

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

MARILYN STRATHERN

Whether phrased as an interest in sex roles (Schlegel 1977; Sanday 1981), gender constructs (Ortner and Whitehead 1981) or feminist anthropology (Rapp 1979; Atkinson 1982), the question of inequality has dominated recent anthropological approaches to the study of male–female relations. It has dominated by dividing. Time and again writers recreate a split, as for instance between

those that consider inequality to be conditioned by relations of production or distribution that arise historically...and those that trace it ultimately to fundamental biological differences between the sexes, and thereby are universal. (Schlegel 1977:10)

Universal inequality is not always related to biological causes; it is also possible to talk of cultural or social universals (Ortner 1974; Rosaldo 1974;1980a). The split thus appears to be generally between evolutionists and universalists (Bell 1983:245). We have here a debate, then, in which explicit positions are taken in relation to inequalities between the sexes. The significant issue becomes whether such inequalities ‘exist’ everywhere. Anthropology is drawn into this project for its cross-cultural expertise.

By way of example one may cite Schlegel’s comparative approach to a theory of sexual stratification. She differentiates various dimensions of stratification (rewards, prestige and power) in order to assess both the relative status of the sexes within a given society, and the variables which determine that relative sexual status – ‘the factors that shape equality or inequality’ (1977:17). Although she concludes that explanations must be directed to the problems which arise for each society ‘in terms of the forces to which it is responsive’ (1977:356), Schlegel’s cross-cultural project is echoed in Sanday’s exploration of why cultures select different styles of interaction between the sexes ‘Why is there sexual symmetry in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - *Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond*

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Introduction*

some instances and asymmetry in others?’ (1981:4). Male dominance, Sanday asserts, is not universal. Rather,

male dominance and female power are consequences of the way in which peoples come to terms with their historical and natural environments ... Power is accorded to whichever sex is thought to embody or to be in touch with the forces upon which people depend for their perceived needs. Conceiving power in this way, one can say that in some societies women have more power, or men have more, or both sexes have an approximately equal amount. (1981:11)

Sanday’s models for measuring female power and male dominance allow her to adjudicate in particular instances about the equal or unequal possession of power by one or other sex.

The present volume makes a contribution to this debate from another vantage point. It is non-adjudicatory in character, non-exclusive in method. Rather than foreshadowing a conclusion about the prevalence of sexual inequality (for instance ‘universalist’ or not) or following dominant theoretical suppositions (whether or not it espouses ‘a culturalist’ approach), it draws attention to problems in anthropological practice. To regard ourselves as dealing with inequality is to make an explicit stand in relation to the analytical activity which here defines us: how we make known to ourselves that inequalities exist.

Dealing with inequality

It is helpful to the construction of such a vantage point that the cases it presents are drawn from a single region – the islands of the Southwestern Pacific – though we have taken advantage of setting off this material against two studies which lie culturally beyond them. Most chapters deal with societies from Melanesia. These, and the one eastern Indonesian society, share many cultural features, and some speak related languages. The peoples of this region are characterisable as ‘egalitarian’ in world terms: horticulturalists, whose local organisations are small scale, and whose cultural efflorescence is to be found in institutions based on wealth exchanges and life cycle events. Big men and institutionalised ranking flourish to a lesser or greater degree, but nowhere is property ownership in land or the alienability of labour a systematic basis for social discrimination between men.

Yet egalitarianism stops short of relations between men and women. Sexual inequality strikes the outside observer; Leacock, for instance, argues that male dominance emerges in parts of this area (specifically the New Guinea Highlands) as a consequence of men’s competition with women for control of what women produce (1981:294). Much of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 3

observed asymmetry concerns overt differentials in the distribution of rewards and prestige to men and women, in their participation in public ceremonial, and in their effectiveness as managers of events. And it is no new observation to note that where inequalities are structured between men, it is most dramatically through their relations with or via women (Forge 1972; Rubin 1975; and see Chowning 1977:57). 'Sexual antagonism' (as between spouses) has been an organising metaphor for gender studies in large areas of Papua New Guinea (e.g. Herdt and Poole 1982); while for the Pacific in general adjudications have been made about the degree of 'complementarity' between the sexes in sibling relations (e.g. Marshall 1983).

