

Part 1

Overview and theoretical perspectives

1 The anthropology of sex and gender hierarchies

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The fact of being born “female” or “male” in all human and non-human primate societies carries with it a specific behavioral assignment.¹ From lemurs to humans, there is no known primate society in which members are not differentiated by sex. Differences between males and females in primate societies, human and non-human, permeate every domain of life: reproduction, production, thought, and communication. Our human lives are influenced by gender differences every day, whether or not we realize it.

Social/cultural anthropologists make much of “cultural universals,” features such as language and incest taboos that are found in every culture, because they provide clues about the nature of human adaptation. Gender-specific behavioral assignments are universal, but they are more than a cultural universal: they are an “order universal” in that they are found throughout the order Primates. Among all primates, males, not females, produce semen and females, not males, bear offspring, but that is as far as the cross-order universal in female–male differences extends.

Beyond those two biological facts, group-by-group variations in appropriate roles for females and males arise among both non-human and human primates. But variations are more complex among humans because humans have several cultural institutions that non-human primates lack: verbal and written language, religion, art, music, literature, and a sense of history.

Turning from differences (which can exist between equals) to hierarchies (which can exist only between unequals), we may ask if sex and gender hierarchies are universal in the order Primates. The perspective I take on this issue, not a completely agreed-upon stance no doubt, is that sex and gender hierarchies are not a primate-wide universal. Depending on how one defines a “society,” it is possible to point to groups among both humans and non-human primates within which neither males dominate females nor females dominate males.

Assessing the existence and extent of sex and gender hierarchies demands that we look more closely than the level of “society.” Complex,

socially stratified human societies may be characterized as a whole as being male dominated, but a socially disaggregated view may reveal much variation by class, social status, ethnicity, religion, and life-cycle stage. Variation by domain also exists, with females sometimes dominating in the domestic realm and males in the public realm. Sensitivity to subgroup and context-based variation existing within more general patterns provides a richer picture of sex and gender hierarchies than a society-wide view. But do not think that I mean that the wider generalizations should be abandoned; instead they should be tested against, reformulated, and enriched by more localized insights.

The chapters in this book explore variations across the order Primates, over time, cross-culturally, and intra-culturally. They demonstrate the extensive range of variation in sex and gender hierarchies. Keeping that variation in mind, we must also recognize that a survey of all human societies in the 1990s would probably reveal a preponderance of male-dominated (as defined one way or another) societies. But such a pattern has not characterized human society throughout its long history, or non-human primate societies past and present.²

Sex and gender

Why use two words, sex and gender? Our discussions at the Mijas conference confronted early on a dilemma caused by the connotations of these terms. Much feminist scholarship on humans distinguishes between sex, based on biological characteristics, and gender, based partly on biological characteristics and partly arbitrarily (for an early presentation of this distinction see Oakley 1972 and for a recent update see Johnson 1990:202–7). In this book, we also distinguish between sex and gender, using such terms as femininity and masculinity, woman and man, as (human) gender-related designations. The terms male and female can refer either to biological sex distinctions or cultural gender differences. Authors in this volume use the terms sex, gender, maleness, femaleness, and sexuality in contextualized ways, not always in agreement with one another's approaches. Such divergencies reflect the flux in anthropology and other disciplines as scholars and activists attempt to understand, and sometimes change, these complex words and their meanings.

The attribution of sex, among human and non-human primates, tends to rely primarily on genital conformation. Among humans, a new-born baby is immediately defined in most (if not all) cultures as a boy or a girl on the basis of its genitals. Scientific innovations now allow testing for sex through chromosome analysis. For example, the sex of athletes competing in the Olympics is determined through a chromosome test. Genitals

and chromosomes, as sex determinants, do not vary from culture to culture or group to group: a penis is a penis whether it is possessed by a orang-utan, a Yanomamo, or a New Yorker, and the same goes for XX and XY chromosomes. Given some chromosomal material and training in how to read it, one does not need to know anything about a particular group to distinguish XX from XY chromosomes, in that group or any other, and to use that information in labeling the bearer's sex as either male or female. Not so with gender.

