Ways of Knowing: Does Gender Matter?

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In a large interview-based study on ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) my colleagues and I asked women the following questions: How do you know what you know? Where does your knowledge come from? To whom or to what do you turn when you want answers? Is there such a thing as "truth" or "right answers"? What makes an expert? We wanted to understand and describe the variety of ways women go about making meaning for themselves in a world that devalues women's authority and voices. Although William Perry in an important earlier study (1970) had explored the way young men think about the nature and acquisition of knowledge and how their thoughts change during their college years, no one had asked, How do women know?

Our initial study was based on a broad sample of 135 rural and urban women of different ages, classes, ethnic backgrounds, and educational histories. It provided an unusual look into the lives of women who, though different from one another in many ways, were subject to common sex stereotypes and sex role socialization processes and presumably shared common experiences by virtue of their gender.

Based on these original interviews, we described in our book *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) five knowledge perspectives, or frameworks from which women view themselves and the world, and make meaning of their lives. Since the original study, my colleagues and I have interviewed an even broader demographic sample of women and men so that we could extend our thinking about the roles of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in the development of epistemological perspectives and approaches to learning. Our new work (described in Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky, 1996), like the original, uncovers themes concerning human psychology and development that have been ignored or are missing in major developmental theories but that are prominent in the stories of women (and men) from several classes and cultures. These stories reveal a great deal about the varieties of ways people think about power, self-other dilemmas, personal authority and voice, and relationships and groups.

Setting the Context: A Brief History

Our research was and continues to be guided by the belief that individuals, not just philosophers, have implicit theories about knowledge and truth that shape the way they see the world, the way they think abut themselves, and the way they relate to authority. We believe that personal theories of knowledge and experiences of gender and self, as they shift throughout the life cycle, are culturally embedded. One shapes and is shaped by one's cultural context; meaning-making is both an intrapsychic and extrapsychic phenomenon. We all grow up in families, communities, and cultures that affect the definitional boundaries for "male" and "female," but each of us also constructs narratives of self, gender, family, authority, and truth that evolve as we encounter new ideas and an ever-widening variety of people and outlooks on life. As we point out (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986, 1996;

Goldberger, 1996), even family histories are rewritten (that is, they are reinterpreted) as people shift from one knowledge perspective to another.

The process of constantly revising and reinterpreting our own histories-- as de Laurentis (1986) and Alcoff (1988 have noted-- leads to a shifting "positionality" with respect to our identities as "woman" or "knower." One's definition of *woman* or *knower* changes as one's social position changes in an ever-shifting cultural context. As the feminist Allison Jaggar has put it (1983), we each know the world and speak from a particular standpoint, or "position in society from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured" (p. 382). As we grow and change, and perhaps shift class and social roles, we see the world differently. Thus, as many feminists argue, all knowledge is situated. I agree.

This emphasis on the central role of social context in meaning-making has recently become a major concern for professional training in psychology. Clinical psychologists are now mandated to become culture-sensitive and competent to work with culturally diverse patient populations. This implies that psychology has become more attuned to how psyche and culture construct each other as well as to diversity in ways of knowing (Shweder, 1991; Goldberger and Veroff, 1995). Many American citizens, especially biracial or bicultural individuals, are shaped in part by what may be divergent or even conflicting world views and ways of knowing that arise out of their minority status in the dominant culture.

Most of the women my colleagues and I interviewed were able to tell us about their history as makers of meaning and how they had changed over time. In some cases an individual's primary and current approach to knowing was clearly a manifestation of the approach to knowing valued by her immediate community or cultural reference group. In other cases, individuals were more conscious of the culture-embeddedness of ways of knowing and more interested in exploring alternative epistemologies espoused by cultures and subcultures other than their own. Most women reported transitional periods and changes in positional perspective that led to major shifts in the way they thought about knowledge and truth. Catalysts for such epistemological revolutions, we found, differed from person to person, although some common ones were education, childbearing, family trauma, difficult or challenging relationships, exposure to other cultures, a new kind of work or work environment, and psychotherapy.

