
Women Who Developed Sociological Theory

Response Paper 3

Sociological theory has been criticized for many years for its exclusion of women and people of color. At a time when white males were dominant, sexism and racism were common discriminatory practices in previous centuries. There were many structural obstacles to conducting scholarly work on racial and gender research, including low chances of opportunities for education and the ability to write. While the focus of “dead white men” was concerned with solely white people, several different sociological researchers contributed racial and gender factors to the classical project.

Harriet Martineau was a social theorist in the 19th century and is known to be the first female sociologist. She noted on the bias expressed in the observations of people. When observing a different culture of people, the observers will likely cast judgment on them. In her treatise, “How to Observe Morals and Manners,” Martineau questions, “If such judgments were attempted, would they not be as various as those who make them? And would they not, after all, if closely looked into, reveal more of the mind of the observer than of the observed?” (Martineau 1838). By saying this, she is turning the observation around on the biased observer; the observer’s ability to cast judgment on other people shines a light on their own sense of morality and personality more so than the observed peoples. Martineau also noted on the foundations of tradition and modernity. She believed that a culture that bases its impression of right and wrong on past events and experiences cannot make progress in society.

Another woman who contributed greatly to research on more diverse perspectives and the ethics of diversity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was Jane Addams. In 1889, she founded Hull House, a settlement house for recent European immigrants in Chicago. This development was an effort at social reform to instill progressive ideas into the treatment of individuals with poor backgrounds. She believed that the inclusion of more diverse individuals in a team helped to develop better solutions to problems and that the tendency of people to be mean and nasty to each other is due to the fact that people often do not know or understand each other. In other words, having a broader range of diverse people one knows will enable them to be more ethically sound in their actions and morals.

Charlotte Gilman was a feminist sociologist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well, and specifically studied the basis of women’s economic dependence on their male counterparts. In her research, she stated that “we are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us, an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex...” (Gilman 1998). She implies that this phenomenon must come about as a social response to sexism rampant throughout society. In the context of a heterosexual marriage, women do not have the capacity to make decisions about the labor they must do in order to be economically supported; in many cases, sexual access for their husbands is the explanation. Because of their reliance on their husbands, the lives and activities of women are heavily influenced by them. During Gilman’s lifetime, women did not have the opportunities to be financially independent and to provide for themselves, or their children if they had any. While things have changed since then,

many parts of the world are dictated by such patriarchal views and societal norms.

W.E.B. Du Bois was a sociologist and civil rights activist in the 20th century. During his time and the critique of America, theorists of black people and women were more often viewed as reformers instead of theorists, as they would incorporate their own personal experiences to their theories. In his work, "The Souls of Black Folk," Du Bois explained the "shades of the prison-house closed round about us all; walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but the relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone..." (Du Bois 1903). In other words, he is referring to the concept of white privilege in this metaphor. White people may come across obstacles in life, but they are able to overcome them through struggle and strife. Black folk, however, cannot "scale the wall" and overcome much worse obstacles through simple struggle. Du Bois also related the term duality, which he referred to as double consciousness, to the fate of black folks. Double consciousness describes individuals whose identities are divided into multiple facets of society and it allows for the analysis of the social divisions of society. He stated, "one ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1903). This statement highlights how African Americans at that time, and to a lesser extent today, struggled with their dual selves and how the white Americans viewed and treated them. The strength that he mentions refers to the internal strength that black folk must have in order to prosper in American society, despite the "doors of opportunity" that are closed in their faces by the white Americans.

Du Bois also theorizes society as seen through the lens of marginality or racial oppression. In the structure of a hierarchical society, he saw that individuals on the outer edges of society, the margins, were better able to view the society as a whole than those occupying central societal positions. This idea is known as "privileging the alter;" by not occupying a dominant social location in society, one has a clearer view of how life operates.