We cannot surely predict, on the basis of either genitals, chromosomes, or hormones what an individual's gender configuration will be in a particular group. Only two things can be known with certainty: that XY people may produce semen, and that XX people may bear children. Beyond that we cannot go. One might argue that XY people universally inseminate XX people, but that is only generally true, as evidence from New Guinea indicates (Herdt, this volume and his references): XY people also "inseminate" other XY people. Another potential case of universal behavior is that of mother (or mother-surrogate) care of young offspring among humans (Levy 1989). But the universality of that practice is disallowed by the cases, among others, of the Efe (Tronick, Morelli, and Winn 1987) and the Alorese (DuBois 1941), placing "mother or mother-surrogate care of young offspring" at the level of a generality, widely diffused, rather than a universality.

In some societies, people with XX chromosomes do the cooking, in others it is the XY people who cook, in others both XX and XY people cook. The same goes for sewing, transplanting rice seedlings, worshipping deities, and speaking in public. Even the exclusion of women from hunting and warfare has been reduced by recent studies from the level of a universal to a generality. While, it is generally true that men hunt and women do not, and that men fight in wars and women do not, important counter cases exist (see Harris, this volume).

Most primatologists feel that gender, like other complex symbol systems, is limited to humans.³ Illustrations of the difficulty in using culture-laden terms for non-human primates can be found in the domain of reproductive relationships. While North American academics comfortably refer to both a human and a non-human primate who has just given birth as a "mother," they might not feel comfortable saying that both mothers have borne a "daughter" or a "son." In the case of the non-human primate mother, North American academics use the terms "female offspring" or "male offspring." These different lexicons reflect emic perceptions of the meanings involved in being a son or daughter versus a female offspring or a male offspring. North Americans who conversationally refer to a human baby as "offspring" would be suspected of

coolness toward children or of having a somewhat twisted sense of humor (as in the television show *Saturday Night Live* term “parental units” for mom and dad). Other examples abound. Consider mating versus making love and pair-bonding versus marriage, distinctions that in English encode culture for humans and non-culture for non-humans.

The immense capacity of humans to symbol and to understand symbols clearly distinguishes us from our non-human primate relatives. But that is not to say that non-human primate societies evince no behavior that is arbitrary, distanced from sheer biological necessity, and learned inter-generationally. As the reader will see from Wright’s chapter in this book on non-human primates, even primary offspring care cannot be universally predicted on the basis of chromosomes or genitals because, among some non-human primates, males are responsible for the primary tasks of offspring care. Nor are non-human primate males universally the aggressive sex and females non-aggressive, or males dominating and females dominated (Zihlman this volume, and Hrdy 1981).

But not all human thought and behavior is culturally based with no biological foundations. The degree of difference, however, in the power of culture versus nature in modeling the behavior of human and non-human primates is vast. When I compare human and non-human primate behavior, I do so not in a strictly comparative sense, since the units are not equal. Rather I use the material in an analogous way: saying that “A” is like “B” indicates that the two are not identical but share similarities in form or function. Tasks for the future include more careful specification of those similarities and differences and attention to the degree of closeness of any analogy being considered.

The Mijas conference was not convened with the explicit goal of comparing human and non-human primates, but several contrasts between them in sex and gender differences and hierarchies emerged along the way. One difference between human and non-human sex assignments is that non-human animals cannot choose to be either male or female; instead their assignment is unchangeable. Among many human societies, an individual can opt for a different assignment and move across genders. Wikan’s study of gender assignment transfers in Oman is an illustration (1977). Third gender roles, neither quite “male” nor quite “female,” are another option available in some human societies (see Blackwood 1986). Transsexualism is, however, not an option in non-human primate societies.

