

The Psychological Development of Girls and Women

Rethinking change in time

Second Edition

Sheila Greene



Women and Psychology

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

This thoroughly revised new edition updates Sheila Greene's original transformative account of the psychological development of girls and women, and the central role of time in shaping human experience. Greene critically reviews traditional and contemporary theoretical approaches – ranging from orthodox psychoanalysis to relational and post-modern theories – and argues that even those that claim to focus on development have presented a view of women's lives as fixed and determined by their nature or their past. These theories, she believes, should be rejected because of their inherent lack of validity and their frequently oppressive implications for women.

Essential but often neglected insights from the more compelling developmental and feminist theories are woven together within a theoretical framework that emphasizes temporality, emergence and human agency. The result is a liberating theory of women's psychological development as constantly emerging and changing in time rather than as static and fixed by their nature, socio-cultural context and personal history.

Updated for a new generation of readers, *The Psychological Development of Girls and Women* will continue to be essential reading for students and researchers in the psychology of women, developmental psychology and women's studies.

Sheila Greene is Professor and Fellow Emeritus at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, where she was co-founder of the Children's Research Centre and the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies. Her research interests include the psychology of women and gender, child development and children's issues, and developmental theory.

Women and Psychology

Series Editor: Jane Ussher

Professor of Women's Health Psychology, University of Western Sydney

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**The Psychological Development
of Girls and Women**

Second Edition

Sheila Greene

To Kit and Helen

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Acknowledgements for the first edition

I would like to thank the following people who have helped me in the writing of this book, whether by providing me with ideas or by encouragement and support: the many students who have participated in my classes in life span developmental psychology and in the psychology of women and gender; my friends and colleagues in the Centre for Gender and Women's studies and the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin; Mary McDermott; Annie Rogers; Gisela Schmidt; and Marian Moylan (for the sanity-restoring walks!).

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Acknowledgements for the second edition

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1

INTRODUCTION

Building blocks for a critical analysis

Writing a second edition

The first edition of this book was published in 2003 and written between 2000 and 2002. I was very pleased to be invited, in 2013, to prepare a second edition for publication in early 2015.

In more than ten years, a lot of work has been published that is relevant to the subject matter of this book. I feel affirmed rather than dismayed by the thrust of a lot of the literature that I have read in updating and reviewing the content of this book. In the first edition I argued that most developmental theories had an unhelpful and erroneous view of female development. However, I also felt strongly that, rather than rejecting developmental theorizing altogether, it was necessary to theorize 'developmental' processes such as change and continuity in time, age, ageing, timing and other dynamic and diachronic phenomena, and to do so in a new way.

This new way forward does not constitute a new theory but a new approach to theorizing the psychological development of girls and women. Recent advances in developmental psychology have included the convergence by a number of cutting-edge theorists on a range of theories collected under the general rubric of dynamic systems theory. This non-linear non-deterministic orientation has the potential to be both more accurate as a picture of the complexities of development and more transformative as a theory of girls' and women's development and potential for change. As a way of thinking about development it is fundamentally contextual and relational: the individual is intrinsically part of a complex dynamic system.

Dynamic systems models take a number of different forms within psychology but their claim to be the favoured theoretical model among theoretically orientated developmental psychologists has strengthened in the years between the writing of the first edition of this book and the writing of the second. Among

developmentalists, the approach is often, though not always, called developmental systems theory. Thus in the 2006 *Handbook of Child Psychology, Volume One: Theoretical models of human development*, edited by Richard Lerner, developmental systems theories dominate over all other approaches.

A developmental systems approach also offers the advantage over alternative theories that it can incorporate the biological, the social and the psychological facets of individual life and change in time. Also, it can do so in a way that is non-deterministic but realistically aware of both the potential and the constraint inherent in our biology and our contexts.

Despite the evident potential of adopting a developmental systems perspective I do not consider that a systems approach is enough when we are dealing with human psychology: there must be room for individual experience and subjectivity within the material and the intersubjective, discursive phenomena that are crucial aspects of our make-up. Thus, another step forward that I saw as important for a rounded and human perspective on women's lives and psychological development came from those theorists writing on the psychology of personhood, self and agency. This focus on the person is, I argued, essential as a complement to the dynamic systems perspective, which, while seeing the individual as at the heart of the complex system and active within it, can still suffer from a failure to take account of the person's experience, self and agency and the meaning to her of her unique and manifold engagements with the world – material, social and cultural.

