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Book Review

Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World

By

Cecilia L. Ridgeway

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Cecilia Ridgway opens Framed by Gender by describing the significant social and economic changes that the United States has undergone, from a primarily agrarian to an industrialized nation and from a predominantly male labor force to an economy in which women participate. Despite these drastic societal modifications, she points out the puzzling persistence of a “system of gender inequality” that seems to reorganize itself with each social and economic transition (3). Since gender inequality has remained relatively stable regardless of changes in women’s access to resources and the labor market, Ridgeway asks, “Are there any general social processes through which gender inequality manages to reinscribe itself in new forms of social and economic organization as these forms emerge in society?” (4). She makes clear that she is not attempting to answer the question of why gender inequality exists, but rather how it persists. While answers to the question “how” can be just as useful as those to the question “why”, a more rigorous analysis of the causes of gender inequality may have assisted Ridgeway in determining how this inequality is maintained. Nevertheless, Framed by Gender offers useful insights for understanding the persistence of gender inequality in society.

Ridgeway provides extensive evidence to explain the importance of gender as a category for organizing and coordinating social interactions. Chapters II and III are the foundation for the rest of her book, which describes the basic requirements necessary for social relations to ensue. For example, relying on Erving Goffman,
Ridgeway explains that coordinating social interactions is possible because of fundamental knowledge that is presumed to be shared by all members of a society. This knowledge allows people to act in a certain way towards others based on assumptions about how others will perceive their actions. Most importantly, she argues, primary categories like gender enable social relations to occur within new social contexts and among strangers, because these categories provide a foundation from which to understand all other information about the person and the interaction.

After describing the function of gender as a category that enables social interactions, and providing convincing evidence to support her claims, Ridgeway pushes us beyond an understanding of basic categories to explain the way status and inequality emerge from categorization. Her explanations throughout these first chapters are very dense, including a plethora of theoretical and empirical details that could overwhelm the casual reader. In particular, Ridgeway emphasizes status construction theory and expectation states theory, incorporating a wealth of social psychological studies as evidence for the utility of these theories. She argues that males and females working collectively on a goal-oriented task over a series of interactions will develop an agreement regarding which group is more influential than the other. This decision is often influenced by a “tipping factor,” such as a pre-existing inequality (48). Here Ridgeway’s discussion would benefit from a stronger analysis of the origins of gender inequality. If the pre-existing inequality that acts as a tipping factor is derived from previous gender inequality, then status construction theory does not provide a complete explanation of how neutral categories become categories of inequality. It seems as though these categories were not neutral before the goal-oriented tasks were performed. In her defense, Ridgeway briefly discusses theories regarding the origin of gender inequality; however she is comfortable ultimately stating that the origins of male dominance simply remain unknown (51).

In Chapters IV and V, Ridgeway’s argument flows more quickly as she applies the foundational concepts from chapters one through three to describe social relations within the labor market and the home. She chose these two settings for analysis because of the crucial role that each plays in reinforcing gender constructions and
access to material resources and power. In the employment sector, interviewing for jobs, training, working with co-workers on goal-oriented tasks, and other activities require individuals to make judgments about one another and act accordingly. Actors can rely on a gendered framework to “fill in the details of an uncertain work task, setting, or person” (122). In addition, the structure and institutions of work places can reinforce sex segregation and inequality within occupations even when gender is not explicitly considered. For instance, employers create standards for job candidates which tend to rely on stereotypically male traits as the “ideal employee” traits. These types of institutionalized behaviors reinforce a gendered labor market regardless of the salience of gender.

In contrast, the home is a location where gender still tends to be very salient and gender status characteristics are described as specific, which means that being a woman has direct perceived implications for her ability to perform certain tasks. The division of labor among heterosexual married couples in the U.S. is particularly important in terms of delegating power and respect. Ridgeway takes time to describe the moral expectations regarding a man’s devotion to the family as a provider compared to a woman’s devotion that tends to be demonstrated by care-taking. These moral expectations deeply influence the division of labor within the household. In turn the power and respect derived from the household roles perpetuates stereotypes and access to decision-making power.

Finally in Chapter VI, Ridgeway provides a more thorough description of the process through which gender inequality persists despite changing economic and political spheres of society. Although the build-up to the heart of Ridgeway’s argument is extensive, by the end of the book she delivers what she has promised her readers. Essentially, despite progress in the political and economic realms of society, “[t]he lack of deep change in the structure of the family has been a powerful force that pushes back against gender change in the public sphere” because it influences men’s and women’s access to opportunities in employment and politics and reinforces stereotypes (159). Additionally, stereotypes and cultural beliefs regarding gender “lag” behind material changes (159). As aspects of the economic or political sphere begin to transform, individuals responsible for reorganizing these structures rely on previous cultural beliefs,
implicitly inscribing ideas and assumptions about gender into new procedures and organizational forms. Ridgeway’s primary contribution to gender studies is her explanation through specific examples of how gender stereotypes and cultural understandings are recycled and reused in new institutions and how they are bolstered by the unchanging dynamics of the private, family sphere.

*Framed by Gender* provides an excellent description of the social relations that have allowed gender inequality to persevere throughout the various social and economic transformations in U.S. history. Scholars and graduate students of Sociology, Social Psychology, and Women and Gender Studies would find this book accessible and beneficial to their understanding of gender and inequality. Although the book is very dense at times, overall Ridgeway accomplishes the admirable and difficult task of describing concepts and theories in a widely-accessible way.