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Gender And Culture In Psychology: Theories And Practices

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3 Laying the foundation

Before proceeding further, we need to put down a foundation for the topics we will take up subsequently. We provide brief discussions of several key ideas. These include culture, humans as meaning-makers, and knowledge as socially and historically situated. What do we mean by "culture" and what is its part in human psychology and social relations? How are meaning-making and language part of human experience, social relations, and cultural life? How is language related to culture, power, and meaning-making?

Culture and human psychology

Culture is an inextricable part of mental life. Culture must be seen as an inseparable part of people's psychological functioning, not something that can be added onto an individual. Seeing culture as *in* psychology has several consequences for psychological practice and research. Throughout this book, we describe many such consequences. In this section, we describe concepts and terms that are central to the ways of thinking about culture in psychology presented in this book. All of these ways share the conviction that meaning is central to human psychology. Moreover, meaning is unavoidably social; there could be no other kind of meaning (Mishler, 1979). No matter how private or unique a person's experiences may feel, meanings are not wholly created in an individual's mind, nor determined by biological drives. As soon as one invokes meaning, one has to begin to think about culture (Mattingly, 2008; Mattingly *et al.*, 2008). Meanings are based on a common or shared framework and a shared language. Such a shared framework is necessary if meanings are to be intelligible to others. Any psychological theorizing about meaning necessarily must take culture as one of its starting points.

Connections between meaning systems in society and individual psychology have been of interest throughout the history of psychology, although that interest has ebbed and flowed. Psychologists have thought about these connections in different ways. Some have simply carried out

studies comparing people in one country to those in another, presuming that everyone who lived in a particular locale shared the same meaning system. Other psychologists have imported anthropological concepts and methods, which are geared to the study of culture, into their research. Others have redefined the relation between individual and society such that their research questions explicitly take culture into account (Kirschner and Martin, 2010; Rogoff, 2003). It is the latter two types of psychological theory and research that we take up in this book.

Defining culture

There are few terms in the social sciences that have been given so many, and such diverse, meanings as "culture." As we view it, culture is one of the conditions necessary for there to be such things as "persons" or "humans" or "humanity." Yet this condition is something that humans themselves produce. The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has expressed this recursivity in the following quotation: "Believing ... that man[1] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs" (1973, p. 4). Because Geertz's thinking about culture has inspired many others, we look more closely at his statement.

The phrase "man is an animal" shows an appreciation of the importance of biology to human existence; it acknowledges that humans have much in common with other animals. The definition of culture as "webs of significance" calls forth an image of a complex and multidimensional network of local and global meanings that intersect and influence one another in a person's daily life. Humans, that is, humanity as well as individuals, are constantly suspended in these webs. This is what defines a person as human. There is no way of being outside culture and still being human. Humans are defined as *humans* by the webs of significance: A human animal without such a support system would not be human.

The image of individuals suspended in a culture as if in a web could be taken to imply that culture is outside individuals. However, as Geertz points out, it is humans themselves who have spun these webs of significance; thus, the webs are not outside at all. There is a fundamental recursivity of "culture" and "humans." Each is needed for the other to exist. Culture cannot exist without human beings and human beings cannot exist without culture. Culture at its very heart is something intrinsically human, and humans are intrinsically cultural beings.

[1] Today's readers will find it objectionable to use the word *man* to denote all of humanity. However, in 1973, when Geertz wrote this definition, this was still common usage.

Culture, then, can be seen as a web or universe of meanings that orders and gives shape to people's experiences and reality as humans. Culture makes experiences knowable in some ways but not in other ways. But culture is a set of meanings that humans themselves have created and continually re-create. Humans both perpetuate traditions and meanings and remake and change them. In order to fashion a personal identity and relate to one another, humans use the toolbox of possible meanings that culture provides (Haavind, 2002). Thus, culturally based interpretations of a certain action contribute greatly to the personal meaning of the action (Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973).

People as meaning-makers

Psychologists studying individuals in culture have a primary interest in meaning-making, particularly as it is part of everyday activity and as it is constituted by culture and cultural processes (Rogoff, 2003). People's meaning-making – both in communicating with others and in making their experiences intelligible to themselves – always draws upon sets of meanings that already exist. Therefore, to study meaning-making, psychologists must locate the individuals whom they study in culture. To speak of mental life – that is, meaning – we need to begin with culture, not with the notion of an individual standing in isolation from the social surround (Bruner, 1990; Mattingly *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, there is no such individual.