By contrast with the Polynesian systems reviewed by Ortner (1981) or central Indonesian societies (for one pertinent discussion, see Millar 1983), hierarchical relations are most visibly constituted on the basis of gender itself.¹ Thus asymmetries appear to turn on unequal relations created by kin ties reckoned through women, or on the unequal allocation of power to the sexes, or most dramatically on the necessity for one sex to withdraw from the other and elaborate its own internal distinctions in exclusive cult practice. In other words, inequalities between men and women seem to be 'about' themselves. Gender symbolism turns in on itself: it appears to organise relations between the sexes, and it appears that these relations comprise the principal locus of social inequality.

Devereaux's chapter on Mexico underscores the interest of the Pacific vantage point. The very different egalitarianism of Zinacanteco ideology is contextualised by a particular ethnic position. The manner in which members of this Mayan community categorise men's and women's behaviour, as a matter of manifested cultural form, speaks to ethnicity as much as it does to gender. Internal equality is set against what Devereaux calls the pressures of external economic and political hegemony. Significantly, such inequality as exists within the community also turns on differential access to economic and political resources.

For the Pacific systems reported upon here, however, what happens to the sexes cannot be taken as a reflection of other orders of inequality. The symbolised relations between them do not simply 'represent' or 'express' the colonial encounter, or class struggle or ethnic stratification. Relations between men and women themselves appear as both chief cause and chief result of inequality. A similar conflation is the starting point for Collier and Rosaldo's (1981) examination of simple societies. They are concerned largely with the same kind of context as Bell's (Chapter 4): systems based on hunting and gathering where relationships are organised through interpersonal claims to services. The Melanesian-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *Introduction*

ists in this volume, on the other hand, are dealing with systems where wealth items move between persons and stand for the claims which link them. Relationships become mediated through such transactions. Indeed, the emphasis which Melanesian societies put on wealth exchange emerges as their single most distinctive feature. This is crucial to several of the analyses which follow. Men's and women's differential participation in public wealth transactions is examined as a principal locus of the difference between them.

It is clear that if the major organisational divide in these societies concerns that between the sexes themselves, the manner in which we might explain this phenomenon becomes highly circumscribed. We certainly cannot excise discrete variables nor extract explanatory principles out of its constituent parts, out of the mode of descent organisation, cult activity or beliefs about the respective powers of the sexes (cf. Lederman 1983), for these are elements of the phenomenon to be explained.

Normal social science explanations often function ecologically, that is, relate disparate data such that one grounds or contextualises the other, as Sanday does in referring sex segregation to societal or environmental stress. Establishing the irreducibility of certain elements in order that others may be marshalled as 'variables' is one of the most important projects of cross-cultural analysis. Agreed-upon definitions have to be sustained (cf. Southwold 1978), insofar as these irreducible elements – measures of power and domination, for instance – are used as bridges which the anthropological exercise throws across societies. The elements considered here pose a special problem, therefore. If inequalities appear to be located significantly in relations between the sexes, then there are only the ramifications of these inequalities to deal with. We cannot relate sexual inequality as a set of variables to some other set of unequal social characteristics which lie outside it. This conundrum forces us away from explanation in this conventional sense.

It also forces us away from conventional cross-cultural analysis. The contributors to this volume have not agreed upon a definition of inequality, nor collaborated in developing a common approach to these societies, nor even focused on the same structural elements in their different instances. On the face of it, not many bridges. And this is because there is that other boundary to cross. As Atkinson put it for gender studies in general: 'the anthropology of women does what cultural anthropologists do best – namely, it heads full tilt at culture-bound assumptions in our own thinking' (1982:238). However adept we are at making bridges, we are also adept at pulling them up after us. This of course can become a different ecological refuge, cultural relativism.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 5

Yet the essays presented here are not really in search of such a refuge.

