

Representations

Social Constructions of Gender

Edited by **Rhoda K. Unger**

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***REPRESENTATIONS:
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OF GENDER***

edited by:
RHODA K. UNGER

**Sponsored by the Society for the
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This book is dedicated to Nancy Datan (1941-1987) who in her life and work taught me a great deal about the reconstruction of reality. She gave from her heart as well as her mind and has left a Nancy-shaped hole in feminist scholarship.

Table of Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction	1
PART I		
Women’s Consciousness: Public and Private Images	13
CHAPTER 1	Sex in Psychological Paradigms—from Behavior to Cognition <i>Rhoda Kesler Unger</i>	15
CHAPTER 2	The Divided Lives of Women in Literature <i>Katherine V. Pope</i>	21
CHAPTER 3	E. Nesbit’s Forty-First Year: Her Life, Times, and Symbolizations of Personality Growth <i>Ravenna Helson</i>	29
CHAPTER 4	Telling Our Mother’s Story: Changing Daughters’ Perceptions of Their Mothers in a Women’s Studies Course <i>Karen G. Howe</i>	45
CHAPTER 5	Case Studies of Agency and Communion in Women’s Lives <i>Abigail J. Stewart and Janet E. Malley</i>	61
CHAPTER 6	A Case of Feminist Transformation: A Constructivist-Developmental Perspective <i>Diedrick Snoek</i>	77
CHAPTER 7	Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Sex Role Stereotypes as Expectations for Behavior <i>Shelagh M. J. Towson, Mark P. Zanna, and Glenda MacDonald</i>	97

PART II

The Construction of Women (and Men)	109
CHAPTER 8 Personal Construct Theory and Stimulus Sex and Subject Sex Differences <i>Susan Z. Volentine and Stanley L. Brodsky</i>	112
CHAPTER 9 Conceptual and Methodological Sources of Controversies about Androgyny <i>Mary Anne Sedney</i>	126
CHAPTER 10 A Sense of Humor <i>Leigh Marlowe</i>	145
CHAPTER 11 Humor in Conversational Context: Beyond Biases in the Study of Gender and Humor <i>Mary Crawford</i>	155
CHAPTER 12 Dialogue with Guatemalan Indian Women: Critical Perspectives on Constructing Collaborative Research <i>M. Brinton Lykes</i>	167
CHAPTER 13 Coping with Rape: Critical Perspectives on Consciousness <i>Michelle Fine</i>	186

PART III

Innovative Strategies for Examining Social Constructs	201
CHAPTER 14 Explorations in Feminist Ideology: Surprising Consistencies and Unexamined Conflicts <i>Rhoda K. Unger</i>	203
CHAPTER 15 Taking the Traditional Route: Some Covert Costs of Traditional Decisions for the Married Career Woman <i>Audrey Sanders, Janice M. Steil and Janet Weinglass</i>	212
CHAPTER 16 Perceptions of Daily Life Scripts and Their Effects on College Women's Desires for Children <i>Irene Hanson Frieze, Scott Bailey, Patricia Mamula, and Mira Moss</i>	222

CHAPTER 17	Earliest Memories: Sex Differences and the Meaning of Experience <i>Adria E. Schwartz</i>	236
CHAPTER 18	She Has Her Reasons: Women's Explanations for Job Changes <i>Marianne LaFrance</i>	245

PART IV

	Dichotomizing Sex and Gender: The Use of Fiction	257
CHAPTER 19	Initiative Taking as a Determinant of Role-Reciprocal Organization <i>Bertram A. John and Lori E. Sussman</i>	259
CHAPTER 20	Androgyny and the Life Cycle: The Bacchae of Euripides <i>Nancy Datan</i>	273
CHAPTER 21	The Pier Glass and the Candle: Reality, Perception, and Gender in the Fiction of George Eliot <i>Joan E. Hartman</i>	282
CHAPTER 22	Imaging Feminist Visions: Comments on a Bibliography <i>Michelle Fine, Louise Kidder, and Joanne Boell</i>	299
CHAPTER 23	The Social Construction of Gender: The Turn to Fiction <i>Sondra Farganis</i>	309
	Biographies of Authors	322



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Foreword

It is a pleasure to bring *Representations: Social Constructions of Gender* to your attention. To begin to appreciate the complex and unusual character of this book—developed from an edited series of journal articles into a larger collection with a clear identity and emphasis all its own—one need only browse through the Table of Contents. “The divided lives of women in literature,” “Case studies of agency and communion in women’s lives,” “A sense of humor,” “Dialogue with Guatemalan Indian women,” “Coping with rape,” “Earliest memories: Sex differences and the meaning of experience,” “Women’s explanations for job changes,” “Androgyny and the life cycle: The Bacchae of Euripides”—these are but a few of the topics represented in this diverse and interesting collection.

What, then, binds these essays together? First and foremost, this is a book of stories about women, about the conflicts, choices, and opportunities that are present in the lives of women, both real and imagined. Beyond that, this volume is a defense of intellectual complexity, differentiation, subtlety, and nuance. As the book’s distinguished editor observes, all of the papers included are, in one way or another, compatible with the conceptual framework of “social constructionism:” a point of view that argues that people are not pawns of the social system into which they are born, but help to create and shape it. If, as Rhoda Unger points out, the prevailing wisdom in American psychology continues to call for a view of the self as stable and coherent, and continues to regard reason and science as able to “provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for conceptions of both the self and reality” (p. 4), then this book offers a dramatically different perspective. Unger believes that the world of the powerful, of society’s “haves,” is a place where rationality, reason, and science are each potential tools to be used in the service of justifying the *status quo*. She calls for a different paradigm, one that argues for the importance of the ongoing creation of new social realities.

