

## 1 Gender and culture in psychology: a prologue

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Gender, the equality of the sexes, and societal inequalities more generally have been intensely debated and studied by social scientists in the last several decades. In the wake of the debates, new fields of study and new ways of thinking about old issues have emerged. This is as true of psychology as of other social sciences. When psychologists take contemporary scholarship on gender, ethnic groups, sexuality, and other social categorizations into account, foundational assumptions and practices in psychology begin to shift.

To begin with, new and different psychological questions emerge and new topics are brought forward. To answer such new questions and address new topics, new research methods have been devised. This, in turn, has caused gender researchers to become attentive to epistemological questions. In this book, we discuss these three innovations associated with gender scholarship: (1) in content, that is, new knowledge about gender and culture; (2) in method, that is, alternate ways of doing research and practice; and (3) in epistemology, that is, new ways of thinking about psychological knowledge. We approach these innovations from several different angles.

We present theoretical tools for thinking about gender, culture, and psychology, as well as methodological tools for doing research about these issues. We present research projects that illustrate innovative method and theory. We also present overviews of issues that have been central to psychological theorizing about gender and culture. And we present debates among gender researchers about such issues. In our presentations we draw upon fields outside psychology, including anthropology, history, sociology, political science, feminist studies, and science studies. We also draw upon several fields within psychology, including critical psychology, feminist psychology, sociocultural psychology, discursive psychology, rhetorical psychology, post-structural psychology, and critical history of psychology. Psychologists in these fields have analyzed the influence of political processes, cultural patterns and forces, and national contexts, as well as social subordination and exclusion, on

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the knowledge that psychology has produced. Many have questioned the idea of universal, ahistorical, “generic” human beings, and many have also advanced epistemological and methodological critiques of psychology.

We are psychologists with long experience of teaching, doing research, and engaging in practical work in psychology, in gender studies, and at the intersection of psychology and gender studies. We work in two very different regions of the world: Eva in Sweden; Jeanne in the USA. We study regions that are even more different: Eva, the Nordic countries; Jeanne, Sri Lanka, an island off the south coast of India. We have seen increasing interest among students and psychologists in incorporating knowledge about gender and other social categorizations into the corpus of psychological knowledge and in bringing a critical cultural perspective to bear on psychological knowledge. Our efforts to integrate such knowledge into courses and study programs have led us to see the need for the book we are offering here: a book that explores the challenges that scholarship about gender and culture brings to psychology. Integrating such knowledge demands more than adding new bits of information to the existing body of psychological knowledge. It also goes beyond devising new techniques to measure gender or measure culture. It is much more. This is what our book is about.

**The roots of the new psychological scholarship  
on gender and culture**

Psychological scholarship about gender and culture constitutes a rich and varied field of knowledge that has flowered over the last forty years. It began with psychological researchers and psychotherapists who were active in the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. They established a field of knowledge, then called the psychology of women, which challenged many taken-for-granted ideas in psychology. They argued, for instance, that psychology was *androcentric*; that is, that the discipline and many of its practices had been shaped by the interests and experiences of men, primarily white, middle-class men in western, high-income parts of the world.

Outside psychology, the multidisciplinary field now often called gender studies emerged around 1970 in the midst of the women’s movement, with its broad political goal of improving conditions and opportunities for women. The earliest gender studies programs (then called women’s studies) developed as a part of this social movement and drew intellectual inspiration, energy, and political support from it. The programs often envisioned themselves as a heady combination of an academic department, a site of political activism and mobilization, and a space of solidarity

for women students, faculty members, and staff in the university and, sometimes, for feminists in the community at large. Researchers in these academic programs came from several different disciplines, among them psychology. They took seriously the project of forging connections between their scholarly pursuits and their political commitments. For many, this was a matter of ethical principle. Yet they were mindful that they walked a tightrope between academic strictures regarding the objectivity of research and their feminist commitments to bettering the lives of women and girls.

In psychology, researchers who studied women also had to contend with the discipline's disregard for "applied" research, which was viewed as less valuable than "pure" or "basic" research. In the eyes of the discipline, research about women (in contrast to research about men) was not seen as "general" research about humans, but as research about a special group, often with solely utilitarian value. Feminists in psychology took up research aimed at challenging discriminatory and oppressive cultural views and fostering societal changes that would expand options for women and girls. The topics mirrored the social issues being addressed by the feminist movement. Researchers in the 1970s, for example, studied the effects of mothers' paid work outside the home on their children; the consequences of unintended childbearing and abortion; the effects of discrimination, sexual harassment, or sexual violence on victims; and the well-being and adjustment of children raised by lesbian women. Feminist psychologists also focused attention on ways that psychological theories reproduced (sometimes deliberately, sometimes unwittingly) the culture's template of good femininity, which included motherhood, domesticity, and a conventional division of family labor.

