

FEMINIST FAMILY THEORY

Bob and Alice Stephens were having dinner at a nice restaurant to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. Bob said to Alice, "Isn't this relaxing? A dinner alone without the kids. We should treat ourselves to this more often." Alice smiled politely but was not convinced that it was such a treat. It's true that Bob had suggested that they go out to dinner, but it was Alice who had made the reservations. In fact, Alice had also picked up Bob's suit from the cleaners on her way home from work. She had arranged for the babysitter, made dinner for the kids before she left, washed the basketball uniform that Bobby Junior needed for tomorrow's gym class, and helped little Alicia study for her spelling test before she drove downtown to Bob's engineering office, where he changed into his suit for dinner. She felt too tired and anxious to relax.

Alice had been feeling a great deal of stress lately. She enjoyed her job as a lawyer but was worried about making partner in her firm. Two men who had joined the firm after her had already achieved partner status. When she asked the senior partners about it, they explained that she was "off track" for partnership because of the maternity leave she had taken to have her children. They also indicated that her work with the Legal Aid fund was notable, but it did not bring in the kind of money to the firm that was expected of a partner. Alice worked with single mothers whose ex-husbands had failed to pay child support. But now she had to find ways to bring in clients who could afford to pay more money. And as much as she loved her husband, children, and her work, what Alice really wished for was an evening at home, soaking in a nice hot bath, with some peace and quiet to read a book.

HISTORY

Feminist family theory, not surprisingly, has its roots in the feminist movement. Feminism can be defined as the search for rights, opportunities, and identities women believe they deserve (Thomas 2000). Feminism in the United States might be said to have begun with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Women—most notably Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—fought for the right to vote, a battle that was not won until ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.

This first wave of the feminist movement was focused on securing equal rights for women, with gaining the right to vote being their primary goal. They also sought equal rights with regard to education, employment, and politics. They also sought opinions, the suffragists separated themselves and focused more specifically on the right to vote (Osmond and Thorne 1993).

Perhaps the most notable feminist writer of the twentieth century was Margaret Mead, whose anthropological research was revolutionary at the time. She suggested that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically driven. Her research in Samoa, the South Pacific, and New Guinea led her to believe that behavior is masculine or feminine is determined by the culture of which you are a part (Mead 1935). Thus, she proposed expanding our notions of gender and making them into the Great Depression of the 1930s and then the rebuilding following the war, so feminist politics were somewhat quiet in the last few decades of the first wave.

The modern feminist movement, or the second wave of feminism, began in the 1960s, concurrent with the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War protests, and the general cultural challenge to the established institutional authorities and the "status quo." Leaders in this movement, like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and the National Organization for Women (NOW), worked toward resolution of issues such as equal pay and job training for women, reproductive choice, maternity leave, subsidized childcare, and an end to sex discrimination (Okin 1997).

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by several branches, each with a slightly different emphasis. *Liberal feminism*, like Friedan, spoke out against the subjugation of women, particularly in terms of their career paths. She stressed the importance of challenging laws and customs that restricted women's ability to achieve significant roles in society. *Marxist feminism* focused on the exploitation of women in their reproductive roles and in household labor, which they felt maintained responsible for the reproduction of children, this oppression will exist. *Radical feminism* emphasized male dominance as the problem with society, specifically male power and authority as oppressive to women. Radical feminists proposed that individuals should not be limited by masculine or feminine traits but should strive toward androgyny (a combination of both masculine and feminine traits). Families, as the source for patriarchy (male dominance) and oppression of women, could not be reformed into something positive and should therefore be avoided. *Socialist feminism* focused on some liberation from the combined aspects of class oppression and patriarchy, particularly as found in families (Okin 1997; Osmond and Thorne 1993). *Cultural feminism* focused on bringing respect and value to those characteristics that are considered essentially feminine, rather than discriminating against those traits seen as masculine. In other words, they believed that we should acknowledge and celebrate the differences between men and women in order to bring equality to those feminine traits that are at present undervalued (Alcoff 1995). Most feminists in the United States today identify themselves primarily with the liberal branch of feminism (Shehan and Kammerer 1997).

Within every field of study, knowledge is advanced by pioneers who propose cutting-edge ideas. Often we see that several extreme philosophies are presented, and after a time, a middle ground is reached that incorporates elements of each philosophy

but is not as extreme as any individual one. This is also the case with feminism. By the 1980s the distinctions among the feminist branches melted away. Feminists focused on issues related to women's second-class status in society and in families, reproductive rights, discrimination faced in the workplace, and how a gendered society affects the socialization of women (Okin 1997).

