

Week 3 Assignment – Explaining how beliefs about Sex and Gender shape social life

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In my initial introduction I do not possess a concrete understanding on how sex and gender actually affect social life. I may only be able to observe casual links and not direct causes and so I will need to be careful not to extrapolate unwarranted conclusions from my notes in this essay. However, in this essay, I can observe Anthropological literature to try and find a conclusion on how beliefs on sex and gender directly impact behaviour.

One extraordinary case we can look at is that of the Trobriand Islanders. They have limited knowledge on physiology of sexual anatomy and so uniquely do not believe that the act of heterosexual sexual intercourse is the cause of pregnancy in females. They regard pregnancy occurring due to the ancestral spirits (*Baloma*) of their clan that the women in question belong to wishing to return from *Tuma*, the Island of the Dead (Malinowski, 1929, p. 170-171). Spirits in *Tuma* live lives of perpetual youth, preserved by the powers of rejuvenation and so lead a life analogous to that of terrestrial life (only much happier) – but eventually, according to the Trobriander's mythology, they become tired of the constant rejuvenation and want to return to earth again (Malinowski, 1929, p. 170-171). In the end of all the different reincarnation myths these spirits are brought back into the woman's body, with the intervention of another spirit, while she is swimming (Malinowski, 1929, p. 171-179). Thus, it is not surprising that there is a pattern of matrilineal descent in their culture – family possessions are passed on from mother to daughter (Malinowski, 1929, p. 3).

With this cosmology it is understandable how the Trobriander islanders view sexual pleasure and experimentation as the most natural thing, and marital fidelity as the least natural (Euring, 1996). They see the sexual experimentation of young children to be perfectly natural (Malinowski, 1929, p. 56), and parents actively build 'love houses' for their children to sexually experiment and to practice free love (Euring, 1996).

Trobriander Islanders are allowed to sleep and live together for a significant period of time to find out who want to marry – and the economic benefits is that the man upon marrying is that he receives a dowry from his wife's family and the wife has someone who can help with managing the children (Malinowski, 1929, p. 76-77). He fully shares in the care of the children and Malinowski describes them to perform their duties with genuine natural fondness – Malinowski describes them "with eyes full of such love and pride (that) as are seldom seen in those of a European farmer" (1929, p. 20-21).

Other indigenous people, such as the Sambia have a culture which separates the sexes via draconian cultural norm that ensure secrecy between males and females. The Sambia believe that masculine attributes develop when young men acquire sufficient semen (from oral sex with older males) (Creed, 1984, p. 164). As Creed states earlier, this "institutionalised homosexuality is rooted in a belief that the attributes of masculinity are not innate in male biology but acquired through strict adherence to a ritualized regimen" (while conversely femininity is acquired in women without effort) (Creed, 1984, p. 112). The Sambia feel that the essence of masculinity itself – the type of masculinity that enables men to do battle, provide for his tribe and prove or reaffirm one's own masculinity – is what they call *Jerungdu*, and is not only uniquely male, but can be transmitted only from males (Anthropology and the Human Condition, 2010). And indeed unsurprisingly, warfare has always been central to Sambia social organisation, and marriage, residence and sexual and family relations were adapted to the threat of war (Herdt, 2003, p. 74). It is an acephalous society – men who desire power and glory were able to achieve renown through force of personality, charisma, achievements

and socio-political networks of influence with multiple sources of power (Herdt, 2003, p. 74). They feel that heterosexual sex with women will sap some of their masculinity – their Jerungdu – from them and that their Jerungdu would be lost from too much stereotypically feminine affection to his partners and children (Herdt, 1929, p. 77-78). The Sambia clearly regard heterosexual sex for procreative purposes but appear to view it as a necessary evil to ensure their own survival. Within Sambia culture, the highly ritualized sex between couples is considered to be intimate due to the very fact it is a product of highly structured rules – and this intimacy is perceived to be broken by lust, which causes ill effects later (Herdt, 2003, p. 780). Herdt makes it clear however that the taboos of secrecy of both the men's huts, but the women's huts (where ceremonies of menarche, birth and marriage occurred) results in complicated and unstable domestic relations within villages (2003, p. 74-75).

In conclusion, what I seem to observe is that crucially the Trobriand Islanders don't view the sexual expression between each other as anything to be ashamed of – it is who they are and they're no shame having occasions when they can act on them – and they seem to have a more harmonious and happy society as a result. Their cosmology seems to generally reflect a more peaceable view of the world as opposed to the Sambia – who live in a society more predisposed to warfare and seem to have a narrower view of how the genders should interact and seem to stress that the ideal version of masculinity impresses more control on women. The Sambia, in how they perceive the difference between genders, have ended up positively fearful of sexual unions with women. Of course, though it is easy for me to judge the Sambia and praise the Trobriander Islanders, when I don't really understand what caused what – whether the social conditions resulted in the respective cultures developing the mythology and beliefs of sex and gender or whether it is the other way around. I can't suggest that from the literature I have analysed – I can only draw links to what I have observed. Though I would imagine most of us would like to work our way to a society more like the Trobriander Islanders, than the Sambia.

Reference List:

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