



READINGS IN CULTURE

Semester 2; Groups: 2

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Culture and Identity

Culture and Gender

Before we get into how culture influences gender dynamics, it's important that we attempt to clarify some misconceptions. Let's start with basic definitions of key terms.

- **Sex** - the biological and physiological differences between men and women.
- **Sex Roles** - the behaviors and patterns of activities men and women may engage in that are directly related to their biological differences.
- **Sexual Identity** - the degree of awareness and recognition of sex and sex roles.
- **Gender** - behaviors or patterns of activities that a society or culture deems appropriate for men and women.
- **Gender Role** - the degree to which a person adopts the gender-specific behaviors ascribed by his or her culture.
- **Gender Identity** - the degree to which a person has awareness or recognition that he or she adopts a particular gender role.
- **Gender Stereotypes** - the psychological or behavioral characteristics typically associated with men and women.

Who does what? Who is culturally "permitted" to do this or that?

It is clear that men and women perform different tasks in most cultures.

Hence, **division of labor** between the man and women, among other things, is said to be culturally determined and readily apparent.

A prevalent view regarding gender-linked behavior is that the qualities cultures associate with masculinity or femininity are not innately male or female. These are socially construed roles. Sandra Bem is a leading expert on **the social construction of gender roles**. Her work on androgyny is particularly noteworthy. According to Sandra Bem, our attitudes and behaviors are based on our "gender schema" which she defines as **a cognitive network of assumptions about the personalities and moral qualities of men and women**. David Gilmore, the author of "Manhood in the Making" (1991), has proposed that we use "gender ideologies" to better understand gender differences. He sees internalized gender ideologies as **the collective representations that pressure men and women into acting in certain ways**.

Gender Stereotypes

Men are viewed as active, strong, critical, conscientious, extraverted, open, and adult like with needs such as dominance, autonomy, aggression, exhibition, achievement and endurance.

Women are viewed as passive, weak, nurturing, and adaptive with needs such as abasement, deference, nurturance, affiliation, agreeable, and neurotic.

Culture and Race

The paradigm of “superiority/inferiority” dates back deep in history to such an extent that all the ancient civilisations knew and legalised the master/slave relationship. The Greeks with such bright minds as Aristotle, who is a partisan of social order based on slavery, tried to legitimise it through a natural inferiority of the barbarian peoples, which destined them to serve as slaves for the Greeks.

The very ancient practice of servitude and slavery illustrates the relationship of domination which existed all along history between various ethnicities and peoples, or sometimes even at the heart of the same societies or cultural groups. Slave and master could originate from the same ethnicity, but the socio-economic differences were clearly marked. The same rules applied to the peoples defeated at war and then relegated to slavery. The social and political statuses (social classes and wars) decided upon the slavery issue more than the ethnic criterion; that is to say that the black colour did not necessarily mean slavery or inferiority until very recently.

Of course the “other” as a race has always constituted a source of fear and apprehension, but this xenophobia has not reached a schematised racist attitude till the Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Europeans tried to make it “scientific” and “academic” by means of some racialised research done by phrenologists and craniologists who tended to explain the primitiveness of the other peoples by the size of their brains. The racist discourse set forth by Buffon was destined to be modified in many ways by a number of thinkers, notably Renan, Le Bon and Gobineau because of their own ideas about race. It seems worth noting here that the term “race”, being of Latin origin: (“ratio” meaning chronological order), is a set of biological and psychological traits linking ascendants and descendants of the same line. It is only until the 17th Century that the word has been transmitted from the world of animals to that of the human beings. It is then that the term began to take more amplitude and overwhelm modern thinking.

The racialised theories of superiority/inferiority have not stemmed from nought. At that time (from 17th to 19th centuries), they have joined with the term “ethnocentrism” to denote the superiority of the European white race(s) over all the other non white ones. Here, it is worth noting too that the English word “race” derives from the Spanish “raza” which the conquistadores borrowed from animal breeds and was later applied to human races. These Spanish conquistadores also wrought another term: the “civilising mission” and forged it to legitimise their allegations of the “natural inferiority” and “perversity” of American Indians, although Christopher Columbus saw that they were very friendly.