

Key study sheet: Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, (1974)

Study context:

Ann Oakley's research was conducted at a time when sexism was not a widely recognised concept. Oakley, a feminist, desired for changes to be brought about regarding women's position. She wanted to show how housework in its own right was not a natural extension of women's role as wife and mother.

Oakley wanted to address the experience of housework from the point of view of those who did. She wanted to find out what women thought about housework.

Discussion points:

How might Oakley's personal views have influenced the choices she made and the research process?

Research method and sample:

Oakley conducted 40 in-depth interviews with London housewives. The interviews took two hours and she tape-recorded the conversations. The sample came from two different areas of London, one predominantly working class and the other predominantly middle class, further determined by the husband's occupation. The participants were selected from medical records from two general practices. The housewives were aged between 20 and 30 and all were mothers with at least one child under five.

Discussion points:

How did Oakley attempt to gain a representative sample?

What problems might she have faced when obtaining her sample?

Difficulties Oakley experienced:

At the time Oakley conducted her research, the emphasis was on statistical data. Researchers were supposed to be unbiased and value-free and the interpretation of data was not supposed to be influenced by the researcher's own perspective. Oakley got through this by describing her study as an exploratory pilot study which could then be developed into a more precise hypothesis.

Discussion points:

What did Oakley favour over reliable and objective data?

Why?

Findings:

Oakley's aim was to describe the housewife's situation and examine patterns of dissatisfaction. She presented her findings as qualitative and quantitative, including direct quotes alongside percentages. For example:

Dissatisfaction is higher among those who report monotony. 80% of the women who said 'yes' to the monotony question are dissatisfied with housework, compared to 40% of those who said 'no'. The conclusion to be drawn is that monotony is clearly associated with work dissatisfaction, and this is supported by the large number of housewives who mentioned monotony spontaneously at various points in the interview. A cinema manager's wife and a toolmaker's wife provide examples:

I like cooking and I like playing with the children, doing things for them – I don't like the basic cleaning. It's boring, it's monotonous.

It's the monotony I don't like – it's repetitive and you have to do the same things each day. I suppose it's really just like factory work – just as boring. (Oakley, 1974a, p81)

Discussion points:

Why do you think Oakley included quantitative data as well?

Conclusions:

The number of housewives in her sample experiencing monotony, fragmentation of work tasks and pressure of speed is compared with assembly workers. There is a close match between the frustrations of assembly-line work and housework, which gives substance to the feminist claim that housework is alienating.

Oakley is critical of work done by Willmott and Young who suggest that there is more equality in marital relationships. Her results show that a fundamental separation remains in the family unit with home and children remaining the women's primary responsibility.

Discussion points:

How relevant do you think Oakley's findings and conclusions are today?

Oakley's research approach:

Oakley abandoned conventional interviewing and did not treat the women interviewed simply as data providers. Interviewing women was a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives with the interviewer providing a vehicle for promoting a sociology for women.

Discussion points:

How might this improve the data?