

# The Sociology of Dorothy Smith

## 1. The Authority of the Male Standpoint

The starting point for Smith's analysis is that our culture is socially constructed. But who are the dominant constructors? In large measure, the symbols, the vocabulary, the codes of our culture reflect the standpoint of the male. Our laws and our legal system, for example, are utterly patriarchal. Virtually all mainstream religions have been concocted and perpetuated by male authority figures, and even now, the voice of women is all but a whisper. Our language is premised on the male standpoint, and this standpoint is so well internalized that even women have some difficulty speaking and writing in a voice that includes their gender. This is because men's standpoint is presented as universal, as if the notion that it could be another way is inconceivable. Try writing an essay in which you use female gender-universal language and see how much flak you will take.

"From the dawn of womankind, woman was in search of tools and techniques that she could use to make her life more bearable."

Now try to tell anyone that you were including both men and women in this statement.

Men who sense that their authority is being undermined continue to make fun of gender neutral language, or they dismiss it as being "politically correct." There is no public institution in society that does not fundamentally reflect a male history, and the authority of the male standpoint.

By authority, Smith means the ability or the power to get things done using words. Words have meaning--but they don't have force on their own. The author--thus author-ity--plays a key role. If the "author" is a man, there is a different resonance to the words than if they are uttered by women. It is not that men have any more expertise; it is that their words have more inherent credibility simply by virtue of being uttered or written by a man. Smith notes: A man's body gives credibility to his utterance; a woman's body takes it away from her.

## 2. The exclusion and silencing of women

The net effect of accepting the male standpoint as universal is that it excludes and silences women. Women throughout history have been marginalized or kept to the sidelines. Women who wanted to write often did so by assuming men's names--George Elliot, for example. Traditional women's art--the making of quilts, for example--is considered to be less important than man's art. Midwives, who once played central roles in childbirth, were removed from this role once medicine became masculinized. For a long time, women were denied access to any formal education at all, and even now, when many more women are seeking education, they are doing so in institutions which are controlled predominately by men, and they face curricula which is almost exclusively "his-story" and not "her-story." The few little niches around some campuses--women's studies programs and courses--are often underfunded, and are usually dismissed as unimportant.

### **3. Ideology and the relations of ruling**

One of Smith's points of genius is her conception of ideology. She essentially extends a Marxist conception of ideology into Freudian categories of consciousness.

The Marxist notion of ideology is one in which the ideas and images of the ruling class become the dominant ones in our culture because these same people also own the productive apparatus of society. So what you and I believe is very much conditioned by the cultural vehicles about which we have very little control. So if all the messages we get from the media are that all feminists are shrill and strident, chances are that we may begin to believe such nonsense. Sociology and other academic disciplines contribute to this ideological construction through creating the studies etc. which legitimize the ideologies and interests of the ruling class.

Where Freud comes in is that these ideological notions become organized and embedded into our deep consciousness. The messages are so subliminal, so persistent, so frequent, that we essentially sputter them out without having ever formulated the ideas independently. Thus I can ask a series of questions to my first year intro sociology class and be absolutely certain that 90% or more of the class will answer the same way using almost the same words even though all 90% would be utterly wrong. What they are spouting are not actual thoughts or ideas, but platitudes that have been planted into their subconscious from the time of Sesame Street onward. I should clarify that neither Smith nor I are suggesting that there is some form of thought police which are imposing a subversive agenda. It's subversive, all right, but the ideologies are equally accepted and believed by the ruling class.

Clearly if we are to understand the relations of ruling, it is necessary to understand the ideological context. It is obviously much easier to rule or to have authority if the person or persons whom I am trying to rule inherently accept as legitimate my version of the world and if they dismiss or suppress their own version of the world as inadequate. Statements such as "They ought to know, they're the experts." suggest a sad compliance and apathy which allows the rulers to rule.

Bear in mind that this ideological discourse is structured and created from the standpoint of men, so women are doubly victimized by the relations of ruling.

### **4. The sociology of experience: knowing from within**

One of the net effects of all of the above is that the experience of men is portrayed as objective, while what is left over for women is the subjective. The categories of knowledge that have been created tend not to give credibility to the experiences of women--as they themselves define and understand that experience.

Smith maintains that when women's lives are studied outside of the home, such as in the work place, that such experiences will be evaluated from the male standpoint of that workplace. Thus secretaries and clerical workers will be primarily women, while their bosses will be primarily men. If asked who makes the decisions, and who does the work, most "objective" observers will

put most of the weight on the male actors, because the experience is being evaluated from male categories. But if the experience is being evaluated from within the woman's framework, an entirely different picture is likely to emerge. A friend of mine--Marylee Reimer--conducted a study in which she sat beside women secretaries in a variety of workplaces. She observed and clarified the tasks of these women, and concluded that no office in her study could survive without the skills and the numerous decisions that women make every hour. That while men get the credit, the women do an extraordinary amount of work, and if there was any justice in the world, they would be earning as much if not more than their bosses.

If we move to the home sphere, the experiences of women are basically not understood or valued at all in our society. The routines of the woman at home are loose and episodic. One responds to events such as baby crying when the need is there. There is little that is linear about the work at home unlike the routines of the office or the factory. Because the work at home does not conform to male norms, it is assumed that therefore that work is not actually being done. Thus the language describing the woman who stays home to do child care, house management, and husband nurturing, is that she is "not working." This is the ultimate devaluation of women's experience.

## **5. the bifurcation of consciousness: a feminist sociology**

Smith recognizes, however, that feminist sociology cannot be just an account of the experiences of women. Traditional sociology distances itself from the "objects" of its study. The sociologist plays the role of the knower, and the field of study is to produce the known. Sociological methods are designed by and large to eliminate the subjective experience of the objects of study. Hence the fascination of quantifying things with numbers, of creating data sets and manipulating variables. Somehow, this is supposed to produce valid and valuable knowledge. By objectifying those studied, the sociologist portrays him or herself as an object as well.

But the sociologist is also a subject. And the experiences of the subjects is important. If something is going to be understood outside of the relations of ruling, then it is necessary for those experiences to be validated. This will require that the sociologist relate to the experiences of her subjects as they experience the world. She will at times give up her "objectivity" in order to understand the "subjectivity." She will play with the notions, the concepts, the words, the ideas, the behaviours of the person being "studied." This becomes one strand of the sociologist's consciousness.

At the same time, the sociologist recognizes that these experiences cannot speak for themselves. They must be seen within the larger context of the relations of ruling, the patterns of domination within society. To abandon this task would be to abandon the possibility of social understanding. Thus the sociologist plays the experiences of her subjects within the conceptual apparatus of a more abstract and mental universe. This becomes the other strand of the sociologist's consciousness.

Smith maintains that the feminist sociologist can only proceed with the task of mental production with these two strands of consciousness both at work. She calls this the bifurcation of

consciousness. It is with this bifurcated consciousness that the experiences of women can be located in their proper context.

Smith sees the everyday world as a problematic. Until the everyday experiences of women and workers and all other marginalized groups are taken into account, we will continue to have a sociology which reflects the male standpoint and the relations of ruling. Says Smith: "The work of the sociologist is to develop a sociology capable of explicating for members of society the social organization of their experiences world, including in that experience the ways in which it passes beyond what is immediately and directly known..."

Smith's task is to create a sociology which will reclaim the voice of women and all other disenfranchised members of society. It is a sociology which puts women back; which validates their standpoint. If you ask " And what about the women?" Smith will show you how to find them.