I also proposed in the first edition that feminist theory and the psychology of women had either neglected developmental theory or adopted theories such as psychoanalysis that have typically a fixation on the past and on first relationships.

Since 2003, numerous books and articles have been published that have a bearing on my thinking and that have challenged or confirmed aspects of this book. As is often the way, some of my own preoccupations seemed to be those of others pondering similar questions and having similar theoretical tools at their disposal. Thus there is new work on temporality (Grosz, 2005; 2011), on the potential of non-linear dynamic systems for thinking about gender and the psychology of women (Harris, 2005; Martin and Ruble, 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2012), on the importance of thinking about age as a category of difference and as a prescriptive ideology (Gullette, 2004; 2011; Thorne, 2004).

In my survey of important theories relevant to the psychology of women I have included in this second edition new work by well-known theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Erica Burman, Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler. And of course there are new contributions to theory from younger scholars, too numerous to list here.

Since the first edition of this book was published, intersectionality theory has gained ground, though its roots certainly pre-date my 2003 book. It is absolutely the case that every woman's identity is also constituted by her ethnic, class, religious, sexual and other locations. Also, since 2003, more work has been carried out by majority world scholars, many of whom reject the world view and categorical frameworks offered by minority world writers. So I must be clear. I

will not deal with all possible aspects of female diversity, nor will I deal with literature beyond that published in English. Most of the work I refer to is published in the minority world by minority world scholars. Inevitably my approach is limited and is ultimately my attempt to understand just a small part of the complexity that constitutes the individual's experience and way of being in the world.

The title of this book *The Psychological Development of Girls and Women: Rethinking change in time* has not changed. It immediately raises concerns about the use of the categories 'girl' and 'woman'. I endorse totally the value of the deconstruction of these terms that has been central to feminist work from the 1970s onward. The dismantling of the sex/gender/sexuality nexus has been a revolutionary achievement. When we think female, we no longer think feminine and heterosexual. Sex, gender and sexuality do not fit neatly on top of one another like Lego® bricks. Each term is contested. Each category, even the assumed male–female sex binary, is multiple. All permutations are revealed as possible, all is potentially open to change within each person's life course, from moment to moment, from context to context, from the conscious to the unconscious levels of the psyche. Change is not always permitted or enabled in a world where we are also inevitably constrained, by the limitations of our bodies, our minds or our contexts, but some constraints are unnecessary and are open to being dismantled. This book is an exploration of the extent of the possibility of change in women's lives as they move through and with time. Also, it is an exercise in challenging how we think about the development of girls and women, one of the factors in constraining women, which is in itself open to change. Existing theories serve to reduce and restrict women: it is time to explore possibility. And as Judith Butler says, 'Possibility is not a luxury, it is as crucial as bread' (2004: 29).

The focus of this book

To date, mainstream developmental psychology has failed to provide an adequate theoretical base for describing changes in the psychology of girls and women across the life span. There is certainly a long history of developmental theorizing about the psychology of women, but even the more recent theories, such as relational psychoanalytic theories or social constructionist theories, show little sign of being influenced by the conceptual insights that have emerged from life span developmental psychology and from important critiques of developmental psychology from both inside and outside this discipline. Also, within the discipline that has come to be known as the psychology of women, there is a failure to confront developmental issues, associated with an over-reliance on social psychological frameworks. Others have arrived at this conclusion. For example, a 2006 paper by Patricia Miller in the journal *Signs* has the title 'Contemporary perspectives from human development: Implications for feminist scholarship' and Adrienne Harris applies a developmental systems approach associated mainly with the work of Esther Thelen to her understanding of gender development in her 2005 book

Gender as Soft Assembly. There are, no doubt, a number of interesting ways forward in relation to connecting new developmental science to feminist scholarship and the ideas in this book represent one possible direction. In general, feminist psychologists and feminist theorists demonstrate either an acute wariness of developmental psychology – which is understandable given the way it has been traditionally defined and practised – or a questionable fixation on psychoanalytic approaches to thinking about development.

