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EDITORIAL

Toward Women's Studies in the Eighties: Part Two

In the last issue, we outlined a new challenge: infusing women's studies into general education and basic skills programs. Here, in an issue that includes a number of lists, we will offer one more editorially: a list of “understandings.” The list below names the areas in which women’s studies has developed “streams” of courses (disciplinary and interdisciplinary), and classifies areas of scholarship from which research agendas are emerging:

1. An understanding of patriarchy in historical perspective: philosophically and sociologically; its relationship to world religions, and to ideas of knowledge and power; a knowledge of feminist theory.
2. An understanding of the complex, confusing, and still chaotic areas of biological/psychological sex differences; the importance of null findings.
3. An understanding of socialization and sex roles, as well as of sex-role stereotyping; the relationships among gender, race, and class—all from a cross-cultural perspective.
4. An understanding of women in world history, including legal and medical history—the history of birth control, for example, is essential even to the study of fiction about women.
5. An understanding of women as represented in the arts they have produced, some of which have been buried or ignored as arts—quiltmaking, for example, or the pottery of North American Indian women; and as represented in literature omitted from the literary curriculum; an awareness that the images of women portrayed by the male-created arts have helped to control the dominant conceptions of women—hence, the importance of studying images of women on television, in film, and in advertising.
6. An understanding of female sexuality, including perspectives on both heterosexuality and lesbianism; special issues involved in reproduction.
7. An understanding of the history and function of education as support and codifier of sex-segregation; education as an agent for change in the past and present.
8. An understanding of the history, function, and various forms of the family in the United States and cross-culturally; the conflict between beliefs and research findings on issues of child care.
9. An understanding of women in the workforce now and through history, cross-culturally; the economy in relation to women; the relationship between money and power in personal interactions, in the family, and in society.
10. An understanding of the relationship between laws affecting women and social change; the history of women and social movements.

The inclusion of women of all social classes, races, nationalities, and ethnic, religious, and sexual identities distinguishes women’s studies from the “men’s curriculum” that has tended to be the study of very few men “at the top.”

Throughout the list of “understandings,” two methodological issues are taken for granted. First, the comparative approach. Since most if not all learning occurs through comparisons, it would be strange indeed if the study of women did not also illuminate the study of men. On the other hand, it is possible to study cohorts of half the human race in their own contexts and on their own terms, without reference to the other half—which is what male-centered social science has done for almost a century.

Second, the documentary base. The decade has produced many full portraits of the lives of women both famous and obscure, public and private, singly and in groups, though we have only touched the surface of the material still to be collected, studied, sifted, made available. Beyond the documents, the music, the paintings, women speak mutely in statistics of births, marriages, employment, deaths. In addition, millions living and still to be born will, as researchers and the subjects of research, improve by their presence the body of knowledge on which public policy is based. —FH

* The list is also potentially useful as a curricular outline for faculty development seminars, like those organized by the editor under the auspices of the Great Lakes Colleges Association’s Women’s Studies Program at Oberlin College and Denison University last year. More on this in future issues.