



Editor's Introduction

Author(s): Joan Huber

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Editor's Introduction¹

Joan Huber

University of Illinois, Urbana

One of the men who evaluated manuscripts for this issue was surprised that "the good gray *AJS*" wanted to publish articles on women. That women are currently a subject of sociological interest has apparently surprised many people. Indeed, as sociologists we have suffered a series of collective shocks as we discovered that some of the natives in our pluralist consensual society were growing restless. In the early sixties we learned that poverty persisted in the affluent society. As the decade continued, blacks, teenagers, and women showed signs of getting out of hand; by the seventies some of the elderly were also becoming noisy. Confronted by events, sociologists typically try to make up for lost time by producing a spate of research or speculation on the latest hot topic. Although we probably know more about the total society than any other group of specialists, we are apparently unable to anticipate major sources of discontent. Why are we so often taken by surprise when some outraged group begins to complain?

Social conflict is likely to occur when some group feels that it is not getting its fair share of rewards. Sociologists often fail to spot probable sources of conflict because our stratification theories are outmoded. We need new theoretical spectacles. For the most part, our notions about stratification are a response to the ideas of Marx. The major strata that we study are descended from Marx's two great classes: the entrepreneurs and the proletariat. Aware of the shift to an employee society, we typically use the categories of white-collar and blue-collar occupations in social and political analysis. Some sociologists then conclude that classes are not very important anymore because the rapid rise of real income and the spread of educational opportunity cause the life styles of blue-collar and white-collar employees to converge; the entire society is becoming middle class. Even sociologists who show deep awareness of persistent economic inequalities in American society are not certain which classes are potentially important as conflict groups. The difficulty is that categories based on collar color no longer tell us enough about what we need to know to make sense of what is going on.

What is most wrong with stratification theory today is the assumption

¹ Those who are sympathetic to the women's movement will be grateful to the *American Journal of Sociology* for devoting an issue to reporting research about women. For their enormous help, I am deeply grateful to Florence Levinsohn and William H. Form, and to the many persons who read and evaluated the 79 manuscripts received for this issue. All mistakes are my own.

that the family remains the basic unit of analysis. That the family has changed with industrialization has not escaped notice, but the changes have never been systematically integrated into stratification theory. Owing in part to rapid technological change, certain strata within the family are systematically disadvantaged by the occupational reward system. The women's movement is a sign that it is possible to have a party with class interests which cuts across traditional class lines. The treatment of women in the sociology texts indicates that sociologists are not aware of this. Women are discussed as part of family and almost never as part of market institutions. Indeed, the categories of race, sex, and age are usually excluded from the topic of stratification in the introductory texts, in which the discussion of race is usually an atheoretical documentation of discrimination in every aspect of American life; sex refers to fads, fashions, and fancies in coital behavior; and age, to social isolation. Any discussion of stratification which makes no attempt to explain the market situation of persons in any of these categories is bound to be thin and unsatisfying.

The preoccupation with the family as the primary agent of stratification has also led to the idea that we live in an achievement society, even though a substantial majority of all Americans suffers restricted opportunity because of an ascribed status. Any woman, for example, whose daily routine includes changing diapers and dishing out the applesauce is doing semi-skilled blue-collar work, regardless of her own educational attainment or the SES level of her husband. A trick of definition—the work is unpaid—allows us to maintain the fiction that this kind of outcome doesn't really count. The anomaly that half of all Americans are expected to do blue-collar work regardless of talent and training is not discussed in the stratification texts. In the labor force, blacks clearly suffer from purposeful discrimination. Women, teenagers, and the elderly suffer from protection. They are excluded from or restricted in labor market participation for their own good because certain jobs might injure their health, interfere with their education, or damage their morals. The intent of the protective laws was manifestly benign, but the consequence is to protect a privileged position for middle-aged males by hamstringing possible competitors.

The main factor in the rise of the women's movement is the perception of occupational discrimination. Women sensed what was going on long before male sociologists became aware of it. The perception was rooted in awareness of two important technological and demographic changes. First, control of pregnancy is not only possible but is increasingly viewed as desirable. A woman who produces a sizable number of children is likely to be defined as socially irresponsible. The average American woman now has her last child when she is only 27, and she may well feel that devoting much of the rest of her life to domestic service for one adult male will keep her busy mainly with busywork.

