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From sex-role to Gender in Scandinavian social research

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I started to work in my present job at the Centre for Research on Women, established in 1986 whereas I now work at the Centre for gender Research.

The Centre's name was changed to 'Centre for Women's and Gender Studies in 2001, and again to 'Centre for Gender Research' from January 2008.

This relates very much to my present lecture:

It has something to do with

- the travel of concepts
 - o between academia and society
 - o between USA and Scandinaviaand
- developments within social research.

To begin with Sex-role studies:

The roles of men and women – or sex roles – have been publicly discussed and scientifically investigated in Scandinavia through the 1960s.

The concept of role implies that behaviour we see as typical/characteristic for men and women are not natural, but the result of cultural and social processes whereby the new-born are taught to react and behave in certain ways.

The concept was imported from USA, especially through the work of T. Parsons who in 1955 published the book "The American Family". Here he describes the American family of his day as the peak of family organisation: Man as the breadwinner and wife as the home maker = complementary roles.

The sex role approach - is related to a theory of society that emphasize that any society must – in order to survive – have structures that organize society so that all necessary functions are taken care of: in our context there must be (adaptation) production or economic activities as well as (pattern maintenance) reproduction of values and new and civilized citizens as well as a place for the participants in the economic sphere to relax and be restituted after a hard day's work in a competitive environment. (The family should be this "haven".)

Consequently there should be norms, values and relations in the family that are peaceful as opposed to the harsh competition in the economic life.

Parsons also introduces his "pattern variables", dichotomous concepts that are used to describe basic choices of values that individuals make in social life. They are also used to describe different social roles, like doctor, teacher – and woman and man - as well as different social institutions or social spheres:

Expressive vs instrumental

Affectivity - affective neutrality

(Father vs clerk in a bank)

- collectivity-orientation- self-orientation
- (Choose between the interests of the collective vs oneself)
- particularism - universalism
- (particular persons vs anyone)
- ascription – achievement
- (Value people for they are vs what they do/achieve)
- diffusivity – specificity
- (Broad vs narrow relation to others)

These characteristics were used to describe different institutions of society as well as what was thought as representing the different sex roles. Thus: the family represented an expressive institution where people might live out their emotions, where they were evaluated as belonging to the family and the interest for the whole was seen as more important than the interest of the individual. On the other hand the economy was characterised by instrumentality where each individual were supposed to control their feelings, might be exchanged for any other who would fit the most to accomplish the tasks and where the individual competition was valued higher than the collective cooperation .

And this fit as a hand in the glove of the 1950s division of work:
man=breadwinner, women=homemaker.

One might say that the concept of sex-roles laid an ideological legitimation of the allocation of tasks in an industrial society. But it was extended even further – to the personalities of women and men. And this was what was studied in social research during the 1960s and far into the 1970s.

So – the concept of sex roles was developed in family sociology and was extended to studies of achievement in academia, traffic accidents as well as in studies of changes in society where more and more women entered the economic sphere.

And the concept of sex roles was transmitted from academia to society – in order to explain f.ex. why girls ended up with a BA degree and not going further or why girls did more homework than boys in schools – during the 1960-70s.

So now I have talked about both the travel from USA to the Scandinavia and also from academia to the public at large.

Women's studies/research

BUT: Meanwhile in Scandinavia, the new woman's movement developed, flourished and demanded equality. And especially in Norway women were included into political positions - the Parliament. The sex-role studies that showed how women behaved different from men and thereby got less pay-back from their efforts - in school, in political participation (as they were seen as more emotional and less rational than men) led to protests - not least among young women students demanding studies on women, based on women's experiences and values.

Here came women's studies - supported by women in politics. Leading to centres for women's studies in universities in Scandinavia - in Norway and Sweden, less in Denmark.

From the 1970s and onwards women's studies documented how women had been invisible in society and culture and the new research succeed in showing how women had contributed - but also claiming discrimination.

In 1973 the Nordic Summer University had a session - inspired by the Danish group who had had a seminar with the UK scholar Juliet Mitchell on "The specific condition of women under capitalism" leading to more Marxist inspired research in Scandinavia. (Norwegians focussing on empirical studies of women in the labour force - women as the reserve labour, in Denmark more on theoretical debates of how women's situation may be subsumed under the logics of capitalism whereas Sweden had a more pragmatic approach - how to develop a democratic family).

With this new approach - critiques of capitalism also critique of patriarchy appeared: The discussion went: What are the relations between capitalism and patriarchy? Today?

Sex-role studies were criticised for not having a concept of power - only positions of power were on the agenda showing that women were not in such positions - but why?

And at the same time: Men's studies emerged. In Norway furthered by the commission on men established by the prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1986. They needed research - like the need of women politicians in the 1970s.

So we see: sex role studies were replaced by women's studies because the enlightened public demanded women's studies. Now the public demanded studies of men. Farewell to women's studies, welcome to gender.

This can be seen as a political shift, but it also mirrors shift in women's studies on the international (USA) scene.

Mitchell, Juliet 1971, *Woman's estate*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Parsons, Talcott 1955, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*. Glencoe. Illinois: Free Press.