

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

IN A DIFFERENT VOICE

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND
WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

"THE MOST INSIGHTFUL BOOK ON WOMEN, MEN,
AND THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEM"

—ELLEN GOODMAN

CAROL GILLIGAN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

In a Different Voice

Psychological Theory and Women's Development

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In a
Different
Voice

To my mother and my father

Letter to Readers, 1993

I began writing *In a Different Voice* in the early 1970s, at a time of resurgence in the Women's Movement. College students now are incredulous when I say that in the spring of 1970, at the height of the demonstrations against the Vietnam war, after the shooting of students at Kent State University by members of the National Guard, final exams were canceled at Harvard and there was no graduation. For a moment, the university came to a stop and the foundations of knowledge were opened for reexamination.

In 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legally available, the underpinnings of relationships between women and men and children were similarly exposed. When the highest court made it legal for a woman to speak for herself and awarded women the deciding voice in a complex matter of relationship which involved responsibility for life and for death, many women became aware of the strength of an internal voice which was interfering with their ability to speak. That internal or internalized voice told a woman that it would be "selfish" to bring her voice into relationships, that perhaps she did not know what she really wanted, or that her experience was not a reliable guide in thinking about what to do. Women often sensed that it was dangerous to say or even to know what they wanted or thought—upsetting to others and therefore carrying with it the threat of abandonment or retaliation. In the relational context of my research, where conversations with women were protected by confidentiality agreements, and where the usual

structure of authority was reversed in that I had come to learn from them, many women in fact did know what they wanted to do and also what they thought would be the best thing to do in what often were painful and difficult situations. But many women feared that others would condemn or hurt them if they spoke, that others would not listen or understand, that speaking would only lead to further confusion, that it was better to appear “selfless,” to give up their voices and keep the peace.

“If I were to speak for myself,” a graduate student said one day in the middle of her oral exam—and then stopped. Hearing the sound of dissociation—the separation of herself from what she was saying, she began to question her relationship to what she was saying and what she was not saying. For whom was she speaking, and where was she in relation to herself? In the immediate aftermath of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, many women were openly questioning the morality of the Angel in the House—that nineteenth-century icon of feminine goodness immortalized by the poet Coventry Patmore: the woman who acts and speaks only for others. Discovering through experience the consequences of not speaking in relationships—the trouble that selfless behavior can cause—women were exposing the morality of the Angel as a kind of immorality: an abdication of voice, a disappearance from relationships and responsibility. The voice of the Angel was the voice of a Victorian man speaking through a woman’s body. Virginia Woolf’s realization that she had to strangle this Angel if she were to begin writing illuminates women’s need to silence false feminine voices in order to speak for themselves.

It was this choice to speak which interested me. Women’s discovery of the problems that ensue from rendering oneself selfless in order to have “relationships” was momentous in releasing women’s voices and making it possible to hear what women know. It was like seeing under the surface or picking up the undercurrents of the human conversation: what is known, and then not known, felt but not spoken. Women’s choices not to speak or rather to dissociate themselves from what they themselves are saying can be deliberate or unwitting, consciously chosen or enacted through the body by narrowing the passages connecting the voice with breath and sound, by keeping the voice high in the head so that it does not carry the depths of human feelings or a mix of feelings and thoughts, or by changing voice, shifting to a more guarded or impersonal register or key. Choices not to speak

are often well-intentioned and psychologically protective, motivated by concerns for people's feelings and by an awareness of the realities of one's own and others' lives. And yet by restricting their voices, many women are wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women.

From Erik Erikson, I learned that you cannot take a life out of history, that life-history and history, psychology and politics, are deeply entwined. Listening to women, I heard a difference and discovered that bringing in women's lives changes both psychology and history. It literally changes the voice: how the human story is told, and also who tells it.