Other psychological theorists have pointed out the relevance of one's personal epistemology (ways of knowing) to everyday experience and decision-making. Greeno (1989) has argued that children's beliefs about the origin and nature of knowledge have been understudied until recently but are central to our understanding of the vast and disparate research on cognitive development and approaches to learning. Magolda (1992) has related epistemology to learning styles and cognitive complexity. Others (Perry, 1970; Loevinger, 1976; Kitchener and King, 1981; Kitchener, 1983; Chenin, 1984; Unger, Draper, and Pendergrass, 1986) have demonstrated how shifts in ways of knowing, beginning in adolescence and continuing throughout adulthood, are directly related to self-concept, social perceptions and attributions, orientation to the future, and moral judgments. Culture theorists (Gardner, 1995; Ogbu, 1981; Shweder, 1991) have argued that multiple intelligences and ways of knowing evolve as individuals respond to cultural imperatives and learn the lessons necessary to grow, survive, and become functioning members of the larger culture as well as their subcultures and communities.

Ways of Knowing

In our original work (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986), we described five different epistemological perspectives apparent in the data we gathered from our interviews with women. These five ways of knowing should be considered as frameworks for meaning-making that can evolve over time rather than as enduring traits or personality types. They are not fixed categories but rough schemata that will undoubtedly be elaborated on and even changed as ways of knowing are studied across culture groups, classes, and other sources of human difference. Whether gender matters in the study of ways of knowing and how gender matters, if it does, are questions for future study as we analyze the intersection of culture, power, situation, and historical moment. For now, I shall summarize the five knowledge perspectives as we originally described them.

I. *Silence* is a perspective in which women experience themselves as mindless and subject to powerful external authorities. In a sense, this is not a way of knowing but a way of not knowing. Such women do not dare to now or think of themselves as knowers. Women who have emerged from this kind of silence tell us that their silence tell us that their silence has been a way of surviving in what they experienced as a dangerous environment. Although silence is also an issue for women at other epistemological positions, we decided to call this particular subgroup of our interviewees the silent women because the absence of voice was as striking as the fragile and hidden sense of self.

For these women, to know, or to use words to protest the actions of others--that is, to speak out--is to court danger and retaliation. What distinguishes silent women is their isolation, fearfulness, and acceptance of the status quo. Silent women are women living out the most pernicious form of structural genderized oppression and sexual abuse. Their families and communities and schools have usually planted and reinforced their belief that they are not smart and know nothing. Such women tend to drop out of school during or immediately after high school.

II. *Received knowing* is a perspective in which a woman conceives of herself as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from external authorities but not capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on her own. Knowledge, she believes, originates outside the self. The received knower tends to discount the importance of her own experience in the process of knowing.

The received knower listens carefully to the voices of authority. She achieves a sense of personal power by identifying with and conforming to the social norms of her primary group. Her self-concept is organized around social roles and expectations. She models herself after the cultural ideals of what a woman should be, ideals transmitted by her church, her family, or her teachers.

The received knower is a vehicle for the transmission of social stereotypes. When she speaks her voice is one of imitation. What she has learned from her good authorities (however "good" is constructed in her community) she can then transmit and teach to others. She derives both pleasure and security from trusting, listening to, and learning from external authorities. Discussion of changes in beliefs or alternative ways to live can be unwanted or even threatening to the received knower who is secure in her community.

III. *Subjective knowing* is a perspective in which truth is found internally. Knowledge is conceived of as personal, private, and subjective. Thought is not seen as central to the process of knowing. As one woman put it, "I try not to think. If you trust yourself, you just know." Subjective knowers value gut knowledge over what they believe to be illegitimate theorizing by self-appointed authorities; thus, they display little respect for official, certified authority. Other people's opinions do not often change the mind of the subjective knower because she tends to be locked inside her own subjectivity; however, like-minded people may be sought out and used to affirm her opinions.

In our study, many of the women who viewed the world from a subjectivist perspective had come to this way of knowing following a rejection of what they experienced as failed male authority. Their interviews were replete with observations about gender relations, power and disempowerment, anger and distrust. The theme of birth and rebirth was common as these women described how they were revolutionizing their lives, discarding abusive relationships, and disengaging themselves from responsibilities to others. They were busy redefining for themselves what it means to be a woman.

IV. From the *procedural knowing* perspective, the emphasis is on learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge-- the criteria for which are held by and agreed on by the members of a discipline, guild, or culture group. Authority is external (as it is for received knowers), but it resides with the intellectual elite (not with all authority, as the received knower assumes). In our original sample, procedural knowers-- whether adolescents or adults-- were primarily students whom we interviewed in either high schools or colleges. Higher education, particularly the kind of education one obtains in the liberal arts colleges and universities that promote critical analytical thinking, can push the received knower into procedural knowing. Thus, authority is external and resides with the academic experts until the student has mastered the "right" way to know, is initiated into the community of scholars, and becomes a knower, presumably with power and influence in the public sector.