But this book does more than provoke theoretical critique of the prevailing wisdom in American scientific psychology. Written by a distinguished group of scholars in women’s studies, many of the articles selected for inclusion present alternative methods as well as findings that may move the study of sex and gender beyond its present concerns to a new level of analysis.

At yet another level, this book may be seen as a response to the ever changing and emerging women's movement of the last several years, a movement that has developed a clear and strong vision, an identity, and—in doing so—has occasionally found it necessary to stake out a set of ideological “rights” and “wrongs.” Unger points out the danger of “minimizing the differences between particular groups of women by focusing only on the commonalities among them” (p. 10). The editor's response to this danger is to encourage openmindedness, the examination of neglected groups, and the tolerance of divergent points of view.

Thus, while you might conclude, on the basis of the book and chapter titles that this book is simply about women and women's lives, it is far more than that. It is a book about the development of social and political movements, the effect such movements have upon scholarship, the challenges that face scholarship with a political focus, and the continuing vigilance that is called for if such scholarship is to continue to develop and mature.

Finally, a word about the organization that has sponsored this book. The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is a 50-year-old organization of social scientists, committed to applying social science wisdom to the analysis and redress of social problems and issues. The work of SPSSI, as represented by the many books we have sponsored over the years, has consistently combined attention to the subtlety and complexity of social science knowledge with the determination to apply what we know to pressing social problems. Rhoda Unger's *Representations: Social Constructions of Gender* is very much in the spirit of this SPSSI tradition. I am therefore extremely pleased and proud that SPSSI has sponsored this book.

Jeffrey Z. Rubin
President, 1987-1988
Society for the Psychological
Study of Social Issues
April 1988

Introduction

RHODA K. UNGER

Several years ago I was asked by the editors of a new cross-disciplinary journal to edit a series of articles on sex and gender for them. Since the title of this journal: “Imagination, Cognition, and Personality: Consciousness in Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice” was both enigmatic and intriguing, I saw this series as an opportunity to extend the parametric base of feminist psychology. Therefore, I sought work that appeared to be somewhat distinct from usual theory and practice within psychology—work that was on the cutting edge of feminist psychology. Not surprisingly, given the broad scope of the journal, many of these papers turned out to have an interdisciplinary outlook as well.

Although the thirteen papers that were published as part of the original series included a number of innovative approaches to the study of sex and gender, the series failed to reach many people who might have been interested in it. The lack of visibility of these articles may have been due to the newness of the journal, the low percentage of scholars of sex and gender who are aware of it, or to the reluctance of most psychologists to deal with interdisciplinary work. Since my purpose was to broaden both the conceptual and methodological base of feminist psychology, it was obviously not in the interests of either myself or the authors to have these papers pass into oblivion.

Fortunately, I was able to persuade the publisher of the journal that it would be valuable to collect the series of articles into a more easily accessible book. By this time, however, I had located a number of other papers that fit into its framework and had also recognized that the materials were more intellectually integrated than I had originally believed. This book is, therefore, not a simple reprinting of already published materials. Nine original articles have been added to the collection and integrated with the previously published materials in a theoretical synthesis that emerged while the series was being developed. For this reason, I have left much of the original introduction to the series intact and added this more current prologue as well.

As I reread the original articles in the series and as new papers arrived, I realized that, in many forms, the various authors were concerned with the telling

of stories. The use of narrative is not a typical component of the dominant positivist empiricist paradigm within psychology which is concerned with the development of general rules for the prediction of human behavior [1]. It is, however, characteristic of social constructionism—a theoretical framework that is important for feminists in many disciplines outside of psychology, notably, anthropology, history, and literary criticism [2]. This theoretical framework is becoming increasingly important for the psychological study of gender as well. The chapters in this book exemplify the subject matter, techniques, and questions of this newer perspective.

According to Kenneth Gergen the assumptions of the social constructionist orientation include [3]:

1. The view that what we know of the world is determined by the categories (linguistic and conceptual) that we possess to define it. “Constructionism asks one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories receive their warrant through observation. Thus, it invites one to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge” [3, p. 267].
2. The idea that the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people.
3. The belief that the degree to which a particular form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on its empirical validity, but on the vagaries of social processes which must be understood in terms of historical events as well as through the analysis of psychological processes.
4. The view that forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life. For example, to treat the behavior of an individual or that of a group as involuntarily manifested as opposed to freely chosen has far-reaching consequences for the individual so designated.

Social constructionism as a form of postmodern philosophy challenges beliefs still prevalent in American psychology as well as American society. Flax suggests that these ideas [4], derived from the Enlightenment, include: belief in the existence of a stable, coherent self; belief that reason and science can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for conceptions of both the self and reality; belief that the knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will represent something real and unchanging; and belief that reason itself has transcendental and universal qualities. She further argues that by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power have been evaded and language can also be seen as unproblematic—as merely the medium through which representation of the world occurs.

Thus, a social constructionist theory of gender goes beyond the conception of gender as a cognitive variable. It is important to view gender as a major social category that functions in a complex variety of ways to influence behavior [5].

However, social constructionism means that we must continually question ideology and methodology that may deny gender its broader cultural and systemic meaning. Some of the issues that extend beyond cognitive mechanisms are: the many ways that different cultures negotiate issues of gender, the function of gender (as well as other race and class categories) as a social control mechanism, and the role of consciousness (in the sense of awareness of and reflection upon our own behavior) in mediating the effects of gender upon us all.

What is important here is that social constructionist does not permit us to define gender as a variable at all. Gender is constantly altered by social context: by culture, by cross-personal interactions, and by the consciousness of individuals themselves. It is an inconsistent and sometimes contradictory category [1].

