Race and Gender: Re-visioning Social Relations

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In the last decade, a new scholarship exploring the intersections of race, class and gender has developed. This scholarship not only offers to advance the social sciences, in general, but it offers a separate challenge to feminist scholarship, one which has the potential for expanding its categories and enhancing its overall explanatory power.

In sociology, the study of race, class and gender is rooted in the fields of race relations and stratification (inequality), both long-established areas of inquiry, and in the more recent study of women and gender. These, when combined with the new scholarship on women of color, have become the building blocks of what we refer to here as race-gender or race, class and gender studies. The concept of race, class and gender studies does not refer to research which treats these factors as mere variables for analysis, but instead to a body of scholarship in which they are treated as fundamental analytical categories with complex and interacting effects on human social behavior. Nor are these constructs used as descriptors solely of Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, the poor, the underclass, the working class, or of women. Instead, they are seen as categories which classify all members of our society. Everyone is affected by their location in each of these categories in the same way that we are all affected by our position in the age structure or our expectations and desires regarding sexual preference. This point, to which we will return later, is critical to
understanding the implications of the new scholarship on race, class and gender for an analysis of society as a whole.

Within the past few years, race-gender scholarship has developed with two major objectives. The first has been reinterpreting the lives of women of color by uncovering new information about their history and by analyzing their experiences with an insider's perspectivity. The second, an outgrowth of the first, has involved correcting social science and feminist generalizations about women of color and ultimately about various aspects of social life and social organization. This paper is organized around these two issues. First, it describes the distinctive features of some of the best research on race, class and gender and outlines its emergent themes. Second, it analyzes the implications of this work for the social sciences and for feminist social thought.

The scholarship on race, class and gender is just beginning to attain some of the characteristics which should accord it legitimacy within the social sciences. Perhaps the most widely acknowledged and accepted axiom in race-gender scholarship today is the interlocking nature of oppression. Stated somewhat differently, this body of scholarship is based on several basic facts:

1. First, that there are multiple hierarchies of resources and rewards, and that these hierarchies condition the material and subjective experiences of women and men
in our society. For women of color this means that their lives are affected by their location in a number of different hierarchies: as women, in the gender hierarchy; as African Americans, Latinas, Native Americans or Asian Americans in the race hierarchy; as poor, middle class or capitalist in the class hierarchy; as young or old in the age hierarchy; as heterosexual or homosexual in the sexual preference hierarchy.

2. Second, that these hierarchies are not simply additive, but that they operate in complex and confounding ways. An African American woman who is a recipient of AFDC is Black, poor and female simultaneously. She experiences the effects of these hierarchies and her location in them as a whole. She cannot divide her life into component parts and say which status has the greatest impact at any given moment. Thus, the researcher must take care in attempting to analyze or understand her life, because the combined effect of these factors creates a distinctive experience.

3. Third, that these hierarchies are structured in such a way that women of color are not merely deprived of rewards and resources because they are at the bottom. Instead, they are at the bottom because of a systematic, historically rooted denial and exclusion of rights and privileges based primarily on their race, their class,
and their gender.

This pattern of systematic exclusion or oppression is being documented in each of these hierarchies and, as pointed out above, oppression in each area interacts with that in the others to create a particular experience for women of color.

Clearly, there is no single women's experience within the varied racial-ethnic categories that constitute this group we refer to as women of color. In addition, there are no complete explanations of either the systematic interaction of inequalities or the causes of inequalities. Yet, there are sufficient data, and enough similarities and recurrent themes to permit generalizations that have implications for men, women and society in general.

In exploring the paths that have been taken in the last decade and a half, we make no pretense of being comprehensive. Nor are our observations entirely new. They build on the work and thinking of many scholars. The basic concern here is a discussion of emergent themes and their relationship to social thought, especially within the discipline of sociology and within feminist theory.

The rapid growth and momentum of feminist social thought provides a good starting place. The race-gender scholarship has been situated primarily within feminist studies. It is within this body of literature that the dialogue about the importance of
race for understanding gender has taken place. Even though feminist theory is expanding to include discussion of a variety of kinds of diversities, there are some striking parallels between the treatment of the new scholarship on women of color within feminist scholarship and the treatment of feminist scholarship within the discipline of sociology. Stacey and Thorne (1985) have described feminism as marginalized within sociology. They contend that feminist sociology has been contained within the discipline through inadequate conceptualizations of gender and ghettoization within dominant sociological traditions.

While the scholarship on race and gender is gradually entering feminist thought, it has yet to become a vital building block for major conceptualizations of feminist theory. Like the study of gender in sociology, the study of women of color remains contained within much of feminist thought. Like feminist thought in sociology, it has been ghettoized.

