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Response

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Response

Ron Barrett

Professor Rebecca Cook addresses a wide range of issues pertaining to gender discrimination and stereotyping that are good launching points for thinking about human rights in the context of global citizenship. Rather than address all these points, I will provide an anthropologist's perspective on three dimensions of gender discrimination that arose in her essay and presentation. The first is a perceptual dimension in which socially constructed stereotypes become so deeply embedded that they appear to be a natural part of the world. The second is an unwritten dimension in which glass ceilings are built over women's careers with rules of success that are based on a long history of male-dominated work environments. Finally, I will address a systemic dimension in which gender discrimination is connected to other axes of inequality that can affect the very survival of women in developing countries around the world.

A major strength of Professor Cook's essay is its emphasis on the *process* of gender discrimination. Much of the anthropological literature on stigma and discrimination has thus far focused on the consequences of stigmatization without enough attention to the underlying factors associated with their emergence. Erving Goffman adopted the term *stigma* from the Greek word for a permanent mark that brands a person as a criminal, traitor, or slave.¹ Building on the social constructivist scholarship of his time, Goffman intended this rebranding to shift the attention of social scientists from studies based on deviance as pathology to those that critically examine why some human attributes become stigmatized in certain societies at certain historical periods.² This is an important epistemological shift, for if we were to define stigma as a social illness, then the locus of the problem would be the discriminators themselves, not at the site of the victims.³ To better understand the problem of stigma, we must better comprehend its underlying etiologies.

Approaching etiology, Cook points out that discrimination in the broadest sense is a set of cognitive processes by which we humans navigate through our social environments. In the same way that most

of us can walk down a flight of stairs without much attention, we can also use cognitive shortcuts to make flash judgments regarding basic and repetitive social interactions. These shortcuts allow us to make faster decisions and devote more attention to higher priority tasks.⁴ However, these otherwise useful cognitive processes become problematic when they extend to negative and unwarranted attributes of other people. They also become problematic when we give undue salience to certain features of other people—such as gender—and allow these features to alter our overall perceptions of them, in the case of stereotyping, or to eclipse other aspects of their identity, in the case of master status attributions.⁵

We can easily recognize the more extreme forms of stigmatization: distortions of character, hate speech, hate crimes, and so forth. But it is far more difficult to recognize the more subtle attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that make up our mental models of other people. This is especially the case when our mental models are acquired during primary socialization in childhood and are pervasive among the people around us. Under these conditions, our mental models are so fundamental that we no longer recognize their social construction.⁶ Instead, they become “nature,” “common sense,” or “just the way things are.” When these naturalized structures serve to create and perpetuate inequalities, *we hold these falsehoods to be self-evident.*

Secondary socialization in adulthood can also create naturalized models of discrimination, especially when they are heavily weighted with the social capital of “objectivity.” Turning to biomedical science, Emily Martin conducted a comparative study of clinical textbooks on reproduction over the last century.⁷ While the medical data itself was reasonably accurate for its respective time periods, the language used to convey the data communicated certain biases and stereotypes about female reproduction. Many biomedical processes were represented in mechanical terms, using industrial metaphors. Childbirth was depicted as a factory-like process with active male and passive female mechanisms, even at the molecular level. Within these metaphorical contexts, menstruation and menopause were often depicted as failed reproduction, breakdowns along the assembly lines of biochemistry. In this manner, scholars and other professionals can play the role of moral entrepreneurs, conveying socially constructed gender biases through the authoritative medium of published texts.⁸

Martin’s work builds on a long line of scholarship concerning the influence of language on human thought, beginning with structural

Ron Barrett

linguistics (de Saussure 1983), sociolinguistics (Whorf 1941), and cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1987). These contributions serve to “raise our consciousness,” to revive a useful earlier phrase, and allow us to see the constructed artifice of naturalized inequalities. This process is essential if we are to re-socialize our gender perceptions.

Professor Cook highlights the struggles for maternal and family leave laws in the United States, with poignant examples in which these struggles have affected fathers as well as mothers. Bringing human reproduction to workplace institutions, Cook raises a challenging question: How do we create laws and policies that recognize biological differences between the sexes without perpetuating stereotypes between the genders?

This challenge is even more problematic when we consider the unwritten laws of workplace advancement. In the late 1990s, Stanford University conducted an internal study to learn how female faculty managed to attain tenure while having children and raising a family.⁹ The objective was to find role models and successful strategies for female junior faculty with children. However, the study was soon terminated when they were unable to find a single female senior professor who had children during her tenure process. Even with rules and policies for maternal leave and delayed tenure clocks, something impeded these “missing” women who would have sought to be mothers and scholars at the same time.

An increasing number of professional women choose to pursue these aspirations in tandem, taking significant time away from their careers to have children. Dianna Shandy and Karine Moe have done an excellent study of this “opt-out phenomenon.”¹⁰ They note the difficult challenges and impediments to later reintegration into the professional world. Here, women often encounter the unwritten rules in which a career trajectory must be continuous if it is to be competitive. These rules constitute what Shandy and Moe refer to as the “Ideal Worker Model” of someone who is competitive, someone who is “on track.” One might argue that the Ideal Worker is a positive stereotype with negative connotations for those who do not fit the expectation.

