

Feminist standpoint theory and institutional ethnography



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Dorothy E. Smith was born in North England in 1926. Dorothy E. Smith has lived a long life and commonly refers to it as “ a long time ago and another world”. According to Smith, she has grown from the young woman to now due to several experiences. Smith has been employed in many different capacities such as a secretary and a clerk. In her Mid-twenties, she worked at a book publishing company. Smith attempted to make a career in the publishing field, but soon realized women were not welcomed or respected. Due to the disappointing job prospects, Smith decided to enroll in college. She was accepted to the London School of Economics and achieved a bachelor’s degree in sociology with a major in social anthropology. Smith went to the University of California at Berkeley in 1955 and later earned a PhD in sociology. There she met and later married fellow student of sociology William Reid Smith. While still in school, she had two children. With small children, William left Dorothy which forced her to become a single parent. This pivotal moment in Dorothy’s life compelled her to run the household, raise her children alone and be the earner.

She taught sociology at the same university where she got her doctorate but was not satisfied with the lecturer position she held. Around this time in 1965, women’s issues were becoming vocalized. Smith was the only woman of over 40 teachers; her education still did not afford her one of the better positions. Smith was delighted that an education for a woman could empower one to gain success, but great strides were still needed. Smith heard of lectures occurring involving women’s plights, mostly ran by men, but she was still intrigued and decided to become immersed in the studies.

She organized several meetings for women to come together and discuss the inequalities they were facing at the university. She realized that the university did not have women and their descriptions in their catalog. Smith gathered all information and compiled her findings into the University of California at Berkeley's course calendar. Dorothy had a difficult time being a single parent with no day care and no family ties, so she moved her family back to her birth place of England. England was even more trying for her and she moved again to Canada.

Her sons were growing and figured Canada would be a safe bet since now the Vietnam War was taking place. Smith took a professor's position at the University of British Columbia and taught one of the first women's studies courses. Alongside Dorothy as female instructors, were Annette Kolodny, an English professor; Helga Jacobson, an anthropologist; and Meredith Kimball, a psychologist. There were scarce teaching materials, but Smith felt they were making history and incorporated their life experiences as women in the lectures.

Dorothy started to become involved in creating action groups for women to enact change for women professors at the University of British Columbia. She also assisted in establishing a women's research center in Vancouver to help provide a link to community colleges and universities. In the late 1970's, Smith and quite a few of graduate students taught in the sociology department at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education. Dorothy sensed many transformations were taking shape and knew it was a remarkable time. This inspired her to start creating sociology for women.

She respected the sociology perspectives that she learned, but was aware that they neglected to speak from a woman's perspective. Dorothy Smith is a great female sociologist who has devoted much of her time to contribute some of sociological perspectives to shape the world. As a single mother, she stood up for women's rights by publishing a lot articles which some of them are political; for instance " feminism and Marxism, place to begin and a way to go. " In terms of a woman stand point, she formed a women's action group at the University of British Columbia that worked to upgrade the women's situation in the campus community.

Smith began her journey of reconstructing the ideology of sociology of the feminine perspective at the University of British Columbia. She attributes most of her transformation of perspective to the women educators at the university at the time; Annette Kolodny, Helga Jacobson, and Meredith Kimball, as well as the 70s and 60s women's movement. The women and women's movement helped her to recognize the need for change in sociological perspective of women, for which it had previously been constructed by men. Through this recognition she began to centralize her work around her personal experience in the roles of a mother and housewife.

While she centralized her perspective at the University of British Columbia, it was at the same time she rediscovered the ideology of Karl Marx. She said that while attending the London School of Economics she had learned the teachings of his work with a distorted interpretation. Smith was influenced by Marx's writings due to the notion of his ideology about politics and the ideas and images of the ruling class and how they become the dominant ones in

our culture because the people ruling also own the productive apparatus of society.

Beginning to hone in her construct of analysis Smith began developing her work and writings with the concrete actualities of the everyday women. Smith's formulation of this work was the "Women's experience as a radical critique of sociology". This speech is the reason that Smith is highly regarded for her contributions to the "transformation of sociology". She introduced in her speech the "feminist standpoint theory", which was the addressing the fallacies that are amid the socially constructed theory of the women's place in society. Smith followed this work by writing *Feminism and Marxism: A Place to Begin, A Way to Go* (1977).

She addressed as aforementioned, the ruling apparatus's of politics explained by Karl Marx, and stigma of men being objective and women having subjective roles in society. Previous to that work, in 1975 Smith collaborated with sociologist Sara David, and wrote *Women Look at Psychiatry: I'm Not Mad, I'm Angry*. The two wrote a feminist critique of psychiatry. In 1987, Smith wrote *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. This book was framed on the current problematic reasons of why women have the continued perspective that society constructed.

The line of blame lies on media, our constituent consciousness of sociological influences, and she includes institutional ethnography as a source. Smith also wrote *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* (1990), *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of*

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Knowledge (1990), *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations* (1999). These books were all extensions of her feminist standpoint theory, explaining the way for women/people to find out more information about the woman standpoint of sociology.

Smith more recently wrote *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (2005) and co-wrote *Mothering for Schooling* — with Alison Griffith (2004). These books addressed the method of attaining information of people, incorporating the expert's (sociologist) research and language into everyday experience to examine social relations and institutions. The ideas that fundamentally influenced Smith were not solely self enlightened, rather driven ideas from other perspectives. Throughout Smith's writing career she was influenced by many theorists and sociologists.

She was influenced by theorist Karl Marx and his work in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Sigmund Freud and his categories of consciousness, rejects Vide Bierstedt's ideal sociology that everyday experience of the researcher is a barrier to knowledge, instead that every day experiences are a " point of entry". Smith was influenced by American philosopher George Mead to understanding societal roles, language, and what the mind is conditioned to believe. The women's movement also played a big role in pushing her to further her research and writings.

Dorothy Smith wrote sociology for women, which aimed to mobile women to be freethinkers and to get involved in male dominated sociology. As she put together many papers which created critical ideas for developing sociology for women and she helped to define life as a woman from the women's stand

point. Smith's task to create a sociology that would reclaim the voice of women is very impactful in an age of social change. If one were to ask Dr. Dorothy Smith " And what about the women? ", it is not wrong to assume that Smith will show you how to find them.