

1

INTRODUCTION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Identify reasons to study the psychology of women and gender.
- 1.2 Compare diverse concepts in the evolving language of sex and gender.
- 1.3 Contrast the different forms of sexism and feminism.
- 1.4 Identify major themes in the psychology of women and gender.
- 1.5 Identify sources of bias in psychological research on gender.
- 1.6 Compare feminist alternatives to biased research.

Expectant parents are commonly asked, “What are you having?” Unless they are ordering food at a restaurant, the question has to do with whether they are expecting a daughter or a son. About two-thirds of pregnant women in the United States want to find out in advance whether they’ll give birth to a girl or boy (Kearin et al., 2014). Today, advances in medical technology mean that many expectant parents may obtain relatively detailed ultrasound images of the developing fetus; that technology can be used to identify the fetus’s genitals. Most expectant parents assume that if the ultrasound shows that the fetus has a penis, they’ll have a son, and if it doesn’t, they’ll have a daughter. Seems simple, right? Parents soon imagine gendered names, clothing, colors, toys, activities, and so on for the child, all based on whether they saw a penis on that ultrasound.

The question “What are you having?” is ubiquitous because most people understand gender as an essential and central characteristic of humans. We tend to have a hard time perceiving or thinking about a person without knowing their gender. To some extent, that’s not surprising; our social world is organized by gender. Public restrooms are often segregated by gender, as are sports teams, social clubs and organizations, items in clothing stores and toy stores, and sometimes even classrooms and schools. In addition, power and status are conferred by gender; around the world, men have more power and higher status relative to women (United Nations Development Programme, 2019; see Focus 1.1 for more on this). In short, gender matters.

Gender is also complex. My goal in this textbook is to help you understand the complexity of gender—that is, when, why, and how gender matters in psychology. Historically, **cisgender** men



PHOTO 1.1 What is this baby’s gender? Why does it matter?

soleg/iStockPhoto

have dominated in society and in psychological science. To redress this balance, I focus on women and, when possible, trans and nonbinary people. Each of these groups has been marginalized, “othered,” or oppressed because of their gender. Although there are many ways to learn about and understand gender, in this book I use the science of psychology as a tool to examine gender.

WHY STUDY THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN AND GENDER?

When thinking about why students might take a course on the psychology of women and gender, I remember what motivated me to take a psychology of gender course as an undergraduate: The professor in my introductory psychology course taught us about a fascinating and elegant experiment on children’s understanding of sexist language (we’ll get to that one in Chapter 4!). It prompted more questions, and I immediately knew that I wanted to learn more about how psychologists study gender. Today, as a professor and a researcher, I still get excited about these topics and love teaching students about them. The questions we ask in our psychology of women and gender courses are unique and provocative. How is gender relevant to psychology? How is our gender identity shaped by things like our race or ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation? What roles do our hormones or brains play in our gender? How does our gender influence how others treat us? In some cases, these questions have complex answers that lead to more questions. In others, we have only begun to gather the evidence needed to answer the questions. And, often, the answers surprise us.

The psychology of women and gender is also personally meaningful. Students take this course for a variety of reasons. For example, many women take the course to understand themselves better, a goal they may feel was not met by their other psychology courses. Often, men take the course to gain insights into the perspectives of women in their lives. Some students may take this course because they have questions about their own gender and how they fit into the world.

The psychology of women and gender is essential to psychology. That is, there are academic reasons to study the psychology of women and gender. For example, many traditional psychological theories have literally been theories about men (as you’ll learn in Chapter 2). Sexism or gender bias exists not only in our everyday experiences, but also in the science of psychology. As a result, the experiences of cisgender men often have been considered the norm. By contrast, the experiences of women and anyone who doesn’t fit into the traditional masculine role have tended to be marginalized, ignored, or devalued. One way to address these biases in psychology is to think critically about gender and study the psychology of women as well as the psychology of trans and nonbinary people.

More broadly, the psychology of women and gender is relevant to understanding our society and improving people’s lives. That is, our social world is organized by gender, and that social organization shapes the opportunities and experiences available to all of society’s members. One of the central themes of the feminist movement has long been that “the personal is political.” What this means is that social roles, norms, policies, and laws shape many aspects of our lives. In some circumstances, our gender may offer unearned privileges or disadvantages. Understanding how our personal experiences are connected to the context of our community and culture is important not only for our own knowledge, but also for improving the conditions in which *all* of us live.

THE EVOLVING LANGUAGE OF SEX AND GENDER

Language is constantly and rapidly evolving, especially regarding gender! The fact that the meanings and connotations of words are in flux can lead to misunderstandings and different interpretations. Plus, many people define terms like *gender* and *sex* for themselves in different

ways (Schudson et al., 2019), which can further complicate conversations. With these caveats in mind, I find it helpful to establish a common vocabulary for readers. For that reason, I clarify my language choices here and how I will use them in this book (see also Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1 ■ Language and terminology about gender are rapidly and constantly evolving. Below is a list of some of the terms I use throughout this book and their working definitions.	
Term	Working Definition
Gender	The state of being male, female, both male and female, or neither male nor female
Sex	Physical or physiological characteristics of maleness and femaleness; sexual behaviors
Gender identity	A person’s internal sense of their own gender
Gender binary	A system of conceptualizing gender as having two distinct and opposing groups or kinds (i.e., male and female)
Nonbinary	Describes gender categories that are not exclusively male or female and therefore are not captured by the gender binary; may also be used as a gender category
Cisgender	Describes a person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth
Transgender	Describes a person whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth
Intersex	An umbrella term describing people who are born with differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy (e.g., genitals, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes) that are not typical of female or male people. In the DSM-5-TR, intersex is termed <i>disorder/difference of sex development</i> .
Trans	An umbrella term for the transgender spectrum; <i>may</i> include people who identify as transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender fluid, or other nonbinary identity

Source: Created by the author.

In the English language the term *sex* is often used ambiguously. Sometimes it is used to refer to sexual behaviors such as sexual intercourse; sometimes it is used to refer to physical or physiological characteristics of maleness and femaleness; and sometimes it is used as way of categorizing a species based on reproductive function. Often, the meaning is clear from the context. For example, if a job application says, “Sex: ____,” you don’t write, “As often as possible.” Yet what is the topic of a book titled *Sex and the Single Girl*? Is it about the unmarried woman’s fulfillment of social roles, or is it about the sexual behavior of such women? To reduce this ambiguity, in this book I generally use the term *sex* to refer to sexual behaviors.

Sometimes people use *sex* interchangeably with gender, which can get confusing. In this book, I define **gender** as the state of being male, female, both male and female, or neither male nor female.

Gender has, at least in Western cultures, long been understood as a binary, such that individuals are *either* male or female but never both or neither (a theme we will revisit later in this chapter). The **gender binary** is a system of thinking about gender as having two distinct and opposing

groups or kinds (i.e., male and female). It is evident in phrases such as “the opposite sex” and in assuming that all people must fit squarely into one of these two groups. When you apply for a driver’s license, for example, you typically must choose *either* male or female for gender; in nearly all states, you may choose only one of these options, and there are no others. Today, we know that people may identify themselves as being outside the gender binary, such as belonging to a third gender category like **genderqueer** or as being **nonbinary**.

Similarly, in recent years we have seen increased visibility and awareness of the transgender spectrum. A person who is **transgender** is a person whose self-identified gender differs from the gender they were assigned at birth, typically based on the appearance of their external genitalia. A transgender woman, then, is a person who identifies as female but was assigned a male gender at birth, and a transgender man is a person who identifies as male but was assigned a female gender at birth. Still, it is important to note that not all people whose self-identified gender differs from their birth-assigned gender will call themselves transgender. By contrast, a person who is cisgender is a person whose self-identified gender matches their birth-assigned gender. The prefixes *cis-* (“on the same side of”) and *trans-* (“across or on the other side of”) come from Latin and appear in chemistry, which uses *cis* and *trans* for different pairs of molecules.

Some people use **trans** as an umbrella term to refer to a spectrum of identities that includes anyone who is not a cisgender man or cisgender woman (e.g., transgender men, transgender women, and nonbinary people). You will notice that my working definition of gender allows for some flexibility and avoids adhering to the gender binary.

Until recently, psychology has neglected the study of transgender men and women or considered them as abnormal (dickey, Hendricks, & Bockting, 2016), operating from **cisgenderism** (or *cissexism*). Cisgenderism refers to prejudice against people who are outside the gender binary or bias that recognizes a person’s birth-assigned gender but not their gender identity (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). One outcome of cisgenderism in psychological science is that, when describing research on gender, we are confronted by some degree of imprecision regarding samples. Thus, I will generally describe research findings with *girls*, *boys*, *men*, and *women*, with the caveat that the researchers either excluded trans participants or just assumed all participants were cisgender. Though I believe awareness of cisgenderism is improving and research on the experiences of transgender persons is blossoming, there is still much room for growth.

The fact that most empirical research in psychology has not incorporated the experiences of transgender persons raises questions about the psychology of women and gender. In psychology, *gender differences* has generally been used to refer to differences between men and women. Thus, gender differences research is rooted in the gender binary. In this book, I review the existing scientific research. Thus, I follow that convention and use the term *gender differences* to refer to male-female differences because most empirical research in psychology has assumed the gender binary. I believe it is possible to be sophisticated consumers of that research without adopting the gender binary (a point we’ll return to later in this chapter).

As for describing psychological differences between men and women, I recognize that other scholars have adopted other conventions. For example, some scholars prefer to use the term *sex differences* to refer to innate or biologically produced differences between men and women and *gender differences* to refer to male-female differences that result from learning and the social roles of men and women (e.g., Unger, 1979). One of the problems with this distinction is that studies often document a difference between men and women without providing any evidence as to what causes it—biology, society, or both. Furthermore, the sharp distinction between biological causes and cultural causes fails to recognize that biology and culture often interact to contribute to men’s and women’s different outcomes (Stefanick & Schiebinger, 2020). In other words, the

distinction between sex and gender isn't obvious or even possible to make. Therefore, I simply use the term *gender differences* for differences between men and women and leave their causation as a separate question.

SEXISM AND FEMINISM

Sexism

Another term that you will find throughout this book is *sexism*. **Sexism** or *gender bias* can be defined as discrimination or bias against people based on their gender. Anyone, regardless of their gender, can engage in sexist behavior or hold sexist attitudes.

Social psychologists have studied sexism extensively, and their research has yielded several findings that are relevant here. First, sexism isn't what it used to be. **Old-fashioned sexism**, the kind that was prevalent in the 1950s and earlier, was characterized by open or overt prejudice against women. An example would be the belief—common in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States—that women could not be anchors on TV news programs because they wouldn't be good at it and because viewers wouldn't accept the news as authoritative if it were delivered by a woman. Today, of course, news programs often have co-anchors, one male and one female, and the old view seems ridiculous. Psychologists measure old-fashioned sexism with items like “Women are generally not as smart as men”; 50 or more years ago, many people would have agreed with such a statement. Today, old-fashioned sexism has largely been replaced by **modern sexism** or neosexism, which refers to covert or subtle prejudiced beliefs about women (Lewis, 2018; Swim et al., 1995). Modern sexism is more subtle than old-fashioned sexism and consists of three components: denial that there is continuing discrimination against women, antagonistic feelings about women's “demands,” and resentment about perceived special favors granted to women (Swim et al., 1995). Although anyone can be sexist, modern sexist beliefs are most strongly endorsed by White men (Hayes & Swim, 2013).

Even in the 21st century, experiences with sexism are widespread and harmful. Women from diverse racial/ethnic groups and sexual orientations experience sexism, and these experiences have negative effects on women's mental health (Lewis, 2018).

Social psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske (1996, 2001) have documented two complementary forms of sexism: hostile and benevolent. **Hostile sexism** refers to negative, hostile attitudes toward women and adversarial beliefs about gender relations in which women are thought to spend most of their time trying to control or manipulate men, whether through sexuality or feminism. **Benevolent sexism**, in contrast, consists of chivalrous beliefs about women that seem to the perpetrator to be flattering or positive but are patronizing and paternalistic. Here, women are put on the proverbial pedestal and viewed as warm, pure, and moral, but also as passive and weak, so that they are viewed as deserving and needing men's admiration and protection.

Although benevolent sexism may seem harmless, it is still a form of sexism because it reaffirms gender inequality and stereotypes women as weak and dependent on men. Being put on a pedestal is extremely confining, both literally and figuratively. Hostile sexism is often easier to recognize and call out as unfair or negative, but benevolent sexism is potentially more insidious simply because it seems positive. Indeed, both types of sexism are harmful. A major review of the hundreds of studies on hostile and benevolent sexism noted that both forms promote men's violence against women (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). For example, while hostile sexism is associated with perpetrating violence, benevolent sexism is associated with tolerating the violence and blaming the women who've been victimized.

These two forms of sexism work together, as a sort of carrot and stick. That is, benevolent sexism rewards women (and some men) for adhering to traditional gender roles, while hostile sexism punishes those who violate their gender roles. The catch with benevolent sexism is that it promises women protection and adoration from men, but *only* if women comply with the traditional female role (Glick & Raberg, 2018).

Feminism

Another important term that needs to be defined in this context is *feminist*. A **feminist** is a person who favors political, economic, and social equality of all people, regardless of gender, and therefore favors the legal and social changes necessary to achieve gender equality. Most Americans support the feminist principle and goal of gender equality, and these numbers have continued to rise over the last four decades (Scarborough et al., 2019). And although a much smaller percentage of Americans actually call themselves feminists, this percentage has increased in recent years. A well-sampled national survey conducted in 2020 found that 61% of women and 40% of men said the word *feminist* described them “very well” or “somewhat well” (Pew Research Center, 2020). Interestingly, more women and younger Americans tend to identify as feminists than do men and older Americans.

Just as sexism has changed over time, so has feminism. One way to think about the historical changes in feminism uses the metaphor of waves to describe periods in which there has been heightened feminist activism. The metaphor can be helpful, but it is imperfect—it can mask the diversity within those historical periods or suggest that there are periods when feminism has

been *inactive* (Nicholson, 2010). With those imperfections in mind, the metaphor suggests four such waves, termed *first-wave* feminism, *second-wave* feminism, *third-wave* feminism, and *fourth-wave* feminism. First-wave feminism describes the period from the late 1800s to the early 1900s in Britain, Canada, and the United States. These feminists fought for many aspects of gender equality, particularly for women’s suffrage. Feminist activism, including picketing of the White House and even hunger strikes, was effective: In the United States, women’s right to vote was won when the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920. Still, voting by women of color remained restricted in many parts of the country for many years and continues to be challenged.

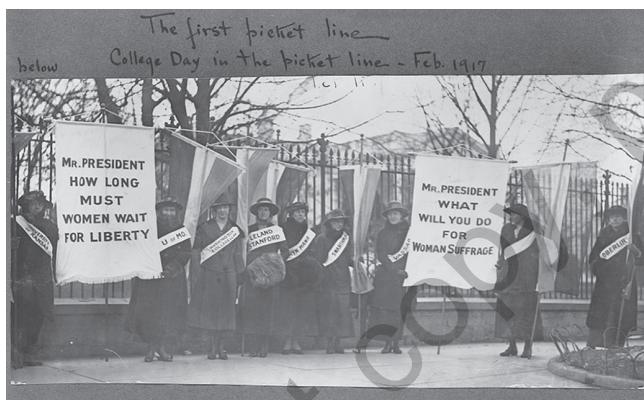


PHOTO 1.2 Women suffragists picketing in front of the White House.

Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-31799

Second-wave feminism describes the period of the 1960s into the 1990s. Second-wave feminists built upon the successes of their predecessors and took on a much wider range of issues: sexual freedom; reproductive rights, especially access to contraception and abortion; pay equity; equal opportunity in education; and gender-based violence. For example, first-wave feminists proposed the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (ERA), which declared, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Nearly 30 years after it was first introduced, in 1972 the ERA passed in the House and Senate but stalled at the stage of ratification by the states until 2020, when Virginia became the 38th state to ratify it. There remains political and legal opposition to finalizing the ERA and enshrining gender equality in the U.S. Constitution.

By the 1990s, many goals of the second wave had been accomplished, and some declared that feminism was dead and that the nation had passed into the “postfeminist” era. Despite no good scientific evidence of a decline in feminism (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003), third-wave feminism began to emerge sometime in the 1990s (Snyder, 2008). In part, it represented a rebellion against second-wave foremothers and attempted to rectify some of the perceived shortcomings of the second wave. One of the key criticisms of second-wave feminism is that it tended to essentialize and oversimplify the category of “women” by focusing on “universal” female experiences such as motherhood. In so doing, it ignored the great diversity among women along lines of race and social class. Second-wave feminists were also accused of being rigid in their ideology, saying that certain approaches were feminist and others definitely were not. Responding to these issues, third-wave feminism emphasized intersectionality—an approach originating in Black feminism—and diversity among women rather than universality of female experience.

We are currently in the fourth wave of feminism, which has been fueled by recent advances in online technology, including user-generated content like blogs and social media (Naly & Smith, 2015). The #MeToo movement is an example of activism within the fourth wave, and it demonstrates the possibilities of leveraging online technology within activism. Building on the third wave, the fourth wave also includes greater emphasis on intersectionality and critique and rejection of the gender binary, such that transgender issues are more prominent than in previous waves. The fourth wave also includes renewed focus on reproductive justice, including access to abortion, contraception, and affordable childcare.

Feminism is also a theoretical perspective! There is a wide spectrum of feminist theories and a rich literature within feminist psychology. I introduce these feminist theories in Chapter 2 and incorporate research from feminist psychology throughout this book.

FOCUS 1.1: GENDER EQUALITY AROUND THE WORLD AND TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM

In 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, 17,000 participants and 30,000 activists met and created the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action affirmed a commitment to gender equality and described specific steps that needed to be taken to improve the lives of girls and women and achieve gender equity. It stated, “The status of women has advanced in some important respects in the past decade but that progress has been uneven, inequalities between women and men have persisted and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for the well-being of all people” (United Nations, 1995, p. 2). As a result, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) now regularly publishes data on how women are doing in all nations of the world, and these data are used to monitor progress toward gender equality. In its 2019 report, the UNDP concluded that gender inequality is “one of the greatest barriers to human development.”

What does gender equality look like? Gender equality has several aspects, such as education, politics, economics, health, and gender-based violence (Else-Quest & Hamilton, 2018). For example, educational gender equality would entail equal numbers of men and women attending high school or university, or equal numbers of men and women being able to read and write. Political gender equality could include equal political representation or having equal numbers of men and women elected to congress or parliament. Economic gender equality would entail equal pay for equal work and adequate family leave policies, regardless of gender. Gender equality in health would include improving women’s access to prenatal care and reducing maternal mortality and adolescent pregnancy rates. With regard to gender-based violence, gender equality would mean freedom from forms of violence in which

men are the predominant perpetrators and women are the predominant victims (such as rape and intimate partner violence, discussed further in Chapter 15). All of these aspects of gender equality are important and were described in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Data from 20 countries are shown in Table 1.2. The UNDP computes a Gender Inequality Index (GII), which is one of many measures of country-level gender equality. The GII indexes inequality of women relative to men in three areas: reproductive health (measured by adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality), empowerment (measured by educational attainment and representation of women in parliament or congress), and labor force participation. High GII scores indicate greater gender inequality, and low scores indicate less gender inequality (i.e., greater equality). A country's overall rank, shown in the left column of Table 1.2, results from an average of these indicators. As these data show, no country in the world can claim to be truly gender equal.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Gender Inequality Index (GII) Scores and Ranks of 20 Countries; Lower GII Values Reflect More Gender-Equal Conditions		
GII Rank	Country	GII Value
1	Denmark	0.009
5	Netherlands	0.025
16	Republic of Korea	0.062
18	Canada	0.069
23	New Zealand	0.082
26	Israel	0.092
28	United Kingdom	0.094
43	Russian Federation	0.178
44	United States	0.180
47	China	0.186
73	Cuba	0.300
74	Thailand	0.310
84	Mexico	0.352
92	Philippines	0.388
94	Brazil	0.391
99	South Africa	0.401
108	India	0.437
121	Iran	0.484
165	Nigeria	0.677
166	Yemen	0.820

Source: Created by the author, based on data from UNDP (2024), available at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2023-24>.

American readers may be surprised that the United States does not rank first; some believe that we have a great deal of gender equality in this country, but it's clear we still have areas of inequality. We rank only 44th and are beaten by countries from many regions of the world. The United States does not fare so well because of our persistent underrepresentation of women in Congress (28.1%, compared with 50.4% in New Zealand) and high teen pregnancy rate (15.1 births per 1,000 women, compared with 1.8 in Denmark). What would need to change to get the United States in first place?

Psychological research has shown data such as these are linked to individual endorsement of sexism and hostile sexism against women (Brandt, 2011; Glick et al., 2000; Napier et al., 2010). That is, countries that have more gender inequality also have more people who hold sexist beliefs. So, achieving gender equality means more than just changing laws and improving our scores on the GII. It also means changing people's beliefs about gender and the roles of women so that women can be free to make their own choices.

Transnational feminism advocates for gender equality across countries and points out that we need to carefully consider women's and girls' experiences not only across countries, but also within them (Grabe & Else-Quest, 2012). That is, within each culture and country, behaviors and roles have different meanings. Consider gender-based violence, where we see differences across cultures and countries in the types of gender-based violence and the meaning of specific violent acts. A man in Sri Lanka might throw a shoe at his wife to punish her for cooking a meal he did not like. Even if the woman was not physically injured, such an act is considered humiliating and degrading (Marecek, 2012). In most Western countries, however, such a behavior might seem simply strange or rude and probably wouldn't be identified in a screening or survey of gender-based violence. Thus, transnational feminists point out that we need to carefully consider women's and girls' experiences not only across countries, but also within them.

Transnational feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (2003, p. 503) advocate for "noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders," cautioning that we should avoid viewing girls' and women's experiences through a Western lens and imposing Western standards on other cultures. What can we do to empower girls and women around the world without dictating that they should adopt Western ways? Can gender equality be universalized to every country? If so, what do you think it would look like?

THEMES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN AND GENDER

You'll notice several recurring themes in this book. Some of these themes are rooted in history, taking somewhat different forms across cultures but remaining essentially the same. Some themes are rooted in feminism. Other themes are derived from current scientific psychological research on women and gender. I focus here on five themes that are central to understanding the psychology of women and gender.

Feminine Evil

One theme rooted in history is **feminine evil**. One of the clearest images of women in mythology is their portrayal as the source of evil (Mathews, 2017). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve disobeyed God's orders and ate from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. As a result, Adam and Eve were forced to leave the Garden of Eden, and Eve, the woman, became the source of original sin, responsible for the fall of humanity. In a more ancient myth, the Greek god Zeus ordered Vulcan to create the lovely maiden Pandora to bring misery to earth in revenge for the theft of fire by Prometheus. Pandora was given a box containing all the evils of the world, which she was told not to open. But Pandora opened the box, and thus all the evils it contained spread over the

world. In addition, in Chinese mythology the two forces, yin and yang, correspond to feminine and masculine, and yin, the feminine, is seen as the dark, or evil, side of nature.

Historically, perhaps the most frightening manifestation of the belief in feminine evil was the persecution of witches beginning in the Middle Ages in Europe and persisting into Puritan America. Guided by the Catholic Church in a papal bull of 1484, the *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, the Inquisition tortured or put to death unknown numbers of witches. The vast majority of those accused and tried were women (Hays, 1964). Thus, it is woman who is seen as being in collaboration with the devil, visiting evil upon humans.

Today, we still see the theme of feminine evil. For example, people who hold hostile sexist attitudes, as discussed earlier in this chapter, believe that women use their sexuality to ensnare helpless men (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Androcentrism

Another enduring historical theme is the **androcentrism**. It means, literally, male-centeredness, or the belief that men are the standard or norm. Throughout mythology the male is seen as the norm or standard, and the female is seen as a variant or deviation. In other words, the male is the important one, the major representative of the species, the “normal” one, and the female is a variation on him. As Simone de Beauvoir (1952) expressed it, woman is the Other.

In the biblical creation story (Genesis 2), Adam, the man, is created first; Eve, the woman, is later fashioned out of his rib, almost as an afterthought. In this and many other creation myths, man is created first; he is the major, important part of the species. Woman comes second and is only a variant on the man, the norm. There are even myths in which a woman is created by castrating a man.

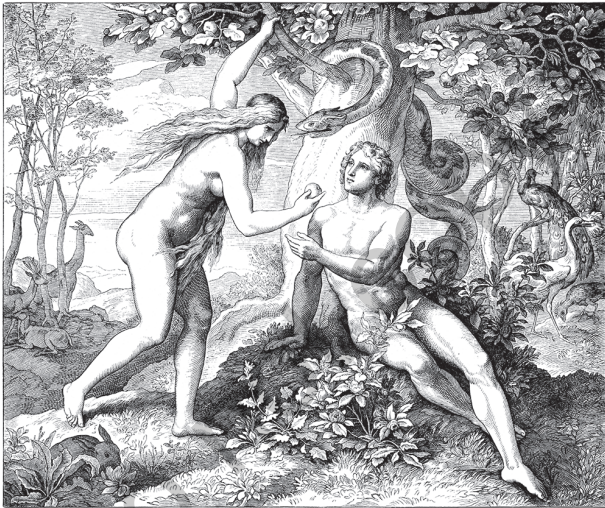


PHOTO 1.3 Androcentrism is a theme throughout history. An example is the Adam and Eve story, in which Adam is created first and Eve is later made from his rib.

ivan-96/iStockPhoto

Androcentrism crops up throughout psychology, including in some of the theories discussed in Chapter 2. Perhaps the clearest example of the androcentrism theme is in our language. The word *man* is used to refer not only to a male person but to people in general. When the gender of a person is unknown, the pronoun *he* is used to refer to “him.” The human species is represented by man; woman is merely a subset. I return to this topic in detail in Chapter 4.

To be the deviation from the norm is, often, to be marginalized, ignored, or devalued (Nettles & Balter, 2012). Thus, embedded within the theme of androcentrism is the lower social status of women relative to men. Throughout the world, women do not enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities as men (UNDP, 2024). Focus 1.1 describes gender equity around the world, demonstrating that we still have a way to go before men and women are treated as equals. For this reason, this book is about the psychology of gender and focuses especially on the experiences of women.

Gender Differences and Similarities

There is a paradox in trying to understand the psychology of women and gender: Women and men are both different and similar. Although **gender differences** are important in the psychology

of gender, **gender similarities** are equally important. Both scientific and nonscientific views of women have concentrated on how they differ from men; this lopsided emphasis on gender differences has led to a distorted understanding of the psychology of women and gender. The study of psychological gender similarities is essential to a comprehensive and unbiased psychology of women and gender (Hyde, 2005a, 2018). This paradoxical tension between gender differences and gender similarities will be a continuing theme throughout this book.

Historically, the overemphasis on gender differences combined with male-as-normative thinking have promoted female deficit models. That is, we spend so much time and energy demonstrating that men and women are different and that men are the norm or the standard, we end up concluding that women are abnormal or deficient. In the 19th century, scientists found that women had slightly smaller brains than men and interpreted this as a sure reason why women were not as intelligent as men (Shields, 1975). Today some researchers continue to argue that girls are not as good at math as boys are. No matter the century, researchers always seem to try to find female deficits. In Chapter 3, we will delve into the study of psychological gender differences and similarities in detail.

Critiquing the Gender Binary

The overemphasis on gender differences and neglect of gender similarities is deeply rooted in the gender binary. There are many problems with the gender binary, which, with only the categories of male and female, is very narrow and restrictive in its range. According to the gender binary, gender is based on biological characteristics (such as sex chromosomes, hormones, and external genitalia), which are assumed to be consistent with one another. The binary also assumes that our gender category is apparent at birth, stable over time, and meaningful to our own self-perceptions. Thus, the binary is essentialist and assumes that our gender identities stem from these physical characteristics. In turn, the gender binary also assumes that everyone is cisgender.

Because of these faulty assumptions, the most glaring problems with the binary are that it excludes anyone who is transgender, **intersex**, nonbinary, or gender-fluid. Many people do not fit within the gender binary; there is *gender diversity* beyond two rigid gender categories.

Critiquing the gender binary requires thinking differently about gender and asking difficult questions. For example, should we think of gender as having distinct categories or groups? Or should we think of it as being a spectrum? If there are distinct genders, how many are there? Can gender change, or is it stable and permanent? Critiquing the gender binary—and exploring the implications of that critique for research—is a pervasive theme in the psychology of women and gender and is important for psychology more broadly (Hyde et al., 2019).

Intersectionality of Gender

A recurring theme in the psychology of women, rooted in Black feminism, is intersectionality. **Intersectionality** can be defined as an approach or perspective that simultaneously considers the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage (E. R. Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). That is, according to intersectionality, we should not consider the effects of gender in isolation. Instead, we should consider the experience and effects of gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation simultaneously. When we talk about the category “women,” we are talking about a diverse group that differs along many dimensions and categories, including ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation.

The Black abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth described the essence of intersectionality in a speech at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. One of

12 children born to James and Elizabeth Baumfree, Truth (a self-given name) was born into slavery sometime around 1797 and sold to four different slave owners before walking to freedom in 1826. Though she never learned to read or write, she traveled and preached on abolition, women's suffrage, and prison reform. At the Ohio Women's Rights Convention, Truth spoke extemporaneously about the importance of women's rights for all women, not just White women. An excerpt of her speech at the Convention, transcribed by a friend and published a month later in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, reflects a need for intersectionality in the feminist movement:

I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it.



PHOTO 1.4 Black abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth.

By Randall Studio, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Public Domain.

Her speech is often titled "Ain't I a Woman?" after a strongly edited version, published in 1863, used that phrase to challenge how women's experiences were constructed within the movement. Several themes are evident in both versions of her speech and continue to be described within intersectionality writings. One theme is that femininity and womanhood have often been defined with White middle- and upper-class women in mind, and thus the experiences of poor women and women of color have often been marginalized or made invisible. Intersectionality recognizes that gender may be constructed differently by racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Some issues that are important to White women may not be relevant to women of color, and vice versa.

Recognizing that diversity and giving voice to everyone—but especially to those who lack power—is central to intersectionality. Thus, another theme in her speech is that, despite the different needs and issues that matter to diverse groups of women, there are also commonalities. Truth was speaking about the importance of all women's voices being heard. That is, *all* women in the United States, regardless of race, were disenfranchised at that time. In sum, intersectionality holds both the diversity and commonality of experiences of people who are oppressed. As a **critical theory**, intersectionality is focused on examining power and inequality, how they are maintained, and how to achieve equity and equality.

Within this perspective, it becomes clear that some groups experience multiple disadvantages, such as poor women or lesbian women. Others may be part of a disadvantaged group but also part of a privileged group, such as White women. The experience of gender differs for the women at each of these intersections, but there are also similarities. Intersectionality helps us to see the differences as well as the similarities, without assuming either.

Throughout this book, we will use an intersectional approach. It's important to acknowledge that psychology's historic overreliance on middle-class White college students as research participants makes it difficult to find an intersectional approach in much of that research.

