CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

**GENDER AND CULTURE**

**Meaning of Gender**

Gender refers to the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated, and expected to behave. It is not possible to determine the extent to which culture or biology determines differences in behaviors or attitudes between males or females.

Although biology sets broad limits on gender definitions, there is a wide range of ideas about what it means to be feminine or masculine. Margaret Mead demonstrated this gender based variation in her classical study of sex and temperament in New Guinea

**Gender Roles**

In some cultures, gender roles are rigidly defined, in other cultures they can overlap. In general terms, however, there is considerable uniformity in gender roles found throughout the world.

Men engage in warfare, clear land, hunt and trap animals, build houses, fish, and work with hard substances. Women, on the other hand, tend crops, prepare food, collect firewood, clean house, launder clothes, and carry water (tasks compatible with child rearing).

Yet there are many exceptions to the rule. For example, in parts of Eastern Africa and in other parts of the developing world, women carry enormous amounts of firewood on their backs. For the foraging Agta of the Philippines, hunting is not an exclusively male activity.

**Status of Women**

The status of women is multidimensional, involving such aspects as the division of labor, the value placed on women’s contributions, economic autonomy, social and political power, legal rights, levels of deference, and the extent to which women control the everyday events of their lives.

The status of women varies around the world, but it is unfortunate that in most cases it continues to remain below that of men.

**Gender Stratification**

Gender stratification contrasts the status assigned by different cultures on the basis of gender. It is important to release that status is itself a multidimensional notion involving issues of economic, social and political empowerment. Stratification on the basis of gender is a common phenomenon.

The relationships between men and women vary in both degree and in extent across different cultures of the world. Many cultures in Asia for example are very stratified along gender lines. On the other hand, foraging societies, like the Mbuti Pygmies of Central Africa, possess a very egalitarian gender approach (all their elders are called ‘tata’).

Gender stratification need not be static. However, in most critical areas, women tend to be subordinate to men in most societies of the world. It is difficult to measure the comparative status of men and women in different societies since there are various components of stratification, which can vary independently of each other.

**Useful Terms**

**Status:** social ranking

**Acquisition:** gaining

**Interaction:** communication

**Abundance:** profusion or great quantity

**Multidimensional:** many sided

**Stratification:** hierarchical division

**Irrational:** without logic

**Suggested Readings**

Students are advised to read the following chapters to develop a better understanding of the various principals highlighted in this hand-out:

Chapter 11 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and/or Chapter 19 in ‘Anthropology’ by* *Ember and Pergrine*

**Gender Ideology**

Gender ideology is used in most societies to justify the universal male dominance. Deeply rooted values about the superiority of men, the ritual impurity of women, and the preeminence of men’s work are used to justify subjugation of women.

However, it has been demonstrated in recent years that women do not perceive themselves in the same ways that they are portrayed in largely male gender ideologies.

**Negative Impact of Biased Gender Ideologies**

In some societies, gender ideologies become so extreme that females suffer serious negative consequences such as female infanticide, female nutritional deprivation, honor killings and domestic violence.

These atrocities are due to the negative impact of gender ideologies as well as due to the disempowerment of females which is another simultaneous consequence of these ideologies.

**Women Employment**

Although the words ‘breadwinner’ and ‘housewife’ accurately described the middle-class western household around the beginning of the twentieth century, the separate gender roles implied by these two terms have become more myth than reality.

Over the past four decades the number of women in working outside the home has increased dramatically. This is true for not only industrialized but also developing countries, due to the ongoing phenomenon of globalization, which has led more and more women into the workforce.

**Occupational Segregation**

The economy of most countries is characterized by a high rate of occupational segregation along gender lines. Not only are occupations gender segregated, but women tend to earn considerably less than men.

**Feminization of Poverty**

There has been a trend in recent decades toward the feminization of poverty. Being disempowered, women fall victims to poverty much more easily then men. They also have less access to resources with which to fight against poverty. Women often are responsible for looking after their children, and their poverty results in declining health standards of both women and their children.

