

Gender

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Nature/Culture and Public Private Theories of Gender

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Nature/Culture and Public Private Theories of Gender

Introduction

Gender has been defined differently over time. However, the woman has always seemed to get the deputized or lesser version of the man's definition. The gender definition bias has existed over time, making the woman seem smaller every time. As a result, researchers have sought to explain the gender differences and inequalities that exist in the definition and roles given to men and women. The nature vs. culture theory explains the gender roles assigned to a woman and a man in relation to nature and culture. The woman is always given nature while the man gets culture. Contrarily, public vs. private theory explains the gender roles, classifying them as either public or private depending on where they are done and the attention they attract. Authors like Ortner, Moore, and Lamphere & Rosaldo draw on the theories of nature/culture and private/public to explain the gender differences and inequalities while discussing their shortcomings in universal applicability.

Nature and culture distinctions have been made in various ways. For instance, culture is what differentiates people from animals. Previous research has shown that all cultures have differences between men and women, with most favoring the former. The woman has been classified under nature, primarily due to her ability to bear children. Another distinction is made on the cooking role given to women in most cultures: they turn the raw (natural) into something cooked. But as Moore (2002) argues, birth cannot occur without both the man and the woman; this raises questions on why the burden of childcare is often left to the woman. Birth is natural, and it only becomes cultural due to rules, regulations, and taboos that the culture around it places on the birth process and the newborn child. However, women are placed under nature due to

their perceived closeness to nature, evident through child-bearing and childcare practices. Unlike women, men are placed under the umbrella of culture due to their perceived productivity and provision roles. Moore insists on the need to separate gender and biological sex definitions to fully comprehend the differences in nature and culture. On the other hand, the man has been classified under culture, which contains roles like provision. Ortner (1972) sees gender inequalities as placing a woman as the “other” of a man, similar to a man but not a man. The evidence of the role given to the woman as an “other” to a man is visible in the allocation of roles in family care, political leadership, and economic activities. For instance, due to the child-bearing ability of women, they assume the role of caregiver for the children they bear. Ortner raises a question on why men cannot take care of the children when the only mandatory function of the woman to the child is nursing.

Moore (2002) views the gender differences as unnatural and blames the classification of women as lesser than men on the social constructs that led to their creation. Ortner (1972) argues that the fact that woman is secondary to man is universal and applies across all cultures. Even in cultures where women seem to take the lead over men, there is always a cultural expectation or practice that returns them to the secondary position. These cultural expectations often relate to how women should handle themselves around men during menstruation, a natural occurrence that can neither be controlled nor avoided. This classification is based on biology, which Moore views as inadequate in defining a man or woman (Moore, 2002). Lamphere & Rosaldo, unlike Ortner and Moore, takes a structural perspective in viewing gender inequalities. Lamphere & Rosaldo (1974) view the woman as capable of production, just like the man. If culture determines men by their productivity, then is a productive woman a man? The evidence of women’s productivity is evident even in the 21st century, where women have taken up roles

previously regarded as men-only. As Ortner states, it is time for the definitions of both nature and culture to change for women and men differences to be biological and not based on societal roles.

Public vs. private theory, unlike nature-culture, touches purely on gender roles. This theory is based on spaces and the work done in them. Women are associated with the private space. The private space supports work that is domestic and which does not require external attention. On the other hand, public space supports work that is considered difficult and that which requires external attention. Women are placed in the private space, which is attributed to the cultural expectation for them to remain within the homestead doing domestic chores and making merry. Women who do their private duties without seeking external attention are applauded by society, whereas men who engage in such private duties are considered inferior (Lamphere & Rosaldo, 1974). Women are also assigned the private space due to their sexual roles, including child-bearing. Men are expected to engage in public activities that lead to production. Other public roles assigned to men are leadership and state roles. These are roles viewed as complex and needing energy and publicity, which women are considered to lack. The inequalities between women and men are therefore also determined by bodily strength and endurance.

The 21st century may not support the notion; women have taken up male roles and have proven to be equal or better than men in various ways. The private/public theory can fit in the argument against culturally-created gender roles shown in the nature/culture theory. Women have long conquered the domestic and private roles that the society assigned them and are currently focused on getting out to the public space that has long been dominated by men. The private roles given to women do not apply universally as many cultures have adopted women's

leadership and are content with the results. However, some cultures are still inclined to the belief that women belong in the private and have put in place stricter measures to ensure that they never come out of that space. However, even women from cultures with such backward beliefs have come out of the private spaces, gone against their cultural inclinations, and moved into the public sphere. The push to move to the public space has been established individually but greatly influenced by the actions of men while in the public sphere (Lamphere & Rosaldo, 1974). Though women are subjected to gender inferiority, unlike men, they have an internal drive that makes them go against the norms and strive to get their rightful place among men.

Conclusion

Gender inequalities have persisted over the years due to the long-held beliefs, rules, taboos, and restrictions put in place by culture. Women are mainly considered inferior due to their productive roles and sexuality. However, nature is quickly joining culture, which is evident in the exchange of roles of men and women. Though Ortner, Moore, and Lamphere & Rosaldo discuss the theories of nature/ culture and public/ private in different ways, they all assert that the universality of gender inequality with regards to public and private roles may not be long-lived. Change is possible but only if the norms restricting women to subordinate roles are abolished and replaced with norms that support competitive roles among men and women.

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