

Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind

Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule
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The subtitle of *Women's Ways of Knowing, The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, is indicative of the authors' approach in their study of women's intellectual development. Tracing women's maturation as knowers, the authors realized the impossibility of extricating knowing from its social and psychological contexts. A study of women's thinking turns out to be as much a study of their "voices", which include those moral and psychological, familial and societal dimensions that help create the individual voice, that contribute to a definition of self. It is this sense of self, according to the authors, that is at the heart of women's experience as knowers in a way that is saliently different from men's. As their study indicates, gender proves a pervasive and enduring force in women's intellectual lives, shaping not only their roles as knowers, but, in fundamental ways, their modes of knowing.

Women's Ways of Knowing is the work of four developmental psychologists (Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule) who base their findings on in-depth interviews with 135 women of all ages. The women differed widely with regard to class, race, ethnic and educational backgrounds. In order to avoid merely testing their own preconceived hypotheses, the researchers proceeded inductively. Listening to the women in their own terms became primary, and this stance offered the opportunity to gather data rarely available since a number of the women studied were disadvantaged, a group historically overlooked by academic research.

Women's ways of knowing, the psychologists maintain, differ from men's in significant ways that, although powerful in their own right, have been "neglected and denigrated by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time." (p. 18) Unapologetically feminist in their point of view, the authors contend that, in a society which benefits from the exploitation of women, such a difference is regarded as illegitimate. The effect is, predictably, an undermining of women's confidence in their intellectual abilities, of envisioning themselves as knowers.

The approach of *Women's Ways of Knowing* is remarkable in its synthesis of various pieces of information. The resulting richness of the authors' insights are due in great part to their acceptance of the continual interplay of diverse elements involved in women's position as knower. The authors acknowledge the impact of familial background, institutional expectations, traditional pedagogy, and the moral dimensions of learning as they influence intellectual growth. They cite the myriad effects that sexual inequality has on women's knowing, an influence rarely explored in studies of this kind.

What the researchers were able to create from the information they received is a model of intellectual maturation based on five positions of knowing which they detail in part one of *Women's Ways of Knowing*. The authors then turn, in part two, to the institutions expressly devoted to human development – the family and schools in their respective roles in women's development. In delineating different stages in women's epistemology, the authors note their indebtedness to the groundbreaking work of Carol Gilligan and of William Perry. Drawn from the patterns that began emerging from the interviews, the authors describe five positions of women's intellectual growth. The process of maturation evolves from a position of silence, to a position of received knowledge, to subjective knowledge, to procedural knowledge, and finally culminates with the position the psychologists refer to as constructed knowledge.

The authors' use of "silence" as a starting position is directly related to their growing awareness of a recurring metaphor many women used in describing their intellectual development – the metaphor of voice. Women compared their progress as knowers to discovering a voice, finding the words, developing the ability to speak for the first time, images that recur in the literature of oppressed peoples and in the pedagogy of radical educators such as Paulo Freire. Such images comprise a powerful tradition in women's writing as well. The repetition of this metaphor in the women's stories suggests their belief in the necessity of articulating their thoughts in order to progress as knowers. (Worth reflecting on is an early discussion in the book on traditional images for knowledge such as light and illumination with their suggestion of insight as a solitary, spontaneous act and their antithesis, the women's image of voice, suggesting a knowledge reached through dialogue, an evolving, imperfect, collaborative endeavor.)

Although the first position the psychologists describe, the silent knower, was encountered infrequently, the authors felt it provided an important starting point of a continuum of intellectual maturity. The authors refer to these women as silent because of their fear of and reticence in using language. The

figures of speech suggesting the gaining of a voice were noticeably absent from their descriptions of themselves. Because of their lack of facility with language, representational thought was underdeveloped hence intellectual ability limited.

A common characteristic of these women is their unquestioning obedience to those in positions of authority. They believe that the source of self-knowledge is not found in the self but in others. It is not surprising that these women believe in extreme sex-role stereotyping given the extreme powerlessness they have experienced in their lives. The authors describe these women as passive and subordinate. A shared experience of these women was isolation as children with few if any opportunities for either play or dialogue. Play and its impulse for creating metaphors appears to be crucial for advanced intellectual development because of its reliance on make-believe or hypothetical situations.