**Useful Terms**

**Segregation:** separation

**Resources:** means of production or more generally the (financial) means required to do something

**Ideology:** an established way of thinking

**Decade:** a period of ten years

**Disempowered:** without any say or without any authority or power

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**STRATIFICATION AND CULTURE**

 **Stratification and its Manifestations**

Individuals in different cultures and societies have varying amounts of access to wealth, power and prestige

This evident inequality leads to stratification, whereby groups or categories of people are ranked hierarchically relative to one another

**Social Ranking**

Social ranking is an important feature found to one degree or another in all societies

The degree to which societies rank individuals however varies and results in varying amounts of inequality to be found in the world

**Dimensions of Inequality**

According to Max Weber, stratification takes place on the basis of three reasons

People are distinguished from each other on the basis of wealth or economic resources they posses

Secondly, stratification takes place on the basis of differing levels of power

Power is the ability to achieve one’s goals and objectives, even against the will of others. The amount of power often correlates to amount of wealth individuals possess.

**Types of Societies**

**Stratified societies**, which are associated with the rise of civilization, range from open class societies,which permit high social mobility, to more rigid caste societies, which allow for little or no social mobility

**Class societies** are associated with achieved status, the positions that the individual can choose or at leasthave some control over.

**Caste societies**, on the other hand, are based on ascribed statuses into which one is born and cannotchange.

The United States is often cited as a prime example of a class society with maximum mobility Although its national credo includes a belief in the possibility of going from rags to riches, most people in the United States remain in the class into which they are born because social environment has an appreciable effect on a person’s life chances.

The mobility in less developed countries is even more restricted. Hindu India is often cited as the most extreme form of caste society found in the world. Social boundaries among castes are strictly maintained by caste endogamy and strongly held notions of ritual purity and pollution.

**Useful Terms**

**Inequality:** unevenness

**Purity:** cleanliness

**Pollution:** environmental degradation or physical corruption/deterioration

**Social mobility:** ability to change one’s status

**Ritual:** a social routine

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**Prominent Theories of Stratification**

Theories of stratification try to explain the existing inequality of wealth in and between different cultures. The Functional Theory and the Conflict Theory provide two conflicting interpretations of social stratification evident around the world today.

**The Functionalists**

Functionalists adopt a conservative position and maintain that social inequality exists because it is necessary for the functioning of society. Functionalists emphasize the integrative nature of stratification, which results in stability and social order.

They point out that class systems contribute to the overall well-being of a society and encourage constructive endeavor. Functionalists argue that differential awards are necessary if societies are to recruit the best trained and most highly skilled people for highly valued positions. They maintain that highly skilled people need to be given greater rewards to act as an inventive for them to acquire the required skills. For example, a brain surgeon needs to spend enormous amounts of time and energy to develop his skills and help society and society must in turn reward him more than it does other people who do not have to make a similar investment in obtaining a skill.

Functionalists cannot account for non-functional success of pop icons for example. Famous personalities are often given enormous amounts of money to make public appearances due to their popularity rather than their exceptional amount of skill. Functionalists ignore the barriers to participation of certain segments of society.

**Conflict Theorists**

Conflict theorists assume that the natural tendency of all societies is toward change and conflict. Conflict theorists believe that stratification exists because the upper classes strive to maintain their superior position at the expense of the lower classes.

Conflict theorists do not view stratification systems as enviable or desirable. Lack of social mobility leads to exploitation, crime, revitalization, reform and even to revolution. Conflict theory is influenced by the wirings of Karl Marx.

**Functionalists versus Conflict Theorists**

Integrative aspects of stratification are beneficial for society but the exploitation of under-classes does cause tensions and conflict. Neither theory can alone explain the existing use and dysfunctional aspects of stratification.

**Useful Terms**

**Revitalization:** recuperation or revival

**Dysfunctional:** no longer able to function or have utility in the given circumstances

**Exploitation:** taking advantage of someone else sue to their inability to safeguard their own interests

**Differential Awards:** different remunerations or rewards

**Social Inequality:** a state of being where certain segments of society are more well off than others

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