Harriet Martineau & Gender Conflict Theory: Crash Course Sociology #8

Crash Course: Sociology
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Where my ladies at?

Seriously, we've spent a lot of time learning about the origins of sociology, and all of the founders we've talked about so far have been men. That's because, when sociology was becoming an academic discipline, women didn't have the same access to education.

In fact, it was considered improper in the 19th century for women to write articles and give talks to the public. And this continued for decades, with some of the top universities not allowing female students until the 1970s. Which sucks.

But it also raises an important question: Why do women and men get treated differently? This is a question that sociologists can answer! Or, well, we can at least try to answer it.

Gender-conflict theory applies the principles of conflict theory to the relations among genders. Specifically, it looks at how social structures perpetuate gendered inequalities. Now, the functionalist approach has historically held that gender inequalities are a natural result of each gender taking on the tasks they're best suited for.

But many modern sociologists don't share this view. Economic and political power structures that reinforce traditional gender roles often cause more dysfunction than function. Restricting access to education by gender is a great example of this dysfunction: Denying women access to quality education makes our society worse by squashing the half the world's potential!

Sociology's understanding of society wouldn't be complete without the women and feminists who started the conversation about gender as an academic field of study. First stop: sociology's forgotten founder, Harriet Martineau.

[Theme Music]

Harriet Martineau was the first female sociologist, born in 1802 in England. Unlike Marx or Durkheim or Weber, who are hailed as the forefathers of sociology and get entire chapters devoted to their theories, Martineau typically gets, at most, a couple of sentences in a textbook.

Martineau started out kind of like the Crash Course of her time – bringing research to the masses in easily digestible bites. She wrote a best-selling series called Illustrations on the Political Economy, which used fables and a literary style of writing to bring the economic principles of Adam Smith to the general public. She was a favorite of many of the leading intellectuals of the time.

Even Queen Victoria, who loved Martineau's writing so much that she invited Martineau to her coronation. But this was just the start. Martineau decamped for the United States and spent two years travelling the country, observing social practices.

She went from North to South, from small towns to Washington DC, sitting in on sessions of Congress, a Supreme Court session, and a meeting with President Madison. She then captured her observations in two books, Society in America and How to Observe Morals and Manners. The first was a set of three volumes that identified principles that Americans professed to hold dear, like democracy, justice, and freedom.

Then she documented the social patterns that she observed in America, and contrasted the values that Americans thought they held, with the values that were actually enshrined in their economic and political systems. Martineau's observations included some of the first academic observations of American gender roles, and she dedicated much of the third volume to the study of marriage, female occupations, and the health of women. Despite the title of her second book – How to Observe Morals and Manners – it was not a guide to etiquette.

It was a treatise on research methodology, describing how to do cross-cultural studies of morals and moral behavior. Martineau talked about interviewing, sampling, bias in observation, the problem of generalizing from individuals to a whole society – many of the hallmarks of modern research. She wrote about class, religion, suicide, nationalism, domestic life, gender, crime, health – and this was all before Marx, before Durkheim, before Weber.

And her English translations of Comte's work on positivist sociology were so good that Comte himself told her: 3:16"I feel sure that your name will be linked with mine." But of course, Comte was wrong. Soon after her death, Martineau's work was forgotten. It wasn't until the 1970s, when feminist scholars began to revisit her work, that the full extent of her influence on sociology began to be realized.

That's right, feminist scholars. Now, I know for many people feminism is a loaded term. And I want to make sure we're clear about the historical and sociological context for feminism as I'm using it here.

Here, we're defining feminism as the support for social equality among genders. This is in opposition to patriarchy, a form of social organization in which institutional structures, like access to political power, property rights, and occupations, are dominated by men. So feminism isn't just associated with activism; it's also a scholarly term.

Feminist theory is one school of thought in the study of gender. And over time, feminism has gone through many different forms, often categorized as waves. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to look at what's known as feminism's first wave.