The chief comparative advantage of cultural relativism lies in the reflexivity which the analyser brings to his or her materials. Certainly the contributors here are forced to be explicit about how they propose to utilise concepts such as 'dominance' or 'complementarity'. Some of the chapters deal with this more squarely than others; none of them takes the concept of inequality for granted. At the same time none is content merely with local interpretive exercises. Together they address the central problem of comparative analysis: how to create (anthropological) concepts of value. These have to be concepts dually constructed: transactable between societies in order to elicit comparison, yet also retaining an intrinsic connection with social realities as they are differently lived. The essays which follow allow a reflexive scrutiny of the concepts which motivate them. But they also offer substantive approaches to sexual inequality as a societal phenomenon.

Dealing with inequality can be taken as an organising metaphor for the volume. Questions about inequality have to deal with the place which the concept holds in anthropological analysis and in those parts of Western cosmology to which such analysis claims to speak.² For instance, formulations of inequality as they enter anthropological discussion rest on certain systemic peculiarities in Western constructions of difference, a matter to which I return in the Conclusion. Simply put, difference is often taken to culminate in conversions, that is, an evaluation of a relationship or context in favour of one set of relations at the expense of the other. Various anthropological models of society evince this tenet, as in the supposition that a problem facing 'individuals' is having to cope with the constraints of 'social structure'. Social relations in turn are seen as designed to cope with (say) the exigencies of stress. Coping with inequality in this sense makes inequality itself a cultural exigency which bears on people's lives. This leads to other kinds of dealings with which these essays are concerned. 'Dealing' can also refer to distribution, allocation. Not 'coping with' (constraints) but 'dealing out' (items) or 'dealing in' (values) as an instrumental activity. For cultural arrangements are also instruments. They may be instrumental to the pursuit of particular personal or social interests, even though these interests can never be independently defined. They are certainly instrumental in respect of any analytic interests one might have in the issue of agency – that is, accounting for the sources of people's actions and for their being perceived as actors.

As far as the Pacific societies are concerned, we are not just dealing with various institutions, arrangements, structures, and images, which show the factors and effects of 'inequality'. If the problem were of this

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

nature, then investigation would indeed have to be adjudicatory.³ We would want to know how to weigh and measure this or that index of inequality. The resultant assessment would necessarily participate in the adjudications of those we have under study. Are women everywhere excluded from public life; what does that exclusion mean; what does it entail? Whether using exogenous indices or indigenous ones, the questions would collude in the modelling of society that (in this instance) puts emphasis on exclusion. Yet, since we cannot apparently explain sexual inequality except by tautologous reference to other parts of the same complex of relationships, we are left with something else to explain: the construction of inequality through sexual difference. Thus enquiry shifts – from the nature of inequality between the sexes, to the construction of inequality through sexual difference.

Such a shift of emphasis admits the extent to which, for these societies, inequality is played out in a gender idiom; in this sense sexual inequality is irreducible.⁴ And it is this perspective which enables one to see beyond the sexual relations themselves. For one should not be misled by appearance and imagery. If gender differences are instrumental in the structuring of unequal relations, this may include the concealing of other inequalities. They do not express these other differentiations but, as Bloch (1977) might say, hide them. Thus material inequalities between men may be hidden by an indigenous emphasis on inequality between men and women (Josephides 1982). Where sexually constructed inequality emerges as an important instrument of all kinds of social differentiation, then these differentiations are mediated through but are not, as it turns out, necessarily reducible to differences between men and women. I return to this observation later.

In the meanwhile we do not have to decide, on behalf of the peoples referred to in this book, whether men or women ‘have’ power. Rather, it is helpful to describe how they make known to themselves that this or that category is powerful, that these persons are unequal, and so on. This gives some insight into how people construct relations.

The peoples of this part of the world lack the rhetoric of a Judaeo-Christian past (cf. Burridge 1973:ch.1) or the yearnings of a Rousseauesque present (Bloch and Bloch 1980). They do not have the conceptual tools of stratified state systems which project fantasies of a common humanity or unitise the citizen-isolate (Lawrence 1984:163), nor indeed of a capitalist economy which commoditises ‘sex’ (Illich 1982). Many of them, however, do seem to have a vested interest in maintaining internal relations among themselves through exchanges of all kinds which simultaneously preserve differences between categories of persons and enable them to enter into relations with one another. They live as it were

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 7

the cross-cultural problem: how to transact with items which retain value by reference to their origins (in the activities of persons) and yet can move between persons and thus have value to that extent detachable from persons.⁵ One solution to this constructional issue in the building of relationships requires that things/persons also be conceptualised as standing for things/persons they are not. What is striking about many of the systems described in this book is not the immutability of gender, but its transactability. Contrasts between men and women become a vehicle for the creation of value: *for evaluating one set of powers by reference to another.*⁶

Preserving the debate

The differences between the members of the Research Group are instructive. This section touches on how we dealt with them, in the context of debate deliberately kept open; but some general observations must be made first. These stem from the charge that dichotomous theorising in the specific debate over sexual inequality echoes the posturings of a morality play (Losche 1984).