Now, twenty years after I began writing *In a Different Voice*, I find myself and also this book in the midst of an active and lively and often contentious discussion about women's voices, about difference, about the foundations of knowledge or what is currently called "the canon," about relationships between women and men, and about women's and men's relationships with children. Within psychology, these questions have led to a serious reconsideration of research methods and the practices of psychological assessment and psychotherapy. Within education, these questions are radical and far-reaching. From people whose lives are very different from mine or who work in very different fields, I have learned to hear my own voice in new ways. For example, it seems obvious to me, as a psychologist, that differences in the body, in family relationships, and in societal and cultural position would make a difference psychologically. Listening to legal scholars, in particular Martha Minnow in her book *Making All the Difference*, I have come to appreciate the legal ramifications of different ways of talking about or theorizing differences and to understand the reluctance of some people to talk about differences at all.

I find a strong resonance also in Ronald Dworkin's recent essay "Feminism and Abortion" in the *New York Review of Books* (June 10, 1993). Dworkin was led by the work of feminist legal scholars to the women whom Mary Belenky and I interviewed—the women whose voices are recorded in the third and fourth chapters of this book. Writing twenty years later, he also is struck by what at the time I found so striking: the difference between these women's voices and the terms of the public abortion debate ("the screaming rhetoric about rights and murder"). Listening closely to the voices of adolescent and adult women, he finds

them deeply illuminating, so that he also reaches the conclusion which I reached at a time when it seemed a radical and difficult-to-support position: "deciding about abortion is not a unique problem, disconnected from all other decisions, but rather a dramatic and intensely lit example of choices people must make throughout their lives."

In the years since *In a Different Voice* was published, many people have spoken to me about their lives, their marriages, their divorces, their work, their relationships, and their children. I am grateful for the many letters, books, and papers which people have sent me, often from places where I have never been, sometimes from places where I could not go. Their experiences, their examples of different voices, and their ideas expand and complicate what I have written, often in highly creative ways. During this time I have been working collaboratively with Lyn Mikel Brown, Annie Rogers, and other members of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and the Development of Girls. We formed this project to connect women's psychology with girls' voices and to develop a new voice for psychology—to "find new words and create new methods," as Virginia Woolf put it in the 1930s, expressing the hope that women's lives and women's education and women's entry into the professions might break the historical cycle of violence and domination. In working toward this vision, I feel a profound affinity with the work of Jean Baker Miller and draw inspiration from her radical insight that "women's situation is a crucial key to understanding the psychological order."

As I have continued to explore the connections between the political order and the psychology of women's and men's lives, I have become increasingly aware of the crucial role of women's voices in maintaining or transforming a patriarchal world. By becoming actively involved in this process of change, I have found myself and this book at the center of a psychologically and politically volatile debate in which sanity as well as power is at stake.

In listening to people's responses to *In a Different Voice*, I often hear the two-step process which I went through over and over again in the course of my writing: the process of listening to women and hearing something new, a different way of speaking, and then hearing how quickly this difference gets assimilated into old categories of thinking so that it loses its novelty and its message: is it nature or nurture? are women better than men, or

worse? When I hear my work being cast in terms of whether women and men are really (essentially) different or who is better than whom, I know that I have lost my voice, because these are not my questions. Instead, my questions are about our perceptions of reality and truth: how we know, how we hear, how we see, how we speak. My questions are about voice and relationship. And, my questions are about psychological processes and theory, particularly theories in which men's experience stands for all of human experience—theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women's voices. I saw that by maintaining these ways of seeing and speaking about human lives, men were leaving out women, but women were leaving out themselves. In terms of psychological processes, what for men was a process of separation, for women was a process of dissociation that required the creation of an inner division or psychic split.

These are not simply abstract speculations on my part. My work is grounded in listening. I was picking up the sounds of disconnection and dissociation in men's and women's voices. I began to wonder: How is it that men in speaking of themselves and their lives, or speaking more generally about human nature, often speak as if they were not living in connection with women, as if women were not in some sense part of themselves? I also asked: How do women come to speak of themselves as though they were selfless, as if they did not have a voice or did not experience desire? Women's discovery that to be selfless means not to be in relationship is revolutionary because it challenges the disconnection from women and the dissociation within women that maintain and are maintained by patriarchy or civilization. The justification of these psychological processes in the name of love or relationships is equivalent to the justifications of violence and violation in the name of morality.

The different voice in resisting such justifications is a relational voice: a voice that insists on staying in connection and most centrally staying in connection with women, so that psychological separations which have long been justified in the name of autonomy, selfhood, and freedom no longer appear as the *sine qua non* of human development but as a human problem.

