Perspectives on Women's Development: Instructional Implications in Higher Education

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Abstract

Theories of development typically explain developmental progress as a linear process with individuals moving through stages of development and becoming more independent and autonomous with each stage. While there are several theories of development, all of them suggest that there are gender differences in the way individuals develop. Perspectives on women's development have become more prevalent with the growing awareness related to gender equity issues in education and the workplace. These theories of development suggest that women have a need to feel connected and that they tend to define themselves in terms of their relationships with others. With women over the age of 25 increasingly represented as students in institutions of higher education, the importance of examining these perspectives and understanding the instructional implications associated with them is becoming all the more important. This paper contains reviews of contemporary and emerging theories of human development as they relate to women. In addition, the author analyzed responses of two women, one a traditional student, and the other non-traditional with regard to their college experiences. There are two general instructional recommendations. The first is that educators working with adult learners should always focus on individual growth. The second is they should incorporate educational practices that support student development.

Keywords: Women, Development, Theories, Instruction, Higher Education

Introduction

Theories of development have typically suggested that development progresses in a linear manner with individuals moving through stages of development becoming more independent and autonomous with each stage (Daloz, 1999; Miller, 1994). Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, and Freud have all suggested theories to explain human development, but all of their theories suggest that there is something not quite the same about women's development (Daloz, 1999; Geary, 2010; Gilligan, 1982). Some researchers and theorists have asserted that women appear to become stuck at lower levels of development than men (Daloz, 1999; Gilligan, 1994; Noddings, 1986). Additionally, psychologists and psychiatrists throughout the twentieth century have documented instances in which girls who had seemed intelligent and lively become much less so as they reach adolescence (Gilligan, 1994, 1996; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Moreover, girls are more likely than boys to have psychological problems in adolescence (Calvete, Camara, Estevez, & Villardon, 2011; Gilligan, 1994, 1996; Mezullis, Funasaki, Charbonneau, & Hyde, 2010). While it appears obvious that women have developmental differences, until recently these have been largely ignored (Daloz, 1999; Geary, 2010; Gilligan, 1994, 1996).

Around the end of the 20th Century, new perspectives regarding the development of women, based largely on interviews with women, became more prevalent (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1994, 1996). These perspectives grew out of recognition that traditional developmental theories incorporate biased assumptions regarding development and ignore the role of social context in human development (Arnot, 2006; Sneed, Cohen, Chen, Johnson, Gilligan, Crawford, & Kasen, 2006; Zaytoun, 2006). A recurrent

theme throughout these perspectives is the importance of connection in women's development (Belenky, et al., 1986; Daloz, 1999; Flannery, 2000; Gilligan, 1994, 1996; Miller, 1994; Noddings, 1986). This paper will review these perspectives on women's development, examine current research related to women's learning and development, and explore the implications of these perspectives for nontraditional women in higher education programs.

Perspectives from the 80's and 90's

Gilligan (1982) describes women's moral judgments as contextual and based on relationship and responsibility. According to Gilligan, while a man's psychological development is hierarchical, with the goal being to move to the top of the structure, women' psychological development is more like a web, with the goal being to stay toward the center of the web while avoiding the edge. Through interviews with women and girls, Gilligan has identified three perspectives in the moral and psychological development of women: self as separate, self in connection, and transformation.

In Gilligan's (1982) work, the perspective of self as separate describes women as feeling isolated. They feel in order to survive, they must take care of themselves because of a conflict between what they perceive as right for themselves and what they believe others perceive as right for them. Women in this perspective eventually begin to feel disconnected and selfish. These feelings of disconnectedness result in a need to behave in a way that is responsible toward others in order to become connected, thus leading to the second perspective of women, the self as connected.

Perceptions of Others

Women in the perspective of self as connected become focused on behaving in a way that they believe others perceive as good (Gilligan, 1982, 1994). Because they felt disconnected when they were acting on behalf of themselves, they now feel that they should be selfless and act in the interest of others so that they can become connected. From this perspective, the importance is maintaining relationships with others and moving away from the self. Responsibility to and for others is a focus. In her research with adolescent girls, Gilligan (1994, 1996) has identified this same tendency of young women to disconnect from themselves and their personal desires, instead seeking to meet the needs of others. Gilligan (1994, 1996) theorizes that young women believe this is the only way to remain connected to others and maintain relationships. For some women this disconnectedness to oneself leads to a sense of confusion and a feeling that responsibility and caring for others to maintain connections hinders the ability to recognize the self. Women who come to this realization move on to the last stage, that of transformation and resolution of conflict (Gilligan, 1982).