As soon as one becomes aware of such dichotomous thinking, the temptation is to generate a third term. History may so intervene. Thus the universalists and evolutionists may be brought together, as Rosaldo indicated (and cf. James 1983), by turning attention to the specific historical embeddedness of social inequality.

Gender in all human groups must ... be understood in political and social terms, with reference not to biological constraints but instead to local and specific forms of social relationship and, in particular, of social inequality. (Rosaldo 1980a:400)

Recent comparative attempts to treat the issue of sexual inequality in the context of other inequalities have been made for the Melanesian region. Allen's (1981, 1984) survey of political systems in island Melanesia and the essays in A. Strathern (1982) on the Papua New Guinea Highlands both have a historical cast. Allen's work is considered in the Conclusion; here I briefly make mention of the latter collection.

From a historical concern with the manner in which systems of domination (male/female and male/male) have developed, Godelier and Modjeska analyse relations of production. Control over persons and control over resources are related to one another in the disposition of labour. Given the marked sexual divide in the division of labour, it is inevitable that the kind of value put on female labour should be seen as crucial to relations between the sexes. This perspective opens up an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

avenue for speculation into the evolution of different labour-using technologies among Highlands horticulturalists, as Lindenbaum (1982; and see Tsing and Yanagisako 1983:514) envisages. It would be narrow minded to set the present endeavour against such analytical interests. Rather, a comparative political economy of the kind Modjeska (1982:50) promises is needed before one can begin to assess the significance of labour in the 'history' of these societies. Gregory (1982) offers as much in his investigation of present-day Melanesian exchange systems in terms of the objectification and personification of values. Meanwhile it is worth noting the emphasis which Modjeska, Godelier and A. Strathern all place on the contemporary manner in which human values (the values of certain relationships) are or are not mediated by items commonly described as wealth objects.

Lederman (1983) writes that divorced from the contexts and politics of their use, gender constructs yield ambiguous information about men and women as such. She is alluding to the Highlands, but the point is generally taken. The contradictory idioms and perceptions which inform gender thinking arise from cross-sex and intra-sex differences and combinations being used as the terms for discriminations which may be about relations other than those between the sexes. This is the sense in which Biersack refers to gender as a master code, a source of self-reflective activity: out of the sameness and difference of the sexes comes an indigenous conceptual vocabulary, 'a very simple discursive device for talking about diversity and variability' (1984:134). In order to sustain systematic discriminations, discourse must display some internal consistency; it would be a naive (and archaic) historicity which drew us away from analysing the structural interrelationships between peoples' ideas.

However Losche (1984; n.d.; cf. Dwyer 1978:227) has properly castigated those such as myself who proffer bland assumptions that cultural categories are shared representations. Thus she would argue that contradictions in gender thinking are not to be sorted out in relation to different social contexts of usage as Lederman suggested and as some of the chapters also suggest, nor as Biersack (and others of the contributions indicate) to be resolved in terms of their functioning as a code addressed to issues of diversity in social life. Rather, they should be taken as speaking to irresolvable differences of interest.⁷ The ideological status of certain sets of ideas means that they work in the interests of some and not others. In effect Losche (1984) is criticising oversystematised accounts of other cultures. She argues that 'oppositions form, not a hegemony of categories, but the subject of debate and questioning in other societies as well as "our own"'. Of course; but it remains the case that claims to hegemony frequently have recourse to systematisation in the promotion

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 9

of an inevitable world view, and must enter our subject of study as such. Furthermore, the contributors to this volume question the kinds of interests which gender ideologies may serve, since it is by no means to be automatically assumed for other societies as perhaps it is for our own that men and women will be always divided by social interest.

