Beliefs About the Nature of Sex/Gender and Ethnic Inequality

ROB EISINGA*, AGNES VAN DEN ELZEN** and MIEKE VERLOO***

ABSTRACT

This research examines five lay explanations of the nature of sex/gender inequality — supernatural, genetic, individualistic, cultural, and social — and empirically links these beliefs to lay theories about the nature of ethnic inequality. Using data from a sample of Dutch metropolitan residents, it was found that supernatural, genetic and individualistic explanations of men-women differences are strongly related and that all correlate negatively with a social and a cultural view. The findings also showed that beliefs about sex/gender inequality and beliefs about ethnic inequality are remarkably similar; the greater the acceptance, for example, of a genetic or supernatural explanation of men-women inequality, the greater the likelihood of a genetic and supernatural belief about ethnic inequality. Significant relationships were observed between lay beliefs and church membership, education, age, sex-role traditionalism and Christian belief. No differences in explanations were found between male and female respondents.

Introduction

One of the most passionate debates in feminist literature concerns the subject of difference: are there sex/gender differences, where do they come from, and can and should they be changed? On a very basic level, feminist theorists may be divided into those who deny and those who affirm the notion that women are different from men in ways that are socially meaningful. According to the “minimizers”, as McFadden (1984) has labeled them, the social mode of being men and women is in no way linked with their nature as males and females. It is essentially a product of social mediations, ones which act to transform biological males and females into sociological men and women and thereby to consign women to an inferior position with respect to men (De Beauvoir, 1961; Chodorow, 1980; Collective, 1980). The way in which these social mediations, especially patriarchal ideology, are used to oppress women is that women are asserted to be different from men

* Department of Social Science Research Methods, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands
** Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare, The Netherlands
*** Department of Political Sciences, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1999
by nature. In the minimizers’ opinion this assertion is extremely objectionable: males and females are both identically human beings and the only reason that their anatomical differences, for example, are stressed is that it helps to rationalize the elaboration of more important differences. According to the “maximizers” (McFadden, 1984), on the other hand, the differences between men and women are both radical and ineradicable. In their view women are essentially different from men with respect to, for example, the unconscious, libido and anatomy, and these differences require accentuation and celebration (Cixous, 1980; Feral, 1980; Irigaray, 1980). Moreover, the subordination of women to men cannot be a function of the ascription of difference. Instead, it can only be a result of the denial of authentic and absolute differences. The source of this denial is not to be found in any particular ideology but in male values and identity inscribed in thought and language.

While these academic views — important Dutch contributions include Aerts (1991), Costera Meijer (1991), and Komter (1991) — have received considerable attention in women’s studies and feminist theory in the past decades, it is astonishing and rather disappointing to find that public beliefs about the nature of men-women differences have been subject to surprisingly little study. There are, however, important reasons for interest in lay explanations of sex/gender differences. Not only do they provide a contribution to understanding the origins of sex discrimination, popular views on equal or unequal opportunity, for example, also shape perceptions of the legitimacy of public policy, such as affirmative action programs and may thereby either facilitate or hinder their implementation.

Furthermore, as it is well understood, the device of ascribing difference to a social group and then using that difference as a pretext for the subordination of that group, has not only been employed against women but also, among others, against blacks. Surprisingly, however, there have been only a few empirical studies that relate sexism to racism in one way or another (Bowker, 1981; Smith and Kluegel, 1984). Hence our knowledge of how or, for that matter, whether public beliefs about sex/gender differences are related to beliefs about racial and ethnic differences is not very great.

This study offers some steps toward filling this gap. It endeavors, first, to advance our understanding of the variety and extent of public beliefs about the causes of sex/gender inequality. The description presented below will focus on the content of the explanations, their theoretical structure in particular. Second, we will empirically examine these beliefs using data from a Dutch survey and explore what beliefs about men-women inequality seem to imply for beliefs about the causes of the native-migrant socio-economic gap, i.e., ethnic inequality in Holland. Finally, we will analyze structural and attitudinal characteristics of those who support particular rationalizations.