Does it make sense to study women's models of society separately?

Anthropology has traditionally had a male bias. The vast majority of ethnographers have been men and – as Edwin Ardener points out – whilst it would be unthinkable to return from the field having only spoken to women about men without "professional comment and some self-doubt", the reverse situation has gone unremarked and has been at times unremarkable[1]. Are women's models of society different from men's? Do these models matter? What analytical benefits does a separate study of the anthropology of woman have to offer and in the midst of feminisms, can it rise above the essentialist trope of treating woman as a homogenous category?

It is salutatory first to examine some of the purely methodological difficulties of seeking female informants. Where Ardener uses the word "muted" to describe the typical verbal behaviour of women, he conversely notes that it is men who predominately are "articulate" – able to talk freely about their models of society to other men in ethnographic situations[2]. Ardener develops this characterisation in his 1972 essay, going on to say that women do not generally produce models which will appear acceptable to

[1] Edwin Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women', *The Voice of Prophecy and other essays*, ed. Malcolm Chapman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.74
[2] Ardener (1989), p.73

ethnographers since "they do not so readily see society bounded from nature"[3]. Furthermore, whereas men consistently tend "when pressed, to give a bounded model of society such as ethnographers are attracted to"[4] ethnographers report that women are more difficult to draw out – "they giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic and the like"[5]. In his 1975 essay, 'The 'Problem' Revisited', Ardener expands on what he intended by using the Lévi-Straussian opposition between culture – for Ardener, "society" – and "nature"[6]. Women lack the "structural readiness" of men to make bounded models of society since women "overlap, protrude beyond the limits set for them by men"[7] into nature.

At a practical level, Ardener identifies that when an ethnographer is in earlier stages of language learning, it is men who are frequently the ones with interpreting and bilingual skills[8]. Also at the level of methodological obstacles, he adds that one reason why women may have less propensity towards developing and elaborating models of society may be due to the realities and rhythms of childbirth and child-rearing within their lives – the "Hot Stove" argument[9]. He goes on to note that these are, however, only expressions of the situations which they are trying to explain.

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[3] ibidem, p.74
[4] ibid., p73
[5] ib.
[6] ib., p.76
[7] Edwin Ardener, 'The 'Problem' Revisited', *The Voice of Prophecy and other essays*, ed. Malcolm Chapman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.132
[8] Ardener (1989), p.73
[9] ib., p.74

The following statements seem to belie a certain sense of consensus about what women do in society. Evans-Pritchard wrote that in societies, “men are always in the ascendancy, and this is perhaps the more evident the higher the civilisation”[10]. Where Sherry Ortner wrote that “The secondary status of women is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact”[11], Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere affirm that “all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated, and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life”[12]. The response to this from feminist anthropologists would be to ask in what ways female power is being understood and whether essentialised models are shaping fieldwork observations.

Sharon Tiffany’s overview of models for the social anthropology of women categorises the models broadly into two types: structural-functional and historical-dialectical. The structural-functional models see women in pre-industrial societies as bound by patriarchy, domination and tradition; and those in post-industrial society as rapidly achieving sexual equality. Historical-dialectical models on the other hand would regard the pre-class status of women as higher before the onset of industrialism and colonialism than in post-industrial society where sedentism and the

[10] cited here from Sharon W. Tiffany, ‘Models and the Social Anthropology of Women: a preliminary assessment’, *Man*, 1978, pp.41
[11] ibid.
[12] ib.

division of labour bring about what is seen as the universal subordination of women. Framing the analysis of the place of women in society in the context of these two opposed archetypes is helpful since it enables the discipline both to incorporate classic anthropological statements about women and still engage with contemporary feminist discourse.

One major criticism of structural-functionalist models is that they are unable to see non-institutionalised access to power[13]. Furthermore, they assume willing compliance and acquiescence by women to social evaluations of their reproductive, socialising and subsistence roles. Cynthia Nelson's critique of Middle Eastern ethnographies was that the private domain, described invariably as "domestic, narrow, and restricted" is typically contrasted with whatever articulates the household to the "political, broad and expansive" public sphere – a domain conceived of as necessarily male since it is political[14]. Some feminist anthropologists argue that this dichotomy, particularly marked in ethnographies of peasant societies, between men occupying public and formalised roles and ethnographically inaccessible women in private, informal roles misunderstands the locus of power within politics. Collier and Rosaldo comment that "in a world where a man needs a wife, and nothing else, to achieve the highest status available to him in his society,

[13] ib., p.38
[14] ibid., p.42

… sexual intercourse takes on the character of a truly 'political' act"[15]. Susan Carol Rogers describes women's informal power politics in peasant societies – which she claims androcentric models ignore:

> Feminine roles involve household decision making, influencing and manipulating public opinion through informal groupings of women, monopolising access to channels of information through gossip networks, and maintaining contacts outside the village linked by women's trading activities and wage work.[16]

Within the dominant male discourses of power, Tiffany posits that such non-administrative political actions regularly undertaken by women are culturally expressed in negative terms – women as disruptive and scheming – and so are less likely to be viewed as being worthy of serious consideration by researchers.

