

**Timothy Macklem.**

**Beyond Comparison: Sex and Discrimination**

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We know a great deal of when and where gender makes a difference. Sociologists offer competing theories of why and how these differences emerge (for example, the “paternalistic/power” arguments based on men’s motives advanced by Padavic and others, or status characteristics theory as applied by Ridgeway and others). Macklem’s book enters the theoretical debate with a somewhat unusual and philosophical (rather than sociological) view of the nature of gender discrimination.

Macklem’s argument is that, in order to have “successful and meaningful” lives, women seek, and need, different resources and opportunities compared to men, and that women are often denied these. The nature of gender discrimination, then, is in denying women the means to achieve their own particular goals, rather than unfair treatment compared to men. The author’s argument rejects the definition of gender bias as “inequality of outcomes” (given identical “inputs” for men and women) in favour of “non-equivalent values of outcomes”. The outcome with which he is most concerned is the individual’s capacity to have a successful life.

Macklem explicitly discards the idea that assessments of discrimination be based on comparisons of men and women, and in particular comparisons of occupational, economic, or other specific achievements. What constitutes a “successful life” can, and does, vary with gender.

The first chapter of the book addresses several key issues, including equality and differences, the role of comparisons, the nature of social roles, the question of what it means to lead a successful life, and the idea of what it means to be a woman. These pages represent the heart of Macklem’s ideas, in particular that what women seek and need that is different from what men want and require. The basic premise is that, since men and women are different in some respects, what each sex regards as desirable or valuable is also different.

The two following chapters criticize the work of MacKinnon and Cornell, two feminist thinkers whose ideas conflict with Macklem’s remedies for gender discrimination, the first in arguing for the equality of men and women, the second in highlighting their differences. The final five chapters round out Macklem’s analysis, driving towards a theory of discrimination, and a discussion of its remedy, i.e., ameliorating sexual discrimination by recognizing diversity in sexual identities and the role of sexual identity in achieving a successful life.

In a sense Macklem’s theorizing is prescriptive rather than explanatory. He seems to be arguing for a different approach to women in particular, one based on recognizing what is required to “make women’s lives go well”. Thus his contribution to the theoretical question, “What is gender discrimination and how and why does it come about?” is perhaps best judged in terms of what the various theories suggest as solutions to ending gender discrimination. At the risk of over-simplification for the sake of drawing comparisons, a paternalistic/power view implies a need for legislation and policy designed to redress the power gap between men and women. Status characteristics theory implies the

necessity for a change in the fundamental cultural values and beliefs that associate gender with status and competence. Macklem's view implies that we require both a change in our perceptions of what it means to be a woman, and valuing and respecting the unique qualities of women. In particular, he criticizes anti-discrimination legal measures as a means of bringing about an end to sex discrimination. Rather, Macklem argues that the solution lies in widespread and sweeping changes of how "... the state, public organizations, private organizations, and individuals, but more profoundly, any and all forms of human activity ..." must alter conceptions of what it means to be a woman. In some respects, this is a "cultural" view of gender discrimination, entailing beliefs about individuals' abilities and characteristics based on sex classification.

It might be argued that Macklem's view is ultimately conservative, even radically conservative. For example, it appears to open the door to employers paying women less than men for the same work, provided that women are given some other kind of reward that is judged more meaningful to them as women. This has parallels in the historical view that lower wages for women were justified since they were working for largely "socializing" reasons in the period between school and marriage.

Macklem is not an easy read. A key word in his argument is "value", but he doesn't explicate the term until the reader is well into the first chapter. Some passages require a second or third reading, as in the following sentence:

Yet to eliminate a [sexual] distinction that is admittedly relevant to value simply because it is often, even typically, invoked improperly is to misunderstand the nature of wrongdoing, which consists not in (wrongly) including among human options, such as the option to engage in the sorts of activities that make sexual different relevant to the evaluation and pursuit of a successful life, options that can be exercised wrongly, but in exercising wrongly options that should be exercised rightly. (p. 3)

Nonetheless this is an interesting, thought-provoking, and at times provoking book. It will reward those sociologists who tackle it with some new and re-framed arguments about the nature of, the causes of, and the solutions to, gender discrimination.

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John Kervin's work focuses on women in the workplace. He is active in the area of pay equity, and conducting research on the process through which female-dominated jobs come to be undervalued and underpaid.

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