Ordinariness, deviations, and narrative

If culture is central to individual psychological functioning, how does culture shape mind? This is not a simple question and there have been many attempts to answer it. Let us follow the cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner through his recent discussion of the question. Bruner (2008) begins with an assumption that seems fairly easy to accept: To be a member of a particular culture means that one shares with the other members of that culture a number of ideas about what is ordinary and unexceptional. These ideas are supported by social institutions such as the family, the educational system, and religion, as well as by language and other shared communication tools. Such supports are of course "outside" each individual.

The sense of shared ordinariness among members of a social group is an experience that people find highly rewarding. It supports the uniquely human capacity for mutual understanding, which is a major part of what most people feel defines them as humans. Moreover, because the sense

of shared ordinariness is so satisfying, breaches are discomfiting; they must be repaired. Daily life, of course, is not completely predictable. Social groups therefore need some means of handling departures from shared ordinariness; that is, instances when shared modes of thinking are not adequate to account for events and actions. Such "cracks" in the ordinary need to be made understandable, either by finding ways to accommodate them within existing modes of thinking or by finding ways to explain why one is not able to or willing to accommodate them.

One of the most common means for representing deviations is narrative. People tell stories about experiences that have created fissures in shared ordinariness. In these stories, cultural resources necessarily serve as both the framework and content. Narratives repair the fissures by using cultural conventions that make deviations understandable. Put another way, when members of a social group are confronted with an unintelligible or threatening event, they jointly devise a meaning that makes the event understandable. In Bruner's view of culture and psychology, culture is present in individual minds "through the conventionalization of experience into shared ordinariness, a conventionalization that makes place as well for rendering deviations from shared ordinariness into a comprehensible and manageable form" (Bruner, 2008, p. 35).

Cultural psychology

Psychologists who espouse ideas such as the ones we have just presented share a view that humans are active agents in their own lives. People make plans, develop intentions, and embrace values that they live out in the courses of action they choose. *Cultural* psychologists such as these are interested in people's own *reasons* for their actions, rather than developing *causal explanations* for certain behaviors. These psychologists see people's identities as constructed through narratives and narrating. Cultural psychologists also view humans as meaning-makers able to move flexibly among existing cultural conventions and resources. They also emphasize that people are always members of more than one social group. People move among different sets of cultural meanings when making meaning and narrating.

Cultural psychology is not a homogeneous field. Different theorists emphasize different aspects of the processes we have just described. We introduce the ideas of a number of cultural psychologists in several of the chapters that follow. For further reading about cultural psychology, we recommend the following texts: *The cultural nature of human development* by Barbara Rogoff (2003); *The sociocultural turn in psychology*,

edited by Suzanne Kirschner and Jack Martin (2010); *Thinking through cultures: expeditions in cultural psychology* by Richard Shweder (1991); *Acts of meaning* by Jerome Bruner (1990); and *Cultural psychology: a once and future discipline* by Michael Cole (1996).

Who holds the power over meanings?

Does "power" belong in psychology? Yes. For psychologists interested in gender and culture, and perhaps for feminists in particular, addressing power is necessary. No matter what their approach, researchers need to take into account how those whom they study are situated in larger social systems that are suffused with power. If psychology is to formulate usable theories and effective therapeutic practices, power must be taken into account (E. Cole, 2009; Fox *et al.*, 2009; Goodwin and Fiske, 2001). Power issues – specifically, psychological aspects of power relations – are often discussed in the chapters that follow. In this section, we lay the groundwork for those discussions.

When people use the word *power* in everyday conversation, they usually refer to a force belonging to, or localized in, a certain person, group, or institution or in the state. In this usage, those who own power can direct their power against others who do not own power or who own less power. They can either force others to do something against their will or prevent them from doing something that they want to do. When one thinks about power in this way, an important task is to identify who owns the power. Another question is whether or not that ownership is legitimate. If not, it can be contested. For example, the state usually restricts the power to punish wrongdoers to the criminal justice system. Ordinary citizens may retaliate against another person for committing a crime, but they are not wielding legitimate power when they do so. Such "power-over" may be at stake in daily life, as when one person commits a violent act against another person, or one spouse restricts the other spouse to the confines of the household.