Social constructionists see the individual as an active—albeit not always more rational—creator of his or her reality. I believe it is this perception that has led many of the contributors to this book (some of whom would probably not label themselves as social constructionists) to make use of one or another form of narrative material. Narrative material lends itself to the exposition of different versions of consciousness: that of its subject, its author, and, perhaps, that of the observer as well. It makes the fiction of one true reality harder to sustain.

This collection is not meant to be either inclusive or exclusive. It is too early in the development of the area to attempt to define a feminist methodology for psychology based upon social constructionism. I believe, however, that these chapters show the value a different theoretical perspective can have for the study of sex and gender. They show how gender has been problematized by feminist scholarship and introduce a new set of issues that have rarely been considered by more traditional treatments of sex and gender. In keeping with my belief in the value of multiple perspectives for psychology, the materials in this book can be used by the reader in several ways.

The chapters have been organized in a framework of several general themes important for the social construction of gender: the nature of women's consciousness in terms of public and private images; cultural constructions of women and men; innovative strategies for the reconstruction of sex and gender; and the personal and societal implications of the dichotimization of sex and gender. However, many of the chapters subsumed under one of these section headings could have been placed in others as well.

This material can also be read in terms of content area: androgyny; dual career issues; social change; humor; rape; attitudes about achievement; etc. Many chapters discuss concrete findings using a feminist framework. They demonstrate that feminist research has gone beyond theoretical critique. I believe, however, that the methodologies and ideological strategies employed are at least as important, than the particular topic addressed. I have chosen, therefore, to introduce each chapter briefly in terms of what I see as its place in the methodology and/or epistemology of the social constructionist paradigm of gender.

THE USES OF AN ALTERED EMPIRICISM

In one sense, these chapters exemplify the way theoretical changes can alter methodological practices and, hence, empirical conclusions [6]. Some of the research discussed here demonstrates that one can make use of traditional empirical methodology to question its underlying framework. For example, Volentine and Brodsky show that cognitions about women and men are constructed in the form of an interaction between the sex of the subject and the sex of the stimulus person. Using rather traditional research methodology, they found that there is no one universal conceptual reality. Identical information involving gender roles is evaluated differently depending upon the sex of the stimulus person and the sex of the observer. Unger uses a modification of a standard psychological measurement technique—a paper-and-pencil scale in which statements can be interpreted in several different ways—to evaluate individual differences in views about the relationship between the person and reality. She found that feminists have a less determinist conception about how the world works than do nonfeminists. This feminist construction of reality extends beyond attitudes involving the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes.

Slight alterations in methodological perspective can produce rather large effects in the area of gender. Thus, Sanders, Steil, and Weinglass demonstrate that the extent to which some religious women appear to be negative about traditional decisions for married career women differed depending upon whether objective or subjective measures were used. Subjective measures indicated more negativity than objective ones. Another subjective measure—the generation of social scripts—used by Frieze and her associates—showed that college women were able to imagine aspects of the housewife's daily life much more fully than other occupational roles available to today's women. The women were more informed about aspects of this role even though they were negative about it. The work of Frieze et al. raises the question of how much familiarity rather than affect influences women's future life choices.

LaFrance examined women's explanations for job changes using longitudinal methodology. There was little stability in reasons given for job changes when the same women's responses at different times in their lives were analyzed. The past appears to have been rewritten by a significant number of her respondents. A cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal survey of earliest memories by Schwartz also suggests that the past may be rewritten. She found that although women's subjective reality appears to be generally less positive than men's, women for whom mastery was not a current issue (those successfully enrolled in graduate school) did not differ from men in the number of mastery themes reported in their earliest memories, but did differ in this respect from undergraduate women still living at home. These studies illustrate the role of the current situation in structuring beliefs about past reality.

Stewart and Malley's findings also relate to the way situational constraints influence consciousness. They examined women in five different combinations of domestic and work roles in terms of how they described the way they gratified their basic needs. Their findings indicated that women can, generally, structure any life circumstance to permit opportunities for both love and work. The particular combination of roles chosen may be less important for life satisfaction than how the individual perceives her circumstances. However, they also warn that their conclusions are probably limited by the rather privileged group of women studied.

All of these studies attempt to involve the consciousness of the respondents by the use of several versions of research questions or through qualitative analysis of more extended responses than are usually elicited in laboratory research. In contrast, John and Sussman used a technique that seeks to intervene actively in the respondent's perception of reality. They used an ambiguous narrative between two sexually unspecified individuals in which clues to gender were available from an on-going dialogue. They found that subjects made assumptions about the heterosexual nature of the interaction even at the expense of role consistency and the integrity of the narrative. Their subjects inferred role reciprocity so that when one participant was inferred to be "male," the other automatically became "female." Subjects used gender stereotypes to form cognitive schemata by which to infer the sex of the participants and their sex assignments became more stable as they continued to respond to the narrative. These data demonstrate how social knowledge is constructed even at the expense of a loss of so-called objective information.

Towson, Zanna, and MacDonald's discussion of an impressive series of experimental studies on the self-fulfilling prophecy further elucidates mechanisms by which the gender-related expectancies of significant others are communicated to women (and others in low power positions). They show how behaviors consistent with sex-stereotypic expectations are rewarded and confirm beliefs in sex-related differences. Individuals incorporate such social beliefs in their self-presentation strategies, but may be unaware of the extent to which their behaviors are producing consequences that are harmful to themselves.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS

A number of chapters in this book question the nature of our society's assumptions about so-called masculine or agentic versus feminine or communal characteristics. Feminists have used the concept of androgyny as a way of transcending psychological theories that see masculinity and femininity as opposite and contradictory traits [7]. Bem, among others, has argued that gender is a social construction or schema that can be eliminated by extensive changes in the gender socialization practices of our society [8]. Androgyny is, however,

also a social construction and as the careful theoretical analysis by Sedney indicates, a number of different conceptualizations have evolved using the same label. Sedney provides a taxonomy for the term that takes into account its different operational meanings as well as the levels of personality theory into which androgyny may be fitted. Her ironic conclusion is that although androgyny was originally offered as a way of envisioning alternatives to traditional sex-typing, much of the research on the concept has been constrained by existing professional and social biases. "What was designed to be a 'new' model has generated primarily 'more of the same' methods using fairly traditional scales that lead to results that often confirm old biases (p. 112)."

