THE Gender AND Psychology READER

EDITED BY
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AND JULIE K. NOREM

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PART VII: Contextual Constraints and Affordances

Introduction

Blythe McVicker Clinchy and Julie K. Norem

Assembling this volume was roughly equal parts joy and frustration. The joy came both from the process of collaboration and from being able to discover, read, discuss, and learn, all while virtuously claiming that we were working. The frustration too had many sources: Some of what we read caused us to sigh in despair or shake our heads in exasperation. More importantly, however, we were frustrated by the number of wonderful works we could not include because we did not have space (and we cannot even begin to list them here). We used a number of different criteria to pare down our list. First and foremost, we wanted an eclectic group of papers that were *provocative*—that would stimulate others to think, read, disagree, and discuss further. We chose not to select reports of single studies, because we did not think that any single study would be as useful as the more general papers we include. We did select papers (and organize sections), however, that we thought would provide a context for students to think about and question examples of single studies on gender-related topics.

Though the volume has a psychological focus, the readings are interdisciplinary, with contributions from sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists. In addition to influential contemporary work, we wanted to include a few "classic" older pieces that offer valuable perspectives on the field. The selections included range from research summaries on particular topics (e.g., gender differences in emotion) to work on development of gendered self-concepts, to discussion of psychology's ambivalence about the study of difference and its failure to systematically consider race, ethnicity, and class. Our concluding chapter considers themes that can be traced through different sections, gaps in current perspectives, and future directions we think might be useful. The book is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of the psychology of gender. It does, however, touch upon most of the significant and controversial underlying issues involved in the study of gender, including methodological issues.

The book is intended for use alone or as a supplementary text for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in gender. We have divided the volume into seven broad sections, some of which are further divided into subsections. Though selecting the articles was a daunting task, it was easier than dividing them into sections, because so many of the pieces we chose could reasonably fit into more than one section. This is not surprising, given that the pieces we found most intriguing

tended to employ more than one perspective or level of analysis, and thus did *not* fit neatly into any particular, circumscribed category.

Nevertheless, we think there is both coherence and diversity within the sections we have created. Each section can be used independently, without the need for a particular chronological progression. In the introduction to each section we preview some of the major issues considered by the authors included in that section, mention historical controversies relevant to the readings, and point students toward general questions and themes that arise from those readings. Beyond the usefulness of individual sections, we think there is considerable coherence, as well as pedagogical potential, to the entire collection. Many of the points raised in one way by one author are considered from very different perspectives by other authors in different sections, vividly illustrating the power of multiple analyses, as well as the irreducible complexity involved in the study of gender.

As is obvious from our introductions to the various sections and from our concluding chapter, we have opinions and we do not try to hide them. We will introduce ourselves to provide some background for our points of view.

Blythe: I am a white, middle-class, married heterosexual with three sons and three grandchildren. Although I was a committed feminist in my "personal" life, in my early days as a developmental psychologist I had no particular professional interest in women or gender. Inspired by William Perry's (1970) research at Harvard on intellectual development during the college years, my colleague Claire Zimmerman and I decided to conduct a follow-up study at Wellesley, the undergraduate college where we taught. Perry's sample was largely male; ours, perforce, was entirely female, because Wellesley is a women's college. In applying for funds for the project, we claimed that one of our goals was to test the applicability of Perry's developmental scheme on a sample of women, but in truth we had no doubt that it was perfectly applicable, that Perry's was a gender-neutral theory. To some extent, this turned out to be true: We found that we could code most of our interview data in terms of Perry's scheme.

But not quite all of it. We found, as Carol Gilligan found in attempting to fit women's moral considerations into Lawrence Kohlberg's scheme, that the women who spoke to us in this and subsequent research (reported in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997) often spoke in a different key, describing ways of knowing and ways of being that were largely ignored or denigrated in developmental theory and in academic circles generally. At first, when we could not make sense of a woman's perspective in terms of the theory, we just shunted her aside—left her out. But gradually we began to wonder if perhaps something had been left out of the developmental story we had been taught, as well as the methods we had been taught to use in assembling the data to construct that story. This was a wrenching transition for me. After years devoted exclusively to "women's things"—housewifery and child-rearing—I was deeply wedded to the cool professionalism of being a psychologist. Occasionally, I still feel a pinch of nostalgia for that peaceful period before the gender Zeitgeist swept over psychology. Mostly, however, I am thrilled to be a part of it, for I am convinced not only that modern psychology can teach us a great deal

about gender, but that our understanding of gender can profoundly alter the discipline of psychology.