In this final perspective, women have come to the realization that the self and the other are interdependent, and that relationships are reciprocal (Gilligan, 1982). Women in this perspective look at each situation and make decisions based on the context of the situation. They learn that it is possible to be true to oneself while considering the needs of others. Thus, in this perspective, women have shifted the focus from society's perceptions of goodness to their own perceptions of truth (Gilligan, 1982).

Connectedness

Very similar to Gilligan's perspective of women's moral and

psychological development is that of Jean Baker Miller. Miller (1994) describes women's experience as being organized around a sense of connectedness with others, as does Gilligan. Miller suggests that when women feel connected and are involved in mutually rewarding relationships, everyone benefits because it is a reciprocal interaction. This type of relationship increases self-worth as well as increasing the personal development of everyone involved. When a woman is not in a mutually rewarding relationship, however, she may begin to feel disconnected from the other and will try to do whatever is necessary to remain in a relationship, even if this means she must deny parts of her own feelings to connect with the feelings of others. Once again, this bears great similarity to the findings of Carol Gilligan. Just as Gilligan (1982, 1994, 1996) has suggested, Miller (1994) proposes that relationships in which a woman denies her own feelings may cause her to disconnect from herself, keeping her own feelings out of relationships, as she feels that her personal feelings are selfish. Instead, the woman focuses on what she believes must be done to meet the needs and desires of others in order to remain connected, thus becoming more and more disconnected from herself. Miller (1994) suggests that this type of relationship inhibits psychological growth, and probably causes psychological harm over time.

Caring

Another major perspective on women's ways of viewing the world is that of Nel Noddings (1986). Noddings has described a feminine view to moral and ethical development that she calls caring. Similar to the perspectives described by both Gilligan and Miller, Noddings' approach describes the importance of connectedness to women's interactions. Noddings (1986) describes women's perspectives on problem

solving as situational, as opposed to the problem-solving methods typically used by men. Men tend to use logic and reasoning, and solve problems by applying principles that are developed in advance of the situation. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to consider the context of each situation and attempt to consider the impact of the situation on the people involved (Noddings, 1986).

The feminine approach as described by Noddings (1986) is based in caring relationships that are reciprocal in nature. Similar to Miller (1994) and Gilligan (1982, 1994, 1996), Noddings' proposes that because women want to remain in relationships, they strive toward an ideal of goodness or of being moral, in order to sustain relationships. Noddings also explains, much like Miller (1994), that for individuals to experience moral and ethical development, relationships must be mutual with all persons involved giving to the relationship (1986).

One final perspective on the development of women to be considered is that of Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule (1986). In an effort to understand why women in educational settings so often spoke of feeling doubtful about their abilities to learn and develop intellectually, Belenky, et al (1986) interviewed 135 women who were either currently enrolled in or had recently graduated from institutions of higher learning, or were involved with human service agencies. From these interviews, five perspectives on women's development emerged: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing (Belenky, et al, 1986).

The first perspective, that of silence, was rare in the Belenky et al (1986) study, and comprised a minimal percentage of all the women interviewed. However, because

of the extreme lack of voice present in these women, the authors found it important to include their perspective. The silent women were the most disadvantaged economically, socially, and educationally of those interviewed, and none of them were in institutions of higher learning. Interviews with these women indicated that they had learned that words are dangerous, thus they had chosen to become silent. Furthermore, they all blindly obeyed those they perceived to be in authority without questioning, and were powerless and disconnected from others (Belenky, et al, 1986).

Whereas silent women were afraid of words, received knowers described listening as the most important element of learning, thus basing all of their knowledge in the power of words (Belenky, et al, 1986). Received knowers perceive knowledge as coming from other people, and feel that there is a truth can be gained from listening to those who have the knowledge. From the perspective of the received knower, even information about oneself is gained from others, thus individuals within this perspective try to live up to others' perceptions of them, much like the adolescents in Gilligan's study (1994,1996). Received knowers are very literal and dichotomous in their thinking and are easily influenced when they are introduced to differing ideas and opinions. Similar to Miller's (1994) and Gilligan's (1982) suggestions that women tend to disconnect from themselves to remain connected to others, received knowers as described by Belenky et al (1986) tend to give in to the wishes of others in an effort to avoid conflict. Thus, received knowers tend to become selfless and base their own self-worth on their ability to care for others.