In the 1960s, one of the dominant theories of the family was structural functionalism. Structural functionalists proposed that roles in families should be divided in a "natural" way, generally based on sex. They proposed that families functioned best when men did the instrumental tasks of earning money and providing for basic needs, and women did the expressive tasks of caretaking for family members (Baca Zinn and 2000). In 1972, sociologist Jessie Bernard wrote *The Future of Marriage*, in which she contradicted this perspective on marriage. Bernard found that there were two marriages—his and hers—and that his was better than hers. This finding was in direct opposition to the ideas presented in structural-functional theory.

Based on the work of Bernard and others, feminist family theorists began to consider status in families, causing them to analyze how males dominate family power, both intentionally and unintentionally. When male power dominates families, they said males benefit but females do not, thus leading to two types of marriages. Feminist family theorists recognized that male power and dominance were the result of socialization and challenged the concept that male power was natural and inevitable, as suggested in structural functionalism. Feminist scholars examined how the family was influenced by social institutions and politics and how it was affected by the wider system of societal norms.

Feminist understanding was furthered in the 1980s by the groundbreaking work of Carol Gilligan, who analyzed the psychological and internal development of women's sense of self as being different from that of men's. In her book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) explored how women defined their identities and understood reality through relationships, particularly intimate relationships. Their experiences must be taken into account in the analysis of their development; she noted, particularly as they internalized their senses of self and their moral codes. She further clarified that, for women, nonviolence and caring for others dominated their views of justice and equality.

In the 1990s, feminist scholars sought to combine both the societal and individual perspectives of oppression, paving the way for a third wave of feminism, which is still a work in progress. This perspective focused on the multiple forms of oppression that might be experienced on an individual basis as a result of societal oppression. A "matrix of domination" (Hill Collins 1998, 2000) could include oppression based on gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or physical ability. For example, although all women experience relatively less status than men, White women experience relatively more status than women of color, middle-class women have more status than poor women, and heterosexual women have more status than lesbians or bisexual women. Multiracial feminism (MRF) is one example of feminism that developed from this third wave of feminism. MRF focuses on the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity and challenges the assumption that gender is the only issue that matters. It encourages us to understand "social location" as a more complex social phenomenon (Lorber 1998). We explore this concept a little further when we review literature on Black feminism at the end of this chapter.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Although there have been many different forms of feminism, feminist family theorists generally base their work on the following basic assumptions (Baca Zinn 2000; Osmond and Thorne 1993; Sollic and Leslie 1994):

Women's experiences are central to our understanding of families. Feminist family theorists begin with the question "What is the perspective of women?" Other theories have investigated the structures, roles, and resources people bring to their relationships. Feminist family scholars focus on women's perspectives and feelings, how women have been left out of the social and historical dialogue, and how men's issues have been ignored. Gender becomes the organizing concept. For example, the concept of "work" used to mean only paid work, which used to mean only men's work. Adding women's experience to the conceptualization of the term expanded it to include the unpaid labor that women did for families and communities as well.

According to Katherine Ferguson (as cited in Osmond and Thorne 1993), "Feminist theory is not simply about women, although it is that; it is about the world, but from the usually ignored and devalued vantage point of women's experiences" (592-593). Osmond and Thorne go on to add:

By making women's experiences visible, feminist scholarship reveals gaps and distortions in knowledge that claims to be inclusive but in fact is based on the experiences of Euro-American, class-privileged, heterosexual men. Starting with the life experiences of women, in all their diversity, opens new epistemologies or ways of knowing the world. (593)

Feminist family theorists "analyze gender as a central principle of social organization and as something that all people do in their daily activities in every institution" (Osmond and Thorne 1993, 593). Two related concepts are that people exaggerate differences between men and women and that they use "these distinctions to legitimize and perpetuate power relations between men and women" (Osmond and Thorne 1993, 593).

Feminist family theory also addresses the development of women across the lifespan. Because women have been oppressed, their development has been hindered. The theory investigates how their development might be different if society did not constrain them (Thomas 2000) and asks questions about the experience from a gendered perspective (Gilligan 1982). Think about Alice from the vignette at the beginning of the chapter. How would her life be different if her work environment had a different perception of her mothering role?

Gender is a socially constructed concept. When we talk about gender, we talk about something different from sex. Sex refers to biological assignment; gender refers to "the social meanings of masculinity and femininity that are produced through social processes and interactions that produce 'men' and 'women'" (Rutter and Schwartz 2000, 61).

