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Re-examining “In a Different Voice” for the New Millennium

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ABSTRACT

Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) first presented the concept of different moral reasoning as key to understanding how men and women seem to arrive at different conclusions in similar situations. Contrasting her work with the influential model of Kohlberg, Gilligan argues that women’s concept of moral decision-making is inherently relational, rather than reflecting the acceptance of abstract justice deemed to be the highest level of decision-making by Kohlberg. Here, I explain this contrasting perspective, and then examine modern integration of Gilligan’s perceptions as seen through print and broadcast media.

INTRODUCTION

Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* speaks of women’s empowerment on a unique level. It argues for a restructuring in the analysis of human development and it calls attention to the complexity of the moral judgment that occurs within every human being. Gilligan uses her book as an expression of the countless women who have been ranked inferior with regards to masculine developmental standards. She poses questions that people have either been too uninformed or unconcerned to ask. Most importantly, she has brought “the woman” to the spotlight and exposed her moral judgment. *In a Different Voice* truly is just that. It is a forgotten voice in our society. In writing this work, originally published in 1982, Gilligan has brought the woman’s voice forward and this is what it has to say.

SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

In a Different Voice reveals several important concepts with regards to the female population and how as individuals they have evolved into people morally different from their male counterparts. Exemplary of second wave feminism, Gilligan’s concept of women’s moral nature and reasoning creates a place for women to grow and reside within a society where the male has been considered superior. It is in this second wave of feminism where the slogan “the personal is political” came to be. West (2010) states, “With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements for equality, and during the 1960s and 1970s, Second Wave Feminism would arise to question the domination of patriarchy and gender inequality in all walks of life” (p. 1). It is within this mindset of equality during the second

wave of feminism Gilligan's book is written. She argues for the equality of women with regard to how they form conclusions on moral judgments. She further argues for equality in the developing of original theories of developmental processes. These items, along with many others, will be taken into consideration throughout this paper.

LIBERAL FEMINISM

Gilligan's book follows the tenets, too, of liberal feminism. According to Lucy Brookes (2011), "Liberal feminism is an individualistic form, concentrating on women having the ability to maintain their equality through being responsible for their own actions and choices" (p. 1). This broad definition is clearly represented within *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan contrasts women's capability to make decisions in a unique way to that of men in our same society. She further argues that it is this unique capability that gives women the individual power to make responsible decisions and take actions within society. The system as a whole has left this difference in judgment out of all developmental scales; instead society has placed women into categories meant for men. It is within liberal feminism where Gilligan makes her argument that through varying choices it becomes apparent that the need for an individual developmental scale for women must be created. It is through this creation that women will begin to be treated equally to their male counterparts.

Throughout her book, Gilligan examines equality of moral reasoning by highlighting how men and women view moral dilemmas differently, challenging previous models which rank one as superior over the other. For example, Gilligan (1982) states:

While Jeffrey sets up a hierarchical ordering to resolve a conflict, between desire and duty, Karen describes a network of relationships that includes all of her friends. Both children deal with the issues of exclusion and priority created by choice, but while Jeffrey thinks about what goes first, Karen focuses on who is left out. The contrasting images of hierarchy and network in children's thinking about moral conflict and choice illuminate two views of morality which are complementary rather than sequential or opposed. (p. 33)

Gilligan argues that all developmental theories have failed to take these differences and look at them in a more cohesive fashion rather than hierarchical one. She believes the system has focused simply on the boys' track of moral judgment and thus has left the thought process of the girls as inferior to that of the boys.

THE FAMOUS CASE OF "HEINZ"

Gilligan's work stands in contrast to the influential approach presented by Lawrence Kohlberg, which is wide-spread in the discipline. Kohlberg created a moral developmental scale which scientifically placed children in categories of moral development. He argued that children go through three different stages of development: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. At the pre-conventional level, children are said to obey authority and look to it for undeniable truths. It is at this stage that children are more interested in what the

law regards as right and wrong and less concerned about what they believe to be correct. At the conventional level, children begin to do what they believe to be right and avoid doing things they believe to be wrong. At this stage, children look to society and the ideals of love, trust and empathy with regards to what they should and should not do. At the final stage, post-conventional thought, Kohlberg argues that children move into the concept of justice. These individuals often attempt to obey the laws until what is morally right and what is right by the law come into conflict. When this conflict occurs, Kohlberg believes one must look at the child's intentions in order to determine to which stage he or she belongs (Crain, p 118, 1985). Within this developmental framework, Kohlberg finds that girls are more likely to fall within the pre-conventional or conventional stages whereas boys are more likely to fall into the post-conventional category. Kohlberg argues that boys regard moral justice more so than girls. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to reflect on what is most beneficial for others that are close to them rather than what is just or right toward society.