Both Crawford and Marlowe question assumptions about women's and men's humor. Marlowe reviews the literature on sex-related differences in humor looking at the social use of humor as well as developmentally based differences between the sexes. Her analysis of feminist uses of humor may be particularly valuable in a social constructionist framework. She suggests that what is funny is defined not only by social roles but by the institutional structure in which roles are embedded. The "new" feminist humor may be seen both as a way to strike back against social control and as a vehicle by which women can reconceptualize themselves.

Crawford describes findings obtained from more open-ended methodologies than are customarily used in studying humor. She asked people of both sexes about their perceptions of their sense of humor rather than impose an experimenter-defined "humor stimulus" on them. Men and women saw their own humor as serving different purposes. Women use humor to facilitate social interaction, to invite self-disclosure, and to share perspectives reciprocally. For these reasons, women's humor must be analyzed within its conversational context. Crawford charges that men's preferred style of humor (the use of set-pieces) is more easily adapted for laboratory study. Consequently, the professional literature on humor is a body of knowledge that focuses on the appreciation of "canned" humor while ignoring creativity and the social use of humor.

THE USE OF NARRATIVE FOR PSYCHOLOGY

I suggested earlier that traditional empirical methodologies can be adapted to social constructionist theory, but it is also true that new methodologies have evolved that broaden our psychological perspective. It is no accident that almost half the chapters in this book involve some form of narrative analysis. A synthesis of psychological and literary perspectives may be particularly rewarding for understanding aspects of gender. For example, androgyny probably has different meanings for each individual as well as for each theorist. Datan analyzes *The Bacchae* of Euripides from the standpoint of modern life-span developmental theory to give us a different perspective on the meaning of androgyny for different individuals. She suggests that the traits supposedly

characteristic of the “other” sex may be more threatening to younger individuals than to those at a later life stage. She also notes that androgyny as a scholarly concept has been advanced and “forgotten” more than once because of its threat to prevailing perspectives.

Analyses of literary narratives are particularly valuable for exploring the consciousness of individuals. Psychology’s experimental paradigms have difficulty in distinguishing between the self and the roles that self plays. Pope’s analysis of literary themes makes the point that the roles constructed for women in our society frequently conflict with their own image of themselves. This conflict between social roles and self actualization is difficult to resolve and most resolutions are only partially successful. If the woman opts for portrayal of a traditionally female role, she is forced to ignore or deny her image of herself. If, on the other hand, she publicly acknowledges her true self, she is likely to be punished for failure in role-playing behavior. Self-actualizing women often lack external sources of validation as well and may be forced into fantasy. Pope’s literary analysis is remarkably similar to my more psychological analysis of the “double-bind” [1].

Hartman gives us another view of women’s private and public lives through her intensive analysis of the female protagonists in some of George Eliot’s novels. Hartman argues that the heroic characters in Eliot’s fiction—those who are able to enlarge their perceptual field to take in other selves—are, more often than not, women. She also argues, however, that although Eliot recognizes the pain attendant upon women’s confinement to the domestic sphere in nineteenth century England, she was not able to imagine an alternative reality for them. Eliot’s escape from women’s private world was costly for her. As a result of her gendered upbringing and internalization of society’s expectations, Eliot continued to feel herself a trespasser in the world of men throughout her life. Thus, she was able to grant her female characters perceptual clarity, but not the ability to alter their actual life circumstances except in limited ways.

Hartman’s analysis involves the contextual aspect of feminist scholarship—the need to understand fictional works in terms of the historical and personal situation of the author. Helson’s psychological analysis of a nineteenth century children’s fantasy writer, Edith Nesbit, looks at the evolution of an author’s fiction in terms of changes in life circumstances. Nesbit suffered a severe midlife crisis centered around losses in important familial relationships. Her fantasies changed at this time to themes of abandonment and their resolution and a search for the more rational parts of the self. She also created gatekeeper figures that embodied more female sexuality and androgynous symbolism than those of other (male) Edwardian fantasy writers.

The analysis of the imaginative work of women (a group once thought incapable of symbolic manipulation) may tell us much about the conflicts they experience. The conflicts between autonomy and dependency and between emotional and sexual expression and rationality are as salient today as they were

in the nineteenth century. Women are still particularly likely to be caught in double binds by the mutually exclusive definitions of roles they are supposed to occupy.

Given the strength with which gender is embedded in our society, it is difficult to understand how transformation ever takes place. Snoek attempts to understand such change through the narrative of “ordinary women” who made major changes in their lives as a result of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Through an extensive series of interviews, we see one such woman, “Nancy,” move from seeing herself as only a product of her roles to a view of herself as a more autonomous individual. Snoek argues that while Nancy’s particular life experiences made her susceptible to personal change at this time, she would have been unlikely to have been able to do so without the supporting ideology of the women’s movement and contact with a critical mass of women espousing this ideology. He suggests that feminism legitimized what had heretofore been seen as privately held complaints. In other words, feminism validated an alternative view of reality.