Feminist family theorists make the point that gender roles are defined by society, not by biology. In the past, fathers went to work; mothers stayed home. Doctors were men; nurses were women. Business executives were men; secretaries were women. Boys were football players; girls were cheerleaders. These were socially constructed roles. In today's society, gender roles are changing, but there is still resistance. Women are

members of the U.S. military, but they are not allowed in combat. Women are allowed on aircraft carriers, but they are not allowed on submarines. Contrast that with the Israeli army, in which women are drafted and fight alongside men.

Language is an important element in socially constructed gender roles. In French, for example, all nouns have a male or female gender, usually indicated by the article (*le pere*—father, *la mere*—mother). Although English is not so obvious, words still have gender connotations. Usages become so natural that the implications of words are not necessarily recognized. For example, using the term *mankind* instead of *humanity* implicitly excludes women.

A more subtle example is using the word *spinster* to refer to an unmarried, childless female. What word do we use to refer to an unmarried, childless male? There is no comparable word. We might use the word *bachelor*, but it doesn't have the negative connotation that the word *spinster* has. We define spinsters in terms of what they are not—they are not wives and not mothers (Allen 1994). Feminists pay attention to this kind of language use to ensure that women are not excluded from the social conversation.

Putting behaviors and labels together is termed *categorization*. Behaviors and roles are labeled and categorized according to gender. At a very early age, boys and girls learn what boys do, what girls do, what men do, and what women do. Behaviors by parents or other adults reinforce these categorizations. For instance, if a father were to see his three-year-old son dancing in a tutu at the daycare center, he might yell at the childcare provider, "Don't ever let my son wear that again! I want my son to grow up to be a real man!" Based on such comments, the boy might never play with a tutu again. The son's exploration in the fantasy play area of the daycare center had no social meaning until the father ascribed a gendered meaning to it.

Stratification is an outcome of categorization. Once tasks for men and women and boys and girls have been divided, people begin attributing value (even unintentionally) to those tasks. The value attributed to male tasks has always been greater than the value attributed to female tasks. People who are more highly valued have more power in society. Feminists refer to those with power as *privileged*. People with less value have less power (and are less privileged) and are oppressed because of this. In gender analysis, stratification is most commonly found when women's behaviors and roles are given less value than men's. For example, "women's work" like housework and childcare is unpaid, whereas men's work is given greater value and pay in society. Feminists seek to illuminate such status differences so that women can become empowered.

One way to do this is to bring attention to the ways in which language influences, and perhaps perpetuates, stratification. For example, a man believes himself to be an equal partner and proudly proclaims that he "helps around the house," as if this were an unusual behavior, and therefore notable. This implies that the woman is still in charge of, and ultimately responsible for, the housework, because the man is just "helping out." The old gender roles are still there. Privilege is also evident in race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, physical ability, and religion (Collins 1998). Recognizing the multiple levels where privilege is located and the language that distinguishes status is a complicated task. Many of the hierarchies we learned about were learned in our families (Collins 1998; Walker 1993), and challenging those beliefs is important but difficult.

Social and historical contexts are important. To understand women and families, we must understand the contexts in which they live. As they define roles in families, feminist family theorists look for meanings in both the social and the historical contexts. The analytical focus is not just on the individual relationships but also on the larger social forces that influence those relationships (Ferree 1990). Indeed, feminist family theorists contend that one must take the larger contexts to understand the position of women in the family. For example, the idealized concept of the nuclear family is still the norm in family research despite obvious demographic changes. The historical norm no longer applies to the larger social changes that are occurring, the nuclear family might remain the norm by which to measure; this could lead to incorrect conclusions. But if a researcher does not take into account the larger social changes that are occurring, the nuclear family might remain the norm by which to measure; this could lead to incorrect conclusions.

There are many examples of how society may negatively affect women politically, economically, religiously, socially—and those ultimately affect women of living dropping more significantly after divorce than men's; insurance paying for adoption is higher for men than for women. Many women face additional discrimination in terms of race, class, age, sexual orientation, and religion that adds burdens to their families.

Investigating the influences of religion on culture, families, and women's experiences provides a good example of taking the sociocultural context into account. In early Judeo-Christian world, women were considered property and were expected from father to husband along with a dowry of land, money, and livestock. In this practice is not acceptable in the United States, remnants of the subjugation of women are still evident in some religious perspectives. For example, predominant in the discussion of women's roles in certain Christian families is the question of whether the man is the head of the home (as Christ heads the Church), and how "head" is defined or understood. The issue of power, as influenced by religious conventions and beliefs, needs to be considered in this important social context and in how it affects women and girls within families.