Almost the reverse of received knowers, Belenky et al (1986) describe subjective knowers as seeing knowledge as something that is personal and private, and

that comes from experience. The move to subjective knowledge is an important move because these women have begun to realize that knowledge can come from within. Although this is an important step in a woman's development, the move toward subjective knowing often results in the rejection of logical and scientific thinking, as this type of reasoning is not contextual and is not based in experience. This sometimes results in the view from others that these women rely only on intuition rather than logic. Also because of their reliance on knowledge as personal, subjective knowers are often unwilling to adapt to new ideas presented from authorities whom they feel do not have the appropriate experience base (Belenky, et al, 1986).

Whereas subjective knowers feel that truth is immediately available and can be found within themselves, procedural knowers view knowledge as something that must be uncovered through a process of reason and investigation. Procedural knowers have learned to look at things from outside themselves, and to change the existing knowledge they have to form new ideas and insights. These women use a separate lens in an effort to understand. Within this perspective, Belenky et al. (1986) have identified two distinct approaches to the way procedural knowers view knowledge, those of separate and connected knowing. Women who are separate knowers tend to use reasoning and logic as a lens, whereas connected knowers try to understand by changing their perspective to that of another person. Procedural knowers are moving toward what Gilligan (1982) sees as transformation and conflict resolution.

Constructed Knower

The final perspective identified by Belenky, et al. (1986) is that of the

constructed knower. Constructed knowers have developed the ability to put all the pieces of themselves together. These women have learned to incorporate their own views with those of others to develop a new understanding. They also see that knowledge can be constructed and reconstructed, and tend to consider situations from various perspectives. Women who are constructed knowers are passionate about their beliefs and usually feel they must act on them in some way, usually in the form of a career (Belenky, et al, 1986).

Current Perspectives

The perspectives discussed here grew out of the developing awareness in the late twentieth century that traditional theories of psychological development tend to limit the understanding of women's experience (Arnot, 2006; Zaytoun, 2006). Since that time, few studies have focused exclusively on women's experiences. Current research and theory related to women's psychological development recognizes the importance of expanding traditional views of development, but emphasize the overall impact of social influence on human development including age, race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity as well as gender (Arnot, 2006; Nussbaum, 2000; Smith, 2003; Zaytoun, 2006).

Recent research suggests caring or connected reasoning is not linked specifically to gender, but is variable across gender and is based on each individual's social context (Ryan & David, 2003). However, most studies continue to suggest that gender plays an important role in development (Arnot, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2009; Calvete, et. al, 2011; Carinci & Wong, 2009; Mezulis, et. al, 2010; Taft, et. al, 2007). In particular, socialization of women as caregivers appears to be correlated with

the caring and connected reasoning most often associated with women. (Basow, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2009; Piran & Ross, 2006; Sneed, et. al, 2006).

The tendency to interact in ways that emphasize connection with others appears to impact women in regard to career decisions and educational experiences (Arnot, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2009; Carinci & Wong, 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). The majority of women continue to choose traditional female dominated occupations which tend to pay less and offer fewer opportunities for advancement (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Furthermore, girls who are socialized with traditional gender roles often do not recognize the importance of educational opportunities to career preparation (Basow, 2006).

Women continue to struggle with balancing higher education, career, and family responsibilities (Basow, 2006). Connection to family and friends mediates the difficulties associated with balancing multiple roles, however, as women experience greater success in higher education settings if they have strong social support and secure family attachments (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Adolescent girls tend to take a more active role in classes where cooperative learning is emphasized, but are not as successful in classes placing more emphasis on lecture and question/answer formats, indicating the importance of connection within the learning environment (Meece & Scantlebury, 2006).

Little research examines the role of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences related to development among women. Available research suggests that socioeconomic status plays a part in educational experiences with girls from higher socioeconomic circumstances reporting more positive educational experiences than girls from lower

socioeconomic circumstances (Arnot, 2006). Similarly, women with financial and social resources are more successful in dealing with negative situations than women with fewer resources (Taft, Resick, Panuzio, Vogt, & Mechannic, 2007).

To further examine women's perspectives related to education, interviews were conducted with two women currently enrolled in a university teacher education program. One woman was a traditional college student living on campus, while the other was non-traditional student living off campus with her husband and child. The women were asked to describe their current perceptions of their educational experience.