Howe uses women’s narratives in still another way to examine changes in their perceptions. As an exercise in her courses in women’s studies, she asked students to obtain biographies of their mothers. This project produced changes in daughters’ views of their mothers in terms of a greater sense of the mothers’ personhood, the greater expression of authenticity by both mother and daughter, and the recognition of the role of social context in the construction of women’s lives.

Personal change appears to be facilitated by the recognition that other perspectives are as valid as one’s own. Women writers have increasingly become interested in speculative fiction, a field long dominated by men. Fine, Kidder, and Boell survey futuristic images constructed by professional writers and social scientists. Speculative fiction offers an opportunity to explore a variety of alternative lifestyles in a non-threatening context since the ambience of such fiction is, by definition, *not* here or *not* now. Organized thematically, some of the gender arrangements discussed by this literary genre include: explanations for sex differences (or the absence of such differences), organization of labor, and criticism of current gender arrangements. However, Fine and her colleagues also found that what one can imagine about the future is constrained by what exists in the present. Nevertheless, the use of various kinds of speculation provides one valuable advantage over present day social science methodology. The arrangement of reality is limited more by the imagination of the respondents than by the imagination of the investigator as he or she structures research questions.

FEMALES ARE NOT A GLOBAL CATEGORY EITHER!

Recently, feminist scholars [9] have warned us that we risk minimizing the differences between particular groups of women by focusing only on the commonalities among them. This risk is reduced by spotlighting the experience of

particular women. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the reality that feminist social scientists are constructing is largely limited to the perceptions and circumstances of white, middle-class, Western women. There is no reason to believe that other groups of women deal with gender-related realities in the same way.

Fine's article represents both a departure from conventional empirical methodology and a focus on a woman from one underrepresented group—those who are poor and black. Fine describes an encounter in a rape-counseling situation in order to explore the phenomenology of a rape victim in terms of her methods of coping and control. She argues that the established hierarchy of control sanctioned by mental health experts vitiates the strategies of those with low personal power. Encouragement of active individualistic strategies when change is unlikely places the victim at risk and reinforces existing power inequities. This chapter considers race and class as well as sexual issues. It focuses on the differential consciousness of victims and nonvictims, illustrating how different styles of coping can be evaluated only in terms of the context of the individual's life. One critical issue that is raised for clinical practitioners is whether self-disclosure is helpful in producing the structural changes necessary for the empowerment of members of some social groups.

Lykes also employs consciousness in her discussion of another underrepresented group—Guatemalan Indian women—to raise a critical ethical issue for psychologists. She points out that even such a positive safeguard as “informed consent” (the process by which prospective subjects of a study are told about its procedures and potential outcomes) has embedded within it assumptions about the power of the researcher to control the topics to be studied and the methods used. In her attempts to do collaborative research about the experiences of refugee Indian women, her written informed consent form proved to be a barrier cancelling out prior mutual trust. These women perceived that a written contract of any form reduced their ability to negotiate power differentials which could not be obviated simply by the good will of the investigator.

Fine and Lykes' chapters are particularly useful because these researchers tell us a great deal about themselves as well as about their respondents. These and other papers in this book illustrate one of the best qualities of feminist scholarship—its self-reflexive nature. Feminists make no pretense of being impartial, objective observers. Our definition of context includes that of the researcher as well as the respondent.

THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Farganis' contribution to this volume serves several purposes. Her analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* provides us with yet another example of women's consciousness—this time in a dystopia in which women's reproductive role has become their primary reason for existence. Farganis explores the limits to which the self can be constructed. But, she also provides us with some valuable caveats about the uses to which social construction may be put.

An important issue for her is who has the power to define social reality. In Atwood's story, reality has been reconstructed by religious fundamentalists. Women's sexuality and ability to reproduce have been placed solely at the service of the state. Farganis warns us that a social constructionist position that asserts that anything can be constructed can lead to an invasion of both the private and the personal by so-called outside experts. She argues that social constructionism demystifies biology and can be used to legitimize the appropriation of women's bodies for the purposes of others more powerful than themselves.

It is a large conceptual leap from social constructionism to the "Baby M" case. However, Farganis' discussion suggests that we must continue to examine the assumptions and implications of social constructionism for gender. There are many unresolved issues that are particularly relevant for those of us in psychology. For example, chapters in this book examine a variety of subjects for their narratives such as: fictional characters, authors of fiction, maternal biographies, and extensive interviews with "real" people. Everyone's life is equally important to themselves, but are there any criteria by which we decide whose life is best suited for intense public scrutiny? In other words, if we are dealing with multiple perspectives of reality, whose reality is most useful? And, if we apply some form of utilitarian criteria—useful to whom and why?

Social constructionism can also lead to an extreme relativistic position. For example, if individual lives can only be understood in terms of their particular historical and personal context, what are the implications of this theoretical framework for psychology as a scholarly discipline? Is it possible to establish any general rules for the prediction of behavior? Such an extreme idiographic approach could lead to the disappearance of all forms of empirical research currently used in psychology. With what, then, can we replace such useful psychological concepts as reliability and validity?

To state that meaning is situationally based does not imply that no consensual agreement about meaning is possible. It is important, however, to emphasize that consensual agreement can exist only for the here and now and is always limited by who asks what questions. Inasmuch as women are part of all society, feminist thinking cannot be free from culture-bound modes of understanding.

The understanding of meaning as contextual helps to explain why social problems that have apparently been solved rarely stay solved. "When we intervene to ameliorate some social problem, we cannot hope to change just what we want and nothing else" [10, p. 16]. The solutions we find may benefit some groups, but prove harmful to others. Problems reappear when new spokespersons emerge from a different disadvantaged group to articulate the issue anew. Of course, such spokespersons must also have the power to establish their definitions as socially problematic.