Another difference between humans and non-human primates regarding sex and gender hierarchies is in the area of dissent. Dissatisfaction with one’s gender assignment, questioning of the gender division of labor, and attempts to change gender roles can and do happen among

humans. So far there is no evidence (and probably never will be) of dissatisfaction or reaction against sex role assignments among non-human primates. While human cultures have provided seemingly intractable gender roles and hierarchies, they also offer the ability to question and reject and reform them.

Hierarchy

According to a major English language dictionary, “hierarchy” is “any system of persons or things ranked one above another” (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edition, 1987). A hierarchy always involves more than one person or thing, or primate or other animal, that must be related to each other systemically, one above the other. The concept of hierarchy, added to sex and gender studies, is important. It forces us to think relationally, to consider the links between individuals and groups, and to examine the nature of those links and relationships. Are they open or closed, strong or weak, dynamic or static?

Implied in the phrase “one above the other” is a notion of dominance and control by the top party over the lower party. An example of a hierarchy among humans is the organization of the Catholic church: at the top is the Pope, in supreme command, beneath the Pope are archbishops who are above bishops who are above priests who are above lay people. The person on top controls the person beneath. But that is an ideal and static version of reality. In social hierarchies, individuals in lower positions can seek to influence those in upper levels through various means, or they may try to topple the system. Struggle between occupants of different niches may bring about repositioning, or the mere passage of time may bring a promotion. Studying hierarchies involves learning about both ideal structures and actual dynamics.

An added difficulty arises in studying complex human societies because male–female hierarchies vary depending on which sphere of activity is being considered. Early on in the anthropological study of gender, Friedl (1967) made the important point that women’s status may be low in the public domain in most societies, but it may be high, even dominant, relative to males in the domestic domain.

Another problem is that valid definitions of differential status, or dominance, that apply across human societies are difficult to formulate (those who study non-human primates seem to be more agreed on appropriate definitions of dominance). Brown noted in the mid-1970s that there was no operational definition of “women’s status” (1975:37, note 1), and not much improvement has been seen in the intervening years. Scholars

still disagree as to which “measures” are most relevant. Control of important resources, including food and territory, access to tools and technology, power and authority, deference from others, and patterns of communication have all been considered.

Complications in assessing human gender inequalities arise from several directions, most notably from the distinction between “etic” measures devised by social analysts and “emic” measures valid only to the participants within a particular culture. Attempts at devising etic, cross-culturally relevant measures of male–female status are numerous. An early listing appears in Schlegel’s (1972) cross-cultural study of matrilineality and its effects on women’s domestic status; her consideration of factors like deference behavior and the presence or absence of wife-beating focused on intra-household dynamics. Brown (1970) examines the division of labor by sex. Michaelson and Goldschmidt (1971) consider several facets of peasant life including subsistence roles and inheritance. Whyte (1978) includes variables from both the domestic and the public domains in his cross-cultural study of the “status of women”: inheritance rights, labor participation, preferred marriage forms, and the ritualized separation of men and women. Sanday’s (1981) analysis takes a more emic approach as she incorporates indicators of status taken from myth and folklore.⁴ In non-human primate studies, all measures are etic since any emic realm among non-human primates cannot be accessed through current research methods. In this volume, approaches to assessing male–female status differentials and dominance vary from author to author; one purpose of this collection is to bring into scholarly juxtaposition such variation, not to control or suppress it.

Historically in the anthropological study of sex and gender, attention to biological measures of male–female inequalities, such as nutrition, health, and longevity, has been less developed among social/cultural anthropologists compared to primatologists and paleoanthropologists. Since neither skeletal remains nor non-human primates can talk, researchers who work with them necessarily do things like measure bone length and content, weigh specimens, count incidences of aggression, and gather other kinds of explicitly etic data on welfare and survival patterns.