In a 1986 article in Signs, with Cannon and Higginbotham, we argued that exclusion of women of color limited the explanatory power of feminist theory and the knowledge we have of all women’s lives. We identified three common patterns in the treatment of race and class within the feminist literature. These were: (1) treating race and class as secondary features in social organization with primacy given to universal female subordination, (2) acknowledging that inequalities of race, class
and gender yield different experiences among women, but then setting race and class aside in order to generalize about women with as few "complications" as possible, and (3) focusing on mere descriptions of race and class differences without attempting to explain their source of broader meaning. We argued that these three conceptualizations are inadequate. They create an illusion of comprehensiveness. It was our contention then and remains our belief now that when race (and class) are set aside, even the analysis of White middle-class women’s lives is incomplete. Their lives and their "place" in society is related to where other categories of people are "placed" within the social order. So, the exclusionary practices we described, have hindered the ability of feminist scholarship to explain the "magnitude, complexity (and) interdependence of systems of oppression."

Studying how systems of race, class, and gender intersect to constrain racial ethnic women offers both feminism and social science a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which dimensions of social structure combine and interact to create different opportunities, choices, and lifestyles for different groups of people. This is one of the most important ways the scholarship on race and gender will enrich these various disciplines. In too much scholarship, race and gender are not thought of as forms of oppression. They are seen either as variables used to measure or describe characteristics of the subject; as social or cultural characteristics that explain
patterns of behavior that deviate from the social norms; or finally, as axes of stratification along which certain social rewards are distributed. However, the notion of race and gender as social structural features which are fundamental aspects of domination, subordination, power, privilege and exploitation within this society is not widely enough acknowledged, especially outside the fields of women's and ethnic studies. When it is acknowledged, thinking about social organization can take on different forms and provide new insights. What follows are examples to elaborate the contention that the study of women of color enhances understanding of how society is organized and how all people operate within it.

Themes in the Race/Gender Literature

Three themes which characterize the new scholarship on race, class and gender are the interdependency of systems of inequality; the interdependence of inequality and privilege; and the creative tension inherent in linking the lives of women of color to social science paradigms.

The Interdependency of Systems of Inequality

Central to the scholarship on women of color is the notion of the interdependence of systems of inequality. Virtually all of the research in this area has uncovered different ways in which race, class and gender intersect to create different
opportunities, choices, and life styles for different groups of people. The point is that race and gender are intertwined in a way that creates not simply double oppression or triple oppression, but a different kind of oppression. The result is a framework which moves beyond the type of analysis whereby race is thought to produce one effect, class a second, and gender a third. Instead of prioritizing the relative weight of race, class oppression or gender, or subordinating one of these systems to the other, the research provides fresh views of how these systems interact (Collins, 1986).

For example, Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s (1986) study of Japanese American Women, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride*, shows how three cohorts of Japanese American women domestic workers lived in the San Francisco Bay area from the early twentieth century to the present. The transformation of the economy and labor market in Northern California had created the need for domestic servants. At the same time, institutional racism trapped these Japanese immigrant and Japanese American women in domestic service, and a patriarchal family rooted in the rural Japanese past, kept them subordinated within their families (Cheng 1987:784). Glenn compares the experiences of these cohorts of women as they fit into the labor market at different times, and as they maneuvered within the constraints imposed by the economic structure as well as their family situations. She shows how race and gender are mediated through labor systems. Indeed, it is labor
exploitation and control that are central to the position of these women in society. But, she does more than give us an account of their structural placement in society. She also uncovers evidence of the strategies adopted by these women in the face of their social position. Rather than portraying this experience as unique, Glenn sees it as one instance of the interplay among race, class and gender shared by other women of color.

Denise Segura's (1986) research on occupational mobility and segregation for Chicana and Mexicana immigrant women provides a good example of how attending to race alters some standard assumptions about women’s labor market experience. Using life and work history data from interviews with forty Mexicana immigrants and Chicana women who were employed and participating in an adult education and employment training program in the San Francisco Bay area, she compares Chicanas and Mexicanas employed in "typically female jobs," with those in "minority female jobs" to see how the labor market affects their occupational mobility. She finds critical differences in earnings, working conditions, job ladders, and social relations on the job.

The experiences of the women in Segura's study demonstrate how both structural features of the labor market and social relations in the workplace effect occupational mobility and are shaped by race, class, and gender. The Mexicanas and Chicanas whom she studied, were employed in jobs which were segregated by
gender or by race and gender, restricting the types of occupational mobility the women could obtain. Segura found, for example, that promotional opportunities were greater in typically female jobs than in typically minority female jobs.