Second, in contrast with the early part of the century, when women usually worked only until they married or had children, women today tend to return to work when their children are partly grown. By 1970 more than half of all women worked, in contrast with about 80% of men. Comparing full-time workers in the same occupations, women earn only about three-fifths of the wages of men, a fact which is remarkably constant all over the Western world. The American ideology of equal opportunity holds that equal qualifications and hours worked should bring equal rewards. But it does not apply to women.

Why women's work is less well paid is a complex question; probably the most crucial factor is the social definition of childrearing as women's responsibility. A woman is kept off the ladder for high prestige jobs because she might leave to get married or have a baby. After some years at home with her children, her skills rusted, she is easily outranked by males of the same age who have supposedly accumulated valuable occupational experience while she has been scrubbing crud from the kitchen floor and running the PTA. Only women can have babies, but the fact that women are also expected to rear them is a man-made decision. At the heart of the women's movement is a wish to share the delights and joys of motherhood. But the idea that they might be expected to partake of such joys and actually rear children—not just “help” their wives occasionally—scares many men nearly out of their wits. We should expect men in the most highly rewarded occupations, professionals and managers, to show the most hostility to change because they have the most to lose. The idea that American society is structured so that women encounter severe occupational discrimination brings forth reactions from male sociologists that are not theoretically disappointing. Let us examine a brief typology.

Although male sociologists have been sensitized to the social and psychological correlates of prejudice, their response to the idea that child care is a parental and societal responsibility to enable women to compete freely in the occupational world parallels the response of certain nonblack blue-collar workers who are afraid that they will suffer economically if discrimination against blacks should end. The full force of male hostility will be more apparent here if the reader substitutes the word “black” for the word “women.”

Simple denial occurs when a man claims that he hasn't seen any unhappy women so why stir things up. At the departmental level, he insists that sexism is not now and never has been a factor in the hiring and promotion policies of his department because no one in it is prejudiced against women. The reason more women are not hired, of course, is that they simply couldn't find a qualified woman.

Simple paranoia occurs when a man is convinced that any woman, however stupid, is getting a good job at the expense of a competent male who

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has a wife and kiddies to support. This assertion is made without a shred of evidence.

Classic liberalism is the response of the man who assures everyone that he never objected one bit to his own wife's working and he is sure that most men don't mind having their wives work. His wife has always felt perfectly free to work. She is usually a secretary or a school teacher who edits his copy after she has put the children to bed.

The *laissez-faire individualist* opposes day care centers because the care of children is not society's responsibility. It is a family obligation. And the day when the family does not shoulder its obligations will be a sorry day for America. By this he means that the father is obliged to pay for Kleenex and music lessons and the mother is obliged to wipe the children's noses and see that they practice.

The *jokester* is full of lighthearted pleasantries such as, "And how are the libbies today?" Fortunately, he has enough sense not to go to the director of black studies and say lightheartedly, "And how are the blackies today?"

The *pseudo-radical* is very serious and sincere. He is more than ready for the total transformation of society as long as it doesn't interfere with his own domestic arrangements. He becomes nervous and defensive if anyone compares women with blacks. He likes to tell women professionals that they should be ashamed of themselves for seeking their own occupational advancement in a society where so many people are so much worse off.

The *kindly humanitarian* is filled with sympathy for women. He admits that women are exploited and he is sorry, but he knows that he doesn't want to have to cope with baby's bowel movement himself. If someone isn't socialized to do the job of child-rearing, the nuclear family might wither away. The human race might even die out. So what else can you do?

The research published in this issue of the *AJS* begins to expose these legitimations for the rationalizations they are. While the situation will not be resolved in the near future, the data reported here about what is happening to women indicate that pressure for institutional adjustments will probably persist. That men will joyously accept the task of rearing children seems unlikely. Widespread day care services for young children will be the great leveler of sexual inequality. The ideology of equal opportunity is ill served when half our citizens are either kept on the sidelines or are allowed to play only part of the time.