Trying to understand the multiple levels of influence on women's experiences is the starting point for feminist family scholars. Analyzing these contexts is the basis for understanding how society developed particular views of what women and men should be. Feminist family scholars refer to the act of analysis as social deconstruction. The reflection on and discussion of that analysis forms the basis of the social discourse of gender roles.

There are many forms of families. Feminist family theorists broaden our view of families. The traditional view of the nuclear family is an inadequate description of families in today's society. Economic forces, divorce, and other social factors have changed the nature of the family in the United States. Today, families include long-term cohabiting couples, single parents and their children, multiracial families, multigenerational families, same-sex families, stepfamilies, remarried couples, and fictive kin.

Research data indicate that the most successful family relationships are based on loving friendship, models of equality, intimacy, caring, and cooperation. These qualities are applicable to more than simply the traditional nuclear family (Allen and Baber 1992).

Limiting families to the traditional nuclear definition restricts women's roles to a subordinate position and discounts the experiences of women in diverse family forms. *Emphasis is placed on social change.* One goal of feminist family theory is an *emphasis*—i.e., challenging the status quo. Feminists seek to empower the disenfranchised or those with less power (Solle and Leslie 1994). They advocate exercising diverse family forms, challenging sexism, and questioning aspects of our so-called diverse family forms, including homophobia and male violence, aiming to act against an acceptance of difference and diversity to human interactions. *Praxis* that we can bring an acceptance of difference and diversity to human interactions.

Not only do feminist family theorists seek to uncover gender biases, they also seek to change existing gender relations in society, in the economy, in education, and in families (Allen and Baber 1992; MacDermid and Jurich 1992; Osmond and Thorne 1993). They seek to bring public attention to what had previously been considered private issues, particularly with respect to families. Their slogan is "The personal is political." In other words, what happens personally to women has political and social impact. Given that much of a woman's experience is located within the family, one might also say that "The family is political" as well. You can see the dynamics of power in both society and in families, but power in families (whether of men having power over women or parents having power over children) has often been seen as "natural" and therefore less likely to be challenged. Although few in today's society would dispute the fact that family members should not use their power to the extremes of child or wife abuse, feminist family scholars have continued to uncover less obvious forms of power differentials, such as differing amounts of influence in decision making, uneven divisions of labor in the household, and differences in anticipated costs when leaving a relationship (Okun 1997).

One example of the personal-made-political revolves around the issue of *sexual agency*. Sexual agency refers to the degree of control one has over one's own sexuality and reproductive activity, clearly a personal and a private issue. Early feminists pointed out how power over one's reproductive capacity led to power in one's life, both personally and economically (Baber 1994; Solle and Leslie 1994; Thompson 1992). Prior to the advent of reliable birth control, women (married or not) who wanted an active sexual life had to be prepared for pregnancy. Until the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1975 was passed, women could be fired from their jobs simply because they were pregnant. Years after the federal mandate was passed, young married women were still discriminated against in hiring because employers feared that they would get pregnant and quit. Jobs, therefore, were more likely to be given to young men or single women. As birth control became more reliable and the women's movement opened the workplace, women who were pregnant and women who were mothers had increased access to economic opportunities, and therefore more power.

However, in the United States, women who are pregnant or have children still suffer economically and socially. Pregnant women cannot be fired, but the law does not require that they be paid for time taken off to have the baby. When they return to work, they often must pay for childcare, or miss out on a promotion like Alice, thereby reducing their resources. Compare this with several European countries that actually provide one-year paid maternity leave to women after childbirth and subsidize childcare so that all children receive the same quality of care when mothers return to work (Glaazer 2006).

A subtler example of the personal-made-political may be seen in how women reflect on their roles. Many women believe that they need to stay at home with their children if they can. For economic reasons, most are unable to do that, and they often report feeling guilty about it. These women, and perhaps their families and society in general, interpret their inability to care for their children and work at the same time as a personal failure (Mahoney 1996). This guilt, generally not felt or expressed by men, is an indication of how subtle and pervasive the social inequality in our society is.

There is no objective, unbiased observation of humans. Our observations are influenced by social realities. This is implied by "the personal-is-political" slogan that we mentioned about above. Something that is personal is by definition subjective and not objective.

Feminist family scholars have challenged the traditional approach to scientific understanding. Even the questions that we ask are influenced by how we are trained to be scientists (Thompson 1992). Traditional science teaches objectivity and observation free of bias, with an emphasis on neutral "fact." Feminist family scholars challenge this perspective by saying that there is no neutral observation of humans. If our social realities are constructed based on a gendered perspective, then our perspective on reality, and therefore, the facts as we know them, are socially constructed. So, the real focus for feminists is not about obtaining objective facts, but rather about understanding how people's social realities are constructed by achieving insights into their experiences (Sollie and Leslie 1994).