The self-reflexive aspect of social constructionism is extremely valuable for illustrating the proximal nature of solutions to both social and scientific

problems. Feminists are probably no more objective than any other scholars, but we appear to be more aware that we are speaking only with our own voice. We need to be suspicious of any canon that claims a reality that will “rescue” us from contradiction and differences. I hope that this book shows that there are no easy answers. “Feminist theory, like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure. . . . If we do our work well, ‘reality’ will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now. In this sense, perhaps Freud was right when he declared that women are the enemies of civilization” [4, p. 643].

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PART I

Women's Consciousness: Public and Private Images

The chapters in this section illustrate some of the complex issues raised when one considers various aspects of consciousness. Although consciousness is a very popular term in psychology these days, there is little agreement about what is implied when the word is used. In these papers, consciousness is examined in terms of women's awareness (which may be multilayered or even contradictory), by their subjective response (as either interpreted by themselves or another), and by the role of self-knowledge (or lack thereof) in altering personal reality.

An important contribution of these chapters is their focus on situational context as a determinant of consciousness. Thus, Pope focuses upon the lives of women in literature. She discusses such issues as the distinction between oneself and one's role, the hidden versus the public actor, and the extent to which one acts upon oneself to produce the image that others expect. Helson explores, in depth, the relationship between the life and work of one early female fantasy writer, Edith Nesbit. She looks at changes in her life circumstances and the way it was reflected (probably largely unconsciously) in her subsequent creative efforts. She notes that developmental change appears to be more evident in Nesbit's creative fantasies than in her overt behavior. Howe, in contrast, analyzes students assigned to write their mothers' biography rather than professional writers. Her findings suggest that the reconstruction of the past life of someone important to oneself can have important effects in changing present relationships.

Both Snoek and Stewart and Malley consider aspects of self-consciousness and personal change. Stewart and Malley suggest that objective personal circumstances (in terms of various work and family role combinations) may be less important for women's life satisfaction than how they perceive these circumstances. Their work exemplifies the active role of the individual in structuring personal reality, but may be limited by the privileged group of women that they studied. Snoek also suggests that individuals may restructure their

reality, but warns that such restructuring may first require public validation that personal problems are not just the responsibility of the individual enduring them.

In the most traditionally social psychological paper in this section, Towson and her associates analyze the problems raised for individual women by expectations about members of her group. Individuals with whom the woman interacts may communicate their expectations and produce gender-consistent behavior by way of what has become known as the "self-fulfilling prophecy." This process represents an excellent example of what social constructionists mean by negotiated understanding. One unresolved issue here is the extent to which conscious awareness of such social mechanisms alters the individual's response to them.

Some of the questions raised by these chapters include: Do women possess a public and a private awareness? How do we measure these different forms of consciousness? If women's awareness is more bifocated than men's, how can we account for this difference? What impact does multiple awareness have upon women's lives? Are different perceptions about personal reality available to the individual at any time or are they evoked by particular circumstances? What is the relationship between insight and the quality of one's life? Is insight necessary for personal change to occur? What limits exist for the individual in the reconstruction of her reality? Do universal biological realities lead to the similar construction of different psychological norms for females and males across time and place? How generalizable are women's realities across culture, race, or social class?

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CHAPTER 1

Sex in Psychological Paradigms—from Behavior to Cognition

RHODA KESLER UNGER

Once upon a time I was a confirmed behaviorist. In principle, this meant that I believed effects derived from orderly determinist causes, that the subjective aspects of behavior were irrelevant, and that the best studies required maximal distance between experimenter and subject. In practice, this meant that my first major research, my doctoral dissertation, involved making lesions in the caudate nucleus of rats and examining their effects upon temporal and spatial alternation by means of operant conditioning procedures. If I thought of sex professionally at all, I saw it as a variable which could neither be manipulated nor controlled and therefore of very little scientific interest. Even the rats were male.

In some ways my assumptions at that time about the lack of scientific value in the study of sex reflected the state of psychology as a whole. Buss has described psychology as having undergone a paradigm shift in recent years: from a view that reality constructs the person (assuming an invariant stable set of causal variables whose past actions determined present behavior) to a view that the person constructs reality (acknowledging the important function of the persons' view of themselves and their circumstances in formulating their behavior) [1]. In theory and in research, the study of sex and gender exemplifies this shift in perspective.

For those who are unfamiliar with recent work in this area a brief discussion may be useful. First, researchers in the area became dissatisfied with the data base on which assumptions about sex differences were based [2-4]. Still later, they questioned whether sex differences were anything more than a description of behavior rather than an explanation for it [5]. The recognition that sex was more than a mere biological dichotomy—female or male—brought into the social sciences a number of new terms about whose definition there is not yet

complete agreement. These terms illustrate some of the complexities that have been brought to what was previously thought of as a discrete organismic variable.

It has been found necessary to discriminate between sex as a subject variable—what males and females do or say about themselves or others (the traditional area of sex differences)—and sex as a stimulus variable—how people respond to a stimulus person who is either female or male [6]. It is also necessary to distinguish between sex and gender—referring to those characteristics assigned to a particular sex by sociocultural assumptions and practices [5]. For convenience, these can be termed masculinity and femininity if it is recognized that different cultures recognize different trait constellations as appropriate to one or the other sex [7]. The extent to which the relationship between sex and gender is biologically programmed is unknown due to the fact that virtually no aspect of the human environment is sex-blind [8]. A few studies indicate, however, that under some circumstances self-ascribed gender traits or sexual preferences can be a better predictor of behavior than biological sex [9, 10].

