think there is likely to be, any unanimity in the results of efforts to resolve these tensions. (20-21)

The Diversity of Feminist Thought

It would be a mistake to expect a brief and clear definition in a sentence or two of feminism or feminist thought. Feminism, after all, has a long history, going back at least to the 18th century and the work of early liberal feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Feminism is also a response to women's lives and experiences and the varieties of feminisms reflects the changing and varied nature of women's experience. Despite these difficulties, all varieties of feminism agree that

women have been oppressed and unjustly treated (Grimshaw). But as Jean Grimshaw notes, how feminists conceptualize that oppression, its causes, and the responses to it, varies. The editors of the anthology *Feminist Frameworks* use the metaphor of lenses to understand the variety and diversity of feminist theory. Feminists, they suggest, use a variety of categories to organize and understand women's social reality and women's lives and subordination can be understood adequately only in terms of several categories. Drawing on the work of several feminist philosophers (Tong's noteworthy *Feminist Thought*, Jaggar, Grimshaw; none of this should be construed as original intellectual work), this outline of several distinct feminist theories is impartial and brief and programmatic but should provide a little introductory background into the varieties of second-wave feminist thought.

Liberal Feminism

- Lens of gender and gender equality
- Emphasis on traditional understanding of human nature and personhood: rationality, individual autonomy, self-fulfillment (characteristics possessed by all).
- Sex and gender neutral; all human beings possess a common nature.
- A just society is a society that allows individuals to exercise their freedom and fulfill themselves.
- Emphasis on equality of opportunity: all persons deserve an equal chance to develop their rational and moral capacities so that they can achieve personhood.
- Because society has the false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men it excludes women from many opportunities and the true potential of women goes unfulfilled.
- Liberal feminists argue that women share the same rational human nature men do and so should be given the same educational opportunities and civil rights as men are given.
- The goal of women's liberation is freeing women from oppressive gender roles: sexual and gender equality.
- Liberal feminism led to advances in the economic sphere, in equality of opportunity and in civil rights.
- The main problem of liberal feminism is its tendency to accept male values as universal values. All women should want to become like men, to aspire to masculine values. Liberal feminism often did not include an analysis of class or sexuality (the sex/gender system).

Marxist Feminism

- Lens of class.
- influence: the philosophies of Marx and Engels
- key concepts: class, wealth, capitalism
- explanation: women's oppression originated in the introduction of private property. Capitalism is the cause of women's oppression.
- prescription: The capitalist system must be replaced by a socialist system in which the means of production belong to one and all.

- Rejection of the abstract individualism of liberal feminism.
- Emphasis on our social nature, as it is our social existence (class, the kind of work we do) that determines our consciousness.
- A woman's conception of herself is a product of her social existence which is largely defined by the kind of work she does—relegated largely to domestic work in the private sphere and the reproduction of the species (rather than production).
- With its emphasis on economic factors, Marxist Feminists see women as a distinct economic class, rather than as individuals, analyzing the connections between women's work status and their self-image.
- Capitalism perpetuates the subordination of women by enforcing their economic dependence on men.
- Impact on comparable worth debate, wages for housework, women's double-day.
- The weaknesses of Marxist Feminism include its obscuring differences between distinct economic classes of men and women and its failure to make room for issues unrelated to the nature and function of work (the sex-gender system).

Radical Feminism

- Lens of sex/gender and sexuality.
- Influence: to some extent the black power movement, other social and progressive movements of the 1960s.
- key concepts: biology, sex/gender system, patriarchy, power, dominance, hierarchy.
- explanation: women's biology is closely related to their oppression, as well as all the manifestations of sexual violence.
- prescription: generally revolves around their conception of female biology, perhaps androgyny (radical-liberation feminists), separatism (radical-lesbian feminists), recovery of an authentic female nature (radical-cultural feminists).
- Main insight: distinctions of gender, based on sex, structure virtually every aspect of our lives and are so all-pervasive that ordinarily they go unrecognized.
- Gender is the unquestioned framework in terms of which we perceive and interpret the world. Radical feminists appeal to women not as an economic class but as a class defined by the sex/gender system.
- Sexuality is the root cause of oppression—women are oppressed because they are women.
- Radical feminists, through their analysis of the gender system, first disclosed the elaborate system of male domination known as patriarchy.
- Radical feminists focus on the subordination of women as its primary concern—revealing how male power is exercised and reinforced through such practices as sexual harassment, rape, pornography, prostitution, as well as childbearing, housework, love and marriage. Radical feminists made stride in the battle against violence against women.
- In response to the almost total domination of women by men, radical feminists have tried to celebrate womanhood in contrast to the devaluation of women that pervades the larger society, focusing on the creative power inherent in women's biology.

