



Gender Ideology and Psychological Reality: An Essay on Cultural Reproduction

Melford E. Spiro

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Why do members of a society espouse culturally constituted beliefs that are at odds with their personal interests and experiences? In this book Melford Spiro, a psychological anthropologist, answers this question by investigating ideologies of gender and sex relations in Burma, according to which men are superior and women are morally and sexually dangerous - despite the reality that women enjoy high economic, legal, and social status. Spiro argues that these sexist ideologies - prevalent in most of the human world - are an expression of male anxieties and insecurities. Spiro propose a theory of cultural reproduction that is an alternative to the enculturation model of radical cultural determinism. He postulates that cultural systems are reproduced only insofar as they are internalized by members of society and that this occurs if these systems resonate with members' conscious and unconscious beliefs and desires or are employed by them as a resource for the construction of defense mechanisms. He compares his firsthand observations of a Burmese village to extensive data from a wide array of other societies (including our own) and argues that this explanation applies to all societies.

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