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De-essentializing Sex & Gender

We are now moving towards the final topic of our discussion on sex and gender, that is from sexuality, which involves desire, behaviour, identity, and various constellations of the three, to reproductive politics. In this transition it is helpful to retrace the history of contrasting sexual ethics:

PROCREATIVE ETHIC OF SEX	PLEASURE ETHICS OF SEX
➤ sex is productive of babies ➤ giving birth to babies is a good thing to do ➤ sex is blameless, morally good	➤ sex is pleasurable ➤ sex can be thought of and valued apart from procreation ➤ sex is gratifying, morally ambiguous

The pendulum swings of sexual ethics (from agrarianism to capitalism; from the post-WWII baby-boom to Playboy and the 60s sexual liberation) have been a matter of emphasis and not one of absolute contrast. Both polarities have been available for rhetorical appeal and this is certainly true today, too. The pleasure ethic of today, bolstered by the increased visibility of homosexual lifestyle, is however moderated by the increasing appeal of the “abstinence-only” sexual education.

These competing ethics have been differentiated by - and used to differentiate - not only an axis of sexuality but also of gender. While many heterosexuals were committed to the procreative ethic, homosexuals carved out an alternative identity based on a different attitude towards sex and the pleasure ethic. Among heterosexuals (once we've got that category) the procreative ethic has been applied more consistently to women than to men as women's natural sexual desire is said to be aimed at procreation more consistently than men's. These sexual ideologies have flip-flopped frequently enough in recent history – even in your lifetimes – so it is not difficult to realize that sexuality – i.e. how people experience themselves and others as sexual beings – is historically and culturally produced and shaped.

However, it may be more difficult to view motherhood in the same way – as ideologically produced and socially constructed, but it is true that sexuality, motherhood, marriage, the Family are all pieces of the same puzzle – elements that some have depicted as the “foundation of society” or, alternatively, “the foundation of civilization” – a particular, exalted type of society. But as Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako¹ point out, “most of our talk about families is clouded by unexplored notions of what families ‘really’ are like”:

	“Confusing <i>ideal</i> with <i>reality</i>, we fail to appreciate the deep significance of what are, cross-culturally, various ideologies of intimate relationship, and at the same time we fail to reckon with the complex human bonds and experiences all too comfortably sheltered by a faith in the ‘natural’ source of a ‘nurture’ we think is found in the home.” (Collier, <i>et al.</i>, p. 25)
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In other words, when we hear about families, we often take illusions for reality. The above-quoted authors consider that this happens because family has been on the private side of the private/public division (itself an illusion, but with real effects for how people act) and we have constantly failed to grapple with the complexity of what goes on in the name of the family, in the name of kinship and love. Collier et al. give further reasons for this specific “blindness” in respect to what happens in families:

- families are regarded as being not merely a matter of law, but of culture
- Adrienne Rich wrote in her article on “compulsory heterosexuality”: to believe that intimacy is part of what a family/marriage is has also meant that we often limit our search for intimacy to the family, which can be an inhospitable place in patriarchal societies (because of the rigid Law of the Father) for women and children
- of course, families can be inhospitable places for gender/sexuality nonconformists (boys who like to dress up, girls who refuse to sit still or who are overweight, etc.) because the cultural stakes are extremely high for such people
- the belief in the sanctity of the home as a space of privacy has also served eventually as a basis for legitimating homosexuality (anti-sodomy laws were struck down in Europe, US and many other countries because they were proven to infringe on privacy).

¹ Collier, Jane, Michelle Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako. “Is There a Family? New Anthropological Views.” In *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*. Edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, 25-39. New York: Longman, 1982.

In any event, we need to closely examine what we mean by these terms – not just sexuality, but family, marriage, motherhood, fatherhood – and not take their meaning for granted. We should also recognize that they are not transhistorical “things”, but products of particular social, political, economic histories – and therefore subject to ongoing cultural and legal interpretation. To see them otherwise, as universal and fixed (as early anthropologists did), is to miss the specificity and malleability of our own definitions and understandings.

For instance Bronislaw Malinowski, who is considered the “father” of British anthropology, did ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific during WWI. Malinowski argued in the 1920s that indeed, family was a human universal, but he was against the 19th-century social evolutionism with its progress narrative of human cultural evolution (for them, families were not natural but “cornerstones” of civilization, also evidence of western moral superiority). Though well-intentioned, Malinowski’s cultural relativism was undermined by the fact that his arguments rested on the ethnocentric assumption that family is equated with nurturance. This functional definition of family is illustrative of early British social anthropology which built the following theoretical framework:

Basic human needs →	are met through social institutions
➤ NURTURANCE	➤ FAMILY
➤ PROCREATION	➤ KINSHIP SYSTEM
➤ SUSTENANCE	➤ SUBSISTENCE TECHNOLOGY
➤ SHELTER	➤ DIVISION OF LABOUR
➤ ORGANIZATION	➤ HOUSING DESIGN
	➤ LAW SYSTEMS
	➤ POLITICAL SYSTEMS

For Malinowski, family could be mapped onto:

- ✓ Distinct and bounded group distinguishable from other such groups;
- ✓ Group located in physical space – *hearth* and *home*;
- ✓ Shared affective bonds, particular set of memories and emotions.

Thus, family is a conflation of genealogy, household and emotional intimacy. Collier et al. point out that this is informed by the Victorian public/private division. Similarly, the sex/gender system is ethnocentric to a certain extent, implying a sex/gender binary model of difference. Other cultures recognize other possibilities, too (perhaps a 3rd gender/sex or blending of binaries).

The description of family as an institution pertains to the so-called *functionalist thinking* according to which a social institution is observed to perform a necessary function. This “does not mean either that the function would not be performed if the institution did not exist or that the function is responsible for the existence of the institution” (Id, p. 73). Just because we can describe it, “see” it, does not mean that what is going on is normal. So, instead of asking “Is Family a human universal?” we need to ask: “What do you mean by Family? Is there a Family pattern? ” Instead of assuming all mothers are by definition or by nature nurturing and loving, we have to ask: what does nurturance look like? Does it look different under different circumstances? Myriads of question arise here. What is *mother love*? What makes a *mother*? Instead of assuming that all children are better off with biological mothers or that they “need” a both a father and a mother, we need to ask:



- What do we mean by “real” mothers?
- What distinguishes fathering and mothering?
- Is what makes a “good” father similar to “good” mothering or different? Are both equally nurturing?
- Can a woman who isn’t biologically related to a child be his/her actual mother?
- Can a man mother a child?

In Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s opinion:

- learning to mother means learning when to let go but also when it is safe to love;
- motherhood is ascribed, not achieved, status;
- motherhood is socially produced to a certain extent and here we include not only feelings of bonding but also the way in which these are shaped by contingencies, necessities, etc. (for example, by poverty).



There is also a social production of indifference, not only of motherhood. Comment upon the way in which infant mortality is concealed by both the State (deaths are not properly registered) and the Church (dead infants are not baptized).