Unlike the silent women, the second type of knower, the received knower, relies on received information and regard words as central to the learning process. These women are similar to the silent women, however, in that they "still their own voices" to hear the words of others for they, too, believe that truth resides in others. They regard their role as listeners and equate "receiving, retaining, and returning the words of authorities with learning." Extreme dualism characterizes their thinking and they assume that the authorities have one right answer for every problem. Paradox, ambiguity, and metaphor are unknown or intolerable for received knowers. Literal thinkers, they have trouble with subjects like poetry, for instance, because of its seeming indeterminate quality.

The impact that gender has on these women as knowers becomes clear when they are compared to men. When comparing these women to men similarly described by Perry, the authors found a significant difference between the two groups: the women, unlike the men, do not align themselves with authorities. This was no less true for privileged women than for underprivileged women; both appeared "to identify more with outsiders than with authorities."⁽⁴⁶⁾ In comparison to these women who listen, Perry's dualistic men seemed to lecture. Much like the silent women, these women desire to live up to the cultural standards that relegate women to a subordinate position. Moreover, these received knowers believe that a high price is paid for their success: they fear that should they excel intellectually, those they love will be "penalized."⁽⁴⁶⁾

The next developmental position, the subjective knower, marks a turning point in women's epistemological growth characterized by a move away from external indexes of truth to a "new conception of

truth that as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited."⁽⁵⁴⁾ Almost half of the women interviewed were subjectivist in their thinking and this intellectual position cut across every boundary whether it be age, class, race, or education. The change is notable in its shift from the two previous positions of passivity, from "self as static to self as becoming."⁽⁵⁴⁾ Clearly, this is a definite break with previous positions yet subjective knowing remains dualistic in that the knowers earnestly believe that there are right answers: truth now originates solely in the individual. The tendency toward solipsism is problematical; at its worst the position becomes extremely antirationalistic.

The psychological profiles gleaned from the interviews attest to special considerations for these knowers that are gender-based. The families the majority of these subjective knowers grew up in were characterized as unstable and unsupportive; they tended to be more chaotic than other families. The researchers were struck by a recurrent theme in these stories: that of failed male authority. The loss of trust in male authority was most complete when the women had been the victims of sexual harassment and abuse. These women "spontaneously mention childhood and adolescent sexual trauma as an important factor affecting their learning and relationships to male authority."⁽⁵⁸⁾ The occurrence of abuse was not limited to any particular epistemological grouping of women in the study but its prevalence induced the authors midway into the study to survey the women systematically on their history of physical and sexual abuse. The results of the survey were deeply disturbing: the authors found sexual abuse to be "a shockingly common experience for women."⁽⁵⁸⁾

The subjectivist position, the psychologists noted, often became abandoned, in time, "in favor of reasoned reflection."⁽⁸⁸⁾ This new position is held by the procedural knower. Procedural knowers differ from the subjectivists in that the former eagerly learn techniques or procedures and use them for understanding. They engage in "conscious, deliberate, and systematic analysis."⁽⁹³⁾ The authors allude to Simone Weil's idea of "attentiveness" in describing this transition where the knower becomes empty in order to receive the truth of the object or work being studied.

The researchers differentiate between kinds of procedural knowledge borrowing from Gilligan's terms, "separate" and "connected" knowing. It is the relationship between knowers and the objects of knowing that distinguishes these two types of knowers: the separate knower is essentially autonomous while the connected knower is in relationship to others: "Separate knowers try to subtract the personality . . . connected knowers see the person as adding

to the perception.”⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Another way to distinguish between the kinds of knowing is suggested by the psychologists’ differentiation between knowledge and understanding. Knowledge suggests distance from the object and mastery over it while understanding “involves intimacy and equality between self and object.”⁽¹⁸³⁾

Complex connected knowing seems to require a kind of self-analysis that, the authors suggest, is largely “relegated to counseling and, for the most part, nonexistent in the traditional liberal arts curriculum.”⁽¹²³⁾ If current educational practices discourage self-analysis as part of the knowing process, women will continue to see such reflection as self-indulgent. Indeed, the procedural knowers studied echoed the sentiments of the received knowers in believing that selfishness is concomitant with their epistemological progress. The researchers point out that a sense of identity as knowers is, for these women, weak, which accounts for their regarding their pursuits as selfish.

