

de-essentializing sex/gender/kinship; querying motherhood

moving to final topic: from thinking about sexuality — as desire, behavior, identity, and various constellations of the 3 — to reproductive politics — not unrelated stories

helpful transition is to recall the history we traced (Katz) of contrasting sexual ethics:

**procreative ethic of sex** — sex is productive of babies, producing babies is good, therefore — in this way — sex is good

**pleasure ethic of sex** — sex is pleasurable, can be thought of and valued apart from procreation

the pendulum swings of sexual ethics (agrarianism to capitalism; post WWII baby boom to *Playboy*<sup>TM</sup> & 60s sexual liberation) has been matter of *emphasis*, not absolute difference — not mutually exclusive; both available for rhetorical appeal — certainly today:

pleasure ethic today bolstered by increasing visibility of homosexual lifestyles — straight people don't want to miss out on pleasure part — but increasing “abstinence-only” sex ed new voice for procreative ethic (more in couple weeks)

sex *can* be procreative; sex *can* be pleasurable — it's often neither what we're talking about are reigning **ideologies** of what sex “is” and *should be*, how people expect to *experience* it, and why we should *value* it — its significance as a component of “human nature”

*missing* from this distinction (Katz) is how these competing ethics have been differentiated by – and used to differentiate -- not only along an axis of **sexuality** (while many heterosexuals were committed to procreative ethic, homosexuals carved out alternative identity based on a different attitude toward sex, pleasure ethic) but also of **gender** — among heterosexuals (once we get that category), procreative ethic has been applied more consistently to *women* than to men — women's “natural” sexual desire said to be aimed at procreation more consistently than men's

these sexual ideologies have flip-flopped frequently enough in recent history — even your lifetimes — not difficult to realize that sexuality — how people experience themselves and others as sexual beings — is historically and culturally produced, shaped

however, it may be more difficult to view **motherhood** in the same way — as ideologically produced, “socially constructed” — but it's true

sexuality, motherhood, marriage, The Family (capital letters) — these are all pieces of the same puzzle — elements that some have depicted as the “foundation of society” or, alternatively, as the “foundation of civilization” — a particular, exhalted, type of society

But as **Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako** point out, “most of our talk about families is clouded by unexplored notions of what families ‘really’ are like.”

“Confusing *ideal* with *reality*, 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.” (first page)

in other words, when we hear about families, we often stop thinking!

Why?

C, R, Y suggest that b/c family has been on private side of public/private division (itself illusion, but with real effects for how people act) — as a society we’ve failed to grapple with the complexity of what goes on in the name of the family, in the name of love

not merely a matter of law, but of culture — we don’t want to see legal officials make random checks of domestic settings (which of course they do when families are receiving state support) — aren’t a lot of checks on what happens in families

Adrienne Rich wrote in her article on “compulsory heterosexuality”: to believe that intimacy is part of what a family/marriage is has also meant we often limit our search for intimacy *to* the family — can be an inhospitable place in patriarchal societies (law of fathers) for women and children

of course family can also be inhospitable place for gender/sexuality non-conformists — boys who like to dress up, girls who refuse to sit still or who are overweight, etc., coming out to parents often most difficult hurdle — stakes are high

[then again, our belief in the sanctity of the home as space of privacy has also served — eventually — as a basis for legitimating homosexuality — anti-sodomy laws struck down as unconstitutional, infringement on privacy]

In any event,

we need to closely examine what we *mean* by these terms — not just sexuality, but family, marriage, motherhood, fatherhood — *not* take their meanings for granted — recognize they are not transhistorical ‘things’, but products of particular social, political, economic histories — and *therefore* subject to ongoing cultural & legal interpretation

To see them otherwise, to see them as universal and fixed (as early anthropologists did), is to miss the specificity and malleability of our own definitions and understandings

from article: Bronislaw Malinowski, considered a “father” of British social anthropology, did ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands in the south Pacific during WWI

Malinowski argued in 1920s that yes, family = human universal, he was arguing *against* 19th C **social evolutionists** with their progress narrative of human **cultural evolution** (Europeans at apex; for them, the family not “natural” but as cornerstone of “civilization” — evidence of western moral superiority)

Malinowski’s **cultural relativism** was well-intentioned

BUT undermined by fact that his argument rested on **ethnocentric** assumptions: that family = nurturance  
basically, he argued that since we “need” nurturance, and families = nurturance, thus we have families — it’s a *functional* definition

functionalism theoretical framework characteristic of early British social anthropology

for Malinowski:

basic human needs:	are met through social institutions
nurturance	family
procreation	kinship system
sustenance	subsistence tech, division of labor
shelter	housing design
organization	law, political systems

difference = cultural variation in ways humans meet basic needs (hunting/foraging v. agriculture? patrilineage v. matrilineage?)

