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Chapter Two Creating Knowledge: Integrative Frameworks for Understanding

As a foundation for understanding the issues presented in this book we start with a chapter on creating knowledge. Thinking about thinking can be very abstract. We assume that the key ideas from this chapter will be reinforced by subsequent lectures, readings, films, class discussions, and writing assignments. Some instructors may prefer to come back to this topic later when students have more information on thematic issues.

The focus of this chapter

- The creation of knowledge, e.g. through the "scientific" method or "socially-lived theorizing".
- The role of media in the creation of knowledge and opinion.
- The social construction of gender.
- Patriarchy as a system of power and inequality.
- The importance of understanding the intersections of gender, race, class, and nation, along with sexuality, gender expression, religion, culture, ability, age, etc. with an emphasis on "situated knowledge".
- The need for theoretical frameworks that allow students to see and explain the diversity of individual experiences as well as the structures of inequality that shape gendered lives.

Keywords in this chapter

dominant culture
epistemology
essentialism
ideology
intersectionality
media literacy
media representations
objectivity
Orientalism
patriarchy
relativism
scientific method
social construction
standpoint
subjectivity
subjugated knowledge
socially-lived theorizing

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values

Teaching goals

We want students to understand

- How knowledge is created and how they know what they know.
- That knowledge is not value-free or neutral, but rooted in specific historical, political, and cultural contexts.
- The importance and relevance of socially-lived theorizing for women's and gender studies.

Additional goals are for students to

- Think critically about what they know, read, or are exposed to through college courses, social media, and mass media.
- Think of themselves as theorists who can construct explanations of the world around them.

Classroom strategies

- See the questions in the overview essay about developing a theory of poverty and how to evaluate any theoretical perspective. The section *Questions for Reflection* at the end of our overview essay is designed to stimulate students' thinking about what they know. These could be used in preparation for class discussion, in journal responses to the readings, and in writing assignments.
- Instructors may want to collect—or ask students to look for—news clippings on contemporary topics that illustrate different theoretical approaches to the same "story."
- Ask students to look critically at media representations. How are people portrayed? If these representations reinforce stereotypes how do they do it?
- Although students are often media savvy, instructors may want to spend some time showing how to analyze media texts. The box, "Principles of Media Literacy" included in our overview essay is relevant here.
- Instructors may want students to follow a particular blog or blogger to analyze their theoretical perspectives -- see examples below.
- Some instructors may prefer to teach this topic later when students have more information on thematic issues.

Summary of readings

6. "The Five Sexes, Revisited"

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Feminist biologist **Anne Fausto-Sterling** explains that experts distinguish several levels in defining sex: the genetic and cellular level, the hormonal level, and the anatomical level. She accepts criticism of her own earlier work as overly focused on genitals, the anatomical level. She came to see that these different levels make many mixes and permutations of maleness and femaleness possible, not just two, or even five—as she had proposed. She uses this example to show how knowledge reflects and serves the interests of the culture that produces it, and also how scientists may be pushed to rethink their perspectives as the wider society changes. For example, intersex activists have confronted doctors who used their knowledge and authority to insist that intersex infants and children needed "corrective" surgeries to make them "fit" the male/female binary and this has helped to change scientific thinking. However, Fausto-Sterling accepts that medical and scientific communities "have yet to adopt a language" that is capable of describing the potential diversity of maleness and femaleness.

7. "Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us"
The late **Allan G. Johnson** argues that patriarchy is not just a collection of individuals but a system—a set of interconnected relationships, structures, and shared understandings. Its core value is control and domination. Everyone is involved and implicated in this system, even if unknowingly or unwillingly, but we can choose *how* we participate. This emphasis on a wider system is crucial. Without it, as Johnson suggests, our thinking is reduced to the personal or micro level, and discussion easily becomes bogged down in accusations, defensiveness, and hurt feelings. This article is also useful in analyzing other social systems like racism or capitalism.

8. Excerpt from "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment"
Sociologist **Patricia Hill Collins** argues that university-based Eurocentric masculinist epistemologies did not recognize traditional creators of Black feminist thought as theorists. Such thinkers included "blues singers, poets, autobiographers, storytellers, and orators validated by everyday Black women as experts on a Black woman's standpoint." She argues that standpoint is not about individual experiences but about "historically shared, group-based experiences" (1997, p. 375). Black women's standpoint exists in a context of domination, so Hill Collins refers to Black women's thought as subjugated knowledge.

9. "Decolonizing Culture: Beyond Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist Feminisms"
Nadine Naber discusses her Arab American identity and the polarization between rigid versions of "Arab" and "American" values that she learned growing up, a familiar struggle for children of immigrant parents, especially for girls. She considers the impact of Orientalism—a European fabrication of "the East" – that has been used to justify "the targeting of people perceived to fit the racial profile of a potential terrorist living in the United States" and to support "post cold war imperialist expansion in the Middle East". This macro-level context makes Arab American identity complex and contradictory, and poses a challenge for Arab American feminist organizing. Naber goes on to describe research and organizing efforts she has been involved in that seek to address these complexities and transcend polarization.