- Biology gives rise to those psychological characteristics linked with women: nurturance, warmth, emotional expressiveness, endurance, practical common sense.
- A possible problem: in celebrating womanhood are they celebrating what has already been defined as feminine by the patriarchy? Some radical feminist theory was also biological determinist and obscured differences among women.

Socialist Feminism

- influence: Marxism, psychoanalysis, radical feminism
- key concepts: unity and integration of capitalist system and patriarchy
- explanation: women's oppression is complexly determined by a variety of forces, including economic, social, psychological.
- Socialist feminism attempts to synthesize best insights of Marxist and Radical feminism. Capitalism, male dominance, racism, imperialism are intertwined and inseparable.
- Socialist feminism remains more historical than biological and more specific than universal: recognizes all the important differences among human beings—class, sex, but also age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation.
- Women, like all human beings, are constituted essentially by the social relations they inhabit. A woman's life experience is shaped by all these various dimensions.
- Refuses to reduce oppression to one single type or cause.

Psychoanalytic Feminism

- the lens of psyche
- influence: Freud, the psychoanalytic movement, including object relations theory
- key concepts: sexuality, the Oedipus complex, id, ego, superego
- explanation: women's oppression is tied to the manner in which she resolves the Oedipus complex
- prescription: altering parenting habits, reconceptualizing the Oedipal stage; women must gain insight into how their psychic lives—especially their sexual lives—were structured while they were still infants.
- Weaknesses: is female sexuality parasitic upon male sexuality? How does psychoanalysis deal with issues of race and class?

Existentialist Feminism

- influence: Existentialism, Sartre, De Beauvoir
- key concepts: woman as "Other"
- explanation: woman is oppressed by virtue of "otherness", the object whose meaning is determined for her.
- prescription: Woman must become a self, a subject who transcends definitions, labels, and essences. She must make herself whatever she wants to be.

Postmodern Feminism

- influences: Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, other postmodernists
- key concepts: difference and diversity (race, culture, class)
- explanation: woman as difference
- prescription: by refusing to center, congeal, and cement their separate thoughts into a unified truth too inflexible to change, feminists resist patriarchal dogma.

Multicultural and Global Feminism: the lenses of sex/gender, class, race, imperialism, colonialism

- lens of imperialism or post-colonialism
- influences: civil rights movement, the post-colonial movement, multiculturalism
- key concepts: race, difference
- Multicultural feminism examines how class, race, gender, and sexuality operate as an interacting system of subordination. These are intertwining systems, transformative—not simply additive. Mends elements from race liberation, class liberation, and women's liberation.
- Global feminists address the social forces that divide women and focus on how to value cultural diversity. They examine the connections between gender issues and national liberation, military dictatorship, democracy, and colonialism. They also examine the role of women in the global economy.

Ecofeminism

- influences: radical environmentalism, animal-rights movement
- key concepts: the nature/culture divide, the relationship between human and nonhuman nature
- explanation: woman, nonhuman animals, and the environment have all been identified together as natural forces to be dominated by Man
- prescription: overcoming the rift between nature and culture, feminism must work to eliminate all forms of the oppression of nonhuman nature
- Ecofeminists argue that we will not succeed in eliminating the hierarchical relations that plague the human social order unless we also eradicate those that regulate the relationships between the human social order and nonhuman nature. The denigration of women and men of color, of working-class women and men, and of animals has its material origins in the subjugation of women by men. The male-female relationship is the paradigm for any and all hierarchical relationships.