

August 17, 2011



MICHELLE R. CLAYMAN INSTITUTE
for GENDER RESEARCH
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Contact: Lori Mackenzie
Clayman Institute for Gender
Research
Phone: (650) 725-0371
Gender-email@stanford.edu
<http://gender.stanford.edu>

Stanford Professor Cecilia Ridgeway publishes *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*

(STANFORD, Calif.) "If you only read one book about inequality this decade, make it this one," says Barbara J. Risman, University of Illinois at Chicago professor, about Stanford professor Cecilia Ridgeway's new book, **Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World**. This praise is due to the significance of Ridgeway's accomplishment: in her book, she provides a well-reasoned, well-researched explanation of why we continue to observe unequal outcomes for women and men, even in the face of changes that work against gender discrimination, including economic rationality, changes to the legal system, progressive politics, and even women's own efforts to achieve equal opportunities.

Ridgeway states that our use of the Gender Frame (which she describes as our automatic sex categorization of others) to organize our interactions can create inequality. She argues that the Gender Frame perpetuates inequality, because it allows gendered beliefs to be rewritten into new economic and social arrangements, with no prior history of gender differences.

"The book bridges her studies in the sociology of gender and social psychology to answer the important question of why gender inequality persists even when there are so many countervailing forces out there that might have led us to believe that gender inequality may have withered away by now," says Shelley Correll, director of Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research.

Ridgeway argues that there is a coordination problem in social relations; namely, for interactions between individuals to proceed smoothly, they must be able to synchronize their behavior. To do so, they use shared category systems used to create "common knowledge." In the US, basic "primary" cultural categories include sex, race, and age; thus, upon meeting another person, you instantly sex categorize them. But research shows that sex categorization unconsciously primes gender stereotypes, which allows these stereotypes to become cognitively available to affect behavior and judgments. However, the extent to which they shape behavior varies from negligible to substantial, depending on the situation. This is because stereotypes about women and men depend the subject matter, as stereotypes are task-specific.

August 17, 2011



While men are believed to be especially more competent than women in male-typed settings (e.g. engineering, sports) and positions of authority, women are advantaged in female-typed settings (e.g. childcare, communication). In mixed sex, gender neutral settings, men are believed to be modestly and diffusely more competent. Even though these beliefs are based on the “average” woman and the “average” man, Ridgeway argues that they become the “default rules” for coordinating behavior. So if equally qualified applicants apply for a male-typed job, such as a computer engineer, male applicants will be advantaged relative to female applicants. But if two equally qualified applicants apply to a female-typed job, such as a nanny, the woman would be more likely to receive the job offer.

“Since these beliefs oftentimes lag behind the actual social realities, they perpetuate gender inequality” adds Ridgeway. “These lagging beliefs are especially likely to impact social and technological sites of innovation, as these sites are generally small, interpersonally organized, and have few institutional schemas to guide behavior. She states that this, “...increases the likelihood that participants unconsciously fall back on the gender frame to help organize their uncertain setting.”

To demonstrate that the gender frame contributes to the persistence of inequality, Ridgeway contrasts biotech and IT start-ups that utilize flexible work arrangements with firms that have more traditional hierarchies. Unlike many organizations, these particular start-ups organize work in terms of project teams that have a relatively flat management structure and have not existed long enough to have a history of institutionalized inequality. Despite having the same organizational form, Ridgeway shows that women fare better in the biotech than the IT start-ups in comparison to traditional firms, due to differences in the gender stereotypes that surround these fields.

Ridgeway argues that the life sciences are no longer strongly sex typed in US; indeed, half of biology PhD students are women. And while there are still gendered beliefs about ability in biology, but they are only modestly biased against women. For this reason, Ridgeway argues that women in these biotech start-ups are able to take full advantage of the flexible network structure, as they are perceived as credible by their fellow co-workers. And indeed, her prediction holds true: women do better in these biotech startups than in traditional biotech firms (as measured by their number of patents).

However, in the IT industry, there are more doubts about the ability of women as, “engineering and the physical sciences are still strongly sex-typed in favor of men.” As such, “...the background gender frame is more powerfully present and relevant which creates stronger implicit biases against women's competence.” For this reason, the flexibility and informality does not provide the same benefit to women in IT start-ups as it does to the women in biotech. Indeed, it may even prove to be a disadvantage. Thus, the gender frame predicts that women

August 17, 2011



MICHELLE R. CLAYMAN INSTITUTE
for GENDER RESEARCH
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

will fare poorer in these IT start-ups than in traditional firms. And indeed, women in these firms do the same or worse than women in traditional firms (again, as measured by their number of patents).

Although Ridgeway's argument is both complicated and nuanced, it provides strong evidence for the claim that despite innovation in organizational forms, our use of the gender frame is a source of persistence of inequality. In a review of the book, University of California, Hastings College of the Law professor Joan Williams called "Framed By Gender" the most important book on gender she has read in decades.

"Why has gender proved so unbending?" Williams says. "Ridgeway gives us answers, and paves the way for a new feminist theory that incorporates decades of studies on how gender bias operates at home and at work."

For these reasons, Ridgeway thinks that achieving gender equality is likely to be a bumpy and uncertain ride. However, she believes that, "This persistence dynamic does not mean that inequality cannot be overcome, but it does mean that it will not automatically be overcome."

###

Cecilia L. Ridgeway is the Lucie Stern Professor of Social Sciences in the Sociology Department at Stanford University. She is interested in the role social hierarchies in everyday social relations play in the larger processes of stratification and inequality in a society. Her recent projects include empirical tests and further developments of status construction theory, which is a theory about the power of interactional contexts to create and spread status beliefs about social differences.

The Clayman Institute on Gender Research at Stanford University was founded in 1974 and is one of the nation's most distinguished research organizations devoted to the study of gender. The Clayman Institute creates knowledge and seeks to implement change that promotes gender equality at Stanford, nationally and internationally.