Julie: I am a white, middle-class, married heterosexual with one son. Since at least third grade, I have considered myself a feminist. Like Blythe, however, I have not always considered myself a "feminist scholar," and I did not intend to focus on gender in my own research in personality and social psychology. I enjoyed doing traditional experiments and was rather relieved not to consider gender in my work—discussion of gender tended to raise my blood pressure. My professional involvement in the study of gender developed slowly, as I became more and more frustrated with mainstream theory and research in personality and social psychology—especially with the focus on reified structure in personality psychology, and on "disembodied" process in social psychology. Sometimes that frustration was a reaction to specific writings about gender. More often, however, frustration arose from *how* that psychology was typically conducted and what was *not* written, discussed, or considered. Identification with traditional paradigms left me without a language, and thus without a voice, to talk about the kinds of psychological processes I found most interesting. I was forced to study gender in order to learn about language (and ideas) that would allow me to pursue the psychology I wanted to pursue. I believe, based on my own experience, that Abigail J. Stewart is absolutely right in her claim (see chapter 3, this volume) that personality psychology has a great deal to learn from feminist theory. I also believe that some of the most telling gaps in personality theory will not be filled until workers in this field face the need to consider gender systematically in their theory building and theory testing.

We hope that as they think about gender, both instructors and students will find our points of view useful even if they do not agree with them, just as we have learned from those authors with whom we disagree and from our disagreements with each other. We hope that this volume will contribute to the stimulating, exciting, frustrating, infuriating, and absolutely crucial ongoing conversation about gender.

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Part I

Underlying Epistemological Issues

Recent theory and research on the psychology of gender has been profoundly influenced by developments in epistemological theory. These developments take a variety of forms. Those who call themselves postmodernists, post-structuralists, social constructionists, and contextual relativists (to name just a few possibilities) do not agree in every respect, but all share the view that meanings are *contextual* and that knowledge, being constructed rather than simply discovered, inevitably involves interpretation. As Jane Roland Martin notes in her chapter, "any human or social phenomenon can be understood in countless different ways," depending upon the context in which it occurs and the angle from which it is viewed. No particular understanding can ever be complete, adds Abigail J. Stewart, for it is filtered through "a perspective which is inevitably partial."

From this standpoint there is no such thing as utter objectivity; the knower is inextricably involved in the known, and much that passes for observable "fact" actually involves interpretation. This position is at odds with the objectivist paradigm that, as Laurel Furumoto tells us, came to dominate psychology in the early twentieth century, driving out earlier, more humanistic models. At the heart of that "new scientific psychology," derived from natural science, was a "subject–object split." According to this paradigm, to quote the philosopher Susan Bordo, it is "the otherness of nature" that "allows it to be known" (Bordo, 1986, p. 452), and psychological truth is achieved through quantitative accretion of measurable data by detached, impersonal observers. Furumoto sees this as a "masculine" paradigm, inhospitable to women. Other feminist scholars have suggested that women and people of color may be particularly wary of objectivist theories: Because they themselves have too often been objectified, treated as things, as "other" (Fee, 1981; Jordan, 1985; Keller, 1983), they do not wish to see the human subjects of psychological research treated as faceless objects, devoid of subjectivity.[1] Mindful of the ways in which people in power have "made a pretense of objectivity . . . and have used the claim of objectivity to protect their judgments from rational scrutiny" (Nussbaum, 1994, pp. 60–61), members of oppressed groups have learned to be suspicious of such claims. Although few psychologists would abandon the scientific norm of objectivity, many would see it now as an ideal to be approximated, but rarely if ever utterly achieved: "It is crucial," Evelyn Fox Keller writes, "to distinguish between the objective effort and the objectivist illusion" (1983, p. 134), an illusion that is maintained and reinforced by the "rhetoric of objectivity" (Dillon, 1991, cited by Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995, p. 433) prevalent in mainstream psychological journals, which portrays the authors as models of "neutrality" and "impersonal detachment" who are "conveying objective information about a fixed external reality" (Madigan et al., 1995, pp. 433–434).