Analysis of the effects of sex and gender is made more complex by findings that suggest that perception of one's own gender identity can serve as a cognitive cue for various instrumental and expressive behaviors [11]. An extensive and controversial literature has developed on such issues as the extent to which instrumentality and expressiveness encompass the domain traditionally assigned to masculinity and femininity [12, 13]; whether a personality constellation combining traditional masculine and feminine traits (known as androgyny) predicts behavior associated with sex-typing in our society [14, 15]; and the degree of relationship between personality traits and socially prescribed sex-typed roles [16, 17].

The term sex-role is also being reexamined by the new psychology of sex and gender. As Carolyn Sherif has noted the concept of sex-role is a curious one because it is one of the few concepts (if not the only one) that uncritically couples a biological term with a sociological one: "Thus, the concept suffers double jeopardy from myths about sex smuggled in uncritically and from denotative confusions in the sociological concept of roles." [17, p. 392] Theorists in the area have questioned the extent to which sex roles are internalized [18], the extent to which so-called sex stereotypes are actually stereotypes based on the differential distribution of females and males in various social roles [19], and the degree to which fears that are widely believed related to gender such as fear of success among women may actually be fear of role deviant behavior [20]. As in all cultures, sex roles serve both a normative and a prescriptive function—they define behaviors that are considered both typical and desirable [21].

Interest in sex roles has forced psychologists to take a look at the world outside of the laboratory. "Traditional" sex differences are more likely to appear in the real world than in the laboratory and are more likely to appear in public than when people believe themselves to be unobserved [22]. A major

factor that is probably responsible for these differences is the role of differential status in the regulation of interpersonal relationships. A number of theorists and researchers have dealt with sex as an ascribed status characteristic. There have been repeated suggestions that relationships between the sexes parallel relationships between people of the same sex who possess different degrees of social power and status, in which the more powerful person assumes control and the less powerful defers [23-25].

Still other research indicates that sex is a significant label in the categorization of others as well as the self. Sex is the category chosen first by most people when asked for a description of an individual with whom they have had a brief interaction [26]. People will also choose sex in a problem solving task involving the selection of a particular individual from a group that is differentiated in a number of stimulus characteristics even when sex is a statistically less valuable cue than some other qualities of the members of the group. Individuals are more likely to be given a deviant label or even their normal behaviors may be described as deviant if they are viewed as distinctive within a group [27, 28]. People selectively describe their own properties as distinctive depending on their statistical probability within particular reference groups. Thus, when asked "Who are you?," both children and adults respond with sex-related categories when these characteristics are rare in members of their families or within their classrooms [29].

In sum, the work summarized above represents the other side of the paradigm characterized earlier as "the person constructs reality." In the new psychology of sex and gender, maleness and femaleness are viewed largely as social constructs that are confirmed by sex-characteristic styles of self-presentation and the differential distribution of females and males into different social roles and statuses and maintained by intrapsychic needs for self-consistency and the need to behave in a socially desirable manner. Most of the work to be presented in this volume derives from this paradigm.

At this point some readers may have noticed an omission of two areas from this discussion—the psychology of women and feminism. Indeed, much of the work in this series and in the field as a whole focuses on the behavior of women in general or upon the unique personal experiences of particular women. This is partly a response to the relative neglect of these areas within traditional disciplines, but also reflects the "state of the art" as it exists today. There is no *a priori* reason why the psychology of sex and gender needs to focus on women. In fact, the work of Joseph Pleck provides similar analyses with a focus upon men [21]. Since, however, particular life experiences of the investigators may predispose them to certain aspects of the lives of their subjects it is perhaps not surprising that most of the work in the field is conducted by women about women [30].

Some of the chapters in this book derive from a feminist perspective although this theoretical orientation was neither necessary nor sufficient for inclusion.

Since feminism is a controversial term—indicating for some a lack of objectivity in scholarship—it may be useful to offer a limited exploration here (Feminism probably has as many definitions as there are feminists, as might be claimed for psychology and psychologists). The feminist perspectives offered by some contributors to this volume include: willingness to accept women’s personal experiences as valuable data; unwillingness to make value judgments about the relative worth of particular gender-related traits with a preference for androgyny as a combination of the strengths of both sexes; desire to expand existing scholarly bodies of knowledge by considering and including information from and about women; and awareness that integration of such information will benefit both sexes and society as a whole. Feminist theorists of either sex appear to be more aware of the role of power and status inequities within social and disciplinary groupings and to be more sensitive to the role of hidden assumptions in values and ideology in formulating what we believe we know about the world [31]. In the final analysis, however, we are probably no more active in constructing reality than are others proceeding from different ideological points of departure.

Does a belief that gender is largely a product of social construction mean that I am no longer a behaviorist? Yes, but it certainly does not mean a complete abandonment of all long-term antecedents of sex-related behaviors. Some physiological and early experiential factors are probably important in behaviors that are more characteristic of one sex than of the other. One cannot, however, make global generalizations in this area. Each behavior must be examined in terms of how it is influenced by self-awareness, role prescriptions (and the degree to which each role is internalized), group composition (and how one apprehends one’s membership in the group), etc. as well as in terms of past realities in whatever form. There is a need for a dialogue between both paradigms.

Those who study consciousness may be particularly helpful in expanding the field. The traditional question, whether men and women are different, no longer suffices. The sexes are likely to be as different as they believe themselves to be. If sex and gender are viewed as “inside the head” phenomena, innovative strategies are required to determine how they function “out there.”

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CHAPTER 2

The Divided Lives of Women in Literature

KATHERINE V. POPE

I am wrapped in lies which
do not penetrate my soul.
As if the lies I tell were
like costumes.