As a brief example here, women's attitudes about gender roles tend to vary as a function of their race or ethnicity (Cole & Zucker, 2007). Feminists of any race or ethnicity, for instance, have readily recognized that White men oppress White women. Black feminists, on the other hand, have emphasized that the oppression of Black women by Black men can be understood only in the context of the fact that Black men themselves are oppressed by White people. Gender intersects with many other social categories, and understanding the psychology of women and gender requires examining and understanding those diverse intersections.

The Social Construction of Gender

Many of these themes in the psychology of women and gender reflect the social construction of gender. Feminist theorists view gender not as a biologically created fact or truth, but as a socially constructed phenomenon (Crawford & Kaufman, 2005; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Marecek et al., 2004). **Social constructionism** is an epistemology (or theory of knowledge) that holds that people—including scientists—do not discover reality; rather, they construct or invent it (Watzlawick, 1984). That is, we actively construct meanings for events in the environment based on our own prior experiences, social interactions, and predispositions. Likewise, we “do” gender in the ways that we communicate with and relate to others, modify our appearance, and perform our social roles (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, concepts like the gender binary are a product of social interactions and culture and are not objective truths.

The extent to which we socially construct gender becomes clearer if we view how gender is constructed within other cultures. In European American cultures, the gender binary is assumed by most people. To them, it is perfectly obvious—a clear reality—that there are two genders, male and female. However, among many Indigenous Peoples in North America, including the Cherokee, Shoshone, Diné, Lakota, and Zuni, there is another gender category, known generally as **Two Spirit** (a recently coined term, since each tribal language has a unique name for this gender). Native individuals who identify as Two Spirit feel they possess both male and female spirits, and they may dress as and adopt roles traditional for both men and women or for a gender that differs from the one they were assigned at birth. Viewed within their communities as gifted, Two-Spirit individuals may serve as spiritual leaders or perform specialized work. Some nations consider Two Spirit to be a third or fourth gender, and it is perfectly clear in their culture that there are more than two genders (Garrett & Barret, 2003; Jacobs et al., 1997; Kessler & McKenna, 1985). What seems like an obvious reality to European Americans, that there are only two genders, turns out to be a social construction, which becomes clear when we see that other cultures have constructed the categories differently.

Feminist psychologists have noted that gender is not only a person variable (as traditional psychology has maintained) but also a stimulus variable (e.g., Grady, 1979). By saying that gender is a *person variable*, we mean that it is a characteristic of the individual; this point of view leads to the study of gender differences, a pursuit that has occupied some traditional psychologists and some feminist psychologists (see Chapter 3). By saying that gender is also a *stimulus variable*, we



PHOTO 1.5 We'wha was a Two-Spirit person from the Zuni Nation. She was born with a male body but adopted traditionally feminine traits. We'wha was often misgendered by White Americans, who understood gender only as a binary system and assumed she was a cisgender woman.

By Unknown—The Library at The College of Staten Island of the City University of New York, PD-US.

mean that a person's gender has a profound impact on the way others react to that person. Our understanding of an individual—that is, our social construction of that individual—is in part determined by our knowledge of that individual's gender. This point of view stimulated an area of research in which participants are led to believe that a particular piece of work was done by a man or a woman, or that a particular infant is male or female; their responses to the work or the infant can then be studied as a function of the gender they believe it to be (see Chapters 8 and 11 for examples). Therefore, gender is both a personal characteristic and a stimulus variable.

Social constructionism, then, argues that these processes occur in at least three areas: (1) The individual engages in social constructions, for example, reacting to another person differently depending on whether that person is male or female; (2) the society or culture provides a set of social constructions of gender, for example, whether there are two genders or more; and (3) scientists socially construct gender by the way they construct their research.

Among other things, this view that gender is socially constructed challenges the belief that science is fundamentally objective (Intemann, 2020). Scientific knowledge, like all other knowledge, is shaped by the values and assumptions of the perceiver—in this case, the scientist. If scientists think of themselves as objective, they won't consider how androcentric or sexist bias may shape their research, and the result will be science that further marginalizes women and nonbinary people (Chrisler & McHugh, 2018).

Continuing Topics in Psychology

You will also notice other topics or issues that return throughout this book, which are present throughout psychology. For example, you will learn about theories of women's behavior, some of which have solid data (empirical evidence) backing them, some of which do not. Not every theory is true, nor is every theory a good description or explanation of behavior. Just because Freud said something does not make it true (or false). Readers need to become critical thinkers about the difference between statements based on theory and statements based on empirical evidence.

Another important topic in psychology is the distinction between internal and external determinants of behavior. Is human behavior determined more by internal factors, such as a person's enduring personality traits, or more by external factors, such as the specific situation the person is in. Advocates of the latter position point out how inconsistent people's behavior can be from one situation to another—for example, a man may be aggressive toward a business competitor, but passive or nurturant toward his spouse. This suggests that his behavior is not determined by a personality trait (aggressiveness), but rather by the situation. This distinction also has practical implications for improving people's lives, which is the primary goal of psychology.

SOURCES OF BIAS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

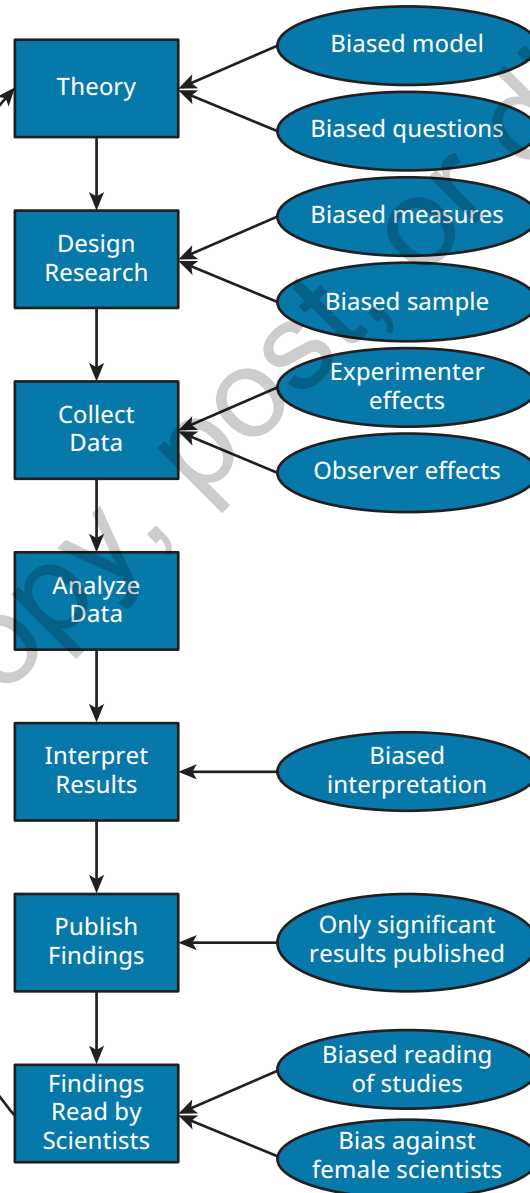
Research in the psychology of women and gender is progressing at a rapid pace. I will share with you much important information about the psychology of women and gender in this book, but note that there are still many more questions yet to be answered. With research on the psychology of women and gender expanding so rapidly, many important discoveries will be made in the next 10 to 20 years. Therefore, someone who takes a course on the psychology of women and gender should do more than just learn what is currently known about women and gender. It is even more valuable to gain the skills to become a "sophisticated consumer" of psychological research. That is, it is very important that you be able to evaluate future studies about gender that you may find in newspapers, magazines, blogs, websites, or scholarly journals. To do this, you need to develop at least three skills: (1) Know how psychologists go about doing research,

(2) Be aware of ways in which gender bias may affect research, and (3) Be aware of problems that may exist in research on gender roles or the psychology of women. In general, one of the most valuable things you can get from a college education is the development of *critical thinking skills*. The feminist perspective encourages critical thinking about research and theory. The following discussion is designed to help you develop these skills in psychology.

How Psychologists Do Research

Figure 1.1 is a diagram of the process that psychologists go through in doing research, shown in rectangles. The diagram also indicates points at which gender bias may enter, shown in ovals.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Ways That Gender Bias May Enter Each of the Stages of the Research Process



Source: Created by the author.

Copyright ©2026 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

The process, in brief, is generally this: The scientist starts with some theoretical model, whether a formal model, such as gender schema theory (see Chapter 2), or merely a set of personal assumptions. Based on the model or assumptions, the scientist then formulates a question. The purpose of the research is to answer that question. Next, they design the research, which involves several steps: A behavior must be selected, a way to measure the behavior must be devised, a group of appropriate participants must be chosen, and a research design must be developed. One of these substeps—finding a way to measure the behavior—is probably the most fundamental aspect of quantitative psychological research. The next step is for the scientist to collect the data. The data are then analyzed (often, but not always, using statistics) and the results are interpreted. Next, the scientist publishes the results, which are read by other scientists and incorporated into the body of scientific knowledge (and in textbooks!). Finally, the system comes full circle, because the results are fed into the theoretical models that other scientists will use in formulating new research.

Now let us consider some of the ways in which gender bias—bias that may affect our understanding of the psychology of women or gender—may enter into each stage of this process (Caplan & Caplan, 2009).

Bias in Theory

The theoretical model or set of assumptions the scientist begins with has a profound effect on the outcome of the research. Gender bias may enter if the scientist begins with a biased theoretical model. One example of a biased theoretical model is psychoanalytic theory as formulated by Freud (see Chapter 2). A person with a psychoanalytic orientation might design research to document the presence of penis envy or immature superego in women; someone with a different theoretical orientation wouldn't even think to ask such questions. It is important to be sensitive to the theoretical orientation of a scientist reporting a piece of research—and sometimes the theoretical orientation isn't stated; it needs to be unearthed—because that orientation affects the rest of the research and the conclusions that are drawn.

Feminist scholars advocate an important method for overcoming the problems of biased theoretical models and stereotyped research questions: Go to the community of people to be studied, ask them about their lives, and learn what the significant questions are. For example, research on transgender women may be limited if it is conducted by cisgender women working from theories developed by cisgender men. It is better scientific practice to begin by asking transgender women for input on the questions or issues that need to be explored. Theories can be built at a later stage, once a firm foundation has been laid beginning from the women's own experiences and perspectives.

Bias in Research Design

As shown in Figure 1.1, the next step in psychological research is designing the research. Research methods in psychology include a range of techniques and a variety of settings. Depending on the research question, a psychologist might conduct a controlled experiment or a naturalistic observation, collecting data in a laboratory or field setting. For example, it is possible to conduct an experiment in a naturalistic setting like a classroom, and sometimes observational research happens in laboratories. Some scholars argue that laboratory experiments are inherently gender biased, although this point is controversial (Peplau & Conrad, 1989). We will return to this question in greater detail later in this chapter. The most important point is that the methods are a logical fit to the research questions. Regardless of the setting, to be a true experiment, the methods must always include (a) the researcher randomly assigning participants to conditions,

(b) some kind of experimental control to rule out confounds, and (c) the manipulation of an independent variable.

Designs that don't meet these three criteria are known as **quasi-experimental designs** (*quasi* meaning “not quite”). For example, a quasi-experiment might compare two or more groups of participants on their response to a treatment without randomly assigning the participants to the treatment conditions. Thus, studies of gender differences are not true experiments, but rather quasi-experiments, because the researcher cannot randomly assign participants to be a particular gender.

When psychologists study a trait or behavior, they must clearly define it for the purposes of their study; that is, they must create an *operational definition*. **Quantitative research methods** use operational definitions that involve **psychological measurement**, or the assignment of numbers to psychological characteristics. Psychological measurement may take many forms. If the researcher wants to measure aggressive behavior in preschool children, the measurement technique may involve having trained observers sit unobtrusively in a preschool classroom and make check marks on a research form every time a child engages in an aggressive act. Or, researchers may conduct diagnostic interviews with participants to determine whether a participant has a psychiatric disorder, such as depression. We'll return to the topic of bias in psychiatric disorder diagnosis in Chapter 16.

Here, however, we will concentrate on psychological tests, some of which have been the objects of sharp criticism for problems of gender bias (Baker & Mason, 2010). Let's consider as an example the mathematics portion of the SAT, which continues to be taken widely by high school seniors who are planning to attend college. The SAT Math has been criticized a great deal on the grounds that it is biased against women. In 2024, for example, women taking it scored an average of 496, compared with an average of 514 for men (College Board, 2024). How could such a test be biased against women? One issue is that the test is timed; the gender difference in standardized math test performance decreases with a longer test (Balart & Oosterveen, 2019). Another issue is the content and wording of questions. If the content of an item involves situations that men experience more frequently, or requires knowledge to which men have more access, then the item is gender biased. As an example, consider the following item, which actually appeared on the SAT in 1986:

A high school basketball team has won 40% of its first 15 games. Beginning with the 16th game, how many games in a row does the team now have to win in order to have a 55% winning record?

- a. 3
- b. 5
- c. 6
- d. 11
- e. 15

Men, who tend to have more experience with team sports and computing win-loss records, have an advantage. There is a direct algebraic solution, which a woman could do if she had mastered algebra, but it is time-consuming, and the test is timed. A man might say, “I know that 11 out of 20 is a 55% record. Will that work? Yes. The answer is 5.”

If women score lower than men on a particular psychological test, there often are two possible interpretations: (1) Women are not as skilled at the ability being measured, or (2) the gender

difference simply indicates that the test itself contained biased items. We'll consider bias on the SAT again in Chapter 3, when we discuss stereotype threat.

Another area of gender bias in research design has to do with sampling. There is a long history of gender bias in choosing participants for psychological research, with an overreliance on male participants. Even in nonhuman animal research, scientists have largely excluded female subjects, with significant consequences for public health and policy (Shansky & Murphy, 2021). In research with human participants, we see that the tide is changing. For example, in 1970 in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 42% of the articles reported on male-only studies, and in 1990 the percentage was 20% (Gannon et al., 1992). By 2007, women were somewhat overrepresented as research participants in mainstream psychology journals, a pattern that may stem from the overreliance on undergraduate psychology students (who are disproportionately female) as research participants (Cundiff, 2012). The reliance on single-gender samples varies by discipline; although women are now somewhat overrepresented as participants in psychological research, they remain underrepresented as participants in biomedical and neuroscience research (Eagly & Riger, 2014).

Researchers can make a second error that compounds the effects of using an all-male sample: **overgeneralization**. That is, having used a single-gender sample, the researchers then discuss and interpret the results as if they were true of all people, regardless of their gender.

Although psychological research has become less prone to gender bias in sampling, problems remain. Psychologists have been guilty of an overreliance on college student samples, which are typically homogeneous in several ways, including age (most participants are between 18 and 22), race/ethnicity (mostly White), and social class (mostly middle class). Feminist psychologists argue for the importance of recognizing the diversity of human experience. Your family's ethnic group and social class influenced the environment in which you grew up and therefore influenced your development and behavior. Feminist psychologists urge researchers to use samples that will allow an exploration of gender as well as other forms of diversity.

Bias in Data Collection

In the step of research in which the data are collected, two important kinds of bias may enter: experimenter effects and observer effects.

Experimenter effects occur when some characteristic of the experimenter affects the way respondents behave and thus affects the outcome of the experiment. For example, in one experiment, a sex survey was administered by either a male or female researcher; men reported more sexual partners when they had a female researcher (Fisher, 2007). It is disturbing to realize that an experiment might have different outcomes depending on the experimenter's gender. What other characteristics might contribute to experimenter effects?

The problem of experimenter effects is not unsolvable. The situation can be handled by having several experimenters—for example, half of them female, half of them male—collect the data. This will minimize any experimenter effects due to the gender of the experimenter and demonstrate whether the gender of the experimenter did have an effect on the participants' behavior.