Tiffany proposes that while neither structural-functional models or historical-dialectical models are completely wrong in their opposing characterisations of women's power statuses pre and post-industrialisation, they do however work with differing conceptions of what constitutes power; and the structural-functional models tend to over-emphasise the formal structures of authority relations at the expense of "dissensus, conflict and competition"[17]. After M.G. Smith, the following distinction is encapsulated: "power is the ability to impose one's will; authority is the public

[15] cited by Sherry. B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, 'Introduction', *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.5
[16] Tiffany (1978), p.44
[17] ib., p.47

legitimation of power"[18]. Thus, to return to the peasant women described by Rogers, part of what we could call the performative labour they undertake surely includes helping to "perpetuate the 'myth' of formal male dominance through gestures of public deference and respect to men"[19].

An economic approach to the position of women in a given society is prey to the same pitfalls of androcentrism as seeing female influence and status purely in terms of politico-jural rights or formalised public role. However, as Ann Whitehead and Marilyn Strathern have noted, by examining the extent to which women are cross-culturally able to attain full subjecthood as independent entities and thereby to assert their rights to property – the extent to which women can "own", independently of the kinship / family system – we derive a better understanding of why women are "less able to act as fully operative subjects than men in any particular society"[20]. Since concepts of personhood are intertwined with designations of property, Whitehead has suggested that we look at the way that kinship systems construct men and women as different sorts of persons. In her overview of *Feminism and Anthropology*, Henrietta Moore rejoins that such a model would enable feminist anthropology to move beyond the position that the home is the

[18] ib., p.43
[19] ib., p.44
[20] Henrietta L. Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Cambridge: Polity press, 1988), p.72

central site of women's oppression in society[21] to consider within the variety of ethnographic circumstances which do exist, the role of a male-dominated state in promoting particular kinds of familial ideologies[22]. She calls to our attention the ethnography of Marine Segalen, whose work in Brittany uncovered the contradiction between, on the one hand, families' express avowal of nuclear family status with formal maintenance and material reinforcement of the ideological separation; and on the other hand the reality, especially during peak periods of labour demand of "A constant reciprocal flow of service, contacts, and psychological help"[23] between apparently nuclear households. So strong is the ideal of the nuclear family that the designation is imposed onto behaviour to which it cannot apply.

For all the supposed reticence of female informants, Ladislav Holy presents a coherent women's model of society in his analysis of the Farkh al Ganān myth of the Berti of Northern Dafur, Sudan. The myth describes how men and women first met and how the men exchanged their fire for the women's daughters. Holy notes how in the Lévi-Straussian sense this myth resolves a contradiction integral to the social structure. Berti men vociferously assert that they are dominant and "in front"[24] of women. Whilst a

[21] ibid., p.126
[22] ibid., p.183
[23] ib., p.126.
[24] Ladislav Holy, 'Fire, meat and children: the Berti myth, male dominance, and female power', *Reason and Morality*, ed. Joanna Overing (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), p.190

woman must be represented by a man if she is to press a claim and also cannot initiate divorce, women privately agree that ultimately men are dependent on women not just because their social status rests on their being head of a household, but also because women control the processing of food. While a woman could live on her own, purchasing male handicrafts from the market as necessary – and does so if her husband is away from the village or is deceased – a man cannot cook his own food without indicating that he has failed to keep a woman; and thus failed as a man. It is this potentially destabilising aspect of ever-present female power which is negotiated by the myth when it articulates that the fire which tamed the womenfolk was willingly surrendered by the men in the first place. Holy suggests that the female model of Berti society is not averred as insistently as the male model precisely because female power is tacitly taken for granted whereas male dominance depends upon the repeated performance and acknowledgement of authority[25].

In conclusion, compensating for the historic middle-class male ethnocentrism of anthropology would require female informants to be drawn to articulate. There are structural disincentives here – linguistically, spatially, temporally, socially, even conversationally women have been found to be less accessible than men to male ethnographers. Nonetheless, if anthropologists are to stop seeing in women subordinated

[25] ibid.

and passive pawns and start recognising female agency, female ethnographers are not the panacea. Anthropology must also work with models of power which recognise informal roles, non-institutionalised access to power, legitimation work, information exchange, consensual performative deference, and dissensus; thereby rendering visible the political activity of women particularly in peasant societies, and elaborating the links between the kinship system, property rights and constructions of female personhood. Without incorporating women's models of society – such as that of the Berti women – the anthropologist's duty of representation has only been discharged in part.

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