If it is good to be responsive to people, to act in connection with others and to be careful rather than careless about people's feelings and thoughts, empathic and attentive to their lives, then why is it "selfish" to respond to yourself, I would ask women,

counterposing the logic of my question against the force of their self-condemnation, the readiness of their self-abnegation and self-betrayal. “Good question,” many women replied. When I was working with Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard, teaching psychology in the traditions of Freud and Piaget, I remember moments in classes when a woman would ask a question that illuminated with sudden brilliance the foundations of the subject we were discussing. And now, remembering those moments, I also can hear the sounds of my own inner division: my saying to the woman, “That’s a good question,” and then saying, “but that’s not what we are talking about here.”

In asking about my own and other women’s relationship to the “we” that was for so long unselfconscious, I asked about men’s relationship to this “we” as well. Were the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* or other versions of the hero legend—stories about radical separation and violence—exemplary stories for men to tell themselves? The most basic questions about human living—how to live and what to do—are fundamentally questions about human relations, because people’s lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically, and politically. Reframing these questions to make these relational realities explicit—how to live in relationship with others, what to do in the face of conflict—I found that I heard women’s and men’s voices differently. Women’s voices suddenly made new sense and women’s approaches to conflict were often deeply instructive because of the constant eye to maintaining relational order and connection. It was concern about relationship that made women’s voices sound “different” within a world that was preoccupied with separation and obsessed with creating and maintaining boundaries between people—like the New Englanders in Robert Frost’s poem who say that “good fences make good neighbors.” When I began writing, however, concerns about relationships were seen for the most part as “women’s problems.”

Within the context of U.S. society, the values of separation, independence, and autonomy are so historically grounded, so reinforced by waves of immigration, and so deeply rooted in the natural rights tradition that they are often taken as facts: that people are by nature separate, independent from one another, and self-governing. To call these “facts” into question is seemingly to question the value of freedom. And yet this is not at all the case. The questioning of separation has nothing to do with questioning

freedom but rather with seeing and speaking about relationships. To take a current example, whatever one thinks about Columbus—however one judges the man and his mission—the fact is that he did not discover America: people were already there. In a very different vein, however one hears Anita Hill's testimony about her relationship with Clarence Thomas, the fact is that many women felt that they knew exactly what she was talking about because they had experienced similar incidents in their own lives. As with the revised story about Columbus, an illusion of autonomy was dispelled by a radical shift in voice or point of view: American Indians were Native Americans; sexual talk in the workplace was harassment. At the core of my work was the realization that within psychology and the larger society, values were being taken as facts.

Of the many questions people have asked me in the years since *In a Different Voice* was published, three kinds come up frequently and go to the heart of my writing: questions about voice, questions about difference, and questions about women's and men's development. In thinking about these questions and learning from the work of other people, I have come to understand voice, difference, and development in ways that go beyond what I knew at the time when I wrote this book. I have also come to see more clearly the book's two-part structure: the relationship between psychological theory and women's psychological development, including the ways in which psychological theory becomes prescriptive. In the outer chapters (1, 2, and 6), I introduce a relational voice and develop its counterpoint with traditional ways of speaking about self, relationship, and morality, as well as the potentials for misunderstanding, conflict, and growth. In the inner chapters (3, 4, and 5), I reframe women's psychological development as centering on a struggle for connection rather than speaking about women in the way that psychologists have spoken about women—as having a problem in achieving separation.

I will begin with voice. The work of Kristin Linklater, one of theater's leading teachers of voice, has led me to a new understanding of voice and also to a far deeper understanding of my own work. Her analysis of the human voice has given me a physics for my psychology—a way of understanding how the voice works in the body, in language, and also psychologically, and therefore a way of explaining some of the psychological

processes I have described. I have learned about resonance and come to a new way of understanding how the voice speaks in relationship—how it is expanded or constricted by relational ties—from Normi Noel, an actor, director, and voice teacher who builds on Linklater's work and that of Tina Packer. These women, all of whom work in the theater, have an understanding of voice which is physiological and cultural as well as deeply psychological. Linklater speaks of "freeing the natural voice," the title of her first book, and what she means is that you can hear the difference between a voice that is an open channel—connected physically with breath and sound, psychologically with feelings and thoughts, and culturally with a rich resource of language—and a voice that is impeded or blocked. Having worked with Linklater, I have heard and experienced the differences she describes. I also have learned from working with Noel to pick up relational resonances and follow the changes in people's voices that occur when they speak in places where their voices are resonant with or resounded by others, and when their voices fall into a space where there is no resonance, or where the reverberations are frightening, where they begin to sound dead or flat.