Another important bias that may enter at the stage of data collection is observer effects. **Observer effects** (sometimes also called *rater bias*) occur when the researcher's expectations for the outcome of the research influence their observations and recording of the data (Hoyt & Kerns, 1999; Lakes & Hoyt, 2009; R. Rosenthal, 1966). Scientists are no more immune than laypeople to having stereotyped expectations for the behavior of women and men. These stereotyped expectations might lead scientists to find stereotyped gender differences in behavior where

there are none. As an example, consider research on gender differences in aggression among preschool children. If observers expect more aggression from boys, that may be just what they observe, even when the boys and the girls behave identically.

The technical procedure that is generally used to guard against observer effects is the blind or masked study. It simply means that observers are kept unaware of which experimental group participants are in so that the observers' expectations cannot affect the outcome. Unfortunately, this method is virtually impossible in gender research, as the gender of a person is usually apparent from appearance, and therefore the observer can't help but be aware of it.

One exception is infants and small children, whose gender is notoriously difficult to identify when they are clothed. This fact was used in a classic study that provides some information on whether observer effects do influence gender research. The study is discussed in detail in Chapter 9, but in brief, adults rated the behavior of an infant on a videotape (Condry & Condry, 1976). The infant was dressed in clothing that didn't signal their gender. Half the observers were told the infant was male and half were told the infant was female. When the infant showed a negative emotional response, those who thought the infant was male tended to rate the emotion as anger, whereas those who thought the infant was female rated "her" as showing fear. The observers rated behavior differently depending on whether they thought they were observing a male or female infant.



PHOTO 1.6 Diverse research teams can help limit experimenter effects.

shironosov/iStockPhoto

Bias in Interpretation of Results

Once the scientist has collected the data and analyzed them statistically, the results must be interpreted. Sometimes the interpretation a scientist makes is a large leap of faith away from the results. Therefore, this is also a stage at which gender bias may enter (Hegarty & Pratto, 2010).

As an example, let us consider a well-documented phenomenon of psychological gender differences. A class of students takes its first exam in Introductory Psychology. Immediately after taking the exam, but before receiving their results, the students are asked to estimate their exam scores. On average, men will estimate higher scores than women will estimate (see Chapter 3). At this point, the data have been collected and analyzed statistically. It can be stated (neutrally) that there are statistically significant gender differences, with men estimating more points than women. The next question is this: How do we interpret that result? The standard interpretation is that the result indicates that women lack self-confidence or have low confidence in their abilities. The interpretation that is not made, although it is just as logical, is that men have unrealistically high appraisals of their own performance.

The point is that, given a statistically significant gender difference, such a result can often be interpreted in two opposite ways, one of which is favorable to men and one of which is favorable to women. A persistent tendency has existed in psychology to make interpretations that are favorable to men; these interpretations are based on a **female deficit model**.

Sometimes there is no way of verifying which interpretation is right. In the example above, however, we can find out how the students scored on the exam. Those results tend to indicate that women and girls will underestimate their scores by about as much as men and boys overestimate theirs (Cole et al., 1999; D'Amico & Geraci, 2022). Thus, the second interpretation is as accurate as the first.

Becoming sensitive to the point at which scientists go beyond their data to interpret them, and becoming aware of when those interpretations may be biased, is extremely important. We will return to this concern throughout this book.

Bias in Publishing Findings

Once the data have been analyzed and interpreted, the next step is to publish the findings. There is a strong tendency in psychological research to publish significant results only. This does not necessarily mean significant in the sense of important; it means significant in the sense of being the result of a statistical test that reaches the .05 level of significance. In other words, it means that if the study were repeated, there would be a less than 5% chance that the results would be different.

Why does it matter if we publish only significant findings in the psychology of gender? It means that there is a tendency to report statistically significant gender differences and to omit mention of gender similarities and nonsignificant gender differences. That is, we tend to hear about studies finding that men and women differ, but we tend not to hear about studies finding that men and women are similar. As a result, there would be a bias toward emphasizing gender differences and ignoring gender similarities.

Bias Against Female Scientists

If there is a tendency for reports by female scientists to be considered less authoritative than reports by male scientists, this would also introduce bias. Evidence of such a gender bias might include the underrepresentation of women as lead authors of scientific journal articles or as lead investigators on grant proposals to the National Science Foundation. Research on the extent of this problem suggests that bias against female scientists happens, but not uniformly or consistently over time or across disciplines (Ceci et al., 2023; Meredith, 2013). Focusing just on the science of psychology, an analysis of 125 journals found that women are underrepresented as authors, despite being overrepresented among graduate students (Odic & Wojcik, 2020). Over time, change in this publication gap has narrowed, but journals in some subdisciplines (e.g., developmental psychology) have shown more progress toward gender equality than in others (e.g., neuroscience).

Having their research published is important for scientists' career advancement, and so is having their research cited or referenced by other authors. Female scientists have their research shared online or cited in scholarly publications less often than male scientists do (Gruber et al., 2021; Odic & Wojcik, 2020; Vászrhelyi et al., 2021). Likewise, being invited by a journal editor to write an article should reflect one's reputation as a leader in psychological science. Here, women are also underrepresented (Mackelprang et al., 2023). These gender differences aren't the result of men doing better science, however. For example, one study of neuroscience journal articles analyzed the articles' reference lists and authors' gender, finding that articles written by men tended to overcite the research of other men; the same pattern was not found with articles written by women (J. Dworkin et al., 2020). And, men are more likely than women to cite their *own* articles in their publications (King et al., 2017). As a result, research conducted by men ultimately garners more attention, another form of gender bias in the research process.

Other Kinds of Gender Biases

Another kind of bias is introduced if scientists tend to remember and use in their work only the studies that conform to their own biases or ideas and to ignore the studies that do not.

This tendency would allow for dominant biases (such as bias against women and people of color) to be perpetuated in scientific research. Gender bias and cisgenderism in the language used in reports of psychological research are also a concern. We will consider these forms of bias in language in depth in Chapter 4. In addition, research on women has long been considered a specialty or fringe topic, a perception that reflects the theme of androcentrism (Moss-Racusin, 2021). Today, this bias has shifted such that mainstream research includes psychology of women (Eagly et al., 2012) but marginalizes research on people outside the gender binary.

FEMINIST ALTERNATIVES TO BIASED RESEARCH

I have introduced several problems with psychological research that may affect our understanding of women and men. Of course, these problems are not present in every study, and certainly I don't mean to suggest that all psychological research is worthless. The point is to learn to think critically about biases that may or may not be present when you are reading about psychological research. Thinking critically about the theoretical orientation of a scientist and about biased interpretations of results is important.

A more general point emerges from this whole discussion of gender bias in research methods in psychology. Traditional psychology has historically viewed itself as an objective and value-free science. However, many psychologists, feminist psychologists among them, question whether psychological research can be objective and value-free (Peplau & Conrad, 1989). They point out that psychological research might more appropriately be viewed as an interaction between researcher and research participant that occurs in a particular context. The researcher brings to that interaction certain values that may influence the questions asked, the methods used, the results found, and the interpretations made. In short, psychological research cannot be totally objective. Acknowledging our values and reflecting on how they may shape the research process, then, is crucial for good science.

Psychology, of course, is not the only science that has erroneously claimed to be objective and value-free. For example, consider physics and its groundbreaking discoveries of ways to generate nuclear power. These discoveries can be used to manufacture weapons capable of annihilating thousands, or they can be used to generate electricity for cities. Values are closely connected with science.

Feminist psychologists would say that although the preceding criticisms of the research process are important and you should be aware of them, we need to go beyond those criticisms to offer some constructive alternatives. In doing so, let's consider the merits of gender-fair research and feminist research.

Gender-Fair and Feminist Research

Gender-fair research is research that is not guilty of any of the gender biases discussed in the previous sections (Denmark et al., 1988; McHugh et al., 1986). Characteristics of gender-fair research are as follows:

1. Single-gender research should rarely, if ever, be done. In some situations a single-gender design might seem justified, but the demands for gender fairness and inclusiveness might lead to better understandings. For example, a study exclusively examining women's mood fluctuations over the menstrual cycle would fail to identify systematic fluctuations in men's moods.

2. Theoretical models, underlying assumptions, and the kinds of questions asked should always be examined for gender fairness. For example, when someone proposes to do research on the effects of mothers' depression on their children, they should also ask whether fathers' depression has effects on their children. Otherwise, we assume that only mothers influence children and that fathers have no influence, which is unfair to both mothers and fathers.
3. To limit experimenter effects, research teams should be diverse in terms of gender and other social characteristics such as race or ethnicity.
4. Interpretations of data should always be examined carefully for gender fairness, and possibly several interpretations should be offered. For example, if there is a significant gender difference in the number of points students estimate they will get on an exam, at least two interpretations should be offered: that women underestimate and lack self-confidence and that men overestimate and have inflated expectations for their performance.

In a sense, then, gender-fair research proposes that we continue to play the research game by the same set of rules it has always had—tight controls, careful interpretations, and so on—but that we improve procedures so that the rules are observed fairly.

Some feminist researchers argue that we need to go even further in reforming psychological research. There truly is no single, comprehensive, definitive statement of the principles of **feminist research**. But many scholars have made contributions to how to “do” feminist research (e.g., Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Kimmel & Crawford, 2001; Rabinowitz & Sechzer, 1993; Reinhartz, 1992), and I present some of those ideas here.

Some feminist researchers have argued that the classic form of psychological research—the tightly controlled laboratory experiment—needs to be revised. They maintain that it is manipulative, intended to determine how manipulations of the independent variable cause changes in the dependent variable. It objectifies and dehumanizes the people it studies, in some cases still calling them “subjects.” It strips away the context of behavior, taking people out of their natural environments in order to control all those things the experimenter considers irrelevant. In all these senses—the manipulateness, the objectification, the context stripping—traditional psychological experimentation might be accused of being masculine or patriarchal. Thus, feminist research includes several recommendations:

1. Do not manipulate people, but rather observe them in their natural environments and try to determine how they experience their natural lives and worlds.
2. Do not call the people who are studied “subjects,” but rather “participants.” This reaffirms their personhood and agency.
3. When asking research participants about their gender, do not ask them to check a box indicating either “male” or “female” as their gender, which is imprecise and excludes trans and nonbinary participants (Dickey, Hendricks, & Bockting, 2016). Depending on the research question, it may be best simply to ask participants to designate their gender identity in their own words. Alternatively, it may be appropriate to use the two-step method: First, ask participants what gender they were assigned at birth, and then ask them to designate their gender identity using their own words.

4. Devote specific research attention to the special concerns of women and members of marginalized groups, such as trans and nonbinary people.
5. Do not think only in simple terms of variable A causing effects on variable B, but rather in terms of complex, interactive relationships in which A and B mutually influence each other. Complexity is emphasized.
6. Conduct *critical* research. That is, conduct research aimed at empowering members of marginalized or oppressed groups (such as women and transgender persons) and eliminating power inequities.
7. Consider diverse and innovative methods for studying human behavior (Crawford, 2013).
8. Keep in mind that scientific research and activism are not necessarily contradictory activities (Wittig, 1985).

Our values affect the scientific theories we propose, the questions we ask, and the research methods we use (Intemann, 2020). In particular, our values affect how we interpret research findings, as I discussed earlier. Readers need to become sensitive to the values expressed by a particular scientific position. At the same time, high-quality research that documents oppressive or harmful conditions and provides a prescription for eliminating inequities can catalyze social change. For example, if a psychologist conducts research finding that children are healthier and perform better in school when they receive free breakfast and lunch (e.g., Cohen et al., 2021), they may choose to advocate for continued funding of those meal programs in public schools. Psychologists who are engaged in activism and have social justice as their goal can still do good research; such researchers are obligated to articulate their values, but clearly that is a good rule for all scientists!

One example of innovative methods is the use of **qualitative research methods** or the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, known as **mixed methods** (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Most psychological research has relied on quantitative methods (Eagly & Riger, 2014)—that is, behavior is studied by converting it to numbers, such as IQ scores or individuals' ratings of their attitudes toward legal abortion on a scale from 1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 7 (*strongly approve*). With qualitative methods, the data are often text, talk, or images. For example, an interviewer may pose open-ended questions in an interview or focus group, record and transcribe the respondent's answers, and then analyze the answers for themes. In one such study, Watson and her colleagues (2012) interviewed African American women about their experiences of sexual objectification, finding that their experiences were the result of bias based on gender, race, and class. The researchers argued that, since most of the research on sexual objectification had been with White women, African American women's experiences were marginalized and should be a focus of study. The possibilities of feminist research—using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods—are limitless and exciting, especially because they can address social inequality.

The techniques of both gender-fair research and feminist research continue to make valuable contributions as we reform traditional psychological research practices. Gender-fair research and feminist research may diverge on some issues, though. For example, feminist researchers might conduct research on men's sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Gender-fair researchers might point out that workplace sexual harassment may be perpetrated

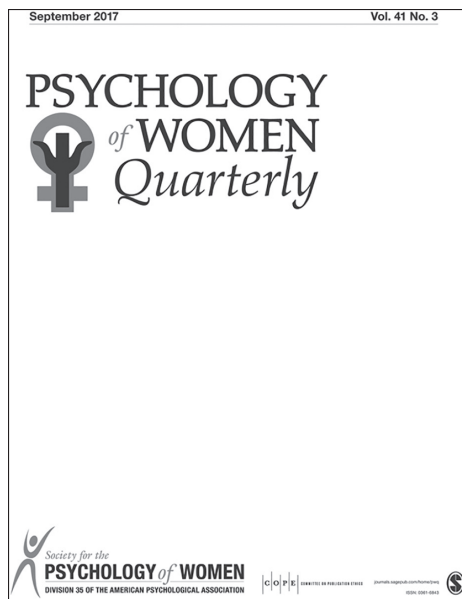


PHOTO 1.7 Scholarly journals such as *Psychology of Women Quarterly* publish empirical research on the psychology of women and gender.

© SAGE

by men and women alike, and that both should be studied. Feminist researchers might reply that, because sexual harassment is disproportionately perpetrated by men against women and trans people, it is a form of gender-based violence that should be a focus of feminist research.

Are We Making Progress?

Feminist psychologists began to publish their critiques of traditional research methods nearly 50 years ago. Has there been any progress? Have psychologists changed their methods to respond to these criticisms?

In a word: Yes! Feminism has positively influenced psychology in many ways (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Hegarty & Buechel, 2006). Substantial shifts have been made toward nonsexist methods in psychological research. There are more women researchers and more equal representation of women among participants. However, other forms of bias—such as bias against transgender persons and those outside the gender binary—remain. It is critical that we continue monitoring our methods and commit to reducing all forms of bias in our discipline.

EXPERIENCE THE RESEARCH

Understanding Gender Bias in Psychological Research

Design an experiment to determine whether an adult is more likely to help a 4-year-old child who is crying and apparently lost if the adult is alone and there are no other adults close by (no bystander condition) or if there are other adults present (bystander condition). Design two versions of the experiment. First, create the experiment as a traditional, pre-feminist psychologist might have done. Then, using Figure 1.1, make a list of all the examples of gender bias in the research. Finally, re-create the experiment to correct all the elements of gender bias so that it will meet the standards for gender-fair research.

CHAPTER PREVIEWS

This text is organized in sections, based both on my own teaching experience and on feedback from other instructors. The first section contains the groundwork for the other sections, covering foundational or essential concepts that we will then apply and explore in greater depth. Thus, in Chapter 2 we will look at the contributions to the understanding of the psychology of women and gender that have been made by some of the major theoretical systems of psychology and also introduce feminist theories.

