

Anthro Notes

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NEW GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

[Editor's note: The following article is based on Carol C. Mukhopadhyay and Patricia J. Higgins, "Anthropological Studies of Women's Status Revisited: 1977-87," Annual Review of Anthropology 17 (1988):461-95. The authors would be happy to provide reprints of the full review. Write to: Dr. Mukhopadhyay, Department of Anthropology, California State University, Chico, CA 95929.]

Is male dominance universal? Are there any societies in which women are the rulers? The warriors? The major economic powers? When and how did male dominance arise? These are some of the questions feminists of the late 1960s asked of anthropologists and anthropological data. Twenty years later, there is still no definitive answer to most of these questions, but recent anthropological

studies of women have had a profound effect on our present understanding of human society and culture.

In the 1960s, the answers to these questions were sought first through a re-examination of the corpus of anthropological data and theory. It became quickly apparent that there was relatively little information about the female of the species, and that the existing information was permeated by androcentric bias. Female lives were seen through the male eyes of native informants, anthropologists, or both. Anthropological theory presumed that political and ritual leadership were male domains, that men exchanged women in marriage, and that cultural evolution was powered by technological advances in male activities. At a minimum, feminists argued, we must



learn to recognize and to question such assumptions.

New Evolutionary Theories

Stimulated by currents of change in their own society, feminist anthropologists more recently set about the task of formulating more comprehensive theories of gender asymmetry and of collecting new data that could help illuminate female lives, to provide a more gender balanced view of humanity. Through this effort they have contributed to a renewed awareness of how difficult it is even for anthropologists--professionally dedicated to "objectively" understanding other cultures from the "inside"--to avoid contaminating their data and theories with subtle assumptions about their own culture.

One of the first areas in which feminist anthropologists cited deficiencies in theory and data was human evolution, with all its implications about "natural" human behavior. "Man the Hunter" theories had down-played female contributions to human evolution. Such theories tended to portray proto-human society as based on male dominance, female dependency, and monogamous or polygynous mating arrangements. Feminist reaction was to formulate alternative theories that would explain the extant data at least as well, while postulating an early human society that was egalitarian, if not in some ways female centered. Isn't it more plausible, for example, to expect that the first food exchange would be from mother to offspring rather than from adult male to dependent female mate? And that among the first tools would be a baby carrier?

Studies of contemporary non-human primates, which constitute one important source of data for constructing theories of human evolution, seemed particularly susceptible to biased interpretation. Couldn't leadership in a baboon troop be coming from the core of females just as easily as from the "point men"? Couldn't their polygynous mating arrangements be as easily seen as a way for females to rid the group of excess males as it is a way for males to accumulate and control females? And wouldn't the chimpanzee, with its

flexible, gregarious, egalitarian social relations and its genetic similarity to humans, make a better model for early human society than baboons in any case? Such alternate theories have become more sophisticated and scientifically grounded, and new studies of non-human primates, contemporary hunting-gathering societies, and the physical traces of early humans have provided much supportive data. Many features of these alternative theories have been incorporated into the standard accounts of human evolution, although androcentric interpretations and assumptions also persist.

"Culture" vs "Nature," Public vs Domestic Hypotheses

In cultural anthropology the initial efforts of feminists were directed toward explaining male dominance in human societies. As in other branches of feminist scholarship, overtly biologically based explanations largely were rejected out of hand. Data were gathered to argue that male size, strength, and hormone balance were insufficient to explain male predominance in hunting, warfare, physical aggression, and male control of political and ideological spheres. The alternative explanations proposed differed most significantly according to whether it was universal male dominance that was to be explained or the particular (pre)historic conditions under which male dominance arose.

Those who thought male dominance was universal sought some other cultural universal by which it could be explained. An early and influential hypothesis was that the universal division of society into public and domestic spheres, and the association of men with the former and women with the latter, underlies women's secondary status. A related argument asserted that all peoples distinguish culture from nature, define culture as superior to nature, and associate males more closely with the former and females more closely with the latter.

These two early explanations generated much debate and discussion, stimulating new data collection and re-analysis of old data. Ethnographers cited examples of

cultures that did not distinguish between culture and nature, or define culture and nature differently than we do: they identified males rather than females with nature, or equated not the female-male contrast with nature-culture, but a gender inclusive contrast such as married-unmarried or child-adult. While the Hagen of New Guinea, for example, make a conceptual distinction between "wild" and "domestic," which embodies some of what Americans mean when they contrast nature and culture, it does not include the notion that the domestic is superior to and can control or tame the wild. The Hagen have no concept of "nature" and "culture" analogous to the Euro-American one. The Laymi Indians of Bolivia also make a distinction between the wild and the cultivated or social, which includes some but not all of the meanings of the English terms "nature," and "culture." In this case, however, when these terms are applied to humans it is the unmarried rather than women who are seen to be more "wild" and less social and the married (men and women) who are the embodiment of the social. Among the Sherbro of Sierra Leone, it is children who are seen as wild and natural and who are made cultural by their parents and by initiation ceremonies. In our own culture men are not always more closely associated with culture; in fact, women are frequently associated with civility and refinement, as contrasted with the "natural" barbarity and roughness of men. Similarly, ethnographers questioned whether a valid distinction really exists between the domestic and public spheres in foraging and other non-state societies, whether females are always associated with one and males with the other, and whether the domestic is always subordinate and devalued relative to the public sphere. Among the Sherbro, for example, men and women are both actively involved in and associated with both the domestic and the public spheres.