With this dramatic expansion of the empirical base of my work, I find it easier to respond when people ask me what I mean by "voice." By voice I mean voice. Listen, I will say, thinking that in one sense the answer is simple. And then I will remember how it felt to speak when there was no resonance, how it was when I began writing, how it still is for many people, how it still is for me sometimes. To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act.

When people ask me what I mean by voice and I think of the question more reflectively, I say that by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm, and language. And voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds. Speaking and listening are a form of psychic breathing. This ongoing relational exchange among people is mediated through language and culture, diversity and plurality. For these reasons, voice is a new key for understanding the psychological, social, and cultural order—a litmus test of relationships and a measure of psychological health.

In an introduction to *Love's Labour's Lost* in the Riverside edition of Shakespeare's plays, Anne Barton makes an observation about language which rings true in the current discussion of culture and voice: "Language cannot exist in a vacuum. Even on what may seem to be its most trivial and humorous levels, it is an instrument of communication between people which demands that the speaker should consider the nature and feelings of the hearer. In love above all, this is true—but it is also true in more ordinary relationships." In this play about love and language, heterosexual love requires a change in language, following the demonstration that the men do not know the women whom they say they love: "Gently, but firmly, the men are sent away to learn something that the women have known all along: how to accommodate speech to facts and to emotional realities, as opposed to using it as a means of evasion, idle amusement, or unthinking cruelty."

Elizabeth Harvey, in *Ventriloquized Voices*, explores the question of why and when men, in the English Renaissance and also at present, have chosen to create feminine voices or to speak through female bodies, to ventriloquize their voices in this way. I find her analysis extremely helpful because she is so clear about the difference between the epistemological question of whether a man can know what it is to be a woman and therefore can speak on women's behalf and the ethical and political questions: what are the ethics and politics of men speaking for women or creating a feminine voice? When I have spoken with women about experiences of conflict, many women have a hard time distinguishing the created or socially constructed feminine voice from a voice which they hear as their own. And yet women *can* hear the difference. To give up their voice is to give up on relationship and also to give up all that goes with making a choice. It was partly because of the link between voice and choice that the *Roe v. Wade* decision initiated or legitimized a process of psychological and political growth for many women and men.

Which brings me to the question of difference. In the early 1970s, when I was working with Lawrence Kohlberg as a research assistant, I found his argument very powerful: in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Middle Passage, it is not tenable for psychologists or social scientists to adopt a position of ethical neutrality or cultural relativism—to say that one cannot say anything about values or that all values are culturally relative. Such a hands-off

stance in the face of atrocity amounts to a kind of complicity. But the so-called objective position which Kohlberg and others espoused within the canon of traditional social science research was blind to the particularities of voice and the inevitable constructions that constitute point of view. However well-intentioned and provisionally useful it may have been, it was based on an inerrant neutrality which concealed power and falsified knowledge.

I have attempted to move the discussion of differences away from relativism to relationship, to see difference as a marker of the human condition rather than as a problem to be solved.

Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, has observed that the ancient Hebrew writers developed a narrative art because only through narrative could they convey a view of human life as lived reflectively, "in the changing medium of time, inexorably and perplexingly in relationship with others." At present, I find that women writers, and especially African-American poets and novelists who draw on an oral/aural tradition and also on searing and complex experiences of difference, are taking the lead in voicing an art that responds to the question which now preoccupies many people: how to give voice to difference in a way that recasts our discussion of relationship and the telling of truth.