In addition to these barriers to occupational mobility, many of the women conceptualized mobility in a manner that legitimized their continued participation in a minority female job market. Segura uncovered important dimensions of subjective mobility—that is, the feeling of occupational betterment—and demonstrated that these feelings were shaped by the race, class, and gender of the women. For example, women who had limited occupational options saw employment in a stable job arena as a form of mobility. Similarly, women who were unsure of whether or not they could obtain any job at all felt mobile when they found employment. For others, especially those in jobs that offered greater promotional opportunities, mobility was perceived in a more traditional manner. This interplay between objective and subjective aspects of occupational mobility underscores the complex character of Chicanas and Mexicanas experience in labor markets, which are themselves shaped by the structures of race and gender.

The Interdependence of Inequality and Privilege

A second theme that has emerged in the study of women of color is the systematic interdependence of inequality and
privilege. When we conceptualize race—as well as gender—as being the property of systems, we are forced to deal with the ways in which these social systems grant privileges and resources to some racial categories and at the same time withhold privileges and resources from others. When we examine race, class and gender simultaneously we have a better understanding of a social order in which the privileges of some people are dependent on the oppression and exploitation of others (Dill 1987:16). This allows us to grasp the benefits that some women derive from their race and their class while also understanding the restrictions that result from gender. In other words, such women are subordinated by patriarchy, yet race and class intersect to create for them, privileged opportunities, choices and life styles. They may even use their race and class advantage to minimize some of the consequences of patriarchy and/or to oppress other women.

These connections between privilege and oppression are made explicit in Dill's (1988) research on family for women of color in late 18th and early 19th century America. The family lives of African American slaves, Mexicanas incorporated into the United States after the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and the few Chinese women who were permitted to join the male sojourners, exemplify both the interlocking nature of oppression and the interdependence of inequality and privilege. All of these women were subject to policies and practices which denied them
political and legal rights as members of racial and ethnic minorities. Simultaneously, they suffered particular kinds of exclusion as women in a patriarchal society. It is impossible to study these groups of women without uncovering repeated examples of the ways in which racial exclusion, patriarchy, and class oppression combined to shape their choices and chances.

In the antebellum United States, women of European descent received a certain level of protection within the confines of the patriarchal family. There is no doubt that they were constrained as individuals. But family life among European settlers was a highly valued aspect of societal development, and women—to the extent that they contributed to the development of families and to the economic growth of the nation—were provided institutional and social support for those activities. Unlike White migrants who came voluntarily, racial ethnics were either brought to this country or conquered to meet the need for a cheap and exploitable labor force. Little attention was given to their family and community life. Labor, and not the existence or maintenance of families was the critical aspect of their role in building the nation. Women of color experienced the oppression of a patriarchal society (public patriarchy) but were denied the protections and buffering of a patriarchal family (private patriarchy). Thus, they were denied the social structural supports necessary to make their families a vital element in the social order. Family membership was not a key means of access to
participation in the wider society. Their families sustained cultural assaults as a direct result of the organization of the labor systems in which their group participated. The lack of social, legal, and economic support for racial-ethnic families intensified and extended women’s reproductive labor, created tensions and strains in family relationships, and set the stage for a variety of creative and adaptive forms of resistance.

Dill’s study suggests a different conceptualization of the family, one which is not so bound by the notion of separate spheres of male and female labor or by the notion of the family as an emotional haven separate and apart from the demands of the economic marketplace. What we see here are families and women that are buffeted by the demands of the labor force and provided no legal or social protection for their existence other than the maintenance of their ability to work. This research on women of color demonstrates clearly that protecting one’s family from the demands of the market is strongly related to the distribution of power and privilege in the society. The majority of White settlers had the power to shelter their members from the market (especially their women and children) and to do so with legal and social support. People of color were denied these protections and their family members were exploited and oppressed in order to maintain the privileges of the powerful.

Another example of the relational conception of privilege and inequality is well-illustrated by Judith Rollins (1985) in
her study of Black female domestics and their White female
employers. Rollins shows how the connections of race, class and
gender structure the daily interaction among these two groups of
women. Using observational and interview data, she demonstrates
how middle and upper class White women use low income Black women
household workers to confirm their own privileged status. She
provides an excellent example of how the structures of race,
class and gender effect the experiences of people throughout the
society, not just those who are the victims.

Feminist scholarship is just beginning to reflect this
concern in a small but growing body of scholarship by White
feminists which seriously addresses the nature of privilege.
Prominent among these are works by Margaret Andersen (1987) and
Peggy McIntosh (1987).