As a consequence of connecting their research to their political commitments, some researchers turned their backs on the psychology laboratory, as well as the reliance on college students as research "subjects." Conventional research methods were not suited to the questions they wanted to answer. Moreover, in situating research in the "real world," studying "real" problems framed in everyday language, and taking into account the multiple social identities and investments of those they studied, researchers came to see that societal and cultural forces had to be reckoned with.

In this period, feminists inside and outside psychology began to challenge established psychological wisdom about men and women – both the claims made by clinical theories and the knowledge produced by psychological research. Feminists in psychology claimed that psychology's teachings about women were laced with invidious stereotypes and dubious assertions (Sherif, 1979; Sherman, 1978; Weisstein, 1971/1993).

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They pointed out that a good deal of the accepted scientific knowledge in psychology unwittingly incorporated cultural assumptions regarding male and female nature. As in the culture, so too in the discipline, these assumptions served to legitimate the subordination of women in the family and in society. Feminists in psychology challenged flawed theories and concepts and they criticized bias in personality tests, intelligence measures, and indices of psychopathology. They also showed that no research method could insulate the research process from the standpoint of the researchers.

Soon feminist scholars argued that the social location of researchers was of crucial importance in constituting the researchers' worldview and forming their view of which topics were worthy of study and which ways of studying them were legitimate (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1987). In other words, feminist critics did not accept the idea of neutral researchers who "study nature," but argued that all researchers, whether openly expressing a political commitment or not, inevitably have an *interested* position. They argued that one's experiences as a human being who inhabits certain categories and social positions indelibly stamp one's perspective and choices of topics, methods, and theories. They went on to argue that the discipline needed to rethink more or less all the knowledge it proffered about women. Very soon thereafter, their voices were joined (and their message intensified) by the voices of psychologists who were not white and psychologists who did not identify as heterosexual.

We have used the words *feminist* and *feminism* several times in the text, and we need to clarify what we mean by them. Put succinctly, someone who calls herself or himself a feminist holds that women and men are equally valuable. He or she also thinks that, in order for all women to be able to live safe and satisfying lives, societal changes are necessary.

**Gender and culture in psychology:  
three kinds of issues**

In this book, we keep our sights on the three concerns about gender, culture, and psychology that we pointed to earlier. First is the set of *content-oriented* concerns, which have their origin in the particular topics that gender scholars studied. Second are the *methodological* concerns: How can we best conceptualize and study particular psychological topics? This has been a major subject of discussion among gender scholars in psychology. If we take seriously the challenges that these scholars have brought to the discipline, a third set of concerns – *conceptual* and *epistemological* ones – emerges: How does psychology construe its objects of study? And how does it make its theories?

Psychologists who work on questions of gender, sexualities, ethnicity, and race have been particularly attuned to the implications of method and epistemology. Why is this so? One reason is that they have been in communication with scholars in interdisciplinary studies and therefore have participated in the “turn to language” that took place in large parts of the social sciences and humanities in recent decades. They have taken part in the many epistemological discussions and critiques that were part of this movement. Moreover, being at the intersection of several disciplines made these scholars especially aware of possibilities beyond the canonical research approaches associated with psychology. They were ready to try out other ways of doing research, of thinking about psychology, and of creating psychological knowledge.

### **Aims of the book**

New disciplinary developments inevitably are positioned, at least initially, in terms of their difference from the old discipline. The new psychologies of gender and culture are no exception; their proponents began by questioning much that was taken for granted in the discipline, from “method” to conceptions of the self, the psychological, and the social. Such disciplinary critique is indispensable to any scientific or professional endeavor (cf. Slife *et al.*, 2005; Wilkinson, 1988). In fact, critical interchange and debate have always been integral elements in building academic knowledge.

The history of psychology is one of pluralism and contestation – and change. Throughout its 130-year history, psychology has never been settled or unified, whether as an academic subject or as professional knowledge and practice (Koch, 1981; Richards, 2010). Surely nothing else is to be expected, considering the complex issues that its branches aim to cover, as well as regional variations between the countries where the discipline has developed. Debates and strife should not be avoided. Respectful debate helps scholars see where important fault lines run in their discipline’s ways of creating knowledge and construing its subject. Such debate can also help researchers see where the important disagreements are, and which disagreements are less important. In this book, therefore, we want to encourage readers to critically scrutinize their discipline – and consequently also what we have written.

