

**Summary on Feminist Anthropology: Our Bodies & Identities**

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Feminist anthropology helped bring attention to the analysis of gender and sexuality hierarchies within large-scale social and cultural systems. For decades historians, biologists, and anthropologists observed cultural behaviors and attitudes through a western essentialist lens that categorized these behaviors into static and biologically determined universals. Born out of feminist theory and cultural anthropology feminist anthropology challenged these essential frameworks and began to expand the ideas of gender identity and sexuality being predetermined. Feminist Anthropologists were not only influential in deconstructing perceived stereotypes about sexuality but also recognizing that old anthropological thought and observation had aided to these essential frameworks. Since that late twentieth century it is a key component of feminist anthropology to challenge and end western ideals and thought. Which includes males being dominate to females, heterosexuality as the normal state of sexuality, the society not playing a role in shaping sexual preferences, and that western cultural systems can explain sexual and gender behaviors from all around the world.

One of the underlying fixed concepts of essentialist frameworks is the idea that males are biologically and hierarchically dominate and superior to females. In her chapter *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* cultural anthropologist and professor Sherry B. Ortner explains the process of looking cross-culturally for symbolic devices, ideologies, and social structural arrangements that identify the female subordination universal. Ortner critiques this system of searching for universals because it does not take into consideration independent cultural practices and simply assumes that all cultures share in this universal. With this critique in mind it is easy to identify western culture as being influenced by this ideology and showing early scientists support evidence for biological determinism.

Another seemingly fixed concept that feminist anthropology seeks to deconstruct is the idea that heterosexuality is the end all/be all of sexual behaviors and preferences. It is important to first understand that the notion of labeling and trying to define sexual behaviors with the use

of terms such as hetero or homosexuality, is a western universal that biologists and anthropologists have sought and continued to seek out. This idea of course is not universal as not all cultures and societies do not assign labels to sexual behaviors and therefore do not categorize or create normativity within sexuality and sexual expression. Anthropologist Carole S. Vance explains how feminist anthropology has worked to distinguish sexuality from identity and gender and highlight how the very essence of sexuality was socially constructed, yet continues to prove it active and constantly changing. In her chapter *Anthropology rediscovers sexuality* Vance refers to sexuality as, "An actively contested political and symbolic terrain in which groups struggle to implement sexual programs and alter sexual arrangements and ideologies." (Vance, pg 44) That once constructed sexuality ideologies gave way to state regulation and public policy to control and dehumanize, which then met a backlash from society's members with those labeled identities. She later gives an example of this on page 51 when describing how members of the gay community worked to promote 'safer sex' in response to doctors claiming the AIDS epidemic originated and spread out of the gay community in the 80's and 90's. Vance also goes on to explain that, "Active sexual agents with an awareness of their symbolic universe and an ability to manipulate and re-create it, rather than passively receive a static sexual enculturation." (Vance, pg 51) It encompasses the idea that only the members who identify and actively participate within socially constructed groups and labels can be the ones to change and reshape it, not those who observe and categorize.

Feminist anthropology also calls attention to the role that communities and societies play in influencing sexual and gender expression. It challenges the idea that individuals who express sexual and gender identities and behaviors that do not fit within the social norm of their communities are simply a product of nature and nothing else. The chapters *Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology* by cultural historian Ellen Ross and anthropologist Rayna Rapp and *Capitalism and gay identity* by history and women and gender

studies professor John D' Emilio showcases examples of society and community influence. Throughout their text Rapp and Ross explain several occurrences throughout time where individual communities societal, religious, and economic tendencies shaped an array of sexual behaviors. On page 54 they write, "Whatever metaphor best represents the social embeddedness of sexuality, it must be able to contain at least the following contexts: (1) kinship and family systems, (2) sexual regulations and definitions of communities, and (3) national and 'world systems'." Ross and Rapp further express that while this list is not complete these reasons have played an active role in creating external limits on sexual experiences and individual behavior. Behavior that when viewed through an essential lens gets categorized, labeled, and falsely judged. In *Capitalism and gay identity* John D' Emilio focuses exclusively on the way capitalism within western society was one of the key components in shaping the gay identity. His first argument is being that gay and lesbian people have not always existed, but that they are in fact a product of history (D' Emilio, pg 251). Capitalism in its early forms was a transitioning from colonial household markets, to wage labor, and eventually the free market systems we know so well today. That throughout its early forms participants of these wage systems were also adhering to its governance on family oriented dependency, with husbands, wives, and kids all actively playing a role. With early societies' focus on the identity of the co-dependent family unit there was little concern in identifying one's sexual behavior. When capitalism began to transform and allow individuals to independently work and support themselves without participating in a family unit the social construct of sexual identity took away. D' Emilio writes, "capitalism has created conditions that allow organization of a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex." (D' Emilio, pg 252) This inevitably led to a division between what appeared as a new sexual identity driven so far away from the heterosexuality norm.

Feminist anthropology is the product of the reevaluation of anthropologic thought concerning cultural universals, with a particular emphasis on sex, sexuality, and gender. It challenges not only the origin of culturally determined universals on sexuality and gender but what historical processes aided in their creation. Feminist anthropology looks at community influence on sexual behavior, its hierarchical tendency to create meaning and value behind sexuality and gender expression, while all-in-all sees each cultural instance independent of each other. It is fight against not only against its historical creation but early anthropological determinism as well.