With the advent and use of reason come a sense of mastery and personal competence. Many women are delighted to be initiated into the public world of the academy or the workplace, in which they assume they can attain the same degree of recognition, achievement, and power as men. And many do succeed. We have found, however, that a number of highly competent women suffer from a feeling of alienation from their own successes and products. They express a feeling of nonownership of their work. They feel they are still learning by rote and thinking by someone else's recipe. They have lost touch with a sense of "I." A number of the stories we gathered from women suggest that this sense of alienation from the self can eventuate in a crisis of identity and meaning that brings some such women into therapy. Others, who may not seek therapy, precipitously drop out of school or leave the disciplines in which they have been studying, claiming that the academy or the professions are not real life. They set out on a journey in search of the "unknown woman" (Koller, 1983), that is, themselves.

This kind of disaffection and frustration seems to be common among female law students. Although they are admitted to law schools in numbers equal to men, women report feeling silenced and experience a high degree of alienation in law school (Weiss and Melling, 1988). A report of legal education at one law school detailed the female students' distress at the hostile competition and adversarial pedagogy that evidently affect their academic performance (Guinier, Fine, and Balin, 1994). The adversarial pedagogy (grounded in the Socratic method) that these women object to is quite similar to what we have called separate knowing-- a kind of procedural approach to knowing that uses dispassionate detachment, doubt and skepticism, and challenge to others in order to defend one's own position.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, we contrast separate knowing with what we call connected knowing, which is based on the premise that in order to understand another person's point of view or ideas, one must enter into the place of the other and adopt the person's terms. Connected knowers are not dispassionate, unbiased observers. They are biased in favor of that which they are trying to understand. They assume a stance of believing rather than doubting. The heart of connected knowing is active imagination, that is, figuratively climbing into the head of another. In connected knowing, objectivity is achieved by entering the perspective of the other and by reasoning along with the other. In our new book (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky, 1996) both Blythe Clinchy and Sara Ruddick expand on how connected knowing is an objective strategy for knowing.

Whether women embrace separate or connected procedural knowing, our interviews suggest that many women are conflicted about the suggestion that they need to learn to "think like a man" and learn the "right" way or socially normative way to know.

V. *Constructed knowing* is a position at which women view all knowledge as contextual and relative. Truth, right answers, and even facts must always be evaluated within the contextual frame within which they arise. Women with this perspective recognize that to claim "I know" is to acknowledge the historical, cultural, and subjective position from which the "I" speaks. Constructed knowers experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and they come to value and draw on multiple ways of knowing-- objective and subjective, connected and separate-- to enlarge their reality and understanding of the world. They believe that different routes to knowing have their place, logic, and usefulness.

Even though constructed knowers acknowledge the tentativeness of knowledge, they struggle toward a "commitment within relativism" (Perry, 1970). It is at this position that a person achieves a critical consciousness (Freire, 1971) and a capacity for reflective judgment that takes into account personal history, social and historical context, and structural inequality. It is from this position that a person makes informed choices and commitments, and conceives of her life and her acts as political.

The "Right" Way to Know

The account that my colleagues and I give of women's ways of knowing is our story of how different women struggle to come to terms with covert and overt social pressures to learn the "right" way to know. Some women yield to cultural norms; others do not. The families, schools, and communities in which women grow up affect the educational routes they take and the perspectives on knowing that they develop. Although our work is, in part, about women's experiences of feeling silenced and intellectually devalued, it is also about women's efforts to gain a voice and claim the powers of their own minds. We look at the phenomenon of women's self-doubt and ask how our American culture gives women mixed messages about who has the right to speak, who has authority, and how one best goes about learning and developing.

Social acceptability, manifested as a preoccupation with the correct or right way to know, was an issue in many of our interviews with women. Not all women felt that their approach to knowing was socially acceptable or valid; they experienced themselves as somehow out of the mainstream; many doubted themselves and their minds. Today, both men and women in the Western world are taught to value what is assumed to be the objective, "male" mind and to devalue knowing that is identified as female and is assumed to be, among other things, overly emotional and personalized. Our androcentric culture sends out the message to women that in order to succeed they need to "learn to think like a man."