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This article provides a way to think about the significance of nation as an analytical category. It is important for US students to grasp this—not only those born elsewhere or with strong links outside the United States, but also for those born in this country who may not have thought critically about their relationship to this nation-state.

10. "That's Not Who I Am: Calling Out and Challenging Stereotypes of Asian Americans"
Whitney Pow, an artist and graphic designer, examines mainstream media representations of Asian Americans. Despite the fact that they constitute a very diverse group with connections to the United States reaching back generations, and that many young Asian Americans have a college education, the mainstream media still portray Asian Americans in stereotypical ways. Media audiences bring our standpoints to what we watch, read, and hear. The more we know about a particular group, the more we are able to judge the accuracy of media representations and to notice whether they reproduce myths and stereotypes, or romanticize, exoticize, or caricature people.

Pow comments: "As a person of color, I feel out of control when I think of the way the media has historically portrayed people like me—the eternal immigrant, the restaurant worker, the money-sucking Chinese threat; the accented, L-and-R-swapped comic relief. It's painful to see how few times I felt I could identify with people like me." She concludes that, "there is power in creating our own identities" as "queer people and as women, trans and nonbinary people, activists and people of color." A central part of this concerns media repesentations, how other people see us, and how we see ourselves.

Other readings that include a focus on creating knowledge

Many of the readings in this collection offer theoretical insights and perspectives. Several do this explicitly:

1. Paula Gunn Allen, "Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism"
2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments"
3. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement"
5. Mathangi Subramanian, "The Brown Girl's Guide to Labels"
20. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"
24. Alison Kafer, "Debating Feminist Futures: Slippery Slopes, Cultural Anxiety, and the Case of the Deaf Lesbians"
30. Rita Laura Segato, "Territory, Sovereignty, and Crimes of the Second State: The Writing on the Body of Murdered Women"
36. Gloria Anzaldúa, "The Homeland: Atzlan/El Otro Mexico"
40. Mark Graham and Anasuya Sengupta, "We're All Connected Now, So Why Is the Internet So White and Western?"
48. Annie Isabel Fukushima, Ayano Ginoza, Michiko Hase, Gwyn Kirk, Deborah Lee, and Taeva Shefler, "Disaster Militarism: Rethinking U.S. Relief in the Asia-Pacific"
49. Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey, "Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African

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Contexts”
52. Betsy Hartmann and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman, “Reproductive Justice, Not Population Control”
56. Abra Fortune Chernik, “The Body Politic”
60. Association for Women’s Rights in Development, Center for Women’s Global Leadership, and African Women’s Development and Communications Network, “Feminist Propositions for a Just Economy: Time for Creative Imaginations”

Discussion questions based on our overview essay and selected readings

These questions focus on the main points of the chapter and can be used in class discussion or writing assignments.

1. Referring to Fausto-Sterling's article, how would you answer the question: “What makes a woman a woman?”

2. What are the characteristics of a social system as identified by Allan Johnson? Why does Johnson argue that it is important to think of patriarchy as a system? Can you apply his argument to your own experience?

3. What are the key characteristics of Black feminist thought according to Patricia Hill Collins?

5. How did Nadine Naber learn about her community and identity? She argues that Arab American identity is complex and contradictory. How does she use her insights in Arab American feminist organizing?

6. What are Whitney Pow’s main arguments? What do you make of them? What examples can you think of from your own experience about negative or stereotypical media representations of your own group?

7. What are your sources of information on current events? How can you assess how reliable they are?

8. What is meant by “objectivity”? Is such a thing possible? Compare “point of view,” “standpoint,” and “bias.” What are the problems associated with subjectivity? Give examples from the readings and from your own experience.

Longer essay topics

1. Use the discussion and readings in this chapter to outline your genealogy, values, and standpoint on social and political issues?

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2. Use the points in the box "Principles of Media Literacy" to analyze media messages about feminism or an issue that matters to you.

3. Allan Johnson writes about "lines of least resistance." What does he mean by that? Why does he think they are important? Some people may be forced or may chose not to follow their prescribed position in terms of race, class, gender, gender expression, sexuality, nation, etc. What does it take to go "off-track"? What is the significance of this? How can it help in making social change?

Making connections

- This topic provides opportunities to bring in media images and examples from popular culture (including movies, TV shows, and reality TV). Since TV shows may not last long in students' memories or may not be aired next season we have not recommended specific shows. This limitation also affects written work analyzing popular culture.
- Feminist blogs – see examples below.

Audiovisual resources

Some films are now available on the web, live streamed from the distributor, or through Netflix or Kanopy.