This book represents an attempt to identify the parameters of a contemporary framework for understanding the psychological development of girls and women. Such a framework should provide a better basis for analysis of the sources of and the meaning of psychological change across the life span, the creation of each unique life trajectory and the significance of the passage of time, of timing, age, ageing and mortality to girls and women. I question the adequacy of historical and contemporary theoretical accounts of female psychological development, while arguing that it is important to retain a developmental perspective on the lives of girls and women and their experience of being in the world.

In this book, I am arguing for the importance of a critical, developmental perspective on the psychology of girls and women (and ultimately on that of boys and men also). The answer to dissatisfaction with current developmental theorizing is neither to adopt its traditional framework and apply it to women nor to abandon the developmental perspective altogether as unredeemable. If we fail to take on board the dynamic and diachronic nature of human psychology and how we construe ‘developmental’ processes, we have an inadequate picture of our subject matter. Instead, we have a picture that is doomed to be static and fixed in time and is incapable of understanding the origins of the self, the dynamic complexities of selfhood and subjectivity and the factors involved in psychological change with time and the person’s evolving relationship to a changing world. The current picture of women’s development, in particular, is both inadequate and undermining of women and their potential.

Developmental psychology is one of the central disciplines engaged in explaining the nature of human personhood, whether it does so explicitly or by implication. I consider that the depiction of the human person which emerges from most traditional and some current developmental theorizing is one which is incomplete, restrictive and ultimately demeaning to the human person.

I am not alone in this assessment. Anna Stetsenko notes:

The traditional models that are still prevalent in contemporary psychology and education (and in many neighbouring disciplines), largely inherited from the early twentieth century, are still mired in outdated notions of human development and its foundational principles, relying on construals of human beings as isolated self-sufficient individuals who develop essentially in a vacuum.

(2013: 181)

The use of outdated models is particularly evident in psychology's views on the restraints imposed on humans by their gender and even more so in its views on the psychology of women. Thus we have many theories that see women as the victim of their anatomies, their genes, their social conditioning, their past histories or, more recently, their brains or the discourses which constitute their subjectivity. This book does not present a new theory of development, it is an exercise in theory analysis and critique, which, hopefully, points to a better way to theorize female development and personhood.

Theorizing the nature of humans, male and female, and what kind of entity we assume them to be is an extremely important task for contemporary psychology and for an adequate psychology of women.

All theories of human psychological development subscribe – either explicitly, or more often implicitly – to an ontological set of commitments, that is they have things to say about the nature and origins of *what is*, in this case relating to the nature of the person and how being and personhood originate, function and evolve.

Elizabeth Grosz makes the case for the importance of thinking about ontological factors and establishing an ontological vision that is a more adequate framework for our theories about individual change. She recognizes that differences between us in our ontological beliefs are often at the heart of theoretical disagreements and political struggle. The way we think about the world and our place in it is fundamental to both thought and action, not abstract, not 'academic'. She says,

In restoring ontology to its rightful place at the center of knowledges and social practices, the ways in which ontology has been previously conceptualized – as static, fixed, composed of universal principles or ideals, indifferent to history, particularity, or change – require transformation and revitalization. 'The real,' 'being,' 'materiality,' 'nature,' those terms usually associated with the unchanging, must themselves be opened up to their immaterial or extramaterial virtualities or becomings, to the temporal forces of endless change, in other words, to history, biology, culture, sexuality. In this reconfigured form, ontology is no longer too broad, unchanging, or abstract to be relevant to political struggles of various kinds; instead, it is (in part, and most indirectly) what is fundamentally at stake in such struggles.

(2005: 5)

How we see reality and how we see persons influence how we treat persons. Thus, how we think about the development of girls and women, academically and in public discourse, affects how we treat them and what we expect from them.