Feminist family scholars believe that families should not be treated as a unitary whole. If they are, the lesser voices in the family are oppressed. For example, if an abuser is asked, "How is your family life?" he might respond, "Fine." His abused spouse probably views the state of the family differently. The question should not be "How is your family life?" but rather "What is your experience of this relationship?" Feminist family scholars seek to uncover the voices in families that have been oppressed or neglected by traditional social science. In order to uncover these voices, feminist researchers are more likely to use case studies, qualitative analyses, and ethnographic studies in addition to traditional survey data.

PRIMARY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Sex

Sex refers to one's biological assignment as genetically defined at birth—i.e., male or female.

Gender

Gender refers to the social meanings and behaviors ascribed to one's sex, particularly with regard to roles and behaviors expected of someone because of one's sex. Gendered behaviors are learned as a result of socialization and are, therefore, the result of one's culture, not genetic predisposition. For example, we often give trucks to preschool boys and dolls to preschool girls as playthings, because that is what society, not

genetics, deems acceptable. In our opening vignette, Alice performs a number of functions in her marriage (e.g., arranges for the babysitter, makes sure laundry is done, picks up her husband's suit from the cleaner) that appear to be "assumed" roles for women within marriage.

Categorization

Categorization is the process of applying labels to behaviors and roles according to one's sex. Certain behaviors, roles, words, and symbols are considered "male" (e.g., aggression, playing with trucks, "strong," the color blue), whereas others are considered "female" (e.g., being nice, ballet, "soft," the color pink).

Stratification

Stratification refers to the application of value to different categories. Assigning social value to categories ranks those categories within the social context. For example, is it better to be nice or aggressive? In the first-grade classes of most elementary schools, it is probably better to be nice, and girls may be treated more positively than boys by their teachers and peers in that social context. But in the social context of a Fortune 500 company, it is probably more highly valued to be aggressive than nice, so a woman who has been socialized to be only nice and never encouraged to learn any aggressive skills probably won't ever be hired as a chief executive officer, no matter how well educated she may be.

Privilege

Privilege refers to the social status given to one with more power and value in society. The concept of privilege requires feminists to ask not only who has power but who does not, and to ensure that those who have been previously marginalized and oppressed are now included in the matrix of voices represented.

Social Deconstruction

The first step in the analysis of how views of reality are constructed by social interactions, particularly in light of how gendered meanings are developed, is social deconstruction (see Figure 9.1). It involves the consideration of how society has categorized and assigned values to behaviors and roles according to sex.

Social Discourse

The next step in the analysis, social discourse, brings the analysis of social deconstruction into the "conversation" of gender expectations and behaviors. Social discourse raises awareness of the analysis into the work of social scientists by examining the ways in which we invite people to participate in the dialogue of deconstruction, ensuring that those who do not have privilege are included in the conversations. It challenges us to question how we focus our questions, and how we analyze the data.

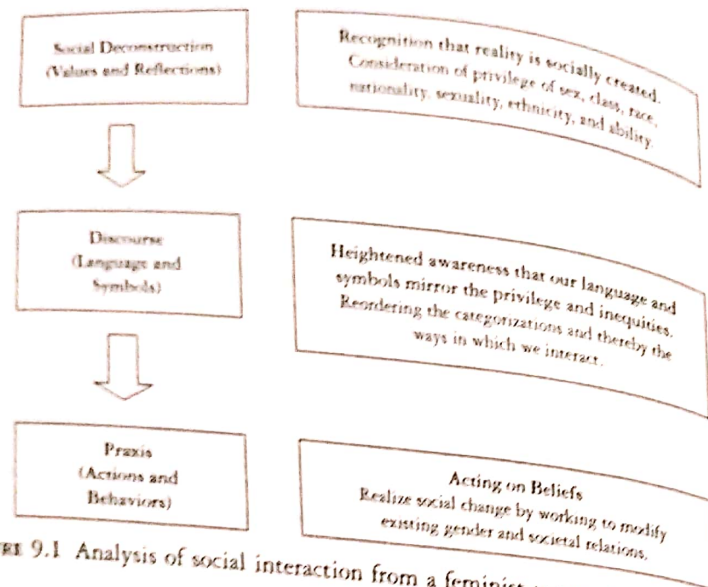


FIGURE 9.1 Analysis of social interaction from a feminist perspective.