Most of those who did not believe male dominance was universal sought to explain its rise in terms of economics and in connection with the origin of hierarchical societies and the state. Women in non-class, communal societies, best represented today by such hunting-gathering societies as the Bushmen, Australian aborigines, and the

Pygmies, were understood to enjoy a status equal to that of men based on individual autonomy within the context of total group interdependence. Even in those "kin corporate societies" with ranked patrilineages, such as the Nuer, Lovedu, Sherbro, and many other African societies, women as sisters and co-owners of property could be equal to men. It is only with the establishment of class society and state institutions that dependency and subordination become the dominant attributes of womanhood.

While such formulations have become more complex and sophisticated, the ethnohistoric and comparative studies they have stimulated have not always produced results which fit neatly into this new theoretical mold. In many state societies, for example, women of the elite continue to enjoy considerable autonomy, power, and prestige, and some states base their ideologies and political institutions on concepts of sexual dualism or gender parallelism. Among the Dahomy of West Africa, for example, every office was held jointly by two people--a man and a woman--and the queen mother held a position complementary to that of her son, the king; a similar pattern of male and female sharing of positions of highest authority was found in other African societies, such as the Swazi and the Ashanti. Among the Incas, women also held high political positions, but they attained these either through individual achievement or succession in the female line, rather than through their kinship relationship to males. In addition, continuing reports of male dominance in even the most communal, foraging societies can only be reconciled with these theories by arguing that the reports are biased or inaccurate or that the behavior patterns reported are the result of contact with male dominant, state societies.

Sexual Division of Labor

While theorists on both sides of the universality issue sought to distance themselves from biological explanations, all accepted as universal not only the existence of a sexual division of labor, but one with near universal parameters set by reproduc-

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("Gender" continued from p.3)

tive roles. It is women's reproductive roles that lead them to be more closely associated with the domestic sphere or to be seen as closer to nature than are men. It is again their reproductive roles that cause women to be less involved in trade or in other economic activities with variable outcomes and, therefore, less able to mobilize the labor of others. At the same time they are more subject to double exploitation as producers and reproducers when hierarchical societies arise.

Newer studies of fertility, pregnancy, nursing patterns and child-rearing have shown us, however, how flexible reproductive roles actually are and the extent to which societies, families, and individual women make choices concerning both reproductive and productive activities. Women around the world control their reproductive lives by a variety of techniques ranging from abstinence to infanticide. In many societies toddlers are cared for by older children, freeing mothers for more "productive" work; among the Nandi of Kenya child nurses do more child care work than do mothers. Even infancy can be handled in many different ways. Among the Bushmen, infants are in physical contact with the mother 70-80% of the time for their first year; among the Pygmies, infants are cared for and nursed by a number of different people. Furthermore, the tendency for feminist theories to see women's reproductive roles as limiting and debilitating rather than empowering, and the associated absence in feminist anthropology of serious development of matriarchal theories, should alert us to another area in which the assumptions of our own male dominant culture may be restricting the development of anthropology.

Women in Economics and Politics

Early efforts to provide a theoretical explanation of male dominance (universal or not) as well as to document the extent of its existence, were clearly limited by the quality of the data available on women's lives and gender relations. A major effect of feminist questions, therefore, has been the publication of much new ethnographic

data on women--some of it culled from old field notes, most of it newly collected. These new data look at many aspects of women's lives, including their economic, political, ritual, and expressive activities as well as their reproductive, family, and "domestic" roles. These data derive from many culture areas and represents a variety of theoretical perspectives. Such ethnographic data can and should be infused into all anthropological teaching, and several recent reviews and guides to the literature facilitate this process. Here I can only give a few examples of the diversity of the literature and the impact it is having on our understanding of culture, and of anthropology.

Much of the new data looks at women's economic roles. Women have always worked, they have always made an economic contribution, and they have never been mere dependents. Early research showed that in contemporary hunting-gathering and horticultural societies women often contribute more than men do to the basic subsistence of the group. More recently a few cases have been documented in which women even hunt, an activity long thought to be an exclusively male preserve. Among the Tiwi of Northern Australia, for example, women hunt small animals using dogs and digging sticks, and among the Agta of the Philippines most women in nearly every age group hunt regularly using the same tools and techniques men use. While the existence of women hunters has challenged previous ideas about the limitations placed on women by size, strength, and reproductive roles, more careful attention to women's work has also challenged the way we define work. It has made us more aware that our definition of processing activities as domestic, and domestic activities as less important, has made us discount much of women's work in non-industrial societies, just as counting only wage labor as work has led economists, sociologists, and historians to ignore women's economic contributions to industrial society.