Class Dismissed: How TV frames the working class. 2005. 62 mins. The film focuses on TV's one-dimensional representations of working class people, and looks at how class dynamics are often caught up with issues of race, gender and sexuality: https://shop.mediaed.org/class-dismissed-p77.aspx

The Codes of Gender: Identity and performance in popular culture. Sut Jhally, 2009. 46 and 72 mins. This film focuses on the intersection of gender, power and the everyday performance of cultural norms: https://shop.mediaed.org/the-codes-of-gender-p177.aspx

Generation M: Misogyny in media and culture. Thomas Keith. 2008. 60 mins. The filmmaker, a professor of philosophy, explains how hateful attitudes towards women and femininity are reproduced in popular culture--with Byron Hurt, Jackson Katz, Jean Kilbourne, Kimberly Salter and others: https://shop.mediaed.org/generation-m-p98.aspx

Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes. Byron Hurt. 2007. 55mins. This documentary addresses issues of masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in hip-hop culture. The film features rap artists, industry executives, rap fans and social critics from inside and outside the "hip-hop generation": http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/film.htm

Judith Butler: Your behavior creates your gender, 2 3-minute segments available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc

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Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, childhood, and corporate power, Miguel Picker. 2001. 52 mins. Analysis of Disney movies in terms of gender, race, and class, showing the values and attitudes propagated under the guise of innocence and fun: https://shop.mediaed.org/mickey-mouse-monopoly-p112.aspx

Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people. 2006. 50 mins. This film explores degrading images of Arabs, the origin of these stereotypes, and how they have served to naturalize discrimination and prejudice toward Arabs and Arab culture. The film inspires critical thinking about the social, political, and human consequences of such caricatures and challenges viewers to recognize the need for counter-narratives that do justice to the diversity and humanity of Arab people, and the reality and richness of Arab history and culture: https://shop.mediaed.org/reel-bad-arabs-p133.aspx

Slaying the Dragon Reloaded. Elaine Kim. 2011, 30 mins. Revisits *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) to see what has and has not changed in media representations of Asian and Asian American women in 25 years: https://www.asianwomenunited.org/slaying-the-dragon-reloaded-2011/

The Urgency of Intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw. 2016. 19 mins. TED Talk about police violence against African American women and Say Her Name Campaign: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o

Where Does the Idea of Race Come From? Tanya Golash Bola, University of California, Merced. 4 mins. https://vimeo.com/285608477

Additional resources for teachers

- Hackett, Elizabeth, and Sally Haslanger. eds. 2006. *Theorizing Feminisms: A reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hurtardo, Aida. 1996. *The Color of Privilege: Three blasphemies on race and feminism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kolmar, Wendy and Frances Bartowski, 2014. *Feminist Theory: A reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 4th edn.

Mock, Janet. 2012. "My Journey (So Far) with #GirlsLikeUs" available at https://janetmock.com/2012/05/28/twitter-girlslikeus-campaign-for-trans-women/

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Rothenberg, Paula. 2011. *What's the problem? A brief guide to thinking critically*. New York: Worth Publishing.

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- Feminism and Media

Dines, Gail and Jean M. Humez, eds. 2015. *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A critical reader.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 4th edn.

Carter, C., L. Steiner, and L. McLaughlin. eds. 2014. *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*. New York: Routledge.

Keller, J. and M. E. Ryan. 2018. *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a postfeminist media culture*, New York: Routledge.

Ott, Kate, 2018 "Social Media and Feminist Values: Aligned or Maligned? *Frontiers*, special issue: Women Digitizing Revolution. 39 (1): 93-111.

- Center for Media Literacy: http://www.medialit.org/
- WomenseNews: https://womensenews.org/
- SUGGESTED BLOGS

Everyday Feminism, a daily magazine with webinars and classes focusing on gender, race, class, and sexuality: https://everydayfeminism.com/

Feministing is an online community for feminists and their allies, that seeks to connect feminists online and off, and to encourage activism. http://feministing.com

Jezebel: This blog's subtitle is "celebrity, sex, fashion for women." It also includes topics such as body image, health, discrimination, and politics seen through a feminist lens: https://jezebel.com/

New Model Minority, a blog abut sexuality, pop culture and race. http://newmodelminority.com

Our Bodies Ourselves. This blog focuses on women's sexuality and health. It was created by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, a nonprofit women's health education, advocacy, and consulting organization, started in 1970 with the first edition of the now classic handbook, *Our Bodies, Ourselves.* https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/issues-impact/blog/

TransGriot: Written by Monica Roberts, this blog includes "news, opinions, commentary, history and a little creative writing from an African American trans woman about the world around her": https://transgriot.blogspot.com/

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Viva La Feminista. Written by Veronica Arreola, who describes herself as a professional feminist trying to navigate and understand the intersection between feminism, motherhood, and Latinidad. http://www.vivalafeminista.com

Women's Media Center FBomb is a blog/community created by and for teenage girls who care about their rights as women and want to be heard—also interesting for older students. http://www.womensmediacenter.com/fbomb/

Young Feminist Wire, created by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) to provide a space for young feminists working on women's rights and gender equality around the world to connect, learn, and share information. http://yfa.awid.org/

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