Praxis

The step after analysis, in which beliefs and values are put into action, is praxis. For feminist family scholars, this includes advocacy for women, inclusiveness in language and behavior, and reflecting on one's own behavior with intention.

COMMON AREAS OF RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

Fetree (2010) addresses the plethora of research in the last decade that includes gender as one of its primary variables in her *Journal of Marriage and Family* decade review article on feminist theory. She points to areas such as household division of labor, work and family balance, and family diversity as being particularly inclusive, and areas such as social and family policy as being rejecting of this approach because of their feared effects on family function. Because of the exhaustive nature of the literature present in the field, this review touches on only a few examples of research done in the areas of division of labor, family violence, and Black feminist theory, or research that takes into consideration the intersection of more than one form of oppression.

Division of Labor

One of the major areas of feminist research is division of labor within the family. Labor divisions are often constructed according to gender, including both paid and unpaid labor in our society. The stereotypic family has been the traditional, idealized, nuclear family, in which the father is the breadwinner and the mother stays home to care for

the house and children. Although the nuclear family is no longer representative of most families in the United States today, we still often see people reacting to women's labor outside the home as "intrusive" because of dated societal expectations that the woman's first responsibility is to home. Furthermore, unpaid work in our society is not considered "real work." The work that is done at home—maintaining the home, paying the bills, raising the children, tutoring the children, ferrying the children back and forth to their activities, nursing, getting up in the middle of the night, cooking, and cleaning—are not considered valuable work in our society because these jobs do not produce an income (Glazer 2006).

Even as women enter the workforce in increasingly higher-status, higher-income professional roles, they are still expected to be "wives" despite their work outside the home. Many high-level corporate jobs are structured according to the assumption that a worker has a partner for support, thereby creating what is essentially a two-person career. One partner, typically the male, is expected to work long hours, as if he does not need to worry about the needs of the children and the rest of the family because those needs will be met by the wife. The outcomes of this arrangement oppress both men and women and are perpetuated by social norms that feminist family scholars challenge. Furthermore, analyses of dual-earner couples show that women continue to do the majority of household tasks and childcare in addition to their full-time jobs (Noonan, Estes, and Glass 2007).

This is not a result of income, as it has been shown that even women who are the primary wage earners for their families do more housework and childcare than their husbands. This is a result of upholding societal gender role norms. In the extreme, it has even been shown that men who are financially dependent on their wives do even less housework than other men—this is how they "do gender." They exert their power by reverting to even more traditional gender roles at home, because they cannot fulfill the traditional role of breadwinner. Thus, the more money women begin to earn within a relationship, the more threatened gender roles become, and the more traditional gender roles within the household become (Mannino and Deutsch 2007).

In her analysis of this "second shift," Hochschild (1989) found that women in general not only did more housework and childcare but also often believed that it was their responsibility. Feminist family theorists analyze this division of labor from an equity perspective and also deconstruct the reality of why a woman would believe those jobs are her responsibility.

Family Violence

A second application of feminist family study is family violence. According to feminist family scholars, in our attempt to maintain privacy in the family, we have failed in our social obligations to identify injustices in the family (Wood 1998). Families are not always the "havens of love, goodwill, and affection" that we would like to believe, and families are not safe places for many women and children.

Although some homes are places that foster support for many of us, many other homes are places where "abuse, violence, exploitation, cruelty and persisting inequities fester for far too many citizens in our country" (Wood 1998, 129). By drawing attention to such abuse in families, feminist family scholars have identified facts about families that others have ignored. For example, a violent act against a woman

is perpetrated every 12 to 18 seconds in the United States, and four women die each day because of family violence (Wood 1998).

It is important to recognize, however, that there are many types of intimate partner violence, just as there is more than one feminist interpretation of the reasons for partner violence (Johnson 2011). There has been a debate recently on the importance of clarifying definitions of partner violence, as the statistics vary from one form to the next and also vary from one data source to another. For example, Haselschwerdt, Hardesty and Hans (2010) note that feminist researchers are more likely to study violence perpetrated against women, whereas family violence researchers focus on research in the family most likely brought on by stress. The distinction is important. Feminist researchers are more likely to obtain their samples from social services aimed at supporting women who are survivors, to study intimate terrorism, which is the use of control over women through the use of violence, and to use smaller samples and more qualitative methodologies. In contrast, family violence researchers are more likely to study episodes of violence between family members that are situational in nature, which is more likely in the larger population, and to study it using data drawn from national surveys using large samples. These different foci lead to very different results. Intimate terrorism is most likely to have equal levels of instigation by men and women. Being specific about the type of violence you are studying or identifying is important for many reasons. Take, for example, people who are evaluating custody cases during a divorce. If they focus simply on situational violence, they might suggest that couples work together on a communication and parenting plan during the process. However, if the female was the victim of intimate terrorism, putting her in this situation would be risky to her overall psychological and perhaps even physical health (Haselschwerdt et al 2010).