The Creative Tension of Women of Color and Social Science
Paradigms and Concepts

Not only is the study of women of color new, but studying
Black women, Latinas, Native Americans and Asian American women
from their own perspective is also new. A third theme which
characterizes race/gender research is the tension between the
life experiences of women of color and the social science
paradigms which are used to understand or explain them. This new
scholarship reflects a firm belief that women of color are
uniquely equipped to explain their own standpoint; that the
structural location of individuals in society and the
constructions that bear on their actions can best be understood by listening to their voices. This results in a concrete effort on the part of researchers to place the voices of racial-ethnic women in the center of any analysis. However, this recentering of analysis creates its own set of problems. Segura (1986) puts it this way:

The challenge I faced in this study was to incorporate their voices into a sociological analysis to understand the day-to-day process of occupational mobility and stratification. Within this context, I joined life experiences to sociological paradigms. The resulting product is filled with tension and strain. Existing paradigms were not built on the experiences of Chicana and Mexicana immigrant women. In recognition of this conflict, I have used an integrative theoretical approach, the qualitative approach here opens the doors to another world—a world that evokes the sociological imagination.

The idea that scholarship about women of color offers a unique perspective on society and can make a potentially important contribution to the discipline of sociology has been well-argued by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) in her article, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." In this article, Collins argues that Black feminist sociologists, for the most part, operate as outsiders within the discipline, that they are
marginal intellectuals, and that they have made creative use of their marginality. The result in her view, is that Black feminist thought reflects a special standpoint on self and society. Collins argues that in the process of addressing both the omissions and distortions of Black women's lives in the sociological literature, this group of scholars has begun to generate a new body of knowledge which is distinctive in and of itself and which presents challenges to existing sociological theory and method by moving Black women's subjectivity from the margins to the center of sociological analysis. Collins' discussion focuses on the processes through which this knowledge is created - the ways in which the creative tension of the outsider-within status may yield a special perspectivity on society.

We contend that this "perspectivity" characterizes most of the new scholarship on race and gender and want to turn our discussion to some of its outcomes. To do this we ask the question: How would we re-envision society and social relations if we were to begin our analysis with women of color? The question here is not where do Black women, Latinas, and other women of color "fit" into current analytical framework, but how might those frameworks be revised if they took these women into account (Andersen, 1988). What feminist, sociological or social science assumptions, generalizations or conclusions, would change if we included race in the analysis of gender and social
organization?

Articles in our forthcoming book, Women of Color in the United States provide several different approaches to addressing this question. For example in an article entitled "Professional Black Women: Job Ceilings and Employment Sectors," Elizabeth Higginbotham (forthcoming) confronts the societal legend that upward social mobility is "the happy ending" for African American women who have achieved professional stature and the economic buying power of the middle class. Instead, by comparing and contrasting employment patterns of African American and White professional women, she argues that though both groups are contained by gender and concentrated in traditionally female occupations, African American professional women face further constraints based on racial differences. She presents data which clearly demonstrate the high concentration of professional Black women in public sector employment in contrast to professional White women who are more likely to be employed in the private sector. Some of the consequences of those differences include lower salaries and different working conditions. In this article and in subsequent work with Cannon (1988), Higginbotham challenges the traditional sociological construction of upward social mobility arguing that even in the middle class, opportunity is constrained by race and gender and that mobility itself is constructed in different ways for women of color than it is for White males.
A second example is provided by Baca Zinn who argues for a "revisioning" of our thinking about the family. In an essay entitled "Family, Feminism, and Race in America," (1990) she argues that if we were to use our knowledge of racial stratification to better understand the family - in a manner similar to the ways in which feminism has revised our understanding of the nature of family life - we would see that racial diversity is not merely a cultural phenomenon but that race is a social structural feature which denies supports to some families and makes them available to others. Thus, race places families in different locations in the social structure, locations which give greater access to resources and rewards to some families while denying it to others. As a result, some families are better able to succeed in the society than others based on their location in the racial hierarchy.