Critics may argue that the Ideal Worker Model is a *just* model insofar as it equally applies to both men and women. Yet this argument sounds much like the famous dictum that the laws of France equally

forbid the rich as well as the poor from begging, stealing bread, and sleeping under bridges. The injustice is that rich people do not need to beg or sleep under bridges. Similarly, men do not need time off for childbirth or to schedule adjustments for breastfeeding. The continuous career trajectory is a holdover from the days of male-dominated careers. To change the situation, these unwritten rules must be rewritten.

This returns us to Cook's question about biological differences and the persistence of stereotypes. Critics may cite the additional costs of maternity leave and job interruptions as objective evidence that women are more costly and less suited to the workplace. The problem with these arguments, however, is that they assume the wrong unit of analysis. Human reproduction is never an individual endeavor, either biologically or socially. Compared with other primates, we *Homo sapiens* are the least developed at birth. We also have the longest period of maturation and, therefore, we require the greatest parental investment of time and energy.¹¹ This investment requires a collective effort—some configuration of family and social support to bring the next generation into adulthood. Likewise, the challenges of caring for career and children are also collective responsibilities. We all owe our existence (inclusive of our careers) to reproduction and parenting. We should take care to ensure that our workplace institutions take this fact into account, lest the perpetuation of our species becomes another Tragedy of the Commons.

The systemic nature of gender discrimination is particularly evident in families where different axes of inequality—such as those of gender, economics, and age—are intimately connected to one another. Here, I call attention to my own work in Northern India, where, in many communities, sex ratios at birth and childhood are unusually skewed toward males.¹² Although human males have a very slight advantage over females *en utero*, females generally outlive males at all ages after birth.¹³ These trends are remarkably consistent across human populations; they are independent of most human biological variation as well as economic differences in all but a very few countries. When these ratios strongly favor male births, or males outlive females in childhood or later years, a red flag should be raised that some social factor is negatively affecting female survival.

Professor Cook mentions the hazards of certain kinship systems to women and girls.¹⁴ In Northern India, one of the chief contributors to male child preference is patrilocality, a kinship system in which new wives move into the household of the husband's extended family, absolving her from inheritance rights and the obligation of support for her natal parents. Under this system, daughters bring significant economic disadvantages: their natal parents must bear the cost of an expensive wedding, there may be a significant dowry, and all of this so that she can move out and support another family. In contrast, sons are profitable. Sons do not come with the heavy burden of weddings and dowries. Sons and their wives help support the extended family, and they will be the ones to care for his parents in their old age. For most Indian families, daughters' weddings are the chief household expense and sons are the chief retirement plan.

Recent economic changes and urbanization have compounded the motives for the preference for sons in India.¹⁵ The liberalization of the Indian economy has led to rapid urbanization and a subsequent fragmentation of traditional extended families, along with overall fertility declines. This has led to the aging of Indian society, as it has in many other developing countries, thereby increasing the ratio of elderly to working age adults. With more than 70 percent of the Indian population living below a very low poverty line, the challenges of aging parents are exacerbated by the dual dilemma of diminishing finances and social supports. With fewer children and fewer supports, the pressure for having sons is even greater.

Unfortunately, it is relatively simple for families to ensure that they have male rather than female children. The technologies for sex determination are readily available and affordable, making sex-selective abortion a feasible option.¹⁶ Among the poorest families, there is also the long-standing possibility of benign neglect, which is a more subtle process in which males have preferential access to essential resources, while girls and frail widows are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Whether by selection or neglect, these actions collectively constitute a slow, silent "gendercide." This problem impacts the dependent elderly as well, for if there are not enough women to provide care, they too may succumb to a benign parental neglect.

It should be noted that while son preference is prevalent in India, there are many regions where this is not the case.¹⁷ But in a country of more than a billion people, even a fraction of its communities that prefer sons presents a significant global problem, not that any single

instance of gendercide should be tolerated or ignored. Gendercide is also a threat for countries like China, where the One Child Policy has led to a massive fertility decline and rapidly aging population.¹⁸ These are perhaps the most extreme examples of gender discrimination, ones that cut off the existence of women in the first place. They are also complex problems comprised of systemic relationships between multiple axes of inequality.

I will conclude by turning a phrase from Gertrude Stein, who once said of her hometown that, "There is no there there." If we are to think of gender inequalities in global terms, then the more apt phrase for our collective home is, "There is no there here." Recognizing that now we all live in the "same place," we must also recognize that we all now have the same problems, and that problems like gender discrimination are connected with many others. I am grateful to Professor Cook for shining light on these connections.

Notes

1. Goffman 1963.
2. Ablon 1981; Barrett 2008; Gussow and Tracy 1977; and Jones et al. 1984.
3. This may include the victims in those cases in which they have internalized the stigmatizing attitudes of their surrounding communities (Barrett 2005). See also, Barrett 2008.
4. Gaertner and Dovidio 2009; and Martin 1986.
5. Hughes 1945.
6. Berger and Luckman 1966.
7. Martin 1990; and Martin 1986.
8. Friedson 1979.
9. Donald A. Barr, Personal Communication.
10. Moe and Shandy 2009.
11. Trevathan 1987.
12. Arnold et al. 1998; Jayaraj 2009.
13. Trevathan 1987.
14. It should be noted that there are many different forms of polygyny around the world. The dynamics of kinship, gender, and power are often complex; it should not be assumed that all forms of polygyny are necessarily disempowering of women.
15. Samaiyar 2008.
16. Sahni et al. 2008.
17. Jayaraj 2009.
18. Greenhalgh 2008.

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