Assumptions about the best, or most advanced, or most scientific and objective ways of knowing are not just a modern concern. Questions about the origins and nature of knowledge-- and the best way to know-- have preoccupied philosophers for centuries. In various historical eras there have emerged different answers, different means for seeking truth, even different ways of asking what are considered to be the important questions about human nature and human knowing (Kuhn, 1970; Sampson, 1978; Gergen, 1985; Watzlawick, 1984; Antony and Witt, 1992; Alcoff and Potter, 1992). In any society there are privileged epistemologies-- the socially valued ways of knowing for establishing and evaluating truth claims-- that assume normative standing. Such social norms affect and delimit individual ways of knowing. When a person or group subscribes to ways of knowing that fall outside the margins of the normative epistemology of their culture, any analysis of their divergent ways of knowing must necessarily also be an analysis of the power relationships within their community, workplace, or culture (Miller, 1976/1987; Howard, 1987; Collins, 1990). Certain perspectives, ways of knowing, and value frameworks are more apparent in and more emphasized by women than men at this point in the history of Western culture. In a sense, one can say that, in any culture, knowledge is genderized in that women "carry" certain kinds of knowledge (for example, knowledge concerning nutrition or conflict resolution or maintenance of social ties); men carry other sorts of knowledge. Some of the ways of knowing identified in the United States as female or feminine have been highly valued in other historical eras and in other cultures.

Increasing attention has been paid lately to how the value attached to different ways of knowing varies as a function of racial, class, and cultural background. Collins (1990) has explored the politics and history of Afro-American knowledge and thought in her development of what she calls a Black feminist epistemology. She emphasizes the importance of concrete experience, dialogue and narrative, and the ethic of caring and connection in assessing knowledge claims. Wisdom, not knowledge, is given high credence among Afro-Americans because "mother wit" is needed to deal with "educated fools" (p. 208). These same values are echoed in the stories of the women we identified as connected knowers. Luttrell (1989) has analyzed how Black and White working-class women define and claim knowledge. The women she interviewed relied on personal experience and common sense but also included intuition as central to knowing (as did our subjectivists). Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (in press) are studying ways of knowing and the development of voice in a group of disadvantaged rural mothers for whom silence and received knowledge are prominent. In my own work (Goldberger, 1996) I am focusing on the effects of acculturation on individuals from different ethnic communities, races, and immigrant groups as they are channeled into the American educational system, with its normative standards concerning the right way to know. What is becoming apparent to me, as I listen to stories about the undermining and loss of the indigenous culture's approaches to knowing, is the pain and compromise that accompany such social change. People whom my students and I have interviewed have told anguished stories about familiar ways of meaning-making, endorsed by their community and culture, that they lost when they were exposed to mainstream privileged American thought and interpretive frameworks.

The Metaphors of Voice and Silence

People who work with, live with, and listen to women know that the metaphors of silence and voice are potent ones. Gaining a voice has come to be equated with personal empowerment. Whether a woman develops a sense of the power of her mind is closely allied to the development of a sense of personal voice and authority. In my recent interviews, I have been paying close attention to how women, people of color, and other members of the so-called subordinate social groups speak about being silent and feeling silenced as they describe their lives and developmental histories. I have found that silence is an issue not just for a subset of women, as we implied in our book, but is a common experience, albeit with a host of both positive and negative connotations, for almost all people. There is a big difference, however, between self-imposed and externally imposed silences. Feeling silenced and feeling unheard are painful and frustrating experiences, so women tell us, when imposed from without. To be ignored when you speak is the equivalent of being told "You know nothing. You have nothing to say worth hearing."

But it is also clear from the women's interviews that self-silencing sometimes takes place. Silence can be a source of retreat, of safety, or it can be a source of self-renewal. Sometimes, according to her wisdom about the situation and the moment, a woman may choose to speak, they have a better chance of being heard.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, described in some detail the distinctive family patterns and "politics of family talk" common to each epistemological perspective. From early ages on, children learn rules of speaking and listening. These rules (and the associated assumptions abut where truth lies) are carried into adulthood and greatly affect the way an individual constructs authority and expertise. One-way talk, inequality in parental communications, and disallowed questioning all contribute to the silencing of children's sense of mind and voice. Mutuality in communication, listening and dialogue, and respect even for half-formed ideas all contribute to a growing sense of personal authority and voice. It is these lessons, learned first in families and then in schools and later in the workplace, that greatly affect developing self-confidence and feelings of intellectual worth. Too often, in American families, girls and women are socialized to be seen, not heard.