Based on this, it seems obvious that much of the work in this area from a feminist perspective is focused on intimate terrorism. Paterson (2010) did an interesting study on the relationship between economic contributions to the family and the presence of intimate violence in the home. She suggests that, to put an end to violence in the home, we need to not only empower women within the home through their voices, but also enhance their ability to provide material resources to the relationship. Increasing women's economic standing can provide them with either an option for exiting a violent situation or an increase of power in the relationship that will allow them the voice they need to combat the oppressive situation.

Although much of the research in this area focuses on adult relationships, Burton et al. (2010) turned their attention to dating abuse in adolescent relationships. They found that adolescent girls stay in abusive relationships in order to fulfill socially constructed gender roles that suggest that being in a relationship is an important determinant of adulthood, and because they feel that they have no power in the relationship. They hope that staying in these relationships will help them develop a positive gender identity. It stands to reason that, if violence occurs in dating relationships for adolescents, it would also exist in relationships for adolescent girls who become mothers. This relatively unexamined area becomes even more unexplored when you add minority status to the mix. Dalla et al. (2010) studied Navajo adolescent mothers and their intimate partner relationships at two time frames: when the girls were 16–20 years of age and then again when they were 28–37 years of age. They found

that this population had a long history of partner violence, as well as a culture that was supportive of male behavior that was at odds with the well-being of women. Furthermore, partner violence was often found in their families of origin, was shown to exist throughout the period of this study, and was discovered to be perhaps not supported by the culture but, at the very least, ignored because of their cultural beliefs.

The idea that culture influences domestic violence was also seen in a study by Xu et al. (2011), who assessed women's experiences with partner violence in urban Thailand. They found that domestic violence was shaped by religion, culture, and social norms. For example, Thai women are supposed to be selfless, devoted, and to put family and husbands before themselves. Their religion further reinforces these notions by stating that the status of women is secondary to that of men. These ideas are further supported in their political and cultural systems, which value the roles of men over those of women. Additional risk factors included inequalities in decision-making power and lack of access to outside resources.

Perhaps it is fitting to end this literature section with a study that focuses on the other end of the lifespan, or the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of elders. It has been suggested that, as our elderly population continues to increase, the incidence of elder abuse will also increase. Brozowski and Hall (2009) found that risk factors for elder abuse include mental health issues, a history of abuse, being an unmarried female who lives alone, and dependence in the activities of daily living. Because of the shame associated with this type of abuse, it is suspected that it is greatly underreported, but it is a topic of concern for those interested in a feminist perspective on violence against women.

Although it is part of feminist family scholarship to identify the problems of oppression and inequities in our society, it is also imperative that it generates alternatives and seeks ways to empower the oppressed and disenfranchised. Feminist family scholars identify issues and also seek ways to advocate on behalf of women and their families through education and support.

Black Feminism

The three waves of feminist theory previously reviewed are based on literature that focuses more generally on the lives and experiences of women. However, many scholars believe it is important to recognize that gender is only one of many variables that can result in oppression. Other examples include race and class. Hill Collins (2000) suggests that one cannot "tease out" these various forms of oppression, and that instead we should focus on how they intersect. Black feminism is one example of research and practice that has emerged from this realization.

Black feminism takes the more general concepts of feminist theory and adds to them the element of the oppression of Black-ness in our society (Brock 2010). As Few (2007) has pointed out, this perspective allows Black women to simultaneously recognize both their sense of being a woman and their experience of being Black. This movement seeks to bring about an end to the oppression faced by Black women both historically and currently, to shape the image of Black women in today's society, and to promote activism on their behalf. They also recognize that, although they share struggles with other women based on their gender, they also face struggles similar to Black men because of their exposures to racism and classism.

Womanism is a term that came out of this movement. Alice Walker (1983) used this term because she did not want to have to use a descriptor for color, but instead wanted to create a word that was new and unique to the movement. She suggests that *womanism* is embedded in the feminist movement and is simply another layer that adds the importance of race and gender to the conversation. Interestingly, this word has been adapted by African feminists in a multitude of ways to reflect their desire to focus on family, mothering, and feminine expressions, to name a few (Jacobs 2011).

