



A New Psychology of Women
Gender, Culture, and Ethnicity

HILARY M. LIPS

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Gender, Culture, and Ethnicity

Hilary M. Lips
Radford University



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*To Wayne,
whose parntership, support, and enthusiasm
have made this and many other projects
more engaging, intricate, and joyful.*



Preface

One of the scholars who reviewed the proposal for this book, after expressing the opinion that such a project was timely and important, went on to say, rather ominously, “She is trying to write the psychology of *all women everywhere*.” Let me say at the outset that this impossible task is indeed *not* the one I would presume to set for myself. I cannot but write from my own perspective, my own cultural background, my own habits of thinking. In using a global, multicultural approach to writing about the psychology of women, I do not pretend to be neutral or “perspectiveless.” What I have tried to do is to be sensitive to the limitations of my own perspective, to seek out and include the voices and work of those whose backgrounds differ from mine, to provide some overview of the type and amount of the diversity that exists among women, and to illustrate some ways that the knowledge we create, learn, and transmit about women and gender is shaped by our culture.

Throughout the book, the primary aim is to provide some understanding of how gender-related expectations interact with other cultural assumptions and stereotypes, and with social and economic conditions, to affect women’s experiences and behavior. A second goal is simply to provide information about the ways women’s lives differ in different cultures.

An important focus of the book is research carried out by scholars outside the United States, or outside the mainstream within the United States. Each chapter includes discussions of findings by researchers in various countries, thus allowing readers to form an image of what issues are considered important *within* other cultures. By using this approach, I have tried to avoid, to the extent that it is possible, the type of comparative method that uses the experience of middle-class Americans as a yardstick against which everyone else’s experience is judged.

Women, in particular, have much to gain by learning about the ways their difficulties and opportunities as women transcend, or do not transcend, cultural and ethnic group boundaries. In most (some would argue all) cultures, women are disadvantaged in some ways in relation to men. Around the world, men control more of the resources, hold more of the leadership positions, are more likely to visit violence on their partners, and wield more formal power than women.

Thus women in different groups might well benefit from exchanging their perceptions of the obstacles they face and sharing their strategies for gaining power, and women worldwide are likely to gain strength by working together as they try to move toward better conditions for women. A prime example of such collective strength was the coming together of women from all over the world for the United Nations Congress on Women in Beijing in 1995.

But there is another benefit when women from different groups listen carefully to one another's voices. If we understand something more about our similarities and differences, we as women may be less likely to share in or tolerate the assumptions and practices that oppress women of other groups. Those of us who are European American may, for instance, begin to understand why African American women might feel excluded and invisible in a college course that treats the notion of employment as a choice women have traditionally been able to make. We may, as TAB (temporarily able-bodied) women, begin to see how women with disabilities are sometimes marginalized when issues of strength or sexuality are discussed. We may begin to see the connections between development aid and the literacy and reproductive control that give the women of rural India a chance to break out of and change patterns of bride burning, suttee (burning a widow alive on her husband's funeral pyre), and grinding poverty.

Women do not automatically understand one another or treat one another well just because they are women; barriers of race, class, and culture can, depending on the meaning they are given, prove insurmountable. Idella Parker, the African American woman whom European American novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1896–1953) called her “perfect maid,” wrote later of the difficulties of this relationship. The two women were together in their maid–mistress relationship for many years. Parker may have been Rawlings's best and most loyal friend. At any rate, she was very fond of Rawlings, rescued her from many disastrous situations involving alcohol, and protected her reputation for years. Rawlings, for her part, often treated Parker more as a friend and confidante than a servant, and provided her with resources that were unusually generous. Yet, under the influence of racist attitudes, the power relationship between the two women was such that Parker finally had to leave. She was never allowed to sleep in Rawlings's house. (Neither was any other Black woman. On one occasion, Parker was forced to share her own bed with the African American writer Zora Neale Hurston, who was visiting Rawlings.) She was expected to place Rawlings's needs first under all circumstances. The scenario, with its complex mix of affection and subordination, is reminiscent of what used to be thought of as the ideal marriage relationship between a man and a woman: the wife protecting and supporting the husband at all costs, he controlling the agenda and rewarding her with extra privileges. We can learn something from this parallel: Where the subordination of women is concerned, men do not always stand alone as villains. Women, like men, have a lot to learn about other women.

Chapter 1 explores the reasons for taking a global, multicultural approach to the psychology of women. In chapter 2 we apply this approach to the beliefs

about, and findings of, female–male differences around the world. Having examined the general framework, we turn in chapters 3 and 4 to specific questions of how girls are socialized through childhood and adolescence: How are they taught to feel about their bodies, what expectations are they led to develop about their identities, abilities, and accomplishments? Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on how these early messages are translated into later behavior in three areas: assertiveness and interpersonal power, communication, and the formation of close relationships. The social conditions and relationships that make up women's lives have an impact on their well-being; thus chapters 8 and 9 examine physical and mental health. Chapter 10 looks at ways in which all of these issues develop and change for women as they make transitions from young adulthood to middle and old age. The last four chapters deal with particular topics that both strongly reflect and strongly affect women's experience in every culture: sexuality, violence against women, work, and power.

I have many people to thank for help and support with this book. Radford University granted me a professional development leave when the manuscript was in its formative stages. During that precious year, Ellen Kimmel found me a home for one semester in the Department of Psychological and Social Foundations of Education at the University of Southern Florida. She and her colleagues supported and encouraged me as I shaped this project and others. I am grateful especially to Ellen and to Nancy Greenman at USF for their support, encouragement, and willingness to discuss ideas about gender and culture during the time I spent in Tampa. I am also grateful to Mirta Gonzalez Suarez at the Interdisciplinary Program for the Study of Gender at the University of Costa Rica. Mirta facilitated my stay as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Costa Rica, and she and her colleagues did their best to expose me to a variety of international perspectives on women and feminism during my one-semester stay there. My year ended with a one-month stay in China, where Zhang Kan and Gu Hongbin of the Institute for Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences went far out of their way to help me learn about China and to understand some of the issues facing women in that country.

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Much of my energy and inspiration for writing about these topics comes from my students, particularly those who have taken my Psychology of Women class during my years at Radford University. I thank my students and colleagues at Radford for sharing ideas, for humor and friendship, for patience and support.

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