One problem in talking about difference and the consequent theorizing of "difference" lies in the readiness with which difference becomes deviance and deviance becomes sin in a society preoccupied with normality, in the thrall of statistics, and historically puritanical. Toni Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, shows how the choice of a Platonic standard of beauty, or an ideal type of "the mother" or "the father" or "the family," affects children whose bodies do not conform to the standard and whose parents or families do not fit the ideal. In this early novel, Morrison gives voice to a father who rapes his daughter, drawing the psychological line that makes it possible to understand and speak about how such a violation could happen not only from the point of view of the daughter but from the father's point of view as well. In *Beloved*, Morrison gives voice to a mother who has killed her daughter rather than see her be taken back into slavery, and in this way explores a psychological and ethical question that has eluded the literature on psychological and moral development: what does care mean, or what could it potentially mean or entail, for a woman who loves her children and is living in a racist and violent society—a society damaging to both women and men?

Where I find myself troubled by the current arguments about difference is where I find them unvoiced and hauntingly familiar—where it is not clear who is speaking, where those spoken about have no voice, where the conversation heads toward the endless circle of objectivism and relativism, veering off into the oldest philosophical or ontological question as to whether there is or is not an Archimedean position, whether or not there is a God. A friend, quoting Stendhal, remarked that “God’s only excuse is that he doesn’t exist,” and even this conversation in contemporary circles leads back to gender and difference, dominance and power. I find the question of whether gender differences are biologically determined or socially constructed to be deeply disturbing. This way of posing the question implies that people, women and men alike, are either genetically determined or a product of socialization—that there is no voice—and without voice, there is no possibility for resistance, for creativity, or for a change whose wellsprings are psychological. At its most troubling, the present reduction of psychology either to sociology or biology or some combination of the two prepares the way for the kind of control that alarmed Hannah Arendt and George Orwell—the hand over the mouth and at the throat, the suffocation of voice and the deadening of language which ripen the conditions for fascism and totalitarian rule, the psychic numbing which is associated with that now curiously unspoken word “propaganda.”

Moral problems are problems of human relations, and in tracing the development of an ethic of care, I explore the psychological grounds for nonviolent human relations. This relational ethic transcends the age-old opposition between selfishness and selflessness, which have been the staples of moral discourse. The search on the part of many people for a voice which transcends these false dichotomies represents an attempt to turn the tide of moral discussion from questions of how to achieve objectivity and detachment to how to engage responsively and with care. Albert Hirschman, the political economist and author of *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, contrasts the neatness of exit with the messiness and heartbreak of voice. It is easier to step out than to step in. Relationship then requires a kind of courage and emotional stamina which has long been a strength of women, insufficiently noted and valued.

Relationship requires connection. It depends not only on the capacity for empathy or the ability to listen to others and learn

their language or take their point of view, but also on having a voice and having a language. The differences between women and men which I describe center on a tendency for women and men to make different relational errors—for men to think that if they know themselves, following Socrates' dictum, they will also know women, and for women to think that if only they know others, they will come to know themselves. Thus men and women tacitly collude in not voicing women's experiences and build relationships around a silence that is maintained by men's not knowing their disconnection from women and women's not knowing their dissociation from themselves. Much talk about relationships and about love carefully conceals these truths.

Current research on women's psychological development speaks directly to this problem. The Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and the Development of Girls, in its investigation of women's lives, moves backward through developmental time, from adulthood to adolescence, and from adolescence to childhood. Taking the voices of adult women as its starting point, including the women who speak in this book, we have now listened in depth to the voices of adolescent girls in girls' schools and to girls and boys in coeducational schools and after-school clubs. Once we found ourselves at home in the halls of adolescence, we moved with some measure of confidence and with new questions into the world of younger girls, initiating a five-year study of girls ages seven to eighteen and a three-year exploratory prevention project involving girls and women.

In the course of this research, Lyn Mikel Brown, Annie Rogers, and I came to a place where we heard a distinct shift in girls' voices and observed that this change in voice coincided with changes in girls' relationships and their sense of themselves. For example, we began to hear girls at the edge of adolescence describe impossible situations—psychological dilemmas in which they felt that if they said what they were feeling and thinking no one would want to be with them, and if they didn't say what they were thinking and feeling they would be all alone, no one would know what was happening to them. As one girl put it, "no one would want to be with me, my voice would be too loud." Hearing what she was saying, she compounded her conundrum by explaining, "But you have to have relationships."

Listening to these girls in relational impasse, we found