I am also arguing that gender is a central feature of the processes entailed in the production of persons and the experience of being a person. These processes will differ for males and females, I propose, as long as the majority of societies insist on dividing humans into two sexes along the lines of the male–female biological division and then build constructs and practices around that division. There is some

evidence that there are cracks appearing in the generally widespread conviction that gender is a binary construct. In 2013, Germany passed law permitting children to be denominated as neither male nor female when their sexual characteristics were mixed or indefinite. The Australian High Court passed a law in 2014 recognizing a third or 'non-specific gender'. Also in 2014, Facebook, in the USA decided to offer 56 gender options other than Male and Female. They include 'Trans Person', 'Non-Binary', 'Two-Spirit' and 'Other'. Such developments may apply to a small minority of people but fundamentally disrupt the rigid male–female sex binary for everyone. Even so, the ideas associated with femaleness, being female, being girl, being woman and being feminine are centrally at play in the construction of new gender categories and stories.

In this sense, while accepting the contested nature of the category 'woman', I agree with Lena Gunnarsson (2011) that we must still deal with the reality that it is a structural category – in the majority of societies – which has immense relevance to how those people who are labelled as women see themselves and are seen by others. (The use of this label also has important consequences for those who are not seen as women and yet might wish to be.) A developmental perspective on the gendering process also draws attention to the shifting, complex and multi-faceted place of gender in the person's psychological functioning over the life course. A new developmental perspective permits better theorizing about multiplicity in the forms of gender expression across the life course.

Clearly gender is one of many sources of difference that come together to make each person's identity. As Judith Butler said many years ago, 'If one *is* a woman that is surely not all one is' (1990: 3). By focusing on gender and developmentally relevant differences, such as age and cohort, I am not ignoring the other sources of difference but recognizing that, analytically, it is extremely difficult to account for multiple categories of difference simultaneously. I recognize that important steps in meeting this challenge have been made by theorists who discuss categorical intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) and it can be argued convincingly that in order to do this one does not approach the matter additively (MacKinnon, 2013). Therefore, being a black, working class woman from London cannot be understood by studying black people, working class people, women and Londoners. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that a better understanding of development, age and gender as it plays out over the life course will add to any effort to theorize the intersections of age and gender with race, class, religion, sexuality, etc.

I wish to emphasize throughout this book that each person must always be seen as immersed in her context and not as a psychological isolate, and that, wherever possible, the whole personhood of each individual should be recognized. Ultimately this implies that the features of the person and her environment that are important to her, consciously or unconsciously, will shape the patterning of her life and that the topics that are highlighted in this book – gender, life course change, age and relationship to time – are only part of the overall story.

This book concentrates on the psychological development of girls and women for the following reasons:

- To date, developmental psychology – with exceptions that will be discussed later – has offered a restrictive, reductive and, at times, oppressive account of the development of girls and women.
- Developmental psychology is permeated in some areas with gender bias and in others with gender blindness.
- For understandable reasons, many feminist researchers and theorists, in psychology and the social sciences, have turned their back on the developmental perspective.
- Notwithstanding this history, there is a need for a critical developmental perspective on human psychology and on the psychology of girls and women.
- Approaching the psychology of girls and women from a developmental orientation provides a foundation for the understanding of the sources of personal change and transformation in the life course. Such understanding is necessary for a complete perspective on human psychological change and is potentially useful to the feminist project, which is also fundamentally about change.
- Life span developmental theory tends to neglect gender, race, sexuality, class and other major categories of difference and thus this book is an exercise in the application of the developmental perspective to the processes involved in the production and shaping of difference.
- Developmental psychology, while being the study of psychological change in time, has not adequately explored the significance of time in human experience and in psychological change across the life course.
- This neglect of the significance of our temporal existence is also a feature of the psychology of women as a discipline and feminist scholarship in general.
- While age is often mentioned in lists of important differences between women and as a contributor to the intersectional mix that produces identity, it is, arguably, undertheorized in comparison to differences such as those connected with race and sexuality.

Construction of a new framework entails the combination of theories, findings and insights from several sub-disciplines of psychology including developmental psychology, the psychology of women, feminist psychology and critical theories of psychology. Many of the most interesting recent developments within these sub-disciplines are due to the influence of intellectual and political movements outside psychology, such as feminism, women's studies, biology, childhood studies, critical age studies and post-modern theoretical movements. I will first outline in summary form the different psychological traditions that are central to the subject matter of this book.

Developmental psychology

Developmental psychology encompasses the study of psychological development across the life course, although some psychologists still use the term to apply only to the study of the psychological development of children and, perhaps, adolescents.