Often issues of power are not as easily deciphered as in the cases noted above. In daily life, it is not always clear who is the legitimate owner of power in a particular situation. Similarly, it is often not clear whether any power has been exercised, even though some people may be behaving as if it had been. Think, for instance, of how people may voluntarily engage in practices that appear self-injurious or self-defeating. If people are overtly forced to behave this way, it seems easy to say that they were subjected to power. But, if people seem to behave this way *voluntarily*, are they subjected to power? If we limit ourselves to power-over, or coercive power, it may not seem so. However, there are other kinds of

power besides coercive power. Here, we examine some of the ways that scholars have conceptualized different kinds of power.

Dimensions of power

Many social scientists interested in power have adopted the tripartite definition offered by Steven Lukes (1974). Lukes, a political theorist, identified three dimensions of power.

The first dimension of power concerns the ability to make decisions that affect others even if those others object. Such power is often lodged in formal institutions such as the police, the military, psychiatric hospitals, or child welfare agencies. Parents of young children have such power over many aspects of their children's daily lives.

The second dimension of power is the ability to "set the agenda"; that is, to determine what can be talked about in public arenas and private life and what ways of talking about a topic are permissible. Power of this kind operates through both formal institutions and informal social processes. One of the consequences of agenda-setting power is that some topics or issues are never brought up for consideration. Power to set the agenda operates via influence, inducement, persuasion, and manipulation, as well as via direct coercion and force. State censorship is an example of the latter.

The third dimension of power, ideological power, is the power to shape people's ways of seeing the world, their meanings and interpretations, preferences and wishes. This power dimension is typically less readily discernible than the first two. It is typical of ideologies that they remain invisible; that is, people are unaware of them as ideologies. Because of the invisibility of ideology, ideologies are often experienced as "the way things are" and thus do not have to be explicitly invoked. Ideological power can lead people to embrace stances that are detrimental to their well-being or position in society. An example is the ideological power that leads many women to support laws and customs that discriminate against women as a group.

Power and knowledge

Michel Foucault, a French historian of science and philosopher, put forward another influential theory of power at around the same time as Lukes was writing. Foucault, who originally studied psychology, was by his own account particularly interested in how societies through the course of history have induced people to regard themselves as certain kinds of human beings (Foucault, 1983). Inevitably, power issues and

the relations among power, knowledge, and identity (or subjectivity, as Foucault preferred to call it) became important parts of his study (Foucault, 1965/1988, 1975/1991, 1979, 1986). Many psychologists who are interested in identity and power, along with the vicissitudes of how people develop knowledge about themselves, have been inspired by his writings.

The word "subject," as Foucault used it, has a double meaning. First, it means being a subject in the sense of "tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge." Second, it means being subjected to someone else's control (Foucault, 1983, p. 212). For Foucault, the inextricable connection between being a subject and being subjected to external control is the central issue to be explored and understood. How do state power and social power work to form self-knowledge? For Foucault, studying the operations of power required new scholarly tools. Foucault therefore developed a number of analytical concepts. He argued, for instance, that, in contemporary societies, certain kinds of knowledge (but not other kinds) about oneself are made available to individuals and made to seem necessary. This knowledge, according to Foucault, is intrinsic to the ability of modern states to govern their subjects without recourse to direct physical coercion. In this view, power exercised by the state in modern societies is not so much about coercing or prohibiting certain behaviors (though it sometimes is) but about enabling and guiding certain desires and forms of conduct.

Free individuals within governed collectivities

By inviting and guiding individuals to want certain outcomes, modern states exert "totalization power" without seeming to do so (Foucault, 1983, p. 221). As Foucault pointed out, no one explicitly forbids individuals to go against the grain, but everyday life is shaped in such a way that going with the grain appears to be the best option or even the only one. Even more, individuals experience that option as their chosen option; that is, as a choice that expresses their own personality and personal preferences. Even when nearly everybody in a group makes the identical choice, it still feels like a matter of personal will and preference. Parents who have observed their fifteen-year-olds being rebellious and expressing their own personalities by wearing clothes that are identical to the clothes of every other fifteen-year-old in the community may appreciate these arguments. This simultaneous individuality and conformity (or totalization) is what Foucault meant by "totalizing power." He saw it as the political genius of modern societies, because power operates on individuals but remains invisible to them, leading people to embrace their subjection as freedom.