Following these theoretical views, we will focus on another foundational concept in the psychology of women and gender: the study of gender differences. Chapter 3 reviews methods and evidence on gender stereotypes and gender differences to see the ways in which women and

men differ and the ways in which they are similar. Because feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of language, Chapter 4 is about gender and communication—considering how we perform or “do” gender in verbal and nonverbal communication as well as how language encodes and transmits gender inequality.

The second section of this book digs deeper into the intersectionality of gender, considering how it is constructed with other social categories, including race and sexuality. Intersectionality requires examination of privilege as well as disadvantage, statuses that can shift across situations. Chapter 5 introduces the scholarship in psychology at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, focusing on Black, Latina, Asian American, and Indigenous women in the U.S. Chapter 6 considers the intersection of gender and sexual orientation, focusing on queer women. And, in Chapter 7 we will examine the psychology of men and masculinity, evaluating the costs and benefits of the male role. Each of these three chapters will help contextualize the next sections of the book and develop a deeper sense of intersectionality.

The third section captures a range of content areas with a lifespan developmental approach. In Chapter 8 we will examine gender development from birth to old age. Chapter 9 presents important research on gender and emotion, including socialization and development of emotional competence. We will look at gender and achievement in Chapter 10 by considering research on gender differences in intellectual abilities and research on motivation and achievement. Chapter 11 is about gender and work, including discrimination and wage inequity as well as issues involved in balancing work and family roles.

The fourth section considers embodiment and health. Chapter 12 explores biological aspects of gender and gendered behavior, including research on nonbinary persons. Chapter 13 examines gender and sexuality, including research on the physiology of sexual response and research on gender similarities and differences in sexuality. Chapter 14 discusses gender within the health care system and research on several physical health issues, including abortion and breast cancer, as well as health issues unique to trans people. Chapter 15 centers on gender-based violence. This section on embodiment closes with Chapter 16, which considers mental health concerns that show gender disparities (such as depression and eating disorders) and feminist therapies.

Finally, in Chapter 17 we will reflect on historical shifts and trends in the conceptualization of gender within psychology.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The psychology of women and gender is an exciting and constantly evolving field. Similarly, language on gender continues to evolve rapidly. Terms such as *sex*, *gender*, *transgender*, *cisgender*, *gender binary*, and *nonbinary* are important and used throughout this book. Table 1.1 clarifies many of these terms and how I will use them.

A chief concern in the psychology of women and gender is sexism or gender bias. Sexism and its variations have changed over time, from old-fashioned sexism to modern sexism. Psychologists study sexism and its impact on psychological phenomena. A feminist is a person who favors political, economic, and social equality of all people, regardless of gender, and therefore favors the legal and social changes necessary to achieve gender equality.

There are several pervasive themes in the psychology of women and gender. The male-as-normative theme results in women and nonbinary people being marginalized, ignored, or devalued. Androcentrism also fuels a lopsided emphasis on gender differences, despite evidence that

women and men are both different and similar. In addition, critiquing the gender binary and analyzing gender with an intersectional approach are contemporary themes that challenge traditional approaches in psychology. We will revisit these themes throughout this book.

Gender bias can shape the design of research, including the type of methods, measures, and sample used. Experimenter effects and observer effects can alter the outcome of research, and results may be interpreted with a female deficit model. There are many feminist alternatives to sexist research, and nonsexist research methods are now more commonly used.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Ahmed, Sara. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press. In accessible and engaging prose, Ahmed describes key tenets of feminist theory and how to apply them in everyday life, working toward gender equality and caring for oneself and one’s community.

Butler, Judith. (2024). *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Butler discusses contemporary controversies around “gender ideology” and considers our evolving understanding of gender in political and historical context.

KEY TERMS

- Androcentrism
- Benevolent sexism
- Cisgender
- Cisgenderism
- Critical theory
- Experimenter effects
- Female deficit model
- Feminine evil
- Feminist
- Feminist research
- Gender
- Gender binary
- Gender differences
- Gender-fair research
- Genderqueer
- Gender similarities
- Hostile sexism
- Intersectionality
- Intersex
- Mixed methods
- Modern sexism
- Nonbinary
- Observer effects
- Old-fashioned sexism
- Overgeneralization
- Psychological measurement
- Qualitative research methods
- Quantitative research methods
- Quasi-experimental design
- Sexism
- Social constructionism
- Trans
- Transgender
- Two Spirit

2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Compare Freud's, Horney's, and Chodorow's psychoanalytic theories of gender differences.
- 2.2 Review mechanisms and evidence of Bandura's social learning theory and cognitive social learning theory on gender development.
- 2.3 Describe the cognitive-developmental approach to gender development.
- 2.4 Explain Bem's gender schema theory.
- 2.5 Compare sociobiology and evolutionary psychology perspectives and evidence on gender differences.
- 2.6 Review Eagly and Wood's social role theory and evidence on gender differences.
- 2.7 Identify major themes common to diverse feminist theories.

Gender differences have long fascinated people. As science has come to dominate intellectual thought, scientific approaches to gender have developed. In this chapter we will examine some major psychological theories that aim to explain differences between women and men and how they develop.

At the outset, I think it is important to highlight the distinction between theory and empirical evidence. In the pages that follow, you will read about many theories that have been proposed about the psychology of women and gender. Some theories have solid data (i.e., empirical evidence) backing them, whereas others do not. Not every theory is true, nor is every theory a good description or explanation of behavior. We all need to be critical thinkers about the difference between statements based on theory and statements based on empirical evidence.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES

In many ways, **psychoanalytic theories** are a starting point in the psychology of women and gender, offering some of the first scholarly explanations for differences between women and men. Originating in Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) formulation and psychoanalysis, these theories emphasize the interplay of unconscious drives and internal forces in development. Freudian theory has had an enormous impact on culture: It has permeated art, film, literature, and even the language and thinking of most laypeople. For these reasons alone, it is important to understand his work as a part of our history and culture.

Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development

One of Freud's greatest contributions was to elevate the perceived importance of the first 5 years of life. That is, he saw the personality of an adult as the product of previous experiences, and he believed that early childhood experiences were most critical. He proposed a stage theory of psychosexual development, each stage being characterized by a focus on one of the **erogenous zones**, parts of skin or mucous membranes highly endowed with nerve endings that are very sensitive to stimulation (e.g., the lips and mouth, the anal region, genitals). During stage 1, the *oral stage*, the infant derives pleasure from sucking and eating and experiences the world mainly through the mouth. Following this is the *anal stage*, in which pleasure is focused on defecating.

Freud proposed that boys and girls pass through the first two stages of psychosexual development, the oral and the anal, in a similar manner. However, during the **phallic stage**, around the ages of 3 to 6, the development of boys and girls diverges. As one might suspect from the name for this stage, girls will be at somewhat of a disadvantage here.

During the phallic stage, the boy becomes fascinated with his own penis, which is a rich source of pleasure and interest for him. At this stage boys experience the **Oedipal complex**, named for the Greek myth of Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. In the Oedipal complex, the boy sexually desires his mother and has an intense attachment to her. He also wishes to rid himself of the father, who is a rival for the mother's affection. But the son views his father as a powerful opponent and fears that his father will retaliate by castrating him. This castration anxiety becomes so great that, to resolve the problem, he represses his sexual desire for his mother and makes the critical shift to *identify* with the father. In doing so, the boy *introjects* (takes into himself as his own) the values and ethics of society as represented by the father and thus develops a **superego**. And, in identifying with the father, he comes to acquire his gender identity, taking on the masculine qualities the father supposedly possesses—strength, power, and so on.

For girls, the phallic stage is quite different. According to Freud, the first critical event is the girl's stark realization that she has no penis. Presumably she recognizes that the penis is superior to her clitoris. She feels cheated and envious of boys and thus comes to feel *penis envy*. Her penis envy can never be satisfied directly and, instead, is transformed into a desire to be impregnated by her father. Holding her mother responsible for her lack of a penis, she renounces her love for her mother and becomes intensely attracted to her father, thus forming her own version of the Oedipal complex, called the **Electra complex**. The desire to be impregnated by the father is a strong one and persists in the more general form of maternal urges, according to Freud.

According to Freud, the resolution of the Oedipal complex is critical for the boy's development, being necessary for the formation of his gender identity and superego. He also theorized that the Electra complex is never as fully resolved for girls as the Oedipal complex is for boys. This leads the girl to lifelong feelings of inferiority, a predisposition to jealousy, and intense maternal desires. In addition, because she never fully resolves the Electra complex and introjects society's standards, her superego is immature. She is morally inferior and lacks a sense of justice, ultimately because she lacks a penis.

Criticisms of Freudian Theory

Numerous criticisms of Freudian theory have been made. From a scientific standpoint, a major problem with psychoanalytic theories in general is that most of the concepts cannot be evaluated empirically. That is, because Freud's psychoanalytic theory placed so much value on internal, unconscious forces—which cannot be directly observed, measured, or tested—it is impossible to falsify or evaluate the validity of his theory.

Another criticism that is often raised is that Freud derived his ideas almost exclusively from work with people who sought therapy. In particular, his views on women may contain some truth about women who have problems of adjustment, but they fail to describe typical or psychologically well-adjusted women. This is an example of an error of overgeneralization.

Many modern psychologists argue that Freud overemphasized biological determinants of human behavior and underemphasized social or cultural forces in shaping behavior. For example, his views on the origin of gender differences between men and women, and on the nature of female personality, are heavily biological, relying mostly on anatomical differences. In relying on anatomy as an explanation, Freud ignored the enormous forces of culture acting to create gender differences.

Feminists have raised the above criticisms as well as many others (e.g., Lerman, 1986; Sherman, 1971; Weisstein, 1971). They are especially critical of Freud's assumption that the clitoris and vagina are inferior to the penis and have argued that Freudian theory is **phallogentric**.

Feminists also note the similarities between psychoanalytic theory and some of the themes discussed in Chapter 1. That is, Freud seems simply to be articulating age-old myths and images about women in "scientific" language. The image of women as sinful and the source of evil is translated into the scientific-sounding "immature superego." Freud's phallogentrism is an excellent example of an androcentric model: basically, for Freud, a girl is a castrated boy. His model of development describes male development, with female development being an inadequate variation on it.

Despite these serious criticisms, Freud made significant contributions regarding the importance of development. Indeed, prominent psychoanalytic theorists have revised or built upon his work, many of them women. Let's consider two.

Karen Horney

Originally, Karen Horney (1885–1952) accepted Freud's ideas wholeheartedly; in a 1924 paper she eagerly documented the origins of penis envy and of the castration complex in women. However, she soon became critical of these notions, and in a 1926 paper she pointed out that Freud's theorizing on women was phallogentric. Horney proposed that Freudian theory actually articulates the childish views boys have of girls. Her chief disagreement was over his notion that penis envy was the critical factor in female development. Horney used the master's tricks against him and postulated that the critical factor was male envy of women, particularly of female reproductive potential, which she called **womb envy**. She also suggested that male achievement represents an overcompensation for feelings of anatomical inferiority (i.e., a femininity complex).

Nancy Chodorow

Nancy Chodorow's (1978) book *The Reproduction of Mothering* is a more recent addition to the psychoanalytic literature, representing a second-wave feminist contribution to psychology (Bell, 2004). Integrating psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives, Chodorow sought to answer this question: Why do women mother? That is, why is it that in all cultures women do almost all of the child care? She theorized that, when child care is provided primarily by women, daughters and sons develop differently. That is, mothering produces



PHOTO 2.1 Karen Horney made substantial contributions to psychoanalytic theory.

Bettmann/Bettmann/Getty Images

daughters who want to mother—thereby reproducing mothering—and sons who dominate and devalue women.

Infants start life in a state of total dependency and, given the traditional division of labor (in which women care for children), those dependency needs are satisfied almost exclusively by the mother. In addition, infants are egocentric, or self-centered, and have trouble distinguishing between the primary caretaker—the mother—and themselves. Because mothers do such a good job of meeting their infants' needs, infants blissfully assume that mothers have no interests outside of mothering their children. As the children grow, the unpleasant reality eventually becomes clear as they come to understand that mothers do have other interests.

Chodorow theorized that the early, intensely intimate relationship with the mother affects the sense of self and attitudes toward women, for both daughters and sons. Boys and girls continue to expect women to be caring and sacrificing, and that forever shapes their attitudes toward women. The girl's sense of self is profoundly influenced because her intense relationship to her mother is never entirely broken. Therefore, girls never see themselves as separate in the way that boys do, and girls and women continue to define themselves as caregivers of others.

By contrast, boys begin with the same intense attachment to the mother but must repress it to develop a masculine identity. Thus, masculinity comes to be defined negatively, as the opposite or lack of femininity. Masculinity involves denying feminine attachment to the mother. Therefore, the boy's need to separate himself from his mother (and all women) and define a masculine identity for himself fosters his devaluation of all women. Traditionally, fathers have been essentially absent or uninvolved in child care, thereby idealizing their masculine qualities and promoting the notion of masculine superiority. At the same time, men's capacity for providing child care is limited by their denial of relatedness.

According to Chodorow, women's relational needs are greater than men's relational needs, which are satisfied by a heterosexual relationship with a woman, in which they recapture the warmth of the infant's relationship with their mother. Yet women's greater relational needs cannot entirely be satisfied by a man. And so, women have babies, their relational needs are satisfied, and the cycle repeats itself.

Chodorow's question—Why do women mother?—is not so small as it might appear. Women's mothering perpetuates the whole division of labor by gender, because once women are committed to be the exclusive caregivers, men must do the other jobs necessary for society to continue. Moreover, women's mothering promotes the devaluation of women.

What makes Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory *feminist*? First, Chodorow argues that women's mothering was taken for granted and not given the attention it deserved (Chodorow, 2013). Second, she offers a feminist revision of some of Freud's ideas. For example, she argues that penis envy results not from a girl's recognition of the inherent superiority of the penis (as Freud said), but rather from the fact that the penis symbolizes the power men have in our society. Third, Chodorow does not stop with her analysis of the family dynamics that perpetuate the devaluation of women; she gives a prescription for social change to eliminate gender inequities. She theorizes that the only way for the cycle to be broken is for men to begin participating equally in child care:

Any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women. (Chodorow, 1978, p. 215)

Research evidence helps us evaluate some aspects of Chodorow's theory. For example, in one study researchers observed mother-child interactions in a sample of Latine families (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019). The team measured maternal behaviors such as sensitivity,

positive regard, negative regard, detachment, and intrusiveness toward their children, as well as child behaviors such as engagement and positive and negative mood. They found that mothers behaved similarly with their sons and daughters and that boys and girls behaved similarly with their mothers. In other words, the findings don't support Chodorow's assertion that mothers and daughters are closer than mothers and sons.

Nevertheless, Chodorow's theory is criticized by feminist psychologists (e.g., Lorber et al., 1981). First, the theory has a heterosexist and cisnormative bias. It explains in detail why children grow up heterosexual, consistent with the gender binary, but it makes no attempt to understand the development of people with other sexual orientations (Rich, 1980). Second, Chodorow's work lacks an intersectional approach, in that it focuses exclusively on gender and ignores race and social class (Spelman, 1988). Third, most of the evidence Chodorow cites in her book is clinical—that is, it comes from individual histories of people seeking psychotherapy. As such, Chodorow's theory is open to the same criticism that was made of Freud's theory: The theory is based on the experiences of a select group of people, and thus their experiences are not generalizable to others.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Psychoanalytic approaches, with their emphasis on unconscious desires, eventually gave way to a very different set of approaches in psychology—learning theories, which instead emphasize behaviors. Social learning theory is a major theoretical system in psychology, designed to describe the processes of human development (Bandura & Walters, 1963). It emphasizes several key mechanisms in development, including reinforcement, punishment, imitation, and observational learning. Thus, an explanation for psychological gender differences is that children *learn* how to behave differently based on their gender. That is, boys and girls act appropriately for their genders because they have been rewarded for doing some things and punished for doing others. The idea is that the operant conditioning mechanisms of reinforcement and punishment explain the acquisition of gender roles. Children are rewarded or reinforced for displaying gender-appropriate behaviors and punished or not rewarded for displaying gender-inappropriate behaviors. For example, little girls are rewarded for being quiet and obedient, whereas little boys are rewarded for being athletic and tough. As a result, children are more likely to repeat the behaviors that have been reinforced, and gender differences in behavior develop.

