

Charlotte G. O'Kelly. Women and Men in Society. New York: D. Van  
Nostrand, 1980. Pp. 351. Subject and Name Indices. Bibliography. No  
price indicated.

Thomas S. Weisner

Associate Professor of Anthropology

Departments of Psychiatry and Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles

Book Review for Women and Politics, in press

Charlotte O'Kelly's textbook/review volume is organized around this important thesis: men's and women's roles depend on the position of the family and the local community in a larger context of economic pressures and ecological constraints. O'Kelly argues throughout that the organization of production at varying levels of economic complexity influences the overall division of labor, which in turn structures the relations between domestic and public domains, and that these conditions in turn shape the roles of men and women. Without question, the general form of this hypothesis is accurate and important. There is a history of excellent ethnographic research which supports this view, and O'Kelly effectively -- if very selectively -- summarizes many such studies in her book.

O'Kelly states in the preface that she intends her book to be used for a wide variety of courses in the social sciences related to gender roles and sexual stratification. She suggests its use for courses on the family, social class, social evolution, introductory courses, courses on sex roles and the family, and courses in general social science. The first chapters ~~of her book~~ review social science approaches to gender differences from an evolutionary materialist point of view. Chapters three through ten are organized around the positions of men and women in a series of ecological/evolutionary societal types: hunting and gathering, horticultural, pastoral, agrarian societies of antiquity and the middle ages, simple peasant societies, capitalist industrial society, advanced industrial society, and socialist societies (the Soviet Union and the Israeli Kibbutz). There is a brief (four page) concluding chapter.

The material is clearly, carefully, and systematically presented. A specialist in some of these culture areas or stages of economic development

would like to see more elaboration and subtlety in the interpretation, but this is not an appropriate expectation for a survey and text. However, as an introduction to the systematic, scientific study of gender roles, this book is seriously distorted. Although O'Kelly's approach has a commendable historical depth and a cross-cultural evolutionary view, her theory is taken as a given: evolutionary materialism, and the struggles for property and power which are related to economic adaptation, are the primary causes of sexual stratification. Not only is the book organized around the stages of subsistence, but the interpretations of the material cited in each chapter all presume this homology between economic and sexual stratification. It is not that her choice of variables is not important and defensible. The difficulty from a scholarly or student-text point of view is that this position is not tested. O'Kelly is not concerned about the relative priority and importance of differing approaches. Other points of view are ignored entirely or are seen as trivial in their influence: still others are described as only a way used by males to provide scientific rationales for the oppression of women and the status quo in class society.

O'Kelly's review of the social scientific history of views concerning sex differences is highly selective and one-sided, presented largely to demonstrate a tradition of sex bias in the social sciences. Her brief intellectual history of this field repeats a single theme of unremitting, overt and conscious sexist bias pervading all levels of a male-dominated science.

O'Kelly's material is also presented with an explicit set of values, and the reader is clearly presented with these throughout the text. Thus, those features of any society that make men's and women's roles more equal

(in the sense of identical, rather than complementary) are presented as an evolutionary improvement. For example, horticultural and agricultural stages of economic growth were not an "improvement" over hunting and gathering, because the role of women became more constricted and specialized; women's increased separation from the public sphere was accomplished at the expense of women's independence.

O'Kelly's discussion of the history of the view of women in anthropology omits any substantive discussion of the work of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (except for a joint mention simply as examples of female anthropologists who are exceptions to the rule of male dominance of the field), or John and Beatrice Whiting, among many others. Similar glaring omissions occur in her selection of work in psychology, sociology, and social history. Freudian and other psychodynamic aspects of the origins and expressions of gender roles are barely considered, and even Nancy Chodorow's recent feminist re-casting of Freudian views goes unmentioned. Even in the materialist, evolutionary and Marxist interpretive framework she uses, O'Kelly is selective. For example, she does not mention the active current debates between the Marxian "structuralists," (who are vigorously non-materialist), and the non-Marxist social ecologists (who make important use of cultural-ideological, or non-"material", factors). These kinds of omissions do not indicate a lack of knowledge or coverage of a wide range of disciplines, cultures and authors on O'Kelly's part. To the contrary, O'Kelly's book is very wide-ranging in other respects. Rather, they illustrate the selective nature of her choices of data and theory.

Although O'Kelly makes heavy use of ethnographic, cross-cultural studies of sex roles, her book surprisingly ignores the folk views of the

women and men in those cultures. Where are their own voices, their own words, a picture of their world as they see it? She does not give the people who live in the many cultures she surveys any opportunities to express their own opinions in their own words as to why men and women do the work they do, why they play their differing roles in public and domestic domains, why the care for their boys and girls the way they do, and how they feel about it all. She instead relies on ethnographic summaries or generalizations made by Western researchers. There is no sense in this work of proactive individuals, making their way through life in the face of cultural goals and constraints and oppression.

The book's style is terse, tight, clear -- and rather dour and unrelenting. There is little or no sense of the quality or spirit of life within the scores of cultures O'Kelly uses for her examples, just as there is no room for the equally diverse and fascinating cultural beliefs about how and why men and women differ which people doggedly persist in having throughout the world. Her version of materialism has nothing to say about the role of cultural ideas as independent factors in producing sex role patterns. Such ideas have real force in shaping behavior -- they give meaning to action; they have adaptive value; they are not epiphenomena or false consciousness.

Many of the cultures O'Kelly draws on for her descriptions of women's and men's roles have also been the subjects of fierce and instructive debate in the social sciences: the Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela; the Hopi of the American Southwest; Oscar Lewis' work on the urban and rural Mexican family; and the caste systems of village India. O'Kelly accepts the view that the Yanomamo historically are a "fierce people" due to protein deficiency and population pressure. She does not present

alternative explanations for Hopi "quietude" -- does it come from local environment, religion, or a style of resistance to culture change? She analyzes caste effects on marriage, dowry and women's economic position without a discussion of cultural ideology surrounding heirarchy or pollution? O'Kelly does not open up the controversies surrounding these cases.

A textbook should open the reader's mind to the plausible alternatives available to account for gender role differences. It should also demonstrate the reasoning and the style of argument needed to choose between these alternatives. This does not preclude taking a strong point of view on the issues. Texts have an implicit point of view anyway, whether or not made explicit. But texts should be "balanced" in the sense of showing what is available for study; where the controversies are; and what strategies are available for attacking the problem. Being balanced does not mean to be unengaged or falsely "objective". It does mean that whatever point of view one has should be tested against others. O'Kelly's book is not balanced; it does not show how to explore alternatives.

In sum, O'Kelly's book is admirable in its scope and its use of cross-cultural data, in the care with which its particular approach is developed, and in its social concern for the effects of economic evolution on women and men. But the work rarely deviates from the repetition of a single theoretical point of view, and the sources and authors cited, although diverse, are selected to reflect her views. As a text, the book could be a useful complement to others; read alone, it does not equip a student to think broadly about new materials. And it misses two of the most marvelous benefits of cross-cultural study: the opportunity to hear firsthand and take seriously the personal voices and cultural categories of

other peoples; and the chance to test a variety of alternative views of gender and society by asking about the rest of the world.