In the 19th and early 20th century, the first wave of feminism focused on women's suffrage – or, the right to vote – and other legal inequalities. That's because, in the 19th century, all property and money that a woman had legally belonged to her husband. Imagine that.

Not being able to earn a salary that was your own, not being able to own land, not being able to write a will. And on top of that, you can't vote, which makes it a little hard to change these things. It was these issues that prompted the start of the Women's Rights Movement, which began with a meeting of 300 like-minded women – and a few men – in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.

Early feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the meeting to put forth a manifesto on women's rights, which became known as the Declaration of Sentiments. This convention was the spark that set off the women's suffrage movement in the United States. It took many years of activism – court cases, speeches, protests, and hunger strikes – until women finally won the right to vote in 1920.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. The first wave of feminism didn't only affect legal issues. It was also where many of the ideas about societal roles of gender first got their start.

Take Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example. You might recognize her as the author of the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." But she was also a sociologist and social activist. Early in the 20th century, she published papers and books on society's assumptions about gender, focusing on marriage, childbearing, and the assumed roles of women as housekeepers and men as breadwinners.

She wrote: “There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. Might as well speak of a female liver.” Notice how she worded that – the brain is not an organ of sex.

Sex refers to biological distinctions between females, males, and intersex individuals. But gender refers to the personality traits and social roles that society attaches to different sexes. Think about it this way: Do men and women act the same way across all cultures and time periods?

If gender arose only from biological differences between men and women, we would expect to see all cultures defining femininity and masculinity in the same ways. But we don’t. From the work of anthropologist Margaret Mead in the 1930s, to the research done today by economists Uri Gneezy and John List, scientists have found that gender roles change among societies, and over time.

And this idea – the idea that gender has societal origins – has formed the backbone of the second wave of feminism. Books like The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir and The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan argued against the idea that women were a lesser sex, who should be resigned to taking care of children and the home. The second wave of feminism focused on female participation in the labor force, equal pay, reproductive rights, sexual violence, educational equality, and divorce.

This was the era of Title IX, the legalization of contraception and abortion, no fault divorce laws, and the Equal Pay Act. But it was also an era of divisiveness within the feminist movement, with many feeling that women in positions of power focused on issues most relevant to white, upper middle class women. These divisions led to what’s known as the third wave of feminism, starting in the 1990s, which has focused on broadening the definition of feminism to encompass issues of race, class, sexuality, and other forms of disadvantage.

The ideas evoked by the third wave are nicely represented by author and feminist bell hooks: In her book “Ain’t I a Woman,” hooks writes: “The process begins with the individual woman’s acceptance that American women, without exception, are socialized to be racist, classist and sexist, in varying degrees ....” That’s a heavy statement. Most people don’t think of themselves as racist or sexist. But one of the underlying ideas behind third wave feminism is the acknowledgement of the structures of power that create inequality across gender, race, class, and other dimensions of disadvantage.

There’s a term that’s used a lot in modern day feminism, which maybe you’ve heard used recently: intersectionality. So what is intersectionality? You add a little race-conflict theory in with gender-conflict theory, and a smidge of Marx’s theories about class conflict – and you get intersectionality, the analysis of how race, class, and gender interact to create systems of disadvantage that are interdependent.

The term intersectionality was coined by race and gender theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. She wrote that the experience of being a black woman couldn’t be understood just by understanding the experience of a black person, or the experience of a woman independently. Instead, you have to look at how these identities intersect.

How you – yes, you, in particular, you – see society and see yourself is gonna be wrapped up in the identities you have. I, as a cisgender white woman, will have a different experience in the world as a result of my own interlocking identities. And when it comes to our understanding of gender in this societal mix, we have to thank Harriet Martineau, whose work was one starting point from which the waves of feminism unfolded.

Today we learned about Harriet Martineau and gender-conflict theory. We also explored the three waves of feminism, as well as intersectionality. Next time, we’ll look at another important figure in sociology Max Weber.

Crash Course Sociology is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio in Missoula, MT, and it's made with the help of all these nice people.

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