Social learning theory also emphasizes the importance of two additional mechanisms: imitation and observational learning. **Imitation**, or **modeling**, means simply that children do what they see others (termed *models*) doing. Children's imitation is motivated partly by the power of authority figures, so they are especially likely to imitate parents, other adults, or older peers. **Observational learning** refers to situations in which children learn by observing the behavior of models, even though they may not actually perform the behavior at the time. According to social learning theory, these three mechanisms—reinforcement, imitation, and observational learning—are thought to underlie the process of **gender typing**, or the acquisition of gender-typed behaviors and learning of gender roles.



PHOTO 2.2 Learning gendered behavior: After the birth of a new sibling, this preschooler uses a doll to imitate her mother's breastfeeding.

© iStockphoto.com/martinedoucet

As for gender typing, the theory assumes that children tend to imitate same-gender models more than they imitate models of a different gender. That is, the little girl imitates her mother and other women more than she does men. This mechanism of imitation helps to explain the acquisition of the complex and subtle aspects of gender roles that probably have not been the object of reinforcements.

Gender-typed behavior may become part of the child's repertoire through observational learning. Such information may be stored up for use perhaps years later, when a situation in adolescence or adulthood calls for knowledge of gender-appropriate behaviors. For example, a young girl may observe her mother caring for an infant sibling. Although the little girl may not perform any infant-care behaviors at the time, much less be rewarded for them, she nonetheless may store up the information for use when she herself is a mother. Children will also learn to anticipate the consequences of their actions. The little girl knows in advance that her attempts to play rugby won't be reinforced and might even be punished.

According to social learning theory, then, gender typing results from differential rewards and punishments, as well as from imitation of same-gender models and observational learning.

Evidence for Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory has stimulated a great deal of research aimed at documenting the existence—or nonexistence—of the mechanisms it proposes. This research makes it possible to assess the adequacy of the social learning model for the development of gender differences.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of imitation and reinforcements in shaping children's behavior, particularly gender-typed behaviors such as aggression. A classic study by the social learning theorist Albert Bandura (1965) is a good example. In the first phase of this experiment, children were randomly assigned to view one of three films. In all of the films, an adult model was performing more than one aggressive behavior, but in one film the model was rewarded; in another, punished; and in the third, left alone without consequences. The children's aggressive behavior was then observed. As the social learning approach would predict, children who had viewed the model being punished performed the least aggressive behavior. Furthermore, and consistent with the findings of many other investigators (see Chapter 3), boys performed more aggressive behavior than girls. In the second phase of the experiment, the children were offered attractive reinforcements (pretty sticker pictures and juice treats) for performing as many of the model's aggressive responses as they could remember. Gender differences all but disappeared in this phase, and girls performed nearly as many aggressive behaviors as boys.

This experiment illustrates several important points. The first phase demonstrated that children do imitate and that they do so differentially depending on the perceived consequences of the behavior. Notice that in this phase the children themselves were not actually reinforced; they simply observed the model being reinforced. The second phase illustrated how gender differences in aggressive behavior can be influenced by reinforcements. When girls were given equal reinforcement for aggression, they were nearly as aggressive as boys. Certainly, the experiment is evidence of the power of imitation and reinforcement in shaping children's behavior.

Many studies shed light on the questions of parents modeling gendered behaviors and children imitating their same-gender parent. For example, one study with Mexican-origin families in the U.S. found that early adolescent girls were more likely than their male peers to imitate their mother's behavior (Perez-Brena et al., 2014). Yet, the researchers also found that boys were no more likely than girls to imitate their father's behavior. Of course, parents influence their children in different ways, and children who have both a mother and a father are shaped by the behaviors of both parents. For example, a study with African American families found that

youths' gender-typed interests decreased when they spent more time with an other-gender parent (Skinner & McHale, 2018). Altogether, findings like these remind us that gender development is complex and shaped by many factors.

There is plenty of evidence of gender-stereotyped role models in the media. For example, in one study experimenters randomly assigned preschoolers to two conditions (stereotyped or counter-stereotyped) in which the preschoolers viewed magazine pages of a boy and a girl playing with toys and saying things like "These are my favorite toys!" (read aloud by the experimenter). In the stereotyped condition, the children saw a boy playing with a toy car and a girl playing with My Little Pony; in the counter-stereotyped condition, the toys were swapped, with the boy playing with My Little Pony and the girl playing with the toy car (Spinner et al., 2018). After the children viewed the pages, they were randomly shown eight toys—half were masculine-typed and the other half were feminine-typed, and they included the car and pony from the magazine. For each toy, the experimenter asked, "Who should play with this toy?" and the preschoolers pointed to pictures to indicate their belief: only girls, only boys, or both girls and boys. The results indicated that children in the stereotyped condition were more likely to say that masculine-typed toys were for boys and feminine-typed toys were for girls, but children in the counter-stereotyped condition were more flexible. Those children tended to say that all the toys were appropriate for both boys and girls. These results demonstrate that exposing preschoolers to counter-stereotyped role models can impact the gender-typing process. We return to the role of media in gender role development in Chapter 8.

Cognitive Social Learning Theory

Social learning theorists have also incorporated cognitive elements into their theories, which are now called cognitive social learning theory or social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The emphasis on reinforcement, punishment, and imitation remains, and cognitive processes such as attention, self-regulation, and self-efficacy are added.

Every day, children observe thousands of behaviors in the complex environment surrounding them, yet they imitate or model only a few of them. Attention is the cognitive process that weeds out most of the behaviors that are irrelevant to the child and focuses on the few that are most relevant. Gender makes some behaviors relevant and others not. Once children can differentiate men and women, they pay more attention to same-gender than to other-gender models (Bussey & Bandura, 1992). As noted earlier, children tend to imitate same-gender models.

According to cognitive social learning theory, as children develop, regulation of their behavior shifts from externally imposed rewards and punishments to internalized standards and self-sanctions. As children learn to regulate themselves, they guide their own behavior (a process known as self-regulation). And, as they learn the significance of gender, they monitor and regulate their own behavior according to internalized gender norms. The data show that children are more likely to monitor their behavior for gender-appropriateness when they are in mixed-gender groups than when they are in single-gender groups (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). That is, they self-regulate their gender-typed behavior more when they are around other-gender peers.

Self-efficacy is an important concept in social cognitive theory. **Self-efficacy** refers to our beliefs about our ability to accomplish something, to produce a particular outcome. People can have a global sense of self-efficacy, but efficacy beliefs also tend to vary depending on the area or task. You may feel certain that you can earn an A in a psychology course but have no confidence that you can pass a chemistry course. Efficacy beliefs are extremely important in individuals' lives. They affect the goals we set for ourselves, how much time and effort we put into attaining a goal, and whether we persist in the face of difficulties. People with strong efficacy beliefs redouble their efforts in the face of challenges, whereas those with low self-efficacy give up.

Efficacy beliefs, for example, play a large role in career choice and pursuing a career, perhaps over many years of necessary education (Bandura et al., 2001). Occupations are highly gendered (see Chapter 11). As girls observe teachers and see many women successfully doing the job, their self-efficacy at being a teacher increases. By contrast, when they observe few female airline pilots, their self-efficacy at being a pilot declines and they don't even consider it possible.

Cognitive social learning theory is an optimistic theory for those who want to see social change in gender roles. It says that if powerful others—for example, parents and the media—change which behaviors they model and reinforce, children can and will learn a different set of gender roles.

COGNITIVE-DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

In terms of impact, perhaps the closest equivalent in the second half of the 20th century to Freud's work in the first half was the developmental theory proposed by Jean Piaget, together with his female colleague Bärbel Inhelder. Lawrence Kohlberg (1966) then extended Piaget and Inhelder's cognitive principles to the realm of gender development.

Much of Piaget and Inhelder's thinking arose from their observations of the errors children made in answering questions such as those asked on intelligence tests. They concluded that these errors did not indicate that the children were stupid or ignorant, but rather that children had a different cognitive organization from that of adults. Piaget and Inhelder discovered that children's cognitive organizations change systematically over time, and they constructed a stage theory to describe the progression of these cognitive changes. Piagetian perspectives on cognitive development emphasize the importance of the child constructing their own development or being active and internally motivated to understand the meaning of concepts. Interestingly, concepts like gender and gender identity undergo developmental changes parallel to the development of other concepts.

Kohlberg theorized that **gender constancy**—the understanding that one's gender is stable over time and consistent across situations—is critical to children's gender development. Put in Piagetian terms, when a child has gender constancy, they can *conserve* gender; conservation is the understanding that, even though something may change in appearance, its essence remains the same. Developing gender constancy is a process that begins with acquiring **gender identity**,

or knowing one's own gender. Children typically have gender identity around 2 years of age (Kohlberg, 1966; Zosuls et al., 2009). You will learn more about the stages of gender constancy development in Chapter 8.

Cognitive-developmental theory views gender role learning as one aspect of cognitive development. The child learns a set of rules regarding what men do and what women do and behaves accordingly. In this theory, gender role learning is not entirely imposed by external forces, but rather is self-motivated and reflects children's engagement with their social environment. The child essentially engages in self-socialization and self-selects the behaviors to be learned and performed based on rules about the gender appropriateness of the behavior. In Chapter 8, we will discuss the self-socialization model of gender (Tobin et al., 2010).



PHOTO 2.3 Psychologist Carol Gilligan proposed a feminist reformulation of an androcentric theory of moral reasoning, described in Focus 2.1.

Neil Turner / Alamy Stock Photo

FOCUS 2.1: FEMINIST REFORMULATION OF A THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawrence Kohlberg made another major contribution to psychology: a theory of moral development. Again using Piagetian theory of cognitive development as the foundation, he developed a stage theory of how our understanding of morality and moral problem-solving changes from early childhood through adolescence. First, let's consider his research methods. Kohlberg and his colleagues (Colby et al., 1983; Kohlberg, 1969) studied moral thought by presenting participants with a moral dilemma like this one:

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging 10 times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about \$1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Next, participants were asked a number of questions, such as whether Heinz should steal the drug and why. The important part is not whether the person says Heinz should or should not steal, but rather the person's answer to the question of *why*, which reflects the stage of development of moral reasoning.

Based on his research, Kohlberg concluded that people go through a series of three levels in their moral reasoning as they mature, with each level divided into two stages. His model is presented in Table 2.1. In Level I, *preconventional morality*, children (usually preschoolers) have little sense of rules and obey simply to avoid punishments or to obtain rewards. For example, Heinz should not steal because he might get caught and put in jail. In Level II, *conventional morality*, children (usually beginning in elementary school) are well aware of society's rules and laws and conform to them rigidly; there is a law-and-order mentality and a desire to look good in front of others. For example, Heinz should not steal because stealing is against the law. Finally, in Level III, *postconventional morality*, a person transcends the rules and laws of society and instead behaves in accordance with an internal, self-defined set of ethical principles. For example, it is acceptable for Heinz to steal because human life is more important than property. In Level III, it might be judged acceptable to violate laws in some instances, like when laws are unjust.

Kohlberg reported evidence of gender differences in moral development. He found that although most men make it to Stage 4, most women get to only Stage 3. From this it might be concluded that women have a less well-developed sense of morality.

One of the most influential critiques of Kohlberg's ideas is the feminist analysis by Carol Gilligan. In her influential book *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982), she criticized Kohlberg's theory for being androcentric and then offered a reformulation from a woman's point of view. Several of Gilligan's criticisms parallel our earlier discussion of gender bias in research. Some of the moral dilemmas Kohlberg used, like the Heinz dilemma, feature a male protagonist. Girls and women may find this a bit hard to relate to. Gilligan also pointed out that the people who formed the basis for Kohlberg's theorizing were a group of 84 men whom he followed for 20 years, beginning in their childhood. When a theory is based on evidence from men, we should not be surprised if it does not apply well to women—it's an error of overgeneralization. Finally, Gilligan identified a gender bias in Kohlberg's interpretation: The phenomenon that women reach only Stage 3 is interpreted as a deficiency in female development, whereas it might just as easily be interpreted as being a deficiency in Kohlberg's theory, which may not adequately describe female development.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s Models of Moral Development

Kohlberg’s Levels and Stages	Kohlberg’s Definitions	Gilligan’s Levels
Level I. Preconventional morality		Concern for the self and survival
Stage 1. Punishment orientation	Obey rules to avoid punishment	
Stage 2. Naive reward orientation	Obey rules to get rewards, share to get returns	
Level II. Conventional morality		Concern for being responsible, caring for others
Stage 3. Good boy/ good girl orientation	Conform to rules that are defined by others’ approval/disapproval	
Stage 4. Authority orientation	Rigid conformity to society’s rules, law-and-order mentality, avoid censure for rule breaking	
Level III. Postconventional morality		Concern for self and others as interdependent
Stage 5. Social contract orientation	More flexible understanding that we obey rules because they are necessary for social order, but the rules could be changed if there were better alternatives	
Stage 6. Morality of individual principles and conscience	Behavior conforms to internal principles (justice, equality) to avoid self-condemnation, and sometimes may violate society’s rules	

Gilligan did not stop with a critique of Kohlberg’s theory. She extended her analysis to provide a feminist reformulation of moral development. Her reformulation is based on the belief that women reason differently about the moral dilemmas—that is, they speak in a different moral voice—and that their voices had not been listened to. She theorized that men reason about moral issues using a **justice perspective**, which views people as differentiated and standing alone and focuses on the rights of the individual, and that women reason using a **care perspective**, which emphasizes relatedness between people and communication. According to Gilligan, men focus on contracts between people, and women focus on attachments between people. Kohlberg devised his stages of moral reasoning with the male as norm; thus, women’s answers appear immature, when in fact they are simply based on different concerns.

What evidence is there for Gilligan’s theory? Gilligan presented several studies in support of her theory. Let’s consider one of these: the abortion decision study. She interviewed 29 women between the ages of 15 and 33, all of whom were in the first trimester of pregnancy and were considering abortion. They were interviewed a second time one year later. Notice how she shifted the moral dilemma from a male stranger named Heinz to an issue that is far more meaningful to women. Just as Kohlberg saw three major levels of moral reasoning, so Gilligan found three levels among these women, but the focus for the levels was different.

Her model appears alongside Kohlberg's in Table 2.1. In Gilligan's Level I, preconventional morality, the woman making the abortion decision is concerned only for herself and her survival. An example is Susan, an 18-year-old, who was asked what she thought when she found out that she was pregnant:

I really didn't think anything except that I didn't want it. . . . I didn't want it, I wasn't ready for it, and next year will be my last year and I want to go to school. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 75)

Women who have reached Level II have shifted their focus to being responsible and to caring for others, specifically for a potential child. Women in Level II see their previous, less mature Level I responses as selfish. These themes are articulated by Josie, a 17-year-old, in discussing her reaction to being pregnant:

I started feeling really good about being pregnant instead of feeling really bad, because I wasn't looking at the situation realistically. I was looking at it from my own sort of selfish needs, because I was lonely. Things weren't really going good for me, so I was looking at it that I could have a baby that I could take care of or something that was part of me, and that made me feel good. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 77)

Typical of Level II thinking, Josie sees Level I thinking as selfish and shifts her concern to being responsible for the child. Notice that deciding to have an abortion or not to have an abortion is not what differentiates Level I from Level II. Either decision can be reached at either level.