Normalization processes and disciplinary power

Foucault's concept of normalization is of special interest to psychologists. Normalization refers to the processes by which a particular way of life (or a way of being a person) comes to feel natural: as *the* way, with all other ways seeming deviant. This way of being becomes a source of pride, self-worth, and pleasure; it is experienced as self-fulfilling. Normalization takes place through what Foucault called disciplinary power. This term points specifically to the power of "the ordinary" (or the taken-for-granted) to discipline individuals (Foucault, 1975/1991; Gavey, 2005). Such disciplinary power operates through social institutions such as education, medicine, work, law, marriage, and religion, as well as through the social institutions of the mental health professions (Rose, 1989, 1996).

In modern societies, disciplinary power has become less open and explicit. Increasingly, it has come to involve self-surveillance and voluntary conformity. Today disciplinary power often takes the guise of guidelines for how people ought to live, guidelines that promise fulfillment, authentic living, happiness, and mental health. When we consider this kind of power, it is not surprising that people willingly seek to comply with such standards. This points to an important aspect of disciplinary power. It is not only constraining or restrictive; it is also productive. That is, it produces desires: meanings, practices, and identities that people want to embrace.

Power/knowledge and self-regulation

Normalization and disciplinary power work through knowledge. For instance, in a particular society, only certain kinds of knowledge about what it means to be a human being are made available. This knowledge seems sufficient, right, true, and morally correct. Its exact content varies over time and between cultures. When people take up such right knowledge, it comes to seem natural to them to want to align themselves with its prescriptions. The ensuing self-regulation and self-surveillance are, according to Foucault, distinctive features of modern life (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault's work has had a profound influence on scholarship in the humanities and social sciences for several years. Foucault's thinking, which is multifaceted and much debated, has been interpreted in many ways. Among psychologists who have made use of Foucauldian thought are discursive psychologists such as Margaret Wetherell, post-structural psychologists such as Nicola Gavey, and narrative therapists such as Michael White and Stephen Madigan. Drawing on various facets of Foucault's work, they have studied justifications for "soft"

racism (Wetherell and Potter, 1992), the cultural scaffolding of rape (Gavey, 2005), and practices of social control that produce personal distress and dysfunction (White, 2007). We explore the research programs of some of these writers in later chapters.

Knowledge as social artifact

In 1966, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. They argued that what people regard as real depends largely on social consensus rather than on empirical validity. In their view, knowledge is a social product. Berger and Luckmann's work was part of a long line of philosophical inquiry into both the nature of reality and the processes by which people know reality. They wrote at a time when these issues generated intense debate among scholars. As sociologists (rather than philosophers or natural scientists), Berger and Luckmann were not concerned with the ultimate nature of reality, but rather with the social processes by which knowledge about what is real is developed, warranted as true, and maintained over time.

The social construction of reality presaged subsequent developments in the sociology of knowledge, feminist theory, ethnomethodology, social constructionism, post-structural thought, and discursive psychology. Most generally, these diverse lines of thought share two broad goals: first, to show that taken-for-granted concepts in everyday life and scientific thinking are contingent on the events and circumstances of their time and place; and, second, to examine in close detail the social and cultural processes by which knowledge is formed and views of the world are produced and naturalized.

What does it mean to say that knowledge is a social artifact? It means that it is not possible to achieve objective knowledge about the world, in the sense of reading off facts directly from the world. People's observations of the world do not simply mirror what is "out there." They are always re-presentations in which language plays a central role. Multiple re-presentations are possible because people have broad repertoires of linguistic expressions to draw on. People's linguistic and conceptual categories determine what they know about the world. These concepts and categories are not inherent in the nature of things; they are products of exchanges between people. Furthermore, people's knowledge of the world is not disinterested; it is laden with cultural, moral, political, and emotional meanings. Knowledge is the outcome of negotiation on both interpersonal and cultural levels. There are often disagreements about what is to be accepted as knowledge and about which categories

and constructs are valid (Hacking, 1995). Moreover, negotiations about such matters are often carried out in circumstances of inequality.

Constructionism in psychology

The term *social constructionism* was introduced into academic psychology in the mid-1980s (Gergen, 1985). Psychologists have continued to pursue constructionist ideas and their applications to social research, to methodological critique in psychology, and to psychotherapy. A number of feminists in psychology, as well as psychologists interested in sexualities, have taken up the idea that what we take to be reality is a product of social negotiation (Bohan, 1993; Bohan and Russell, 1999; Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1988; Marecek *et al.*, 2004; Unger, 1989). Very often, feminist psychologists have been interested in using the analytic lens of social construction both for social critique and for critical scrutiny of psychological knowledge and practice. Within conventional psychology, theories have often been built on the notion of a solitary, bounded individual who stands apart from the social and cultural surround. Constructionist theories of gender move beyond that notion and instead embed the individual fully in ongoing social life.