A third example is in an article by Esther Chow (forthcoming) entitled "Asian American Women at Work: Survival, Resistance and Coping." In this article, Chow suggests that American bureaucracy is not a given, but a culturally constructed form that is advantageous to some and not others based upon their race, ethnicity, class, gender and cultural assumptions about the nature of human relations in the workplace. For Asian American women, the stereotypes of obedience docility and submissiveness seem to suggest a perfect "fit" with the needs of the bureaucracy. However, the realities, Chow suggest, are somewhat
different and Asian American women find ways to cope and survive in a work environment that they find alienating and uncomfortable. It is an environment in which they are particularly disadvantaged because the gemeinschaft nature of American bureaucracy contrasts sharply with the gesellschaft nature of relations in Chinese and Japanese workplaces. As a result, Asian American women may be more easily exploited because of the combined impact of the nature of the organization, their cultural expectations of the workplace and the expectations that others have for them. These findings have implications for how we view bureaucracy and the relative success of immigrant and other non-majority groups therein.

A fourth and particularly illuminating example of the way in which race changes standard thinking within feminist social science is the feminization of poverty. Popular conceptions have treated the growing ranks of poor women as a gendered phenomenon. Yet by stressing what is uniquely female, proponents of the argument leave a mistaken impression that sexism is the fundamental problem (Sparr, 1984). Many recent critiques have made it clear that poverty in minority communities has not been feminized (Burnham, 1985, Higginbotham, 1986). Although women face distinct kinds of difficulties and hardships, poverty is the common condition of a large portion of these communities which includes men, women, and children. The catch-all phrase that "women are just a husband away from poverty" only confuses the
issue by implying that contemporary poverty is purely a family structure phenomenon. Important research that raises questions about how much poverty follows family structure and how much poverty exists before family structure changes, challenges the feminization thesis. While "event" driven poverty is more common among Whites, "reshuffled" poverty is more common among Blacks. Although changes in the family structure of poor Blacks have increased the proportion of female headed families, the members of these families are poor both before and after the family becomes a female headed household. Incorporating the income patterns associated with race and those of Black men in the analysis, shifts the focal point from gender to race, class and gender and reveals how "feminization" results in a distorted analysis of Black women's poverty, one that ignores the impoverishment of minority men and abandons a complex race-class gender analysis for one of gender alone.

Revisioning Social Relations

How do all of these aspects of the new scholarship contribute to the study of social organization? What does the interlocking nature of oppression and people's responses to it offer the social sciences and feminist scholarship? The scholarship on race, class and gender allows us to examine, simultaneously two fundamental dimensions of social organization: culture and structure. Understanding these two dimensions is
what social science is all about. This is precisely what this new body of knowledge addresses. It re-visions society itself, how it is formed, how it changes over time and how people behave within specific social settings, with their unique ideas, values and meanings.

It is our contention that the themes emergent in the new scholarship on race, class, and gender can expand and enhance social science and feminist discourse. First, this body of work moves away from the simplistic determinism of the structural victimization paradigm, and the tendency to add gender to the already vast list of variables to be measured (Andersen, 1988). In other words, it moves us beyond victims and variables. While systems of race, class and gender interlock to constrain women's lives and choices, the works that we have just described do not portray racial-ethnic women as social problems or victims. Rather, all of these works convincingly demonstrate the multiple strategies employed by women of color in order to take charge of their life within the confines of racial and gender oppression.

Such attention to the dialectical processes of subordination should go a long way toward putting people back onto centerstage without ignoring historically formed structural conditions and unequal power relations. We need equal attention to those conditions that shape opportunities and options, and to the cultural repertoire that each group has drawn upon in their efforts to survive, resist, and cope within each of these
structures. This approach resonates well with the orienting concepts of the social sciences. It is well-suited to "the sociological imagination" through its representation of the interplay of social structure and human biography.

Yet, this endeavor is and should be a two-way street. The insights offered by the new scholarship on race, class and gender can be abstracted to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social organization. The new scholarship does far more than make the social science and feminism more comprehensive. Although it expands our understanding of society beyond its current limitations, it does more than add new information to our existing storehouse. Instead, it challenges some of our basic assumptions about social relations and about why people behave in certain ways. Ultimately, it forces us to look at our most studied population - White males - in new ways. We must view them, not as the actors who set the standards by which all social action is to be measured, but as part of a social order in which their privilege as a group, is dependent upon the subordination of others. We must then look at all of these groups together and ask questions which focus upon the interconnectedness rather than the separateness of social phenomena. The crucial question that emerges then is . . . how do the existences and experiences of all people, men and women, different racial-ethnic groups and different classes shape and mold each other? The answers to this should offer a better understanding of social relations.
Studying how systems of race, gender and class interlock to constrain racial ethnic women offers sociology a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which dimensions of social structure combine and interact to create different opportunities, choices, and life styles for different groups of people. It probably provides some of the best opportunities available for exploring the sources and impact of social differences. At the same time, it presents one of the toughest challenges because it requires methods that focus upon the complexities of social phenomena rather than its isolated components.
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