Anais Nia.
House of Incest

The discovery of the discrepancy between the self and the female role is made early on, whenever the girl child discovers that she is supposed to be pure and selfless and is not. Guilt feelings about having a wilful self and the determination to “be good” permeate the diaries of young girls such as Anne Frank and the thoughts of young fictional characters like Jane Eyre. Later on, when the young woman begins to relate to men, the need to act out the appropriate, female role becomes a financial and social matter as well as a moral one. In George Meredith’s novel of 1879, entitled *The Egoist*, Clara Middleton initially falls in love with and becomes engaged to Willoughby Patterne because in the eyes of society he is “the great match of the county.” [1, p. 291] The idolized Willoughby turns out to be complacent, weak, ignorant, and even potentially cruel. Furthermore, he expects Clara to worship him like the others, indeed to be a “mirror of himself,” and totally his, “every thought, every feeling.” [1, pp. 38, 49] Clara is horrified with the situation in which she finds herself and is caught between her sense of duty to the social role she is assigned and her own instincts. The essence of the conflict is, in Meredith’s words, “a dispute between the conventional idea of obligation and an injury to her nature.” [1, p. 250]

Initially, Clara has no one to sympathize with or to validate her perceptions. Clara’s father, for example, who is motivated by a selfish desire for the luxurious

life of Patterne Hall, accuses Clara, when she makes a genuine plea for freedom and honesty, of being “mad as Cassandre,” and the “epitome . . . of all the contradictions and multibilities ascribed to women from the beginning!” [1, pp. 359, 360] As for the others, Clara experiences that “horrible isolation of secrecy in a world amiable in unsuspectingness.” [1, p. 224] Prior to her ultimate departure from the suffocating garden world of Patterne Hall and from the obtuse Adam who presides over it, Clara considers accepting the split life, and she wonders if it is possible to act out a false role of the devoted wife and to preserve her true self at the same time. She asks, “Can a woman have an inner life apart from him she is yoked to?” [1, p. 163]

The answer to the question is, of course, yes. The psychic energy and imagination that it takes to create the image is much greater, however, because of the greater degree of intimacy with those for whom she plays the part. The protagonist in Dorothy Bryant’s recent novel, *Ella Price’s Journal*, is a middle class, middle aged woman who returns to college in order to relieve the boredom of her life at home. Through her experiences at school, Ella develops a new sense of autonomy. She knows that her newly emerging ideas and feelings would threaten her husband and daughter, and therefore, during the time that she spends with them, she elects to “keep smiling and nodding” and “avoiding any subject that would lead to trouble.” [2, pp. 72, 73] Anne Sexton, in her poem, “The Farmer’s Wife,” describes a woman who has had time to develop a completely separate inner life, which makes it possible for her to fulfill the role of the compatible wife and to endure years of an unfulfilling marriage:

. . . she had been his habit;
 as again tonight he’ll say
 honey bunch let’s go
 and she will not say how there
 must be more to living
 than this brief bright bridge
 of the raucous bed or even
 the slow braille touch of him
 like a heavy god grown light,
 that old pantomime of love
 that she wants although
 it leaves her still alone,
 built back again at last,
 mind’s apart from him, living
 her own self in her own words
 and hating the sweat of the house
 they keep when they finally lie
 each in separate dreams
 [3, p. 27].

As these literary examples suggest, the fictional woman may act out the restrictive, socially acceptable image as a way of protecting the male or as a way

of avoiding conflict and social abuse. She also may assume a more aggressive attitude toward the dichotomy, using it to attain financial and social power. Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century protagonist in his novel, *Moll Flanders*, is a brilliant and dynamic creator of her own social image and achieves great social and financial rewards as a result. Born in Newgate prison and immediately separated from her mother, Moll finds herself on her own in the world. As she grows up, she comes to understand that an eighteenth-century woman's greatest financial and social rewards come from an admiring male, and she therefore learns to act out the ideal of womanhood held by the economically and socially powerful characters with whom she must deal. She finds it prudent not even to reveal to them her true name. In accordance with the male ideal of what a woman should be, Moll appears innocent, weak, dependent, and blindly adoring, while in actuality she is experienced, strong, self-sufficient, and keenly aware of the realities of the world. ". . . Let them say what they please of our sex not being able to keep a secret," she remarks, "my life is a plain conviction to me of the contrary. . . ." [4, p. 350] A major cause of the split between the inner and the outer lives of traditional women is the ideal of female purity, to which Moll Flanders directly addresses herself, having learned from her own experience "how necessary it is for all women who expect anything in the world, to preserve the character of their virtue, even when perhaps they may have sacrificed the thing itself." [4, p. 147]

The fictional woman, like her real life counterpart, often sees the dichotomy between the self and the public image as a private joke, which she may or may not share with other women. Much of women's humor is based on the incongruity between the inner and outer self, between reality as women perceive it and the myths of male superiority, for example. Women's humor also exposes the myths of ideal womanhood which require that a woman pretend to be different from, often less than, what she is. In one of a series of essays, entitled *Crazy Salad*, the contemporary writer Nora Ephron describes with wit and candor the endless details involved in fulfilling the female image:

. . . we learned that the way you sat, crossed your legs, held a cigarette, and looked at your nails—the way you did those things instinctively was absolute proof of your sex . . . I thought that just one slip, just one incorrect cross of my legs or flick of an imaginary cigarette ash would turn me from whatever I was into the other thing [5, p. 1].

Because this kind of humor has traditionally been very private, those of us who grew up female, particularly in the South, knew it not only as an oral traditional, but as a major characteristic of the older women, including the most elegant of ladies, with whom we spent our childhoods. Their remarks—about men, sex, marriage, their own socially designed facades and those of other women—varied in style from sharp wit to earthy and even bawdy comedy. Even now, I feel it would be inappropriate to repeat the humorous "asides"—made to themselves, to each