similar to how gender in 70s was seen as cultural variation of biological sex difference — cultural elaboration of gender difference was a social “need” more or less functioned same way everywhere

for Malinowski, “family” mapped onto:

- 1) distinct and bounded group distinguishable from other such groups
- 2) group located in physical space — hearth and “home”
- 3) shared affective bonds, particular set of emotions

family = conflation of genealogy/household/emotional intimacy

Collier et al. point out that this is informed by Victorian public/private division

**it’s ethnocentric to claim “they’re just like us” when argument based on reading our institutions and values onto their practices**

similarly, as we’ve seen, sex/gender system itself to some extent ethnocentric: implies 2-sex model of binary gender difference

(other cultures recognize other possibilities — perhaps 3rd sex/gender, perhaps blending of binaries)

problem of **functionalist** thinking: “because a social institution is observed to perform a necessary function 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” (73)

just because we can describe it, “see” it, doesn’t mean that’s what’s going on

SO, instead of asking, is The Family a human universal? Need to ask: What do we mean by family? (is there A Family?)

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? What is mother love? What makes a mother?

Instead of assuming all children better off with biological mothers, or that they “need” 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? If a woman who isn’t biologically related to a child can mother, can a man mother?

remaining readings for today are about 3 quite different ethnographic cases that raise similar questions, engage similar issues — questioning assumptions about “real” motherhood and “real” families

- 1) selective maternal neglect of poor women in Brazilian shanty towns (Nancy Scheper-Hughes)
- 2) mothers of children with disabilities in upstate NY, struggling with status as “real” mothers (Gail Landsman)
- 3) transracial and international adoption (Christine Ward Gailey)

each of these cases calls into question common assumptions among Americans about the meaning and experience of motherhood — as definition and lived reality

have to understand this in context of wider meanings of personhood, love, agency, marriage, family

divide you into 3 **GROUPS** to collectively **analyze** these case studies

- what assumptions that you held (or see as commonly held) were revealed to be assumptions? overgeneralizations?
- how do gender, sex (action), sexuality (identity) come together in this case — or not?
- what do we learn about families, mothering, nurturing — what these are/aren’t?— how might case study push us to rethink general understandings about what makes a “real” family or counts as “real” mothering? — implications for current debates?

- other things you found interesting, challenging — agreed/disagreed with analysis

### Scheper-Hughes

learning to mother means learning when to let go, but also when it's safe to love  
 motherhood is ascribed, not achieved, status — if *God* wills

social production of indifference

mothers' reactions to infant mortality not autonomously authored  
 tempered by indifference of State (barely registers these deaths, or lives)  
 and Church (which once celebrated child death and now wants to deny it  
 — while also withholding contraception and abortion)

motherhood is socially produced — not just “feelings” of “bonding” but shaped  
 by contingencies, necessities (poverty)

like feelings for another woman ≠ only understood in terms of desire

contrast with the social production of *interest* in US

a woman who chooses not to subordinate own interests to fetus is “unnatural”

### Landsman

social production of interest — if a woman follows prenatal advice, should have  
 control of outcome — motherhood is achieved status, in our control....but not

rites of passage lacking with non-normal infant — not “real” mother  
 shows social construction of motherhood — rituals *do* help constitute it  
 failing that, these mothers go on to be super-achieving mothers

“learning” from child, not just teaching it

### Gailey (white mother of a black child who had been abused by foster parents)

“adoption is the result of two violations of natural motherhood [in US]:  
 procreation without marriage and nonprocreation within marriage. So the U.S.  
 adoption triad has two failed mothers and a rejected or substitute child as the  
 major players” (22) — how does that characterization strike you?

- often, “natural motherhood” script not extended to birth mothers in adoption,  
 transformed into “bad mother” — sexually active, able to procreate, but unable or  
 unwilling to nurture; irresponsible; portrayed as victim (raped?)

myths of mothers who give up child for adoption

in reality, 2% unmarried births —> adoption; women who give up babies  
 for adoption higher education and class aspirations than women who keep

- other side: similar to mothers of children with disabilities (especially “difficult  
 to place kids”) — the harder the child rearing, the more they become “real”  
 parents — achieved motherhood — thrilled when they “**earn**” affection of child

contrast to international adopters more likely to “return” child for “failing to

bond” — **entitled** to immediate love a child (paying for it!?)

ironies of how placements are made?

“difficult” children — older, survivors of abuse, w/disabilities — placed  
with single parents, black parents, interracial parents  
the kids who need the most help placed with people with fewest resources

WHY?

stratification of social reproduction — reproducing class status from one  
generation to the next

What do we learn from the **juxtaposition** of 3 cases?