The entrance of Black feminism in its various forms into social science research and practice has been extensive in the last few decades. Few (2007) discusses the ways that it has been used in the field and provides an example of the integration of Black feminism into her own work. She suggests, for example, that while sharing insider status with the group under study can provide some insight, it also necessitates that scholars be aware of the ways they are different from their participants, as well, in order to remain true to the research process. The nature of qualitative research lends itself to continual analysis of the objectivity of the research process, but what about quantitative research? Harnois and Ifatunji (2011) suggest that quantitative research has not been as successful at recognizing the intersection of gender and race and at developing tools that can detect this nuanced relationship. It is not impossible, but more work needs to be done in this area to truly represent the lives and realities of women and men from a Black feminist perspective.

CRITIQUE

Feminist family theory can be used to analyze certain aspects of family relations. It includes a wide range of family types within its definition of a family unit. Other theories are narrower in their scope. Feminist family theory sheds light on other issues that are neglected or ignored by other theories, such as the male-oriented perspective of what was previously considered "objective" research. It attempts to lend more equal weight to women's issues in family interactions and to downplay the traditional gender roles of some other theories.

Feminist family theory is not without its critics, though. Feminism has been criticized as being oppressive to men by focusing only on issues that affect women. Feminist family scholars refute this by saying that issues that are important to women in families are important to men as well.

Feminist family theory has been criticized for working outside the parameters and paradigms of the traditional scientific base of knowledge. Critics say that, although science is not totally value-free, we should strive to present the information in the best and clearest way without becoming involved in the data. Feminist family scholars respond that, because it is impossible to be truly objective, the most truthful thing is to admit our subjectivity and work hard to reflect on our role as researchers, rather than deny subjectivity's influence in the research process.

Feminist family theorists have also been criticized for their activist position. Social scientists, maintaining an objective stance, have frequently preferred to be describers of events, rather than facilitators of change. Feminist scholars argue that it is impossible to fully embrace and understand the oppression of the disenfranchised without being ethically bound to do something to alter that reality. Issues of inequality, such

as unfair division of labor in families, limited access to economic stability and support, and ways in which society devalues women's work and limits opportunities, should be addressed by those with power and privilege.

Feminist family theorists have also been criticized for working against traditional nuclear families. But the reality is that the traditional nuclear family is no longer the dominant norm. Feminist scholars argue that the inequality within families may actually lead itself to the dissolution of the traditional nuclear family, as power differentials enter into the conversations, economy, and distribution of labor in American families.

Finally, some have challenged feminist family theory because, they claim, it pays too much attention to the oppression of one group—women—to the exclusion of other forms of oppression (e.g., by race, ethnicity, age, disability, religion, etc.). Although helping women find their voices is paramount in today's multicultural climate, exploring dynamics related to race, culture, class, and sexuality are also increasingly important (Ashner 2007). For example, standards for motherhood are often based on a White middle-class norm that leads to the oppression of working-class and working-poor mothers in today's society (Jones 2007). Thus, while attempting to decrease the oppression of mothers, women of lower economic standing are simultaneously being oppressed. Race is another variable that needs to be disentangled. Black feminism has developed as a result of the need to recognize women who struggle with more than one type of oppression, as previously noted. It attempts to find a balance between raising consciousness based on race and raising consciousness based on gender (Few 2007). Exploring the diverse experiences of women across these many variables is a challenge worthy of our attention in the years to come.

So, what is the future of feminism? Some believe that the social activism that was so prevalent and powerful in the second wave of feminism has not existed in this third wave of feminism (White and Klein 2008). Why is that? It has been suggested that feminism is still something with which many people in the United States do not want to be associated (Ferree 2010). Mitra (2011) suggests that the stigma attached to the word "feminist" exists in other, developing countries as well, including India where her research is based. In addition, some men feel as though there is no place for them in feminist movements, but Alilunas (2011) notes that having a feminist movement without the involvement of men who are willing to explore their positions of privilege and work toward greater equality seems hopeless. Our culture needs the involvement of men for real social change to take place. Thus, although feminism has influenced a great deal of theoretical and empirical research in the last decade, it has yet to return to its former place of real social impact. So, who can decide the future of feminism? Only time and the work of many women, and men, will tell.

APPLICATION

1. Alice and Bob Stephens, from the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, seem to have a good marriage, a stable family, and two secure jobs. In many ways, they are part of a privileged class. But it is clear that, at least on this night, there are two marriages—his and hers. Bob relies on Alice to take care of the "little things" that keep their family life going smoothly, yet Alice is feeling overwhelmed by keeping up with all those "little things." Answer the following questions based on their situation: