

Full Length Research

Andromache for psychologists: What can we learn from antiquity?

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The place of women in society is a useful indicator of the extent of equality in that society suggests Wilkinson (2005). Concerns about stagnant (the West) or rising levels of inequality experienced by women globally requires that we look carefully at models of societies in the past and the historical development of male and female power and status differences. The negative impact of low status or lack of power on wellbeing has been sufficiently illustrated by Oliver James in 'Affluenza' (2007). Engels' (1972) essay on 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' brought about a revolution of thinking at the turn of the previous century regarding the place of women in society. Anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and psychologists have since then engaged in debates and research to explore the contribution antiquity made to our understanding of gender roles and a male dominated world by querying the assumption that human societies have always been controlled by men. Goddesses, Angels, witches – which identity do we choose to regain the power and status we deserve? In this essay I explore some of the key points that are made by researchers of inequality leading to the proposition that being in charge of inner – reproduction and sexuality - and outer - occupying territory in society –space is the only way that women shall regain power and control as equals to men. Finally interventions and strategies are suggested that can assist psychologists to use their awareness of an empowering epistemology to guide families towards better mental and emotional health.

Key words: feminism, matriarchy, patriarchy, antiquity, psycho-social factors, taken for granted knowledge, wellbeing and mental health.

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INTRODUCTION

Revelations pertaining to the sexual exploitation of girls here in the UK have shocked the public. Local authorities had to come to terms with the fact that under their very eyes the grooming of girls was taking place over a period of years. Recent research suggests that the level of underreporting of crimes against women is at 70%. These facts bring to our attention how fragile the rights of girls and women are in spite of the achievements of

feminism and anti-discriminatory legislation. Exploring the present nature and extent of equality for women seems therefore to be imperative. Equal pay and equal employment opportunities are vital aspects of equality, however, they do not necessarily translate into equal power and control or, for that matter, a vision of future goals to be aimed for. When we face the reality of women today it does not seem too farfetched to suggest that only

a seismic paradigm shift and a reinvigorated epistemology can lead us out of the present impasse which has not changed noticeably during the last thirty years.

In a recent parliamentary debate politicians Jenny Willcott, Elizabeth Truss and Chi Onwurah expressed concern that the 'pinkification' of toys for girls was adding to gender inequality in careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Fine, *New Scientist* (N. S.) 31.3.14). The gendering of toys for profit is easy to spot when you go into a toyshop. Pink is for girls, other colours are for boys. Action toys, construction sets, vehicles and all manner of weapons are presented for boys to choose from, whereas toys signifying domesticity and beautification are in the girls department, polarising children's interests into stereotypes. While boys' toys prepare them for action, power and the occupation of space, girls' toys prepare them for domesticity. As psychologists we are aware of the powerful influence of early learning and should therefore be concerned about any return to inequality through the backdoor of consumerism and toyshops.

Women around the world

Inequality for women is a less visible problem in developed countries where women form half of the workforce and therefore can be economically independent. Yet, low paid workers are mainly female (the latest statistics puts them at 22% lower on average than men). In the corridors of power inequality is unmistakable. In the UK House of Parliament there are only 148 women out of a total of 650 MPs.

During 2014 the German Parliament passed legislation specifying that 30% of staff in top boardroom positions must be women from 2016. The perceived need for such an initiative is a clear indication that just under a hundred years after women got the vote in Germany gender equality has not been achieved. In an analysis of why so many women have failed to maintain their top position the commentators come to the conclusion that women tend to be hired when major problems such as cuts in staffing have to be executed. Unsurprisingly such work entails much conflict, strain and blame. It was argued that men can hold on to their position because of the male network around them which women tend not to have (*Die Zeit*, 22.11.14). In other words power and the networks of control remain largely out of women's reach. This is also visible in our own profession where a low ratio of men to women during initial training nevertheless produces a higher ratio of men in positions of power.

Globally discrimination, inequality and violence towards women are ubiquitous. Women at American universities face the threat of rape on a daily basis. Female genital mutilation takes place even here in the UK. In India every

fifth woman becomes a victim of rape. In Nigeria the Islamic group Boko Haram abducted over two hundred and seventy young females. Most of them have not been seen since. Women captured by the IS Islamic state are sold for the equivalent of £27 into prostitution. Continuing practices of misogyny take place in Saudi-Arabia where women are not allowed to move about without the permission of a male member of the family. In February 2015 a conference entitled 'Women in Society' at Qassim university (Saudi-Arabia) included not a single female participant. Women are not allowed into Mosques together with men. In Jerusalem women are not allowed to pray at the Wailing Wall. Every day women who attempt to pray at the wall are harassed and arrested by police. In many Islamic countries women have to hide their hair and even their face.

Women in the UK

The widespread use of women to sell consumer goods from chocolate to motorcars goes hand in hand with a stereo-typing of male and female roles, creating subliminal messages about what is expected, in terms of such personal things as body size (size ten), personality (airhead) and preference for macho men. Macleod comments (N. S. 14.2.15):

"Our preferences are personal and flexible, shaped by factors such as our environment, social status and economic prospects. It is time to question the stereotypes and rewrite the rulebook (p42)."

Role models act as indicators in a society for the type of prospect a young woman may aspire to as she grows up. While the TV screens present men in action roles both in politics and on the football pitches. They occupy large spaces, whereas women are usually portrayed in small spaces, such as the home or the garden. The notorious predominance of young men working in the city of London stock market briefly reached media attention after the market crash in 2008, when it received criticism regarding the testosterone driven risk behaviour that may have added to the collapse of the banking system. The struggle to include women bishops has nearly torn the Church of England apart. Nevertheless, the first woman bishop was appointed in December 2014. The Nobel prize given for excellence since 1901 has been awarded to men 94.5 % of the time. This means only 47 women received it. Even in countries that espouse the rights of women to equality the aim to fulfil that demand has yet to be achieved. Neff et al (2007):

"Despite gains made by the women's movement over the last few decades, inequality in the power and status accorded to males and females is still a prevalent part of our cultural and social landscape (p 682)."

Are women different by nature?

Claims that women are different from men and therefore cannot achieve the same roles as men are refuted by girls' educational success. The 2014 GCSE results show that girls have pulled ahead of boys in every subject apart from maths. The poor achievements of gender equality in academic science were highlighted in the Psychologist (December 2014). A new report on women in the sciences indicates that the mathematically intense sciences showed that women were underrepresented in university course and post graduate programmes. In 2011 women received only 25% of GEEMP (geoscience, engineering, economics maths computer science) Bachelor degrees. The results of the report apparently suggest somewhat complex trends of certain movements towards egalitarian experiences. Valian, professor in psychology at Hunters College, CUNY comments:

“(The report) ignores the wealth of experimental data showing that both men and women underrate women and overrate men in professional settings... the subtle daily examples in real life where women's professional contributions are not recognised – including the failure to invite them as keynote speakers at conferences and data showing that female and male students are sensitive to cues indicating whether they will be welcome in a field (p905).”

In the year of 1915 when Albert Einstein developed the theory of relativity a woman called Amalia Noether developed one of the most pertinent theorems about the hidden rules of nature: Symmetries give rise to conservation laws. However, hardly anyone is familiar with her name, although her achievements when described are praised as highly as Einstein's. She worked at Goettingen University but received no financial remuneration for her efforts.

Epidemiological studies (Wilkinson, 2005) in the developed countries have revealed the type of factors that determine our lives, once material privation has declined. These include the nature of early childhood experience, the amount of anxiety and worry we suffer, the quality of our social relationships, the amount of control we have over our lives and our social status. Our health and wellbeing is determined by these psychosocial factors which impinge on the way we think, feel and act. Fine (2010) comments:

“...those gender gaps can close or even disappear depending on social context, place and historical period... we are still at the beginning of the journey of understanding how the brain enables the mind... The sheer complexity of the brain, together with our

assumptions about gender, lends themselves beautifully to over-interpretation and precipitous conclusions (p 900).”

Rather than speaking of nature we need to study the cultural, psychosocial context in which women live and how the social construction of their relative powerlessness has come to be the dominant paradigm in society, often expressed in their economic status and the lack of space they inhabit. Similar to institutional racism institutional sexism lives on subtly in the minds of people without them necessarily being aware of it. However, when language is used it is likely to contain the unconscious perceptions that determine the continuation of the paradigm of powerlessness.

Economics and culture

Epidemiological studies make the causes of discrimination transparent by showing clear links between poverty and lack of rights.

“Although rich countries have continued to get richer, measures of wellbeing have ceased to rise. Since the seventies there has been no increase in average wellbeing despite rapid increases in wealth” (Wilkinson, 2005 p6).

The differences between the 70s and 2014 are poignantly visible in our high streets. There were no nail studios or hairdressers at every street corner. Shoe shops offered comfortable shoes and very few high heels. In a restless culture of competition women endure pain to have body parts puffed up, tugged, cut off, enlarged or minimised. Ever higher heels and shorter skirts are offered in shops. At the recent Cannes film festival women without high heels were not allowed to walk on the red carpet.

“Most of the evidence behind this interpretation has to do with the indication that more unequal societies have a more aggressively male culture... “More unequal societies are tougher, more competitive, dog-eats-dog societies” (Wilkinson 2005, p219).

Wilkinson argues that whether a society is more ‘clannish’ with strong family ties leading to honour killings, vendettas and the sacrifice of dishonoured women “or whether they are closer to the social breakdown found in the concrete jungle of modern urban societies it is easy to see why they are unlikely to lead to improvements in the status of women. When competition between men is intensified, women lose out” (Wilkinson, 2005, p219).

Gender, sexuality and economics

One of the cornerstones of discrimination through the

ages since antiquity has always focused on women's reproductive and sexual capabilities. Graves (1955) describes how women ruled in ancient Greece. Men were unaware of their role in reproduction. The fertility of women was seen as akin to the fertility of nature generally, empowered by earth, sun, wind and water. Women's sexual behaviour was then their own property.

Price (Brunel University) found in a study that a correlation exists between female economic independence and acceptance of promiscuous behaviour:

“As the gender pay gap has decreased in the UK and other Western countries, women have become more financially independent; the relative costs of promiscuity versus pair bonding have gone down...” (Macleod, NS 14.2.15, p45).

Boak (2013) describes how women came under increasing scrutiny during WW1 for perceived sexually immoral activities involving French prisoners of war and prostitution to gain an income.

“The war had, however, challenged bourgeois standards of sexual behaviour, and the hyperinflation further eroded the belief in a woman's chastity before marriage which would provide for her economically and in which the paternity of any inheriting offspring had to be beyond doubt” (Boak, 2013, p219).

At no point in history has male sexuality ever been an issue for debate; however those same entitlements in relation to women run like a destructive current through history and societies from the time of ancient Greece to the attacks on women in many countries today. Currently five women are killed daily in Turkey by mainly male family members. Thus, male dominated society assumes ownership of a woman's sexuality, a fact that has been interpreted by Marxist researchers as being indicative of the economics of private property, leading in turn to the monetarisation of people, artefacts and values.

The correlation between economic independence and sexual and reproductive freedom for women stands in sharp contrast to the perception of woman as empty vessel for the production of offspring who are to inherit wealth and possessions. To achieve this focus a woman's sexuality needs to be annulled in favour of her role as mother of her husband's children. Her sexuality needs to be possessed by a man. The BBC film of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* illustrates this situation very well. Henry chases his women on the basis of his perceived need to have a son. If she cannot deliver one, he is found another woman. She does not count as a person, instead she is an empty vessel designed for procreation and his property to dispose of, if not required.

Throughout history speculations and definitions of women's role and place in society have maintained an ambivalence whereas the role of men as ruler, chief,

captain of industry or otherwise person in command with its associated aspects of power, territory and respect have acquired a position of 'taken for granted knowledge' (Kelly, 1993). Robertson in his article 'How power affects the brain' calls the resultant emotional fallout the 'winner effect' (The Psychologist, March 2013):

“Even small induced power levels increase hypocrisy, moral exceptionalism, ego-centricity and lack of empathy for others (p187).”

Not surprisingly we are witnessing such behaviour regularly in the media and politics, as well as at work. Rather than being innate factors the behaviour that arises out of such emotions is socially induced and maintained to the disadvantage of women and ultimately of men as well. A self-perpetuating vicious cycle of corrosive expectations is thus installed. The effect of the current stalemate in achieving the goal of equality can be seen in the global crisis of the environment, the neglect of nature and the catastrophe of families, mainly women and children, having to flee from war zones. The voice of women has been largely silenced. The result is an on-going crisis of morality in which 'taken for granted knowledge' guides our governments in day to day decisions, which deny the past as well as the future. In order to envisage the future we need to know the past. It is therefore not enough to ask for equal pay and equal work opportunities women.

Instead it is necessary to regain a vision of women's inherent strength. We need to build on an epistemology of power and control and become vigilant about stratagems that attempt to place women in a 'quiet corner' in society. We need to learn to occupy large spaces, literally and metaphorically outside the domestic sphere. We need to learn from history and the examples of powerful women it offers. There is no better place to begin this task than by studying the ancient Greek myths. The most famous is the Orestia which offers insight into how a matriarchic/matristic society changed into a patriarchic/patristic one. So examples from Aeschylus and Homer will need to suffice here.

Matriarchy, myth and classical antiquity

Myths are early human narratives told and retold by later generations changing them in their course and interpreting them to fit their perspective on society. Warburg (2011) declared in his study of Indian mask dances:

“The fairy story-like thinking of these dancers is a step on the way towards our natural science knowledge... It is, if you will, a Darwinism through a mythical relationship (p 35).”

Thus, myths from antiquity can be viewed as early forms of philosophy and sociology that can guide human behaviour. The concept of a matriarchy has been understood by Marxists as synonymous with an egalitarian type society, not a society ruled by women. For the sake of the deliberations in this essay this meaning has been adopted.

“True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals” (Graves, 1955, p12).

From Robert Graves exploration of the Greek myths Jung developed his theory of the archetypes and the collective unconscious. He declares what was myth in Greece began as ritual in Egypt, thus residing his psychology within the Vygotskian social construction of reality. The initiative to an entirely new epistemology of gender relations came from Bachofen in Switzerland in 1861 and Lewis H. Morgan (1877), the founder of American anthropology. Since then the debate over the existence or nonexistence of early matrilineal societies has raged and enraged successive generations of anthropologists, ethnographer, historians and psychologists. Bachofen contributed a ‘unique creation of a mythology in our time’ (Wieacker in: Wagner-Hasel, 1992). Johann Jakob Bachofen’s ‘Das Mutterrecht’ showed that in the codes of Roman law vestigial features can be recognised of a matrilineal order of inheritance” states Campbell in his Foreword to Marija Gimbutas’ ‘The Language of the Goddess, 1989).

Morgan, basing his explorations on Bachofen’s extensive work defined the model of family he found as based on consanguinity in which each child has several fathers and mothers. Such early societies had no knowledge of how procreation took place and lived in polygamous and polyandrous groups. Robert Graves described how women were revered for their power to procreate. Ownership of children for the sake of inheritance was unknown for thousands of years. Out of the wealth of studies that exist in the field Aeschylus’ Oresteia stands out as offering a short guide into the spirit of the Greek mind at the cusp of change from matriarchy to patriarchy. For him civilisation is the ultimate product of conflict between opposing forces, such as the Olympian forces over the chthonic, the Greek over the Barbarian and the male over the female. Zeitlin comments:

“But the male-female conflict subsumes the other two, for while it maintains its own emotive function in the dramatization of human concerns, it provides too the central metaphor which ‘sexualises’ the other issues and attracts them into its magnetic field” (Zeitlin in Wagner-Hasel, 1989, p225). Engels (1972) declared the struggle

between matriarchy and patriarchy as the first class struggle in human history.

The Oresteia traces the evolution of early Greek civilisation by placing the polis at the centre and endowing it with the power to coordinate human, natural and divine forces. The events follow a straightforward story: Woman rises up against male authority. By slaying her husband and choosing her own sexual partner she shatters the social norms of the patriarchic/patristic culture. Her son slays her in allegiance with father/husband. In turn he is pursued by the Erinyes. After the matricide Orestes’ ritual rebirth takes place at the ‘omphalos’ (womb) in Delphi. At an earlier stage Omphale was queen of Lidia in Asia Minor. She was dressed in lion skin and carried an olive-wood club, as can be seen on a Roman mosaic in Spain from the third century. Over the course of time, the ‘omphalos’ was appropriated by the rising patriarchy, when Apollo received it as a birthday gift. Thus, Orestes is reborn from the male.

“Cross-cultural ethnographical data confirms that one of the most consistent themes of puberty rites is, in fact, the notion that the first birth from the female is superseded by a second birth, this time from the male” (Zeitlin, 1989, p243).

As Aeschylus plays proceed Clytemnestra, the female principle in the first play, rebels against the masculine regime by asserting her sexuality. By the time when the last play is enacted her representatives, the Erinyes become mere archaic, primitive creatures, whereas the male principle is portrayed in the young god Apollo, champion of society, conjugality and progress. The shift from matrilineal to patrilineal society has been concluded.

In the story of Andromache the famous departing scene between her and Hector Homer includes Andromache speaking seven verses with advice on military tactics (Ilias, fourth song 433-439):

“Stand your people near the fig tree where it is easy to move up and down to the town and the wall that can be climbed...(Pomeroy, 1975). Later researchers often omit these seven verses on the grounds that a woman could not have given military advice. Andromache (whose name means ‘the one who fights men’) was, nevertheless, in a very good position to give such advice due to the reign of women at the beginning of the Trojan War. Only by keeping those same verses in the text can Hector’s reply of refusing her advice and telling her off be understood.

An example from a society that continues to live along matrilineal gender relationships are the Minangkabau in Sumatra. Minangkabau women cook and wash up, the

surprised visitor found out. However, they are the ones who own the land and the rice fields. Their daughters inherit the wealth from their mothers. When a wedding takes place the bridegroom moves into the family home of the bride and from then on belongs to her family. The men only have caretaker roles. They hold meetings, but the decisions have been previously agreed by the women.

The above offers a brief glimpse of the powerful roles women can hold or have inhabited in antiquity, when they were revered and participated at all levels of society. They are indicative of the postulation that human society and perceptions of gender and sexuality have evolved, similar to nature, through stages and that myths play an important part in informing about our anthropological past. The assumption that Abraham and the patriarchic form of social organisation has reigned since the beginning of human existence needs to be discarded. The ancient myths suggest an affirmation of women as full and equal persons and built into a revitalised epistemology to inform a more assertive and powerful paradigm within which to view the place of women.

What psychologists can learn from antiquity

The current situation concerning gender equality has been stagnating for years and in some parts of the world is arguably deteriorating. Despite gains made by the women's movement over the last few decades, inequality and low status still dominate the lives of most women.

One is tempted to argue that psychology ought to be in the forefront of exposing the 'frontiers' in our minds, yet it is not. To quote an example the divisional journal of Educational and Child Psychology last included a paper on gender inequality in 1993. Liz Kelly's article 'What are little girls and little boys made of, the gendering of childhood' (vol 10(3) p12-21) studied young children and their experience with toys. Kelly declares that there has been a long tradition in psychology to take male behaviour as the norm, as a kind of 'taken for granted knowledge' which includes 'gendered responses to children.

Girls toys are "small, familial and can be played with quietly in a confined space" (Kelly, 1993, p13).

"When these resources are structured through dichotomous gender stereo-typing it makes play between boys and girls problematic...the outcome of these social processes are gendered psychologies, aptitudes and perceptions..." (Kelly, 1993, p13).

The implication of Kelly's findings indicate that as

psychologists we urgently need awareness training of the gendered psychology in our workplaces, our offices, the classroom we enter, the work and play that is offered to children and the attitudes and perceptions of teaching and support staff. The 'taken for granted knowledge' is the invisible frontier in our heads and in our language that continues to make inequality in our society into an accepted and acceptable paradigm. Shifting it will require a constant questioning of 'taken for granted knowledge' and substituting it with language and actions that free women from all forms of subjugation, be it verbal, emotional, intellectual or spatial. We have to actively seek to participate in command and decision making domains in society. We will have to work to come out the 'quiet corner' ourselves and support girls and female teaching staff in our schools to do the same. Our work should include raising awareness of the need for women to own their bodies, both in terms of reproduction as well as sexuality. Our own perception of ourselves as being powerful, being in control of our inner and outer space, being visible and being heard can then to be translated into actions, behaviours and a language that can give hope and confidence to our clients, be they families and children, work colleagues or organisations. The vision of the strong and confident behaviour of Andromache could lead us on the way.

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