The final position in this model of intellectual maturation is that of the constructive knower. One arrives at this point once the realization is made that “even the most ordinary human being is engaged in the construction of knowledge.”⁽¹³³⁾ The most obvious difference in these women is their high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity: “They abandon completely the either/or thinking so common to the previous positions described.”⁽¹³⁷⁾ The constructive knowers see theories not as truth but as models for approximating experience. They “move beyond systems, putting systems to their own service. They make connections that help tie together packets of knowledge.”⁽¹⁴⁰⁾

In constructive knowing there is an intimate relationship between the knower and the known.

For women at this position, attentive caring is important in understanding not only people but also the written word, ideas, even impersonal objects. Constructivists establish a communion with what they are trying to understand. They use the language of intimacy to describe the relationship between the knower and the known.⁽¹⁴³⁾

The effect of this intense involvement is that the knower becomes “enticed by complexity”⁽¹³⁹⁾ and learning becomes, ultimately, a “passion.”⁽¹⁴⁰⁾

The latter part of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* explores how the family and school nurture intellectual and moral development in women. In the dynamics of the family, certain patterns of discourse were found to be especially beneficial. The authors’ conclusions will prove provocative for many: the special position of

women in our society and their manner of dialogue may encourage more highly developed epistemological positions. While fathers served as models of separate knowing, according to the authors, it was in the relationships with mothers that these daughters found the most developed models of and opportunities for connected knowing. “Connected knowing arises out of the experience of relationship; it requires intimacy and equality between self and object, not distance and impersonality; its goal is understanding, not proof.”⁽¹⁸³⁾ The researchers emphasize the importance of the problem-posing strategy of the conversations of mothers with their daughters and it is this question-posing that is at the “heart” of connected knowing.

The kind of teaching methods the authors recommend reflect those approaches that the women themselves articulated as most instructive and inspiring. Neither the “empty vessel” approach nor the adversarial method was felt to promote cognitive development. Quite the contrary, it was found counterproductive to women’s intellectual growth. Instead, the psychologists subscribe to Freire’s “problem-posing” method of teaching in which the object of knowledge is “not the private property of the teacher,” rather, it is a “medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students.”⁽²¹⁵⁾ It is worth noting that, unlike their silent sisters, the connected/constructive knowers mentioned the deflation of authority as a “powerful learning experience.” As the authors remind us:

Women have been taught by generations of men that males have greater powers of rationality than females have. When a male professor presents only the impeccable products of his thinking, it is especially difficult for a female student to believe that she can produce such a thought. (p.217)

Contrary to the psychological literature suggesting that what prompts cognitive growth is doubt, not belief, the authors argue that the doubting model may be especially inappropriate for women.

Because so many women are already consumed with self-doubt, doubts imposed from outside seem at best redundant and at worst destructive, confirming the women’s own sense of themselves as inadequate knowers. (p.228)

The authors write of the need for a commitment as teachers to “think out loud with our students.” The educational dilemma that women find themselves in requires exposure to both thinking as process and to women role models.

Women students need opportunities to watch women professors solve (and fail to solve) problems and male professors fail to solve (and succeed in solving) problems. They need models of thinking as a human, imperfect, and attainable activity.⁽²¹⁷⁾

Women's Ways of Knowing challenges us to rethink our teaching, our very patterns of discourse whenever knowing is central to our project. For the "real talk"⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ necessary for epistemological growth occurs in "an optimum setting of reciprocity and cooperation; domination is absent."⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ A genuine effort is made among participants "to arrive at some new understanding," to allow "half-baked or emergent ideas"⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ to grow. We are left with the prickly situation of designing programs to meet women's needs while simultaneously avoiding the second class status that such special programs often engender. In light of the conclusions of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, the ramifications for both women and men as knowers, a more thoroughgoing revision of our pedagogy seems in order. The work of these psychologists asks us to reconsider our aims of education, to question the philosophy behind our methods in view of current research on women's intellectual and moral development. Ultimately, *Women's Ways of Knowing* requires us to ask ourselves what kind of knowers we desire in our world, for constructing knowledge, for creating truth.

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