There are some exceptions. For example, female infanticide has been studied as an indication of low female status and male dominance in pre-state societies (Divale and Harris 1976). Related analyses indicate that where male dominance is strongest in northern India, intra-household son preference and daughter neglect act to bring about higher mortality rates for girls than boys (Miller 1981, 1987). Harris and Ross (1987) provide an evolutionary perspective on human population regulation mechanisms, such as female infanticide, abortion, and warfare. Such

positivist analyses consider empirical evidence of gender-based discrimination, its variations, and outcomes, which are often at odds with textual/religious statements and other emic data.

But no matter how male–female hierarchies among humans are gauged, most scholars would agree that in the statistical sense, patriarchy or male dominance of some sort characterizes the bulk of human societies today. The whys and wherefores of the social evolution toward increased patriarchy among humans should be at the forefront of the anthropological research agenda (see Harris, this volume). Research on non-human primate societies should be increasingly informative about the evolution of gender hierarchies as well (see Zihlman, this volume), as they have changed over the millennia and as they may be changing in contemporary times owing to pressures on primate habitats and confinement in study centers.

From the human perspective it seems that change that has occurred in the past few centuries and is occurring in the present brings increased levels of male dominance and a decline of egalitarian or female-dominant systems. Such a trajectory, however, may turn out to be only a small digression on the vast path of human development yet to come. Centuries from now the trend toward patriarchy may be reversed, as some would claim has already begun in parts of Europe and North America, and a move toward greater egalitarianism made. In either case, we must not lose sight of alternatives to patriarchy that have existed in the past and that exist today among humans and our non-human primate cousins; thus examples of sex and gender equality or “attenuated” patriarchy (see chapters by Wright and Skinner, this volume) merit special attention.

The evolution of sex and gender studies in anthropology

Social/cultural anthropology

The 1960s and 1970s produced a growing awareness, particularly among feminist scholars who were mostly but not all women, that anthropology has been and still remains to a large degree a male-biased discipline (for a good early discussion see Schrijvers 1979). This period, which brought empirical enrichment to the study of women in anthropology, was motivated by the desire among social/cultural anthropologists to reveal the “invisible” world of women that had been ignored by previous ethnographers. It was a time of great discovery – the discovery was that half the world’s population was almost completely unstudied. Of course, the roots of gender studies in anthropology extend further back in time than the 1960s and 1970s. Margaret Mead must be named as a major founding

figure; her books remain classics in the field (especially 1935, 1949). Phyllis Kaberry's work is also of fundamental importance in developing the anthropology of gender (1939, 1952). In the next few paragraphs I cite some of the major social/cultural books on gender published between the 1960s and early 1980s (examples from the periodical literature, also vast, are not comprehensively reviewed here).

Many edited volumes appeared, including works by Ardener (1978, 1981), Bourguignon (1980), Rohrlich-Leavitt (1975), Caplan and Bujra (1978), LaFontaine (1978), Ortner and Whitehead (1981), Schlegel (1977), Etienne and Leacock (1980), Dahlberg (1981), Hirschon (1984), Vance (1984), Hoch-Smith (1978), MacCormack and Strathern (1980), Matthiasson (1974), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), Raphael (1975), Reiter (1975), Humphreys (1983), and Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh (1981). Some of these books examine specific topics for humans and non-human primates, while others look cross-culturally at women with regard to sexuality, gender symbolism, and the effects of colonization, for example.