Finally, in Level III moral reasoning, the self and others are seen as interdependent, and there is a focus on balancing caring for others (the fetus, the father, parents) with caring for oneself. A woman must have reasonably high self-esteem to reach this level, for without it the "caring for self" aspect looks like a return to the selfishness of earlier levels, rather than a complex balancing of care extended to all, including herself. A recapitulation of her earlier moral reasoning and her current balancing of caring is articulated by Sarah, who is faced with a second abortion:

Well, the pros for having the baby are all the admiration that you would get from being a single woman, alone, martyr, struggling, having the adoring love of this beautiful Gerber baby. . . . Cons against having the baby: it was going to hasten what is looking to be the inevitable end of the relationship with the man I am presently with. I was going to have to go on welfare. My parents were going to hate me for the rest of my life. I was going to lose a really good job that I have. I would lose a lot of independence. Solitude. . . . Cons against having the abortion is having to face up to the guilt. And pros for having the abortion are I would be able to handle my deteriorating relation with [the father] with a lot more capability and a lot more responsibility for myself. . . . Having to face the guilt of a second abortion seemed like not exactly—well, exactly the lesser of two evils, but also the one that would pay off for me personally in the long run because, by looking at why I am pregnant again and subsequently have decided to have a second abortion, I have to face up to some things about myself. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 92)

Sarah's reasoning reflects the cognitive and moral sophistication of Level III, which entails wrestling with complicated and sometimes conflicting perspectives.

Gilligan's theory is an example of many of the qualities of feminist scholarship. She detected the androcentrism of Kohlberg's work, listened to what women said, and created a new developmental model from her data. At the same time, her theory sounds as though men display one kind of moral thinking and women display a totally different kind. Rather, it seems likely that there are men who show "female" moral reasoning of the kind quoted earlier and women who display "male" moral reasoning. Here is the recurring theme of the tension between gender similarities and gender differences.

What do the data say? One major review found that women score at the same moral level, on average, as men. That is, there is no evidence to support Gilligan's basic claim that Kohlberg's scales shortchange women and cause them to score as less morally mature

(Mednick, 1989). Another review examined studies that had tested Gilligan's assertion that men and women reason with different "moral voices." That review found that women were slightly more likely use the care orientation and that men were slightly more likely to use the justice orientation, but these differences were small (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000). In short, although women tend to emphasize care reasoning and men tend to emphasize justice reasoning, most people use combinations of justice and care in their thinking about moral issues. It simply would not be accurate to say that girls and women speak in one moral voice and boys and men in another.

Reflecting on the decades of research on gender and moral reasoning, Gilligan (2023) argues that the ethic of care is not unique to women. In other words, to solve moral dilemmas with a "human voice" is neither male nor female. Thus, perhaps Gilligan's most valuable contributions were to offer an account of moral reasoning that elevated relationships and caring, and to propose a feminist reformulation of an androcentric theory based on biased methods. In these ways, Gilligan is a feminist psychology pioneer.

GENDER SCHEMA THEORY

A feminist social-cognitive perspective on gender development is psychologist Sandra Bem's (1981) *gender schema theory*. *The concept of a schema comes from cognitive psychology*, the branch of psychology that investigates how we think, perceive, process, and remember information. A **schema** is a general knowledge framework that a person has about a particular topic. A schema organizes and guides perception, and typically helps us process and remember information. Yet schemas also act to filter and interpret information, and they can therefore cause errors.

Bem (1981) applied schema theory to understanding the gender-typing process in her gender schema theory (see also Martin & Halverson, 1983; Martin et al., 2002). Her proposal was that each one of us has as part of our knowledge structure a **gender schema**, a set of gender-linked associations. Furthermore, the gender schema represents a basic predisposition to process information based on gender. It represents our tendency to see many things as gender-related and to want to categorize things by gender. The gender schema processes new, incoming information, filtering and interpreting it.

Bem theorized that the developmental process of gender typing or gender role acquisition in children results from the child's gradual learning of their culture's gender schema content. Many gender-linked associations constitute the schema: Girls wear dresses but boys don't; boys are strong and tough but girls are pretty; girls grow up to be mommies but boys don't.

Later, the gender schema becomes closely linked to the self-concept. Thus, 5-year-old Maria knows she is a girl and has a girl schema that she attaches to her own sense of girlhood. Maria's self-esteem then begins to be dependent on how well she measures up to her girl schema. At that point, she becomes internally motivated to conform to society's female gender role (a point much like Kohlberg's). Society does not have to force her into the role; she gladly does it herself and feels good about herself in the process. Finally, Bem proposed that different individuals have, to some extent, different gender schemas. The content of the schema varies because individuals have different experiences and live in different families, cultures, and so on. And the gender schema is more central to self-concept for some people than for others; gender *schematic* individuals are agentic or masculine men and communal or feminine women, whereas gender *aschematic* individuals are less gender-typed.

Evidence for Gender Schema Theory

In one classic study, Bem (1981) gave a list of 61 words, in random order, to a sample of college students. Some words were proper names, some referred to animals, some were verbs, and some were articles of clothing. Half the names were masculine and half were feminine. One-third of the animal words were masculine (gorilla), one-third were feminine (butterfly), and one-third were neutral (ant). Similarly, one-third of the verbs and the articles of clothing were each masculine, feminine, and neutral. The participants' task was to recall as many of the 61 words as they could, in any order. Based on many studies with memory tasks like this, psychologists know that people tend to cluster words into categories based on similar meaning; this is indicated by the order in which they recall the words. For example, if the person organized the words according to gender, the recall order might be gorilla, bull, trousers; but if the organization was according to animals, the recall order might be gorilla, butterfly, ant. If gender-typed people (put another way, agentic or masculine men and communal or feminine women, as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory, a test discussed further in Chapter 3) use a gender schema to organize information, then they should cluster words into gender groupings. That is exactly what occurred. Gender-typed persons tended to cluster words according to gender, a result that supports gender schema theory.

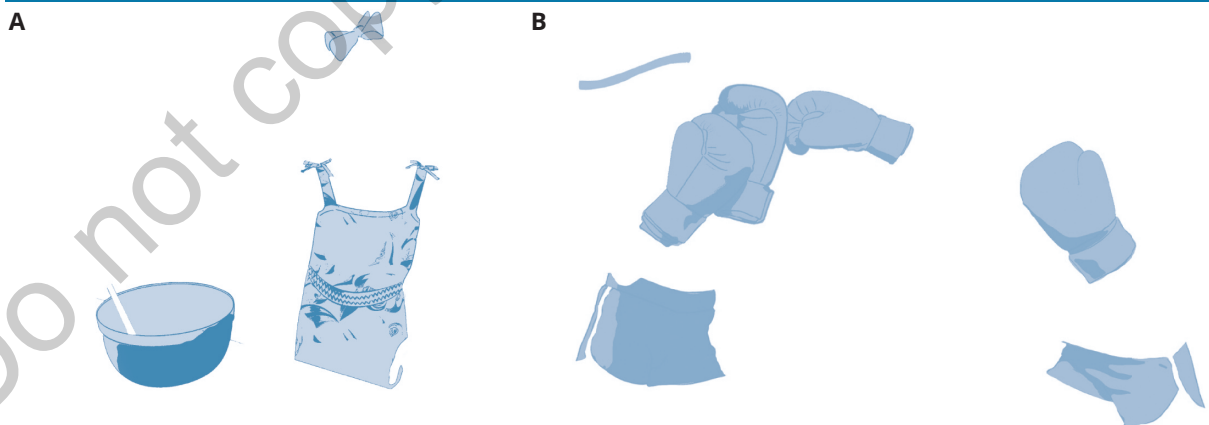
In another classic experiment, this time with children, 5- and 6-year-olds were shown pictures of boys and girls performing stereotype-consistent activities, such as girls baking, and stereotype-inconsistent activities, such as girls boxing (see Figure 2.1; Martin & Halverson, 1983). One week later the children were tested for their recall of the pictures. The results indicated that the children misremembered the stereotype-inconsistent pictures, but not the stereotype-consistent ones.



PHOTO 2.4 Gender-schematic children recognize that these toys are created for girls.

Sipa via AP Images

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Gender schemas and children's memory.



Source: Adapted from Martin and Halverson (1983).

For example, children tended to remember a picture of a girl sawing wood as having been a picture of a boy sawing wood. That result was predicted by gender schema theory: Incoming information that is inconsistent with the gender schema is filtered out and reinterpreted to be consistent with the gender schema. This study also indicates that the gender schema is present as early as 5 years.

Gender schema theory continues to guide empirical research on gender development. For example, researchers have explored how gendered toy marketing—such as signaling that toys are “for girls” by making them pink in color and thus consistent with gender schemas—may restrict the interests and development of children (e.g., Fine & Rush, 2018; Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). Bem’s formulation of gender schema theory also has had an impact beyond the field of psychology (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017).

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Let’s now consider two theories positing that human gender differences are rooted in evolution. Sociobiology is a controversial theory initially proposed by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson (1975b) in his book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, a massive, 700-page work filled with countless examples from insect life.

Sociobiology can be defined as the application of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by **natural selection** to understand the social behavior of animals, including humans. That is, sociobiologists are specifically concerned with understanding how social behaviors—such as aggression or caring for the young—are the product of natural selection.

To understand what sociobiology has to say about women and gender roles, we must first discuss Darwin’s theory. His basic observation was that living things overreproduce—that is, they produce far more offspring than would be needed simply to replace themselves. Yet population sizes remain relatively constant because many individuals do not survive. There must be differential survival, with the “fittest” organisms surviving and reproducing viable offspring. **Evolutionary fitness** is defined in this theory as the relative number of genes an animal contributes to the next generation. The bottom line is producing lots of offspring—specifically, healthy and viable offspring. Thus, a man who jogs 10 miles a day, lifts weights, and has a 50-inch chest but whose sperm count is zero would be considered to have zero fitness according to sociobiologists. Over generations, there is differential reproduction, the fittest individuals producing the most offspring. Genes that produce fitness characteristics become more frequent, and fitness characteristics (“adaptive” characteristics) become more frequent; genes and associated characteristics that produce poor fitness become less frequent.

The basic idea of sociobiology is that the evolutionary theory of natural selection can be applied to social behaviors. That is, a particular form of social behavior—say, caring for one’s young—would be adaptive, in the sense of increasing one’s reproductive fitness. Other social behaviors—for example, female infanticide—would be maladaptive, decreasing one’s reproductive fitness. Over the many generations of natural selection that have occurred, the maladaptive behaviors should have been weeded out, and we should be left with social behaviors that are adaptive because they are the product of evolutionary selection.

With this as background for the general principles of sociobiology, let us now consider some specific arguments of sociobiologists that are of special relevance to women.

Parental Investment and Sexual Selection

Sociobiologists interested in gender development and differences have focused a great deal on the concepts of parental investment and sexual selection. For example, sociobiologists offer a

very different explanation from Chodorow (1978) for why it is typically the female of the species who does most of the care of offspring. The sociobiologist's explanation rests on the concept of **parental investment**, which refers to behaviors or other investments of the parent with respect to the offspring that increase the offspring's chance of survival but that also cost the parent something (Trivers, 1972). Females of a species generally have a much larger parental investment in their offspring than males do. At the moment of conception, the female has the greater parental investment—she has just contributed one of her precious eggs. The male has contributed merely a sperm. Eggs are precious because they are large cells and, at least in humans, only one egg is released each month. Sperm are “cheap” because they are small cells and are produced in enormous numbers. For example, there are 200 million sperm in the average human male ejaculate, and a man can produce that number again in 48 hours (Malm et al., 2004). In mammals, the female then proceeds to gestate the young (for a period of 9 months in humans). Here again she makes an enormous investment of her body's resources, which could have been invested differently. Then the offspring are born and, in the case of mammals, the female nurses them, once again investing time and energy.

It is most adaptive for whichever parent has the greater parental investment to continue caring for the offspring. For the female, who has invested her precious egg, gestation, and nursing, it would be evolutionary insanity to abandon the offspring when they still need more care to survive. By contrast, the male has invested relatively little and his best reproductive strategy is to impregnate as many females as possible, producing more offspring that carry his genes. This strategy is particularly effective if he can count on the female to take care of the offspring so that they survive.

If we apply this logic to humans, women are the ones doing the child care for two key reasons. One, the woman has a greater parental investment, and so it is adaptive for her to continue caring for her children. Two, the woman is sure when a child is hers and thus carries her genes, but the man is not. It is thus adaptive for the woman—that is, it increases her fitness—to care for the child to make sure that they, and her genes, survive. It does not increase the man's fitness to care for children that may not carry his genes. Therefore, women do the child care.

Sociobiologists have also extended their theorizing about parental investment to explain the **sexual double standard**—that is, that a man is allowed and even encouraged to be promiscuous, whereas a woman is punished for being promiscuous and so is very careful and selective about whom she has sex with (Barash, 1982). Again, the explanation has to do with that precious egg and those cheap sperm. It is adaptive for her to be careful of what happens to the egg, whereas it is adaptive for him to distribute sperm to as many women as possible. Anticipating her greater parental investment, the woman must also be careful about whose genes she mixes with her own. In essence, she chooses quality and he chooses quantity.

Sociobiologists have proposed another mechanism contributing to the development of gender differences. **Sexual selection** is an evolutionary mechanism originally proposed by Darwin to act in parallel to natural selection and to produce differences between males and females of a species. Essentially, sexual selection means that different selection pressures act on males and females, and thus males and females become different. Sexual selection consists of two processes: (1) Members of one gender (usually males) compete among themselves to gain mating privileges with members of the other gender (usually females), and (2) members of the other gender (usually females) have preferences for certain members of the first gender (usually males) and decide which of them they are willing to mate with. In short, males fight and females choose. Process (1) neatly explains why the males of most species are larger and more aggressive than the females—aggression is adaptive for males in competition. Likewise, sexual selection explains why, among many bird species, the male has the gorgeous plumage but the female is drab. Males use this

plumage to compete with other males, and females are attracted to the most gorgeous males. Females, on the other hand, in their roles as choosers, need not be gorgeous and have not been selected to be so. Perhaps they have been selected for wisdom?

Sexual selection, then, is a mechanism that is used to explain differences between males and females of a species. It is particularly designed to explain the greater size, strength, and aggressiveness of males. Many more examples exist, but the thrust of the argument is clear: Sociobiologists argue that the social behaviors we see in animals and humans today evolved because these behaviors were adaptive, and they continue to be biologically programmed.

Evolutionary Psychology

Evolutionary psychology is an updated and more elaborate version of sociobiology proposed by psychologist David Buss and others (Buss, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Geary, 2010; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). The basic idea is that humans' complex psychological mechanisms are the result of evolution based on natural selection. These evolved psychological mechanisms exist because, over thousands of years, they solved problems of survival or reproduction. For example, according to evolutionary psychology, fear of snakes is common because it helped people avoid being bitten and poisoned by snakes.