The fields and topics that can be included under the rubric “gender and culture in psychology” are many and far-ranging. In this book the reader will not encounter all of them. That would require far more than a single book. Our aims in writing this book are, instead, to acquaint our readers with some central theoretical and epistemological frameworks

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and methods that scholars in these fields have developed. We illustrate their use by describing examples of research and clinical applications based on them. We hope that these examples inspire readers to explore many more questions and topics.

### **A road map for reading**

Chapter 2, “Categories and social categorization,” examines some of the key social categories that are relevant to the study of gender and culture: sex and gender, ethnicity, race, social class, and sexuality. We discuss different ways of understanding the nature and uses of these categories, their inescapable complexity, and the interrelationships among them.

Chapter 3, “Laying the foundation,” presents conceptual frameworks that are essential to developing psychological thinking and practices regarding the psychology of gender and culture. The chapter discusses definitions of culture, ideas about humans as meaning-makers, power differences in society and their implications for psychology, and ideas about knowledge and language.

Chapter 4, “Theories of gender in psychology: an overview,” first briefly reviews the most common ways that psychologists have theorized gender. We then introduce theoretical propositions of culturally anchored psychologies of gender: thinking in terms of “doing gender”; femininities and masculinities as parts of cultural gender orders; identity and gender in cultural perspectives; theory about gender, power, and other asymmetries; intersectionality and gender; and gender and language.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 set out the contours of a set of analytical approaches, conceptual tools, and research methods.

Chapter 5, “A turn to interpretation,” introduces interpretative research traditions in psychology. It presents the points of departure for such approaches: what “interpretation” means in research, people’s everyday meaning-making as built into local social contexts, and social contexts as parts of larger cultural systems. The chapter ends with a discussion of how all creators of knowledge – including researchers – exist in such cultural contexts, and how, consequently, all knowledge-production is influenced by social and cultural processes and forces.

Chapter 6, “Doing interpretative psychological research,” describes some practices of interpretative research. We begin with a description of how interpretative researchers compose interviews and carry them out, and how they select research participants. We describe researchers’ strategies for listening to their participants and for analyzing the participants’ accounts. Finally, the chapter discusses the ethics of

interpretative research, researcher reflexivity as a central tool for interpretative researchers, and the generalizability or trustworthiness of interpretative research.

Chapter 7, “Discursive approaches to studying gender and culture,” presents discursive psychology as a theoretical and methodological framework for studying gender and culture. We begin with a short discussion of the contrasting meanings of the terms *discourse* and *discourses*. Then we review the development of discursive psychology and the major theoretical issues in using discursive methods to study gender. The second half of the chapter illustrates a number of discursive research tools.

The next four chapters – 8, 9, 10, and 11 – present examples of research that illustrate the ideas and approaches presented in the previous chapters of the book.

Chapter 8, “Gender and culture in children’s identity development,” presents research on children as they move from an identity as a child to an identity as a teenager in a multiethnic setting. The studies we describe highlight how this transition is shaped in accord with heterosexual templates, and how this shaping takes place in ongoing interactions in peer groups.

Chapter 9, “Identity and inequality in heterosexual couples,” presents research on the practical and psychological complications of the encounters between the widespread acceptance of gender equality in the Nordic countries and the negotiations of everyday family life between members of heterosexual couples.

Chapter 10, “Coercion, violence, and consent in heterosexual encounters,” presents research that explores the meanings and consequences of heterosexual coercion in the lives of women. The chapter focuses on the ways that cultural “givens” about heterosexuality set the terms for women and their partners to interpret heterosexual encounters, whether consensual or non-consensual.

Chapter 11, “Women’s eating problems and the cultural meanings of body size,” describes research on the gendered meanings of body size, eating practices, self-deprivation or dieting, and femininity for women in contemporary western, high-income societies. It explores how these meanings are related to eating problems that some girls and women experience.

Chapters 12 and 13 move into the domain of clinical psychology and psychological suffering. They turn attention to the language of the mental health professions and also explore power relations in those professions.

Chapter 12, “Psychological suffering in social and cultural context,” critically examines the current practice of speaking about psychological disorders as if they were akin to physical diseases. The chapter points to

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several ways in which the “disease” metaphor is misleading. Psychological suffering, dysfunction, and deviance necessarily take their meaning from the cultural surround; at the same time, they imbue sufferers’ actions and identities with meaning. The chapter also examines how, throughout history, psychiatric diagnoses have often served to reaffirm and justify the subordination of women, people of color, poor people, and colonial subjects.

