

Gender and ethnicity have become common terms since the late 1960s. Discuss critically their analytical usefulness.

In the post-World War II period with the effects of the political unrest of the 1960's the study of inequalities grew from a return to Marxist theory by social scientists. Within the study of economic and political inequality arose the central categories of ethnicity and gender upon which many inequalities were based or strengthened. The study of these categories has changed significantly over the past three decades with changing attitudes, different anthropological approaches and new awareness brought into relief since their inception in anthropology. One of the main changes was the move away from the study of race and of women where the origins of these categories lay in anthropological research, which were rooted in biology and were seen as the result of their association with nature largely due to Euro-American assumptions which were entrenched in anthropological theorising, to the study of ethnicity and gender which saw the categories as social constructions. Within those categories post-modernism caused a heightened awareness that identity based on these categories was arbitrary and relational depending on socio-historical contextualisation.

The study of women grew to prominence in the 1970's as a result of the feminist movement. Feminist anthropologists sought to approach ethnography in a way which included and often centred on the study of women and their position and roles in society to redress the situation created by earlier anthropologists which was of a male dominated anthropology. Anthropology and the ethnographic research on which its theories were based had largely been the domain of men who had approached their studies entrenched in their own cultural assumptions which were of a male dominated Euro-American society where the role that men played was seen as more important as a result of industrialisation. Their ethnographies as a result also tended to be biased towards the men in a society because as a result of their own assumptions and identifications with the societal structures they tended to concentrate their interviews on the male members of society. Feminist anthropologists wanted to show that the subordination of women was not a natural fact, as was largely the Euro-American conceptualisation of it, but was the result of dichotomies such as the association of women with nature and the domestic sphere (also rooted in nature) which were seen as subsidiary to the traditionally male domain which was associated with culture and the public sphere (also rooted in culture).

Two of the main dichotomical feminist explanations of public: domestic and culture: nature were given in the volume 'Women, Culture and Society' published in 1974 by Rosaldo and Ortner. Rosaldo argued that universally, as a result of the fact that women give birth and are responsible for childrearing they are associated with the domestic sphere whilst since men were responsible for providing they were associated with the public sphere, outside of the home. This division of labour did not create the subordination of women but the subordination of the domestic to the public sphere implied that women were inferior since their roles were largely domestic which led to their subordination. Therefore, according to Rosaldo, it was the extent of the subordination of the domestic to the public in a society which determined the extent of the subordination of women in the same society. Subordination was a universal feature however, it was more pronounced in industrialised societies where the

ideological, political and economic distinction between domestic and public life was far greater than hunter-gatherer societies where less of a distinction was made.

The nature: culture dichotomy which Levi-Strauss had argued was inherent in every society was the explanation of subordination of women offered by Ortner. Similarly to Rosaldo, Ortner argued that it was sex differences that created the dichotomy. Again the female role in childbirth and childrearing or socialisation meant that they differed from men whose roles were more to do with technology, industry and politics. The role of women was associated with their biology and therefore seen as rooted in nature as opposed to the role of men which was associated with the culture. Ortner claimed that since culture was the mechanism used by a society to order nature and attempt to control it, the gender specific associations resulted in men attempting to control women through their subordination. This was not a result of actual differences which placed women closer to men but the cultural constructions which created this perception.

Feminist anthropologists by their focus on the role of women were able to show the weaknesses that existed in the anthropological research that preceded them and to move forward the work of anthropology in the field of sex and gender relations and roles. However there were many weaknesses in their work which have meant that their explanations were not sufficient. Their work perpetuated biological reductionist explanations by basing their explanations of subordination in biology – women's role in childbirth whilst attempting to argue that subordination is a cultural construction. A basic assumption of many feminist anthropologists including Rosaldo and Ortner was that the subordination of women is universal however ethnographic evidence has shown this to be invalid because not all cultures have the same conceptual understandings of what it is to be 'male' or 'female' or of the relationship between them. This was shown by Strathern's work with Hagen Society where gender is assigned through ritual, not anatomical differences therefore the subordination of women due to their association with nature/the domestic sphere due to childbirth does not hold in this society. Similarly different societies do not make the same distinctions between culture and nature as Euro-American society, and even where a similar distinction exists it may be men not women associated with nature. This is the case with the Gimi of Papua New Guinea (Gillison, 1980). Men are associated with the uncultivated and it is male/female relations not women that are associated with the cultivated – here they do not even make a direct male: female dichotomy.

The concentration by feminists on the role of women also served to distort ethnographies and often failed to fully analyse the role of men. The cross-cultural differences in conceptualisation were also not fully appreciated and so as the assumption that women were not universally subordinated to men became to be seen as invalid there was a shift of emphasis to the study of how societies constructed gendered behaviour. The study of gender moved away from its roots in biological differences to the appreciation that genders were culturally constructed as has been shown by many ethnographies. Whitehead's study of the North American Native Indian berdache showed that there is at least one society in which there are not simply two genders but three. The berdache were socially recognised as part man part woman as a result of the combination of their anatomy, role in the division of labour and dress. They are not transsexuals who were men who considered themselves to be women and their sexuality was irrelevant, they are a separate gender. This shows that

not all societies construct gender anatomically as had been assumed before. The social construction of gender in New Guinean Society, as shown by Meigs, showed how their understanding of biology was different to the Euro-American understanding because they believed that 'semen' was a gendered substance through which maleness is transferred from men to women. The difference in biological understanding shows that even biology is a cultural construction so that a dichotomy between biology/nature and culture can not be upheld.

Just as gender is now studied as a social construction, so too is ethnicity, the study of which in its development has its correlations with that of gender. Ethnicity as an analytical category began as the study of race which was rooted entirely in biological difference which was phenotypically visible. As a study it was very narrow simply looking at five essential categories of skin colour as determinants of groupings. However in the 1970's as a result of the racist connotations of the study of race and the increasingly strong movement of campaigners against racism the study became that of ethnicity which focussed much more on identity rather than group inclusion/exclusion than that of simple biological difference. However within the study of ethnicity there were two main approaches; primordialist which was influenced by evolutionism and was still occupied largely with biology as well as geographical situational factors making it determined by birth and therefore permanent, and constructivist which saw ethnicity much more as a social construction with historical and situational factors that meant that ethnicity was fluid.

The constructivist theories such as that of Barth which centre around the construction of group boundaries through individual perceptions of identity and difference and the interaction between individuals which form barriers to inclusion have survived to a greater extent than the primordialist theories of Berghe after they were criticised for failing to see that ethnicity was not something fixed and determined. Ideas of unity and difference could change due to situations like the war in Bosnia which changed the characteristics that had been used to identify 'group' members such as the importance of religion. Okely showed that Gypsies, whilst they would tend to be seen as part of the same ethnic group by primordialists as a result of biology and their geographical location in the same area as Gorgios they in fact create their own boundaries as part of their identity expressed by their pollution beliefs which show that their ethnicity is a different conceptually to that of Gorgios. However since ideas of descent and kinship are still an important part of the creation of identity and therefore ethnicity they have begun to be integrated into a wider constructivism.

Both the study of gender and ethnicity show the importance of post-modernism in anthropology by their development from the biological to the cultural. They have moved on from being rooted in nature and have begun to move away from Euro-American historical and cultural assumptions to the realisation that everything is a cultural construction, even biology or nature based on different assumptions and conceptualisations in different societies. As analytical terms they have proved very useful in anthropology for helping to guide ethnographic research to indicate further the great variances cross-culturally in cultural constructions and offer explanations for the construction of the self, personhood and identity as well as the existence of difference between individuals and conceptual or symbolic groups.

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