At the same time, studies of women's economic activities has also shown that making a large contribution, even through basic subsistence activities, does not

necessarily entail economic power or social prestige (although control over the early stages in a production/distribution process may help to establish control over the entire process). Among New Guinea horticulturalists, such as the Hagen, women commonly do the bulk of the crop cultivation and also the raising of pigs, yet most ethnographers have seen these as highly male dominant societies. Feminist anthropologists turned their attention, therefore, to distribution and its control, to women's activities in exchange systems, and to more direct studies of decision-making, leadership, and politics. While a matriarchal society, in which women dominate men and regularly hold top positions of power and authority is yet to be documented, anthropologists are noting a larger number of societies in which women, individually or collectively, do hold leadership positions of considerable power. A classic example is the Iroquois, where women selected and could depose the chief, although that position was always held by a male. Other examples include the Inca and African societies cited above. Closer study has also shown the many ways in which women are involved in and influence decision-making, even in what appear to be the most male dominant societies. Considerable evidence now exists, for example, that New Guinea women, far from being powerless, make key political decisions in allotting pigs and shaping the exchange relationships of the men.

As in the realm of economics, the study of women in politics has had as much of an impact on the way we look at politics as it has on the way we look at women. Informal decision-making, for example, can be as important as the formal variety, whether it is women, men, or both who are involved, and decisions affecting society as a whole can be made from within the domestic sphere. The study of women in politics has also made us aware of our androcentric biases, as we see how often ethnographers treat women's talk as gossip (but men's as information exchange and networking) and women's organizations as recreational or even frivolous rather than bases for political power.

Biases in Interpretation

Investigations of family roles, the one area in which women were likely to be found in the older ethnographies, have also taken new directions in response to feminist interests. Recent studies look beyond woman as wife and as mother of young children, to woman as sister, aunt, co-wife, mother of adult children, or active agent in extended kinship networks. The arrangement of marriages in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Middle Eastern societies, for example, is largely handled by older women (who, after all, are the only members of the groom's family able to meet and observe prospective brides in sex-segregated societies), although decisions may be announced by males. Our culture's definition of the family as a nuclear, child rearing unit and our idealization of young adulthood, especially for women, has imposed narrow blinders on our view of women in other cultures. As we increasingly note the power and prestige that older women have in many societies--societies as varied as the Iroquois, the Yanomamo, the Chinese, and the Indian--we see how deviant, in cross-cultural terms, our own society is. At the same time, the common attribution of this power and prestige of elder women to "freedom" from childbearing, rather than to the mobilization of adult offspring as a source of labor or as a core political following, serves as another illustration of subtle biases in our interpretation of other cultures.

As feminist anthropologists have become more conscious of the extent to which the assumptions of our own culture color our work as anthropologists, they have also become more involved in studies of American culture. A surprisingly large number of those anthropologists who contributed to the earliest feminist reformulations of the 1970s have, in the 1980s, turned to research in the United States, where they have been joined by other, relative newcomers to the field. As a result, we now have ethnographically based studies of American women's (paid) work and work cultures; of their family and kinship activities; of their reproductive lives and concepts of body; of the domestic division of labor and decision-making; and

of social issues of great consequence to women such as abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and conservative feminism. In the study of women in the United States, as in other culture areas, attention has come to focus increasingly on the diversity of women's lives and on ideologies of gender and their impact on our actions.

Overall, the anthropological study of women has moved, in these two decades, from a search for broadly applicable explanations of male dominance to the study of inter-cultural and intracultural variability in women's lives, male-female relationships, and gender concepts. We have found that the biological differences between the sexes, whether in reproductive functions, body structure, or hormone balance, impose few absolute constraints and are themselves interpreted and given cultural meaning in a wide variety of ways. We have also found that the many roles women occupy, often simultaneously, may confer different degrees of power, authority, and prestige, and that there may be no one "status of women" in any single society, let alone cross-culturally. Our measures of women's status have been shown to be biased by the values of our culture--values that may not be shared by women of other cultures. We have been led to question not only the old androcentric paradigms, but also the new feminist alternatives as we try to free ourselves of Western cultural assumptions--such as the primacy of the individual and of material production. In the process, the focus has shifted from the study of women to the study of gender--an analytical concept comparable to kinship, economics, and politics--and a position from which the anthropological study of women should have an even stronger impact on anthropology as a whole.

Recommended reading:

- Ortner, S. B. and H. Whitehead, eds. *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. and L. Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.
- Sacks, Karen. *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979.
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Department of Anthropology
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- Collier, J. F. and S. J. Yanagisako, eds. *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.
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