Before we describe constructionist perspectives in feminist psychology, we take a moment to sketch a bit of background. For many psychologists, concepts such as roles and socialization have seemed adequate to account for gendered patterns of behavior. Others have found these concepts to be insufficient. For example, they found that the construct of "role" (as in "sex role" or "gender role") was too specific and too limited to capture the pervasiveness of gender imperatives and the multiple ways of enacting them. Moreover, the notion of a sex role originated in theories that advocated complementary male–female roles as a means to achieve harmonious marriages. "Role," therefore, did not easily lend itself to theorizing inequality, power, and subordination. Speaking in terms of roles served to depoliticize gender and conceal male–female hierarchy. Neither "role" nor the related concept "norm" could be used analytically to account for women's and men's social condition, critics argued. Roles and norms needed to be explained by the aid of other concepts (Holter, 1992).

Some feminist researchers also objected to the idea that gendered behavior is a matter of socialization. The idea that gendered behaviors are a matter of training seemed to place too much emphasis on early learning. In fact, few behaviors learned in childhood carry directly into adulthood. Moreover, these researchers criticized socialization theorists

for setting their sights on small slices of social life (families or playgroups, for example) without taking the larger societal and cultural context into account.

Both role theory and socialization theory were criticized for often portraying people as robots who had no recourse but to conform to social imperatives. This picture did not square with observations of everyday life in which improvisation, irony, and subversion occur alongside conformity. Moreover, role theory and socialization theory could not account for the life experiences of many – including many gender scholars – who willfully flouted at least some gender conventions and openly rebelled against normative expectations. Many scholars who sought to theorize psychological gender therefore abandoned these ways of thinking and embraced constructionist ideas instead. Of particular importance, these ideas offered a way to bring societal and cultural patterns into theorizing about individual psychology. We discuss these lines of thinking in Chapter 7.

Making language an object of study

Language shapes thinking; that is, language does not simply reflect inner mental activity. Language enables and limits what these inner activities can be. Language is not just "about" things in the world, but it also sets the frame for how these things can be understood (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001). This means that language is far from neutral. Language practices are always situated within societal and cultural fields; to a great extent, these determine the possible meanings of what is said. Local meanings are always bound up with larger social processes.

There is a field of psychology, discursive psychology, that focuses on language as a social and cultural activity. Some discursive psychologists study the dynamics of conversations and other spoken discourse. Others scrutinize texts of interviews or conversations in order to trace the impact of cultural presuppositions. In Chapter 7, we describe the principal goals and methods of discursive psychology. In subsequent chapters, we discuss several research programs that have drawn on the ideas and methods of discursive psychology.

The historical and cultural specificity of knowledge

If knowledge is a product of ongoing social negotiation, then it is specific to its historical and cultural setting. What is accepted as true here and today may not be accepted as true in another place and time. This is especially true for knowledge about the social world. In other words, the

durability and the truth status of a certain piece of knowledge (including a psychological theory or concept) are determined not solely by its empirical validity but also by a number of social processes. These processes need to be scrutinized in both historical and psychological terms (Smith, 2007). An example of such scrutiny is feminists' scrutiny of the male-centered worldview that prevailed through much of the history of psychology. That worldview, along with a tacit acceptance of the subordination of women as natural, led to an array of biased scientific claims about women's nature (Chesler, 1972; Horney, 1967; Weisstein, 1971; Woolley, 1910). Feminists argued that this knowledge was more a reaffirmation of stereotypes than a depiction of the experiences of women.

Social artifacts are not ephemeral or easily changed. Those who argue that knowledge and meanings are social products do not argue that knowledge and meanings are malleable or easy to change. Far from it. Indeed, once concepts congeal as truths and acquire the weight of social consensus, they often are impregnable. Once in place, knowledge and meanings create conditions for social action and interaction. One example is how shibboleths about femininity and masculinity have influenced interpretations of biological research data. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000a) has pointed out how scientific observations and ideas about bodily processes are filtered through cultural notions about gender. Meanings of masculinity and femininity almost inevitably influence what it is possible for both laypeople and experts to see and say about "biology" and the bodily processes concerned with sexuality.