The "Heinz" experiment is an interviewing tool created by Kohlberg to place children at particular stages according to their response to the situation. The situation posits a man (Heinz) who has a wife with cancer. A drug maker has created a drug to help Heinz's wife; however Heinz cannot afford it. The situation ends with the question as to whether or not Heinz should steal the drug for his wife. Kohlberg is not interested in the child's "yes" or "no" to the situation but rather how he or she goes about reasoning through it.

Gilligan strongly critiques Kohlberg's moral development theory. She argues his theory is focused around the male development regarding moral judgment and disregards the female's process of developing. According to Carol Gilligan, girls differ greatly from boys with regards to moral development. When reviewing two children's responses to the Heinz situation Gilligan notes:

If the trajectory of development were drawn through either of these children's responses, it would trace a correspondingly different path. For Jake, development would entail coming to see the other as equal to the self and the discovery that equality provides a way of making connection safe. For Amy, development would follow the inclusion of herself in an expanding network of connection and the discovery that separation can be protective and need not entail isolation. (1982:39)

In other words, while the male begins to focus on the effect his decisions have on others; the female begins to understand the effect of her decisions on herself. Within the female population, it becomes a moral dilemma of the fine balance between self and others. Additionally, Gilligan argues that while Kohlberg's theory places a hierarchy of development on individuals, she believes developmental processes between women and men should be seen as cohesive and in conjunction with one another.

GILLIGAN'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In direct contrast with Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Gilligan has created a system orientated towards a woman's mental development with regards to moral and responsible decisions. At the first stage of development, women are geared toward individual survival. In connection with this stage is the idea that if the woman does not survive, no other

individuals related to them will be created. This stage is the primal concept of evolution. The next stage of moral development is the moral responsibility to others. At this stage, a woman begins to recognize her responsibility to society and predominantly those individuals who are close to her. Gilligan further argues that it is at this stage when women often forget about their needs and purely focus on the needs of others. Women at this stage may even be willing to sacrifice themselves and their values for the safety or the responsibility they feel towards others. At the final stage of moral development, the reintegration of the self appears. It is at this stage where women recognize the importance of creating a balance between what is right in accordance with others feelings and needs, and what is right for them. This can be a difficult balance and one that often comes with personal growth and experience.

EXAMINING THE MORAL DILEMMA OF ABORTION

Throughout *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan uses several interviews with women who are going through the process of abortion, in order to evaluate the three different stages of her moral developmental scale. A wonderful example that demonstrates the moral stages of development is the story of Ellen, a young woman in her late twenties. Although she defined herself as a career-focused musician, she finds herself caught up in a love affair. Shortly after entering this relationship, she conceives a child. When Gilligan interviews her about her recent decision to have an abortion, Ellen brings up the following moral dilemma, "The pregnancy poses a conflict between her 'moral' belief that 'once a certain life has begun, it shouldn't be stopped artificially,' and her 'amazing' discovery that, to have the baby, she would need much more support than she had thought" (Gilligan, 1982:88). This conflict leads Ellen to question her moral obligation to have the child and at the same time to question whether it is responsible to have a child in her current circumstances. She finds that although she feels responsibility to have the child, she also feels the lack of support she has in order to raise it properly. Gilligan argues this particular situation demonstrates the moral dilemma of promoting care and reducing hurt. It also brings up the complicated dilemma between care for self and care for the other. It is by highlighting the unique moral reasoning based on relative care, as seen in studies such as the one with Ellen, which reveals the extremely complicated process of moral development found within women. Kohlberg's model cannot account for the moral balancing of care, emphasizing as it does the "higher" calling of impersonal justice.

FEMINISM OF DIFFERENCE

Another form of feminism that defines Carol Gilligan's perspective of women is that of the feminism of difference. Many argue that it was Carol Gilligan who in fact coined this term to define how one should view both women and men. Difference feminism, according to Joan Mandel (2006), "emphasizes the unique identity of women as a group, stressing and usually celebrating essential female characteristics which it believes make women different from - indeed even opposite to - men" (p. 1). Within this same article, difference feminism is further

defined to recognize that although differences exist, it is in these differences that men and women should celebrate and look to one another for a cohesive solution to social dilemmas rather than ranking one as superior over the other. Inherent even in the title, it is in this context that Gilligan's book both challenged and expanded understandings of moral reasoning and human development.

Gilligan's work was, as previously noted, written in 1982. The question remains: Are her work and insights still relevant in our society today? While many declare us to be in a "post-feminist" era, it is also clear that many of the thoughts and ideas of second-wave feminism have been incorporated into our current society, especially through representation in modern media. In the second part of this essay, I examine whether Gilligan's insights of women's difference can be seen to be among those integrated into modern culture and understandings, or if they remain needed insights which we have unfortunately left behind.