Feminist Controversy on the Psychology of Difference

Since *Women's Ways of Knowing* was published in 1986, considerable academic debate has taken place among feminist theorists concerning our work and the political implications of an emphasis on gender sameness versus difference. Our work is now considered part of a larger body of theory-- which I shall call different voice theory-- that identifies, typically through interviews with women, some of the issues, themes, and perspectives in human development and thought that have been submerged or ignored (and often devalued) by the normative masculinist culture. Among the work classified as part of different voice theory, in addition to our work on ways of knowing, is the work of Jean baker Miller and the Stone Center on self-in-relation (Miller, 1976/1987; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991), the work of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues on the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor, 1988; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer, 1990; Brown and Gilligan, 1992), and the analysis by philosopher Sara Ruddick of what she calls "maternal thinking" (1980, 1989), which grows out of maternal practice.

It is through the efforts of different voice theorists that attention has turned to what is positive about the characteristics of knowing and thinking that have long been associated with the feminine. Within the spectrum of various feminist positions, different voice theory has been categorized by Offen (1988) and Noddings (1990) as "relational feminism" because it highlights the role of care and connection in women's lives. It has also been categorized by Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990) and others as theory with an "alpha bias," that is, the inclination to emphasize male-female differences, as opposed to "beta-bias" theory, which minimizes difference. Considerable controversy has emerged over whether relational feminism and different voice theory are essentialist (that is, implicitly arguing for natural or enduring differences between the sexes). By focusing on women as a group, some critics argue, relational feminists and different voice theorists only fuel old stereotypes of women. They warn that any focus on gender differences or women's distinctive attributes or perspectives, even those that grow out of differences in cultural experience, can be appropriated by political adversaries (who hold to the "difference is deficit" position), turned against women, and used to endorse male privilege. But as the feminist historian Karen Offen has pointed out (1988), if we reject relational feminism because it can be misappropriated, then we must reject individualist and beta-bias feminism on the same grounds. Ignoring differences and the sociopolitical context as well as the relational aspects of most women's lives can lead to the alienation of ordinary women from mainstream feminism. Many women have gained a sense of power (even if illusory), a voice, control, and an enhancement of self-esteem through the valuing of "women's ways." Even more important, in these days of backlash against feminism and multiculturalism (two movements that have emphasized the importance of listening to different voices and analyzing the social construction of "otherness"), it seems politically unstrategic to minimize difference and implicitly ally oneself with the forces from the right who would have us return to a White-only, middle-class, masculinist culture. As young female law students have passionately argued (Weiss and Melling, 1988), to minimize differences and to "focus on sameness limits criticism and change; it means accepting the world as constructed by men, challenging only women's exclusion from it, and acceding to our forced integration into the dominant culture" (p. 1301). Furthermore, by casting the feminist theoretical dilemma as a matter of choice between two poles (sameness versus difference), such feminists as Spelman (1988), Mednick (1989), Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990), and Bohan (1993), who bring essentialism charges against other feminist theorists, risk fueling the polarization and controversy already apparent in feminist circles (Hirsch and Keller, 1990; Martin, 1992).

Does Gender Matter?

It is true that some of the women my colleagues and I interviewed hold essentialist positions and believe in the natural separation of the sexes. As theorists, however, we do not argue that essential, universal, highly dichotomized, and enduring differences exist between men and women. We maintain that gender is both culturally and psychologically constructed. In an ideal world, gender would not matter, but in this world, gender does matter-- and it will continue to matter as long as social power and influence are inequitably distributed, and as long as certain attitudes and values and ways of knowing are considered to be feminine and therefore lesser.

At this point in my own intellectual development, I value a critical analysis of differences that arise out of such social categories as gender, race, class, or ethnicity because of the historical power of such categories, even though I recognize that an overemphasis on the explanatory power of these social categories can mask important situational and individual differences within social categories. I argue that we must focus on difference and listen carefully to the stories of marginalized people so that we can better understand the logic of individual courses of action in different social contexts. Life stories can teach us how some people's lives simply do not conform to theoretical prescriptions and normative standards. By listening to different voices-- voices from the margin-- and exploring difference, we can challenge authority and old assumptions and paradigms. It is by understanding the epistemological biases behind different strategies of empowerment that we can evaluate and choose the most effective ways to act in and on the world-- an evaluation that is as important to educational and clinical intervention as it is to political and social action. In learning to live with diversity in a pluralistic world, all of us must learn how to make a connection with difference.

Our task, if we are to live successfully as citizens in a world where differences matter, is to find and strengthen our voices, to learn to hear the voices of others, and to develop the art of really talking with other people who are separated from us by gender or race or class or culture or partisan politics.

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