Furumoto now believes that the reason she was unable to hear "a distinctly feminine voice" in the early women psychologists she studied was that "since mainstream and masculine became synonymous, those who were counted as contributors—female as well as male—were obliged to employ the same rhetoric." Although this remains largely true, in recent years a more feminine voice has begun to emerge in psychology as well as other disciplines, one that argues for a conception of knowledge grounded "not in detachment and distance, but in closeness, connectedness, and empathy" (Bordo, 1986, p. 455; see also Code, 1991). Such an approach, Keller asserts, need not be considered unscientific. Just as there is no single truth, there is no single science; the history of science reveals a "thematic pluralism" (Keller, 1987, p. 245). There have always been scientists who, rather than attempting to dominate and control the object of their investigations, subordinated themselves to it, "letting the material speak to [them]," as the biologist Barbara McClintock put it, treating the "object" as "subject"—even when, as in McClintock's case, the subject was an ear of corn—and stepping into it instead of stepping back: Keller quotes McClintock as saying "I wasn't outside, I was down there—I was part of the system" (Keller, 1983, p. 141).

Stephanie Riger, Hope Landrine, and Abigail J. Stewart, in their contributions to this volume, argue that psychologists have paid too little attention to the social context in which behavior occurs. The experimental paradigm entails "context-stripping," Riger asserts; by controlling for the effect of "extraneous" factors other than the ones under investigation through procedures such as random assignment to treatment conditions, "psychologists rule out the study of sociocultural and historical factors, and implicitly attribute causes to factors inside the person." Personality psychology's individualistic intrapsychic bias, combined with its search for universal laws, Stewart says, has caused it to ignore political and economic realities, as if everyone in the society had equal opportunities and bore equal burdens. As Riger puts it, "In an ironic reversal of the feminist dictum of the 1960s, when social context is ignored, the political is misinterpreted as personal." Michelle Fine and Susan Gordon (1989) argue that in conventional laboratory experiments "the social relationships and contexts in which women weave their lives are excluded as if irrelevant" (pp. 154–155). If, as is customary, one defines *gender* as a social construct, distinct from biological sex and the sex category to which people are assigned, and if one conceives of gender not as a bundle of intrapsychic predispositions but as "constituted through social interaction," as Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman and other social constructionists do (see chapter 6 of this volume), then it is clear that such practices make it impossible to explore the workings of gender, at least as it operates in "real life."

But the problem of decontextualization goes deeper than this. It is not just that laboratories are sterile, artificial settings lacking in ecological validity and thus rendering behavior "unnatural." It is, as Landrine reminds us, that we *define* behavior as acontextual. Context, in Landrine's view, is not "a mere setting in which behavior occurs"; it is not something outside the behavior that influences it. Rather, context is *part* of the behavior. "The sociocultural, historical, and political context," Landrine says, must be seen as "an integral part of the label for and definition of behavior,"

rather than "something outside of it, something surrounding it." To call a slave more "dependent" than his master because he shows more groveling "behaviors," without accounting for the difference in power, makes no sense.

Some psychologists who are drawn to these more contextual, interpretive approaches reject conventional scientific methods as useless in the study of psychology in general and of the psychology of gender in particular. However, to us it seems that if knowledge is regarded as perspectival, then there can be no single road to truth, and one is obliged to acknowledge the legitimacy of a multiplicity of methods. To assert otherwise, we believe, is to engage in the "methodological essentialism" that Martin deplores.

NOTES

1. Madigan, Johnson, and Linton (1995) observe that "although the current view is that subjects . . . are anonymous, interchangeable, and distinct from experimenters, this was not always the case. During much of psychology's early history, studies were reported in which participants were explicitly named individuals who were frequently the authors of the report" (pp. 429–43).

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