

Spanning the World (Kimmel, chapter 3)

This chapter reviews the cross-cultural diversity of gender definitions, gendered division of labor, gender rituals, gender categorization systems, and sexual diversity.

Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* illustrates diversity of gender definitions: two tribes with few gender differences (one laid-back tribe and one violent tribe) and another that reversed the "traditional" Western model.

Some societies have more than two genders, e.g., Native American *berdaches*.

Sexual customs include belief that intercourse makes men weaker, that women are sexually insatiable, multiple orgasms each night (for men or women), little or extended amounts of foreplay, and different attitudes toward kissing, oral sex, different sexual positions and so on.

Some societies practice male-male sex without having the Western heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, e.g., ritualized sex between men and boys, intercourse only during the full moon.

Explaining variations in female status

Male dominance is greater when sex segregation is higher (and men's contribution to child raising is lower), e.g., men spend their time in the "men's hut". Colonialism and capitalist penetration usually lower women's status, as does a higher male/female sex ratio. Women's control of property rights after marriage is an important indicator of women's status.

Further thoughts about gender cross-culturally

Kimmel gives some examples of androcentric (male-centered) archeological interpretations, e.g., "Man the Hunter" provided for the tribe, while women raised children. He also gives some gynecentric (female-centered) alternatives, the baby sling was the first great technology.

Both sorts of claims should be viewed with skepticism since we know so little about our early ancestors. However, the benefit of gynecentric interpretations is that they force us to consider alternative versions of human prehistory.