Both women described their favorite professors as those who were "laid back" in their approach. The traditional student explained that to her, this meant the atmosphere was "more relaxed so you didn't feel pushed all the time." She also explained that she felt more motivated because of this. The non-traditional student described traditional lecture classes as feeling competitive and uncomfortable, especially when the professor asked questions. Both women reported feeling uncomfortable when called to answer a question in class. The traditional student stated, "I don't like it when professors call on me in class, because I don't like speaking in class. I'd rather write and do activities." For the non-traditional student, professors who were responsive to questions and took time to explain things were the most helpful.

In terms of assignments and activities, the traditional student described active learning assignments as most enjoyable "because even though it's more work, I learn more." She also reported enjoying assignments that simulated real life situations because she felt they provided more learning opportunities. The non-traditional student reported enjoying group activities, but she also explained that she

preferred online classes because they allowed her to work at her own pace.

The women were also asked what they felt to be the most important thing they were able to take from their educational experience. The non-traditional student felt career readiness was the most important aspect of her education. For the traditional student, however, the awareness that she could make a positive change in the world was the most important aspect of her education. She explained "hearing people speak about things like equal rights or the situation in third world countries have shown me that it's important to be a part of the world and that you can make positive change by being a part of the community."

In considering these women's experiences, relatedness appears to play a role in their reactions to the educational environment. Both women described collaborative learning experiences as most beneficial and feeling uncomfortable when asked to speak in class. Although the non-traditional student felt preparing for a career was an important component of her higher education experience, the traditional student appears to be reaching transformation and resolution of conflict (Gilligan, 1982) or constructed knowing (Belenkey, et. al, 1986) as she reported developing new views of the world based on her interactions in the educational environment.

Discussion

Society tends to value the development of independence and autonomy and as such may consider women to be less developed due to their tendency to remain more connected to family as they transition to adulthood (Sneed, et. al., 2006). The importance of relatedness in women's development has been explained by some as the historical role of women as caregivers (Geary, 2010; Gordon, 1996, Noddings,

1986), while others suggest that women are socialized to meet cultural expectations of goodness and selflessness (Carinci & Wong, 2009; Gilligan, 1982, 1994, 1996; Miller, 1994; Smith, 2003). Physiological aspects have also been suggested as contributing to the difference in the women's perceptions (Geary, 2010; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Physiological aspects include evidence from brain research suggesting that women tend to have a larger corpus callosum, possibly contributing to women's tendency to look at the whole picture while looking for interconnections and to place things within context rather than compartmentalizing the way men tend to do (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Hormonal differences between men and women have also been suggested as a reason for the difference in women's developmental trajectories (Flannery, 2000; Gilligan, 1996).

While an ideal goal would be for all women to transform their perspective to being able to meet the needs of themselves while considering the needs and wishes of others, many women may not achieve this level of personal awareness (Belenky, et al, 1986; Miller, 1994; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Hayes & Flannery (2000) have acknowledged the evidence of women's connectedness in learning and development, but urge caution in applying the theories in an indiscriminate way, as all women do not fall into the categories described. Indeed some men subscribe to the views described as pertaining to women, while many women reason using world views similar to those described as pertaining to men (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, Noddings, 1986; Smith, 2003).

It has been suggested that social context is more important than gender in terms of psychological development (Zaytoun, 2006). Robert Kegan (1982) introduced this idea with the constructive-developmental model of psychological development. Kegan's (1982) work also focuses on the transition between levels rather than the achievement of levels. Kegan places importance on the evolving person, and on helping each individual become the best person they can be, much like Gilligan's (1982) concept of transformation.

Paulo Freire and the concept of critical education is another theoretical framework that suggests social context as important to psychological development (Shor, 1993). In his discussion of education as liberation, Shor (1993) describes Freire's three stages of consciousness growth as disempowerment, semi-transitive thought, and critical transitivity. Like Kegan's work, Freire's theory describes human psychological development in terms similar to those of Belenky et. al (1986) and Gilligan (1982) with the individual at the disempowerment level accepting blind authority, but moving eventually to the level of critical transitivity in which the individual is able to see the larger picture and to think about and act upon the situation (Shor, 1993). This final stage is similar to Gilligan's (1982) transformed individual and Belenky et al's (1986) constructed knower, as these individuals integrate multiple perspectives and often act on their beliefs.