Chapter 13, “Feminism and gender in psychotherapy,” describes ways that feminists in the mental health professions have addressed the power relations in the mental health system. The chapter focuses on feminists’ efforts to undo the power hierarchy in conventional therapist–client relationships, and feminist therapists resisting the systems of power in which they work. It also introduces narrative therapy, an approach that helps clients to observe and challenge the effects of ideological power in their lives.

Chapter 14, “Comparing women and men: a retrospective on sex-difference research,” reviews sex-difference research in psychology. It then presents and discusses the results of contemporary psychological research about differences between women and men and girls and boys. In the latter portion of the chapter, we raise critical issues about psychological sex-difference research and the explanatory principles it most often uses.

Chapter 15, “Psychology’s place in society, and society’s place in psychology,” reflects on the place of psychology and psychological experts in society today. As a prominent cultural institution, psychology both shapes and is shaped by society. This bi-directional relationship demands that psychologists engage in continual disciplinary reflexivity. We examine the contours of this critical self-scrutiny and introduce the growing critical psychology movement.

## 2 Categories and social categorization

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What kinds of “things” are “women,” “men,” and gender? How can we best conceptualize these entities in order to produce good psychological knowledge? One way is to think about the “things” that women and men are as intrinsically different from each other. Other ways of conceptualizing women and men do not point to differences. Instead they focus on social hierarchies between men and women; that is, how men and women often are positioned unequally in the social structures they inhabit. Yet other ways of conceptualizing men and women and gender, such as those ways put forward by queer theorists and transgender theorists, reject entirely the idea of two distinct and enduring sex categories.

Sorting the world into categories is necessary in order to produce knowledge about anything. Knowers need to be able to say, for instance, whether two objects are similar or different. To be able to do this, they need to think in terms of categories. A category is a set of objects that share certain characteristics. “Dog,” for example, is such a category. Knowers also need to be able to specify what differs between the categories that they have identified. For example, what features of the category “cat” distinguish it from the category “dog”?

The observation that people think in terms of categories may seem trivial. But the question of the origin and status of particular categories is far from trivial. For instance, where does the *category* “cat” come from, apart from actual cats existing at a certain moment? And what is the origin of a category like “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (ADHD), as apart from the set of behaviors it currently refers to? Furthermore, most readers would probably say that “cat” and “ADHD” are different kinds of categories, even if they cannot put their finger on exactly how “cat” and “ADHD” differ.

Are all categories kinds that exist independently of human observers or are some categories created by human observers for particular purposes? This question goes back in the history of philosophy at least as far as Plato and the Sophists, who debated the nature of categories. In the Platonic view, the world is divided into fundamental or natural

categories that exist as categories whether humans know about them or not. In this view, categories such as “dog,” “tree,” “sex,” and “race” are naturally existing and universal divisions of the world; they are said to denote natural kinds (Hacking, 1994). In this view as well, the task of science is to produce knowledge that gets progressively closer to reality by discovering these natural kinds and describing their true properties. Plato coined the phrase “carving Nature at its joints” to refer to this task (1972, pp. 265d–266a). These true properties are taken to be the inherent or essential meaning of the categories.

An alternative view, said to originate with another group of philosophers, the Sophists, is that the categories, assumptions, and metrics that people use to classify the world are not found in nature, but are human-made. This makes them *contingent*; that is, they are the product of humans’ efforts to make sense of the world. Categories such as “mental illness” or “ADHD,” for instance, are seen as created by humans and imbued with meaning by humans. More controversially, some have argued that the sex categories (man and woman) are contingent categories, not natural kinds. Humans with different sex organs existed in nature prior to the social distinctions drawn between them. Nonetheless, neither the social categorization of humans into two sexes nor the meanings given to these sex categories can be found in nature. The distinctions drawn between these categories and the meanings given to the categories both are matters of social negotiation. More generally, there is no reason to expect that any categorization scheme will be used everywhere or that any categorization scheme will stay the same forever. Nor is there reason to assume that when new categorizations replace older ones, the new categories are drawing closer to reality or nature (Hacking, 1994).

The contrast between these two opposing (and here simplified) ways of thinking about categories is pertinent to several of the topics discussed in this book. For instance, many gender scholars argue that the strict categorization of people into two sexes, and only two sexes, is not found in nature (Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2000a). Instead, they argue that the meanings given to the sex categories are historically and culturally contingent. That is, the meanings have changed substantially over time, and they are not identical across all cultures. Critical race scholars have made similar arguments in relation to race. In contrast, psychology researchers have often accepted without question the popular view of the categories “man” and “woman” as natural ones with universal and unchanging meanings. Perhaps partly for that reason, the study of the societal and cultural meanings of human sex categories has often been relegated to the margins of psychology (Shields, 2008).