

¹⁶Barbara Dubois. "Passionate Scholarship: Notes on Values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science." *Theories of Women's Studies*. G. Bowles and R. Duelli Klein, eds. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 111, 112.

¹⁷Nelle Morton cited in Adrienne Rich. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. (New York: Norton, 1979) 185.

Critique

Ruggiero's stated purpose is ". . . to expose . . . the mythology which surrounds the image of Italian American women . . ." through studies of Italian American women and the Italian American family in a "feminist framework." These new studies would offer "feminist method and content" and new, unconventional methodologies would provide a "female corrective" to the "masculinist bias [found in] traditional ethnic studies scholarship." Ruggiero's motives are laudable, but she fails to clarify either the "masculinist," "sex-typed" view point she criticizes or the new "feminist" methodology she advocates. A "selected review" of "traditional literature" she offers by way of explanation becomes a rostrum for condemnation of the "masculinist" motives, methods, and conclusions in the works considered (by R. Gambino, H. Gans, B. B. Caroli, C. Mindel and R. W. Habenstein, and others).

The "more accurate image of the female role" she would have them portray is undefined. Undefined also is the requisite "qualitative" research as basis for the methodology she advocates. Acknowledging that "we must learn to identify our biases," Ruggiero fails to offer the means by which "feminist" scholarship can avoid committing the same signs of bias and narcissism as the "masculinist" authors cited. Evidence and examples offered in support of her position are presented as

assertions such as “Sex-typed behavior . . . has devolved from the *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy) . . .” or simplistic, contradictory *non sequiturs*. What is “sex-typed behavior” and how is it attributable to only one region in one country?

In Ruggiero’s “Recommendations for Future Research,” the promised clarification of intent and methodological structure is missing. We are offered, instead, a catalogue of proverbs, arbitrary statements, and vaguely described research procedures—all labeled “misconceptions” to be identified and assessed. Absent are suggested premises and parameters for a “feminist” methodology or even rhetorical questions which might define the scope of these studies.

Among the areas of study that should be included in Ruggiero’s “feminist” methodology are:

—Sociological and economic conditions in the Italian provinces from which the subjects emigrated in their demographic representation in the communities studied;

—Generational differences in attitude and behavior within the families and groups studied;

—Differences in “public” vs. “private” behavior patterns among Italian Americans: Are these different norms limited to women only, or does the dichotomy extend to all members of the family? For whom and when is the “private” image revealed? And how valid are studies that draw only upon the “public” image?

—Is “The man is head of the family and the woman the heart” a *public* statement? And how is it translated in actual behavior and attitudes? In Italian American families, who *really* makes decisions? And how do the different family members perceive their own roles and positions in the immediate family? In the macro- or extended family? In the community? Are there noticeable differences in the ways men and women perceive their roles?

Implied, but not stated in Ruggiero’s proposal for a new methodology, is the value of studies by women, from a “woman’s point of view,” because men (whether fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons) are rarely privy to the *private* thoughts and feelings expressed by women to each other. Outside the family, men have few opportunities to observe anything but *public* behavior by women. Male strangers, coming from outside the family or culture, have even fewer opportunities. If male researchers have failed to portray Italian American women accurately, their failure is due more to genetics than to methodology.

Studies of intra- and inter-familial behavior among Italian Americans should also consider women’s roles and behavior in Italy before emigration. Did they change after immigrating? And what effect did new

economic and social circumstances have on their behavior and on the family structure? In the shaping of attitudes, behavior and relationships, what was the role of music and ethnic traditions? What functions did these traditions have in Italian American families and communities? Are there any noticeable demographic or generational differences in the extent to which “popular” (or “folk”) traditions and culture have been retained by Italian Americans?

Assuming a successful resolution of the questions raised, will studies of Italian Americans based on new methodologies and a “feminist” frame of reference provide new insights for similar studies of other cultures? Can valid conclusions be obtained from studies of individual ethnic groups apart from their social and cultural contexts? Will the results of such studies lend credence to a specifically “feminist” viewpoint? Or will these studies, instead, confirm the need for a “humanist” approach that recognizes gender-based differences in attitude and behavior as functions of the human condition and social dynamics and formulate its methodology, observations and conclusions accordingly?

— Gloria Eive

Critique

The results of the 1980 United States census indicate that about twelve million persons were reported as being partly or solely of Italian ancestry. One in twenty people in the United States or 5.4 percent of the total U.S. population claims Italian descent, representing the sixth largest group in the United States.

Given their significant representation in the population, Italian Americans are a legitimate area of investigation. It is, in addition, a particularly challenging arena for feminist scholars because of the traditional role of women in a culture profoundly influenced by the metaphor of the Madonna. As a result, Italian society has been described as a mother-centered but a male-dominated culture. That male dominance has, unfortunately, sometimes been shaped by values characterized by the following proverb:

Like a good weapon she should be cared for properly,
Like a hat she should be kept straight,
Like a mule she should be given plenty of work and occasional beatings,
Above all, she should be kept in her place as a subordinate.