11.3D: The Feminist Perspective

Feminist theory analyzes gender stratification through the intersection of gender, race, and class.

Learning Objectives

• Explain gender stratification from the feminist perspective

Key Points

• Gender stratification occurs when gender differences give men greater privilege and power over women, transgender and gender-non-conforming people.

• Feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities, highlighting the role of patriarchy in maintaining the oppression of women.

• Feminism focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion of male supremacy.

• Intersectionality suggests that various forms of oppression—such as racism, classism, and sexism—are interrelated to form a system of oppression in which various forms of discrimination intersect. The theory was first highlighted by Kimberlé Krenshaw.

• Intersectionality suggests that various biological, social, and cultural categories—including gender, race, class, and ethnicity—interact and contribute towards systematic social inequality. Therefore, various forms of oppression do not act independently but are interrelated.

• Mary Ann Weathers drew attention to the ways in which white women face a different form of discrimination than working class women of color, who additionally must fight racism and class oppression.
Key Terms

- **patriarchy**: The dominance of men in social or cultural systems.
- **Intersectionality**: The idea that various biological, social, and cultural categories— including gender, race, class, and ethnicity— interact and contribute towards systematic social inequality.
- **conflict theory**: A social science perspective that holds that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor.

In sociology, social stratification occurs when differences lead to greater status, power, or privilege for some groups over others. Simply put, it is a system by which society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy. Members of society are socially stratified on many levels, including socio-economic status, race, class, ethnicity, religion, ability status, and gender. Gender stratification occurs when gender differences give men greater privilege and power over women, transgender, and gender-non-conforming people.

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality, and examines women’s social roles, experiences, and interests. While generally providing a critique of social relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women’s interests.

"Women! The same rights, the same duties. ": This 1919 German social democratic election poster advocates for the rights of women. However, did white women face the same challenges that women of other races and ethnic groups did?
Feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities. Conflict theory posits that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Radical feminism, in particular, evaluates the role of the patriarchy in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, the male’s perspective and contributions are considered more valuable, resulting in the silencing and marginalization of the woman. Feminism focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion of male supremacy.

The feminist perspective of gender stratification more recently takes into account intersectionality, a feminist sociological theory first highlighted by feminist-sociologist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality suggests that various biological, social and cultural categories, including gender, race, class and ethnicity, interact and contribute towards systematic social inequality. Therefore, various forms of oppression, such as racism or sexism, do not act independently of one another; instead these forms of oppression are interrelated, forming a system of oppression that reflects the “intersection” of multiple forms of discrimination. In light of this theory, the oppression and marginalization of women is thus shaped not only by gender, but by other factors such as race and class.

Mary Ann Weathers demonstrates intersectionality in action in “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force.” In this publication, Weathers reveals that in the twentieth century, working-class women of color embodied the notion of intersectionality. The first and second waves of the feminist movement were primarily driven by white women, who did not adequately represent the feminist movement as a whole. It was– and continues to be– important to recognize that white women faced a different form of discrimination than working class women of color, who not only had to deal with sexism, but also fought against racism and class oppression.

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