MODERN MEDIA AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN: PRINT MEDIA

When looking at current media such as journals, television, newspapers, books and the like, it becomes evident that our society still struggles with the concept of cohesion versus hierarchy. It is quite apparent that little has been done to reflect Gilligan's idea of difference feminism within society, but rather the gap between men's and women's positions remain quite large. Magazines are prime examples of such a gender gap. For example, in the latest Glamour magazine, there are multiple articles regarding how to please a man sexually, what the latest fashions are, and how to become skinnier, more beautiful, and more likable. However, there is not a single article that discusses a woman's ability to become a successful business woman, how to build on one's ability to judge particular situations, or how to handle the dual roles women often face. To take this idea even further, the range of magazines out there for women are quite limited. If the article is not discussing how to look younger, it is teaching one how to cook, clean, or become fit. Most women's magazines only reinforce a woman's stereotypical role of "housewife". This lack reduces the significance for the need of a woman's moral judgment and simply reinforces the idea that women are developmentally inferior to men. In contrast to this, men's magazines come in a wide variety of topics. For example, one can find business magazines, sports, hunting, homebuilding, and magazines with attractive women in the spread. Although there are magazines that are solely for pleasure, more magazines exist that suggest the man is the "business-type". It is magazines such as these that suggest men are responsible for making sound decisions and moral judgments.

MODERN MEDIA AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN: BROADCAST MEDIA

Another source that demonstrates the lack of integration of Gilligan's theory is the television. Today, there are countless shows that reinforce the man's role in making moral decisions, and the lack of responsibility of the woman. For example, shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Real Housewives*, *Sex and The City* and *The Office* all have men in higher positions than the women. It is also apparent, especially in *The Real Housewives*, that women are regarded as sex symbols whereas men are responsible for the income and major decisions of the households.

In contrast to these television shows, however, there are a few where the woman is stepping into the male's area regarding career status. Shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *King of Queens*, and *Private Practice* are building upon Gilligan's argument that women, although they morally develop differently than men, are still capable of making responsible decisions. In her book, Gilligan (1982) notes, "The essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice" (p.67). For Gilligan, women's difference is that when faced with the need for a difficult moral decision, women take into consideration the self as well as others, rather than reflecting abstract models of justice. This difference is demonstrated throughout the previously noted television shows. For example, *Private Practice* does an excellent job of showing the conflict between the self and others. The main character, Dr. Addison Montgomery, is responsible for pregnancies as well as abortions that are performed within the clinic. She is constantly speaking with other characters about the inner struggle she faces with regard to what is ethically right and what is right for the patient. This show is a strong example of Gilligan's argument. This character is in the highest position at the clinic even though she does not "think like a man." However, she demonstrates time and time again that as a woman she is capable of making moral decisions.

CURRENT RELEVANCE AND A COMMON CONFLICT

Gilligan's theory of moral development and responsibility does an effective job of describing the complex thought process pursued by women when facing moral decisions. It further describes and helps explain women's role in society and the significant need to hold women as equals to men. Her framework helps us not only understand the moral decision-making processes concerning abortion, but also many other aspects of women's lives.

Today, many women struggle with the burden of household responsibilities, such as taking care of the children and housework, and the desire to dedicate themselves to careers. I argue that Gilligan's theory does quite a nice job explaining what women are faced with in this particular dilemma which men do not appear to share. If one were to follow the linear theory of Kohlberg, one may find it rather difficult to explain why a woman feels the need to play both the role of housekeeper and the role of financial provider. His linear and abstracted model would simply lead to a conclusion of the separation of roles, and the attribution of one role being valued more highly than the other—in this case that of financial provider being perceived as the most important support for the caretaking role. However, Gilligan's

relational model allows us to see this situation differently, and indeed as one containing conflict. A woman’s instinct to care for others is fulfilled through providing nurture to her children and taking care of the household in general. For example, the basic idea of cooking for the family provides a basic need for individuals within the family. As a result, when a woman cooks, she receives fulfillment for her desire to care for others. However, a woman also has a basic desire to take care of the self. Many women today are finding this need fulfilled through striving for career goals or passions. This need for self-fulfillment is where the moral conflict arises. Gilligan’s theory demonstrates the process many women go through when trying to find the balance of caring for others through time and dedication within the home, and the caring for the self through time and dedication to career. Traditionally, men focus on career development rather than trying to find an equal balance between two very different expectations.

Overall, Gilligan’s theory of moral development consistently emphasizes the need for the understanding of a different developmental system for women as those derived from masculine perspectives are not suitable for explaining a woman’s process of responsible and relational decision-making. She underscores the difference in “difference” feminism. While Gilligan’s work was accomplished over 30 years ago, her book *In a Different Voice* still highlights the need for us to understand the differing moral development of women and the importance of relational moral decision-making in our current society.

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