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## Preface

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Deegan, Mary Jo and Michael R. Hill. 1987. "Preface." Pp. xi-xii in *Women and Symbolic Interaction*, edited by Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill. Boston: Allen & Unwin.

To us, as feminist professors, the structural inequality of women is obvious. To our nonfeminist students, however, this inequality is often invisible. They believe, optimistically, that all women's problems have been solved or will be by the time they complete their undergraduate education. They are firm believers that American society is egalitarian and radically different from the world of ten or twenty years ago. This book is oriented toward our students and our vision. We, too, believe that people are flexible and can change, and that the United States Constitution guarantees equality for all citizens. We know, however, that women's status is not radically different from its definition a century ago, let alone a mere decade or two.

Symbolic interaction unites our very different worldviews in the classroom, because it articulates a positive view of human potential and gives us the tool to show how social custom, patterns, institutions, and patterns of interaction make the rhetoric of women's equality compatible with our lived patterns of inequality. Symbolic interaction takes our everyday experiences and shows their underlying patterns of meaning.

Discrimination against women occurs in all our interactions, our language, and our daily situations. It is not something "out there" and foreign to daily life. Symbolic interaction gives us the language to discuss inequality based on the everyday experiences we share, instead of appearing to impose a radical and hostile interpretation of everyday life on students who believe that their everyday life is characterized by equality in action and opportunity.

This book is a communication bridge between feminists and nonfeminists, and it is oriented toward two particular audiences. One audience, as we have discussed, is college students. The other audience consists of apolitical symbolic interactionists. The radical intent of symbolic interaction to improve everyday life has been lost since this discipline's emergence around the turn of the twentieth century. In the intervening decades, symbolic interactionists have become increasingly silent on large social issues and actions. They have emphasized, instead, small groups and face-to-face interaction. This book speaks to the potential of symbolic interactionism to link the everyday, public actions of people with the hidden rules of social life. The study of women in the marketplace and the home has opened new theoretical doors in symbolic interactionism for professionals as well as nonprofessionals.

We hope this book is part of a larger effort to study political situations, particularly between women of different races, classes, bodily capacities, religions, sexual preferences, and ages. Only a small door to understanding inequality has been opened here; we hope it will be widened by our readers and colleagues who share our perspective.

A number of people helped make this book possible. The staff and reviewers at Allen and Unwin Publishers, particularly John Michel, have provided insightful critiques and access to their many resources as publishers. Howard E. Becker, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, Gary Fine, and John Johnson all suggested names of authors who had done outstanding work on women and symbolic interaction. The staff at the University of Minnesota-Duluth also gave us support, especially J. Clark Laundergan, Chair of the Department of Sociology, and Kathy Nelson, Assistant to Michael Hill. Grace Sheldrick of Wordsworth Associates provided excellent editorial advice.

Special thanks are due to the undergraduate students in Deegan's course, Women in Contemporary Society, who have challenged her for more than a decade to show them why they should believe that inequality exists. This tough audience has pushed her to articulate the connections between the individual and society in a way that would be impossible without their naïve optimism, hostility to feminism, and patience to endure a course in which they have enrolled. As a somewhat captive audience and captive professor, we have struggled to address our different visions of everyday life. We have been able to speak to one another, however, through the language of symbolic interactionism. We hope the same can be said of many other people.

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