In also referring to 'our own' I commit that other culturalist error of appearing to assume 'we' inhabit a homogeneous world with recognisable attributes. It is necessary therefore to be explicit about the differences between the chapters which follow. They deliberately keep open several vantage points, which have diverse and heterogeneous origins. 'We' as collected-together contributors do not share a single world view; indeed perhaps some of the social differences between us – our histories and politics – are replicated here as intellectual difference. One can agree with Losche that there are important reasons for keeping debates as debates. Third terms, which attempt to transcend or collapse difference may also displace and mystify the grounds for difference. There is no attempt, then, to homogenise the contributions to this volume; on the contrary, we have tried to preserve a sense of debate. Unity of purpose has its place in social life; but we are not I think required to take it as the only model of collective action.

The point can be underlined in relation to the innovative collection edited by Ortner and Whitehead (1981).⁸ Their intention ('This is a book about the ways in which gender and sexuality are conceptualized in various cultures' 1981:ix) is placed in a specific theoretical field, symbolic anthropology. At the same time, they locate the essays within two broadly contrasting methodological frames, roughly corresponding to 'culturalist' and 'sociological' emphases. And they clearly feel the need to relate further differences between their contributors to different traditional orientations (Marx, Durkheim and Weber are all mentioned). Simultaneously, given that the essays are rich and subtle ethnographies, the editors of *Sexual Meanings* are also able to show that the papers – sometimes singly, certainly collectively – transcend these theoretical dichotomies. Thus 'even the more sociologically oriented studies are committed to a symbolic (or "cultural") view of gender, and that even the more culturally oriented papers have important sociological underpinnings' (1981:2).

Transcendence requires that the sources of difference lie beyond the project in hand. This is one version of the Western culture/nature dichotomy: through culture Westerners deliberately collectivise their activities, against a nature innately differentiated. Nature in this particular instance is the set of assumptions and precepts by which its practitioners were socialised into varieties of anthropology. It is note-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

worthy that the *contemporary* fragmentation of anthropology sometimes causes concern. People feel they should be contributing to the same enterprise, where they might be quite comfortable with the idea that the dead giants were radically different from one another. Marx, Durkheim, Weber do not have to be assimilated to one another; on the contrary they are the precursors for the ‘natural’ differences which exist today in the subject and which one strives to overcome. *Sexual Meanings* opened, then, with a strongly idealistic statement on the unity of endeavour, indexed in its common name (symbolic anthropology).

As a historical fact, the members of the ANU Research Group had come together with different theoretical interests and antecedents. Moreover the experience of sustaining discussions, over as much as a year for many of them, did not lead to the submergence of these interests, as a briefer interaction might have done. Precisely in so far as we were involved as whole persons, such a submergence was not even desirable. Although participating in a provisional agreement that we were all ‘doing anthropology’, it is clear that we each had different versions of what that subject entailed. Indeed, to have constructed a unitary subject matter would have instantly thrown up the problem of what to do with our differences.

Yet given their regional focus, one might expect that at least for this part of the world a small group of anthropologists could agree what they wanted to mean by ‘gender’ or ‘inequality’. That is, they would establish conventions through collectivisation. For many anthropological tasks it is desirable to establish definitional conventions. However, if one actually looks at past debates of theoretical interest, it is an intriguing fact that debates usually subside not through unanimity but exhaustion. The fervent arguments two or three decades ago – do primitive societies have ‘law’? What is the character of ‘descent’? – are over, not because in the end there was agreement as to what ‘law’ or ‘descent’ meant, but because of a quite different reason. In the effort to deal with law or descent, anthropologists at the time brought to the discussion their complete tool kit of theoretical issues and considerations, and this was their achievement. The questions mobilised and thus displayed all the discipline’s going theoretical resources. Consequently the resurrection of old debates always looks odd, insofar as it is impossible to recapture the contemporary significance of that display. Issues of gender currently hold anthropologists in dispute, as a similarly important arena for the display of disciplinary expertise.

There are in addition ethical reasons for preserving the sense of debate. For it is not just the case that we can allocate the theoretical differences between ourselves to different positions among different ancestral giants.