Volumes of essays on women in particular regions also proliferated: Albers and Medicine (1983) on Native American women, Wolf and Witke (1975) on China, Gale (1970) on Australian Aborigines, Hafkin and Bay (1976) on Africa, Beck and Keddie (1978) on Muslim women, Allen and Mukherjee (1982) on India and Nepal, O'Brien and Tiffany (1984) on the Pacific, and Oppong (1983) on West Africa. Case studies of particular cultures have added much in-depth information on women. Some examples are: Strathern (1972) on New Guinea, Dwyer (1978) on Morocco, Lee (1979) on the !Kung, Murphy and Murphy (1974) on the Amazon, Spiro (1979) on Israel, Maher (1974) on Morocco, LeVine and LeVine (1979), Sacks (1979), and Bledsoe (1980) on Africa, Chiñas (1973) and Elmendorf (1976) on Mexico, Price (1984) on Surinam, Weiner (1976) on the Trobriands, Goodale (1971) and Bell (1983) on Australia, Hall and Ismail (1981) on the Sudan, Pellow (1977) and Bukh (1979) on Ghana, Poewe (1971) on Zambia, Ginat (1982) on Arab women in Israel, Loveland (1982) on Central America, Wikan (1982) on Oman, Makhlof (1979) on Yemen, Atiya (1982) on Egypt, Roy (1976) and Jeffery (1979) on urban India and Sharma (1980) and Miller (1981) on rural India, Kerns (1983) and Massiah (1983) on the Caribbean, Smith and Wiswell (1983), Bernstein (1983), and Dalby (1983) on Japan, Johnson (1983) on China, Wolf (1972) and Kung (1983) on Taiwan, Skjønberg (1982) and Risseuw (1980) on Sri Lanka, Martius-von Harder (1981) on Bangladesh, Potter (1977) on Thailand, and Bennett (1983) on Nepal. During this period also, four textbooks on the anthropology of women were published: Friedl (1975), Kessler (1976), Martin and Voorhies (1975), and a reader edited by Tiffany (1979).

The overriding concern of most social/cultural research on gender of this period was to “correct” the male bias in traditional anthropology. But these studies were more than “compensatory” because they did more than just replicate for women what had been studied previously about men. Several studies questioned previous interpretations (Singer 1973; Weiner 1976, 1979; di Leonardo 1979; Mathews 1985). New directions emerged, spurred by the differences of women’s lives compared to men’s.

One impetus, prompted initially by Friedl’s paper (1967), was to direct attention inward to the workings of the household, the “private domain,” an area which few male anthropologists had penetrated. Recent examples of intra-household analysis include LeVine, Correa, and Uribe (1986) on marital morality in urban Mexico; Rohner and Chaki-Sircar (1988) on child treatment in West Bengal, India; Swartz (1982) on power relationships among the Swahili; and Sharma (1986) on household decision-making in urban North India. Strange as it may seem for the discipline of anthropology, of which one of the core subjects is marriage and the family, their internal dynamics were not much studied before an explicit focus on women developed, though notable exceptions exist (Whiting and Whiting 1975; Broude and Greene 1983).

This newly born interest in the domestic scene continues to develop. Reproductive practices, especially reproductive decision-making (Scrimshaw 1978), childbirth (MacCormack 1982; Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1989), and child treatment (Scheper-Hughes 1987), have begun to attract research attention, a phenomenon linked to the growth of interest in medical anthropology in the 1980s. Martin’s study (1987) of American women’s knowledge of reproduction and experience of menopause is an important empirical analysis of a conceptual domain previously unexamined by anthropologists. A new interest in the analysis of the cultural amplification of motherhood (Zihlman 1978b; Poole 1984; Margolis 1984; Schrijvers 1985) promises to expose both its material bases and ideological buttresses.

The early period of development of anthropological gender studies in the 1960s and 1970s saw the publication of several key analyses of why males “universally” dominate females. Rosaldo’s work was a leading force in this area (1974), as was Ortner’s symbolic equation of females with “nature” and males with “culture” (1974). Related theories include Reiter’s focus (1975) on patriarchal property rights and Harris’ approach (1977) involving population regulation. An important counter-movement to the study of male dominance and female oppression appears in work devoted to revealing bases of women’s power and autonomy. Illustrative work in this area includes analyses of Oaxacan women’s secret knowledge about reproduction (Browner and Perdue 1988), power through “sub-