Implications

Keeping in mind women are diverse in their ways of knowing, and models of development exist supporting the idea that men and women are similar in their developmental trajectories, there are some things adult educators should nonetheless keep in mind when working with non-traditional adult women in higher education. A guiding principle in working with non-traditional learners should always be to focus on the process of personal growth while incorporating educational practices that support their development.

One consideration in working with adult women, particularly those returning to school after starting a family, is that they may already feel guilty for attending school as they may feel that education is a selfish goal that uses family resources unnecessarily (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Taylor, 1995; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Women may thus experience conflict, which necessitates the provision of support for their attempts at self-development (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Giancola et. al. 2009; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). Some ways to support women include building in peer support systems and cooperative learning opportunities to ensure that women have the support they need but for which they are afraid to ask (Massin, 1992; Taylor, 1995; Vaughn, Battle, Taylor, & Dearman, 2009). Assigning women to work in pairs and small groups helps ensure they connect with others and everyone has the opportunity to participate equally. Group assignments should be made early in the term and groups should be developed with some consideration of the differing abilities of group members in order to facilitate optimal group interaction and full participation of all members (Rotenberg, 2005).

It is also important to help women develop self-direction, as they may be accustomed to following the wishes and desires of others (Friedrich, Rafaelle Mendez, & Mihalas, 2010; Massin, 1992). To promote self-direction, adult educators can incorporate self-assessments and written or taped journals that encourage women to consider multiple perspectives and methods of inquiry (Friedman, 2004; Massin, 1992; Taylor, 1995). The use of journals as well as encouraging work in small groups and pairs helps women to use self-reflection and begin to include their own voice with that of others (Friedman, 2004). In this way, women can begin to move from received toward subjective knowing (Rotenburg, 2005; Taylor, 1995).

In order to encourage women to move outside of narrowly defined roles to which they may subscribe, adult educators can incorporate role-plays and simulations (Paul & Elder, 2007; Taylor, 1995). In addition to encouraging women to try out new roles, such activities also help women develop knowledge about situations through experience, a preferred way of learning for women (Belenky, et al, 1986). Other ways to incorporate experiential learning are providing case studies and asking students to discuss the cases in relation to their own everyday experiences. Encouraging students to use their own frame of reference to think about problems helps them realize that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to effect change in their environment (Rotenburg, 2005; Sheared, 1994).

Incorporating dialogue is another important element of adult education for women. Dialogue encourages relatedness while allowing students to voice their own viewpoints and allowing them to hear the viewpoints of others. This increases the understanding of multiple worldviews as well as encouraging students to feel confident in voicing their own views (Paul & Elder, 2007; Sheared, 1994). Dialogue also deemphasizes the teacher as the holder of knowledge and allows students and teachers to construct understanding together (Anglin, Pirson, & Langer, 2008; Belenky, et al, 1986; Rotenburg, 2005).

Classrooms that encourage connected learning welcome and encourage diverse opinions. In encouraging student's contributions, it is important not to use the students' comments to make the teacher's point, but rather to respect each student's viewpoint (Belenky, et al, 1986). Furthermore, student developed classroom dialogue is important and this dialogue should incorporate student interests and

values without challenging their beliefs (Rotenberg, 2005). Women often have a great deal of self-doubt, and challenging their assumptions may discourage their participation and cause them to remain silent (Belenky, et al, 1986; Noddings, 1986). To accommodate all learners it is important to build community in the classroom so that everyone feels safe and supported when participating in discussions (Rotenberg, 2005).

Finally, while it is important to have guidelines for expected behavior, it is best in the education of adult women not to impose penalties for not abiding by the guidelines. It is important the specific needs and challenges of nontraditional adult women are understood and acknowledged in order to support success (Giancola, et. al., 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). The imposition of penalties undermines the development of relationships that are important to the development of women, and also

undermines intellectual development as the student is not given the benefit of explaining why the guidelines have not been met (Noddings, 1986).

As mentioned earlier, the most important issue in adult development is the process of transformation. Paulo Freier describes education as something the student does rather than obtains, and knowing as an active process of transformation that takes place between the teacher and the students (Shor, 1993). Growth is an on-going process and should be viewed as such (Geary, 2010; Kegan, 1982). Rather than attempting to put the woman as learner in a process of disequilibrium so that she will learn, the adult educator should work toward helping women maintain balance while supporting her through transformations that encourage personal and psychological growth (Anglin, et. al., 2008; Daloz, 1999; Giancola, et. al., 2009; Kegan, 1982).

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