Buss proposed *sexual strategies theory* as a way of articulating the evolved psychological mechanisms that are related to sexuality and, according to the theory, explain certain psychological gender differences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This theory distinguishes between short-term mating strategies (e.g., hooking up) and long-term mating strategies (e.g., marriage), proposing that women and men once had very different problems to solve in both short- and long-term mating. Because it is to men's evolutionary advantage to inseminate as many women as possible, men put more of their energy into short-term mating. Women, having the greater parental investment, were more interested in ensuring that their offspring survived and therefore put more of their energy into long-term mating strategies that ensured resources for them and their children. Thus, while men needed to identify women who were fertile, women needed to identify men who were willing to make a long-term commitment and able to provide resources. Over time, then, men have evolved psychological mechanisms that lead them to prefer sexual partners who are women in their 20s—even if the men are in their 60s—because women are most fertile in their 20s. By contrast, women have evolved psychological mechanisms that lead them to prefer long-term mates who possess resources—like wealth or ambition—that should indicate good capacity to provide resources in the future. To support his theory, Buss (1989) conducted a study in which he collected data on mate preferences in 37 distinct cultures around the world, and he found results generally consistent with his predictions. Likewise, a more recent study by Buss and his collaborators found that men tend to have a higher preference for a physically attractive mate than women do, and that women tend to have a higher preference for good financial prospects than men (e.g., Walter et al., 2020). However, there are two important but easy-to-miss caveats about these findings. One, these gender differences are small. Two, for both men and women, neither physical attractiveness nor financial prospects are as important in an ideal mate as kindness, intelligence, or health. In other words, for the characteristics that people value most in a potential mate, gender similarities are the rule.

According to *sexual strategies theory*, men are also notoriously jealous about their mates' sexual infidelity because of the uncertainty of paternity. In short, if a man is going to provide resources to a woman and her baby, he wants to be certain that the baby is his. By contrast, a woman will be more jealous if her male mate develops an emotional connection to another woman (termed *emotional infidelity*) because it represents a threat to the resources she needs

for herself and her baby. Evolutionary psychology argues that men and women differ in their responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). However, the data don't support this argument: A review of 54 studies on this topic found that both men and women find sexual infidelity more distressing than emotional infidelity (Carpenter, 2012).

Feminist Critique of Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology

Feminists have long been skeptical of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology (for feminist critiques, see Bianchi & Strang, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Janson-Smith, 1980; Weisstein, 1982), and some evolutionary psychologists have been dismissive of feminist approaches (e.g., Campbell, 2013). Many feminists are wary of biological explanations, in large part because biology always seems to be a convenient justification for the status quo.

For example, the sociobiologist argues that men's greater aggression and dominance result from sexual selection and genetics. Therefore, men are genetically dominant and women are genetically subordinate, and the subordinate status of women will have to continue because it is genetic. That kind of logic is a red flag to a feminist, who believes the status quo can be changed. Sociobiologists do not ignore environmental influences completely, so this nature-nurture controversy has to do with relative emphasis, in that sociobiologists emphasize biology and feminists emphasize environment. Consider this passage from an article written by E. O. Wilson (1975a):

In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies and, on that ground alone, appears to have a genetic origin. No solid evidence exists as to when the division of labor appeared in man's ancestors or how resistant to change it might be during the continuing revolution for women's rights. My own guess is that the genetic bias is intense enough to cause a substantial division of labor even in the most free and most egalitarian of future societies. . . . Thus, even with identical education and equal access to all professions, men are likely to continue to play a disproportionate role in political life, business and science. (pp. 48–50)

If Wilson's claim were true, then we would not have witnessed the tremendous social changes that have occurred in the past century. As we will discuss in Chapters 10 and 11, women's achievements in some (though certainly not all) areas of education and work (including political life, business, and science) have matched or surpassed men's. In other words, sexual selection doesn't doom humanity to an eternity of gender inequity. Clearly, human behavior and culture are very complex.

Feminist scientists also have pointed out the sexist bias in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology to ignore or minimize the significance of the active role of women in evolution (Gowaty, 1997; Hager, 1997; Sokol-Chang et al., 2013; Vandermassen, 2005). They argue that Darwin's portrayal of females as passive was inaccurate and androcentric (Hrdy, 2013) and that sociobiologists ignore animal behaviors that contradict human gender stereotypes (e.g., Weisstein, 1982). For example, evolutionary psychology has paid relatively little attention to mothering (a behavior which is pretty important for evolutionary fitness!) and women's role in the ancestral diet. By contrast, a considerable amount of attention has been given to rape as an adaptive reproductive strategy that evolved through natural selection (e.g., Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Criticisms have also been raised about the representation of women among evolutionary psychologists (Meredith, 2013).

Sociobiologists also rely heavily on data from nonindustrial societies, specifically hunter-gatherer societies that are supposed to be like those that existed at the dawn of the human

species, millions of years ago. Once again, the emphasis is androcentrically selective; it also tends to support a colonialist bias on development. Sociobiologists emphasize “man the hunter” and how he evolved to be aggressive and have great physical prowess. Meanwhile, “woman the gatherer” is ignored, although she may have formed the foundation for early human social organization (Janson-Smith, 1980).

Studies evaluating evolutionary psychology are sometimes contradictory. As one example, evolutionary psychologist Devendra Singh (1993) presented evidence that women with a waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) of 0.70 are judged as most attractive by men, compared with women with greater WHRs. According to sexual strategies theory, men are constantly nonconsciously assessing the potential fertility of female partners and finding the most fertile ones to be the most attractive. WHR is an index of body fat distribution, and Singh argued that WHR is correlated with youth, sex hormone levels, and health. He found that Miss America contest winners and *Playboy* centerfolds have WHRs averaging 0.70 and vary little from that mark. This study was much publicized, and the magical 0.70 ratio became well known, taking on the status of an academic urban legend. However, multiple studies have obtained results that contradict Singh’s claims.

For example, some teams have noted that cultures that have been insulated from Western media influence tend to prefer a larger WHR (Wetsman & Marlowe, 1999; Yu & Shepard, 1998). Clearly, cultures may vary in their beauty standards or ideals. Likewise, another independent team of investigators analyzed 2,500 years of feminine beauty ideals as represented by two data sets: paintings and sculptures of women from 500 BCE to present day, and the WHR data of Miss America contest winners and *Playboy* centerfolds from 1921 to 2014 (Bovet & Raymond, 2015). A key finding was that the ideal WHR in Western societies has fluctuated a great deal over history, such that there’s no evidence of a “universal” male preference. Claims that the preferred WHR was “hardwired” by evolution thousands of years ago clearly are not accurate.

Space limitations don’t permit a comprehensive review of all the studies that provide evidence contradicting some of the claims of evolutionary psychology. Suffice it to say that there are many more (e.g., Dantzer & Eisenman, 2003; Eastwick et al., 2014; Grice & Seely, 2000; Harris, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2002; Zentner & Eagly, 2015).

You may be noticing that, with all this focus on sexual selection and heterosexual mating preferences, evolutionary psychology seems deeply rooted in heteronormativity and the gender binary. That is, theories such as sexual strategies theory appear to assume that all people are innately heterosexual and either male or female. Such theories can thus contribute to the marginalization of individuals outside the gender binary. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have long struggled to explain the diversity of sexual orientations among humans (Diamond & Alley, 2023). More recently, social psychologist Charlotte Tate proposed an intersectional feminist approach to evolutionary psychology that avoids the assumptions of heteronormativity and the gender binary (e.g., Tate, 2013; Tate & Ledbetter, 2010).

In addition to these feminist criticisms, evolutionary psychology has been criticized on the grounds that it is not an empirically *falsifiable* theory (e.g., Panksepp & Panksepp, 2000); that is, it is difficult (if not impossible) to imagine a pattern of results that would contradict or refute evolutionary psychology.

Feminist Evolutionary Psychology and Feminist Sociobiology

Many of these criticisms of evolutionary psychology have been raised by feminist evolutionary psychologists. Impossible, you say? Remember that feminists are focused on gender equity and equality, regardless of their field of study. This means there are feminist approaches throughout

the sciences, including feminist evolutionary psychology, feminist sociobiology, and feminist biology (we'll return to feminist biology in Chapter 12).

Frustrated with the inattention to the active role of women in shaping human evolution, feminist evolutionary psychologists have responded with efforts to make their field higher quality and more equitable. In addition to providing these insightful critiques, they have conducted high-quality feminist research in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. They have also formed the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society and contributed to a hefty volume on women's role in human evolution titled *Evolution's Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women* (Fisher et al., 2013).

Feminist evolutionary psychologists argue that there are three core components of a feminist approach within evolutionary psychology. A direct response to the feminist criticisms discussed earlier, these components are (1) thinking critically about sex and gender, (2) explicitly recognizing women as active agents in evolutionary processes, and (3) explicitly recognizing women as active agents in human dynamics, including those related to sexual selection and competition for mates (Kruger et al., 2013).

An example of feminist sociobiology is the work of primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (1999, 2009, 2024), who has written several excellent books describing the crucial and complicated roles of mothering and fathering in evolution. For example, in *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*, Hrdy (1999) assembled the evidence regarding evolutionary forces on mothering behaviors in humans and other species, while at the same time taking a decidedly feminist approach. Moreover, she has the biological sophistication and complex knowledge of primate behavior that many sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists lack.

Hrdy's basic argument is that women have evolved to care for their children and ensure their survival, but in reality these evolved tendencies are miles away from romanticized Victorian notions of all-loving, self-sacrificing motherhood. Hrdy notes, for example, that female primates of all species combine work and family—that is, they must be ambitious, successful foragers or their babies will starve. Likewise, in contrast to sociobiology's traditional view of females as being highly selective about whom they mate with, Hrdy points out that female primates of many species will mate promiscuously with males invading their troop, even if they are already pregnant. Essentially, the females seem to be trying to create some confusion about paternity because males happily commit infanticide against infants that are not theirs but generally work to protect infants they have sired. Under these circumstances, the best thing a pregnant female can do for her unborn infant is to have sex with strangers! Hrdy's arguments subvert many ideas about traditional gender roles in humans and whether these roles have an evolutionary basis.

Gender-Neutral Evolutionary Theory

Not all evolutionary theorists propose that gender differences are the result of natural selection processes. For example, evolutionary biologist Patricia Gowaty has proposed a gender-neutral evolutionary theory that offers an alternative to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology (Gowaty, 2018; Gowaty & Hubbell, 2009). Gowaty is critical of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology's argument that biology is destiny—that evolution over millions of years has determined our behavior and, in particular, gender differences in behavior.

Gowaty notes that the environments in which humans—and other species—find themselves vary enormously, both across geographical spaces and across an individual's lifetime. It is therefore not at all adaptive for humans to display fixed behaviors determined by evolution. Neither should there be fixed gender differences in behavior. Instead, it is most adaptive for individuals to be flexible in their behaviors, and that is exactly what evolution has selected for: flexibility and

adaptability. An individual may behave in ways that are more male-typical in some situations and more female-typical in others because different behaviors are adaptive in those different situations. Likewise, a fixed mating strategy for females (or males) would not be adaptive across numerous environments. Instead, a flexible mating strategy would be most successful.

The evidence for this theory, at least so far, is based on mathematical modeling and proofs that show that individuals who can and do change their mating behaviors in adaptive ways depending on the environment have the best reproductive fitness (are the most likely to mate successfully). Beyond that, the theory is too new to be able to evaluate it thoroughly. Notice, though, that it is a theory that can accommodate transgender and nonbinary individuals because the theory does not insist on fixed male behaviors and female behaviors.

SOCIAL ROLE THEORY

Social psychologists Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood (1999) provided a probing critique of Buss's sexual strategies theory from evolutionary psychology and its explanations for psychological gender differences. They also articulated an alternative, social-structural explanation for Buss's findings that explains gender differences as resulting from women's and men's different positions in the social structure.

Eagly and Wood's alternative explanation, **social role theory**, emphasizes the variability across cultures in patterns of gender differences rather than cross-cultural universals. According to this view, a society's division of labor by gender (that is, gender roles) drives all other gender differences in behavior. Psychological gender differences result from individuals' accommodations or adaptations to the particular restrictions on or opportunities for their gender in their society. Social role theorists acknowledge biological differences between male and female bodies, such as differences in size and strength and the female body's capacity to bear and nurse children, but emphasize that these physical differences are important mainly because they are amplified by cultural beliefs. Men's greater size and strength have led them to pursue activities such as warfare that in turn gave them greater status, wealth, and power than women. Once men were in these roles of greater status and power, their behavior became more dominant and, similarly, women's behavior accommodated and became more subordinate. The gendered division of labor, in which women were responsible for home and family, led women to acquire such role-related skills as cooking and caring for children. In this way, women acquired nurturing behaviors and a facility for relationships. Men, specializing in paid employment in male-dominated occupations, adapted with assertive and independent behaviors.

Eagly and Wood (1999) reanalyzed Buss's original 37-cultures data to test the predictions of social role theory. Their basic hypothesis was that the greater the gender differences in status in a culture, the greater would be the psychological gender differences; societies characterized by gender equality would show far less psychological gender differentiation. Recall from Chapter 1 that the United Nations maintains a database that indexes gender inequality in countries around the world (described in Focus 1.1). Correlations were high between societies' gender inequality and the magnitude of the difference between women and men in a country on psychological measures of mate preferences. In other words, in countries where opportunities for men and women were more equal, men and women were more similar. If mate preferences were determined by evolution thousands of years ago, they should not vary across cultures and they definitely should not correlate with a society's gender equality. Although these findings provide powerful evidence in support of social role theory, recent attempts to replicate Eagly and Wood's (1999) findings have been mixed. One issue that seems to matter is how researchers measure a country's gender

equality (Else-Quest & Hamilton, 2018). For example, aspects of gender equality like women's access to higher education differ from aspects like women's parliamentary representation or maternal mortality rates and likely shape gender development in different ways. Which aspects do you think are most important?

FEMINIST THEORIES

Feminism has a rich, articulated theoretical basis drawing from diverse academic disciplines. Similarly, diverse scholars have contributed to feminist theories, consistent with the desire of feminists to avoid power hierarchies and not to have a single person become the sole authority. Thus, there is no single feminist perspective. For that reason, I title this section "Feminist Theories" rather than "Feminist Theory." Some of the central concepts and themes of diverse feminist theories follow. All can be applied within psychology.

Gender as Status and Power

Feminists think of gender as similar to a class variable in our society. Just as social class confers status and power, so does gender. Men and women are of unequal status, with men having higher status (Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004).

Likewise, men have greater power than women (Brace & Davidson, 2000; Pratto & Walker, 2004). Male dominance goes hand in hand with female subordination. The areas of male power and dominance are diverse and occur at many levels, from institutions to marital interactions. Most political leaders are men, which gives men the power to pass laws that have a profound effect on women's lives. Feminist analysis has long extended this logic to many other areas, for example, to viewing rape not as a sexual act but as an expression of men's power over women (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975). In short, the concept of gender as an axis of power is at the heart of feminist analysis (Enns, 2004; Moradi, 2019).

From the observation of the lesser status and power of women comes another basic feminist theme: Sexism is pervasive, both in our everyday interactions and in our institutions. Women are discriminated against in diverse ways, from the underrepresentation of women in Congress to the androcentrism of psychological theories, from the different pay scales for women and men to the gendered division of household labor. Thus, sexism pervades our lives in innumerable, profound ways, perpetuating men's power over women.

A long-standing maxim of the feminist movement has been "the personal is political" (MacKinnon, 1982). Here, "political" refers to expressions of power, not partisan politics. Feminists have reconceptualized many acts that were traditionally viewed as personal, as simple interactions between individuals, into acts that are seen as political, or expressions of power. As examples, Mr. Executive gropes his female assistant, or Josh stalks Meghan. Traditionally, these were thought of as personal, individual acts. They were understood to be the product of an obnoxious individual such as Mr. Executive, or of a rare, disturbed individual such as Josh, or of the female assistant's inappropriately seductive behavior or Meghan's poor communication. Noting the systematicity and commonality of these incidents, feminism reframes them not as personal acts but as political expressions of men's power over women. The greater status of men gives them a sense of entitlement to engage in such acts. Moreover, when men engage in these acts, they exert power and control over women.

Theorists believe that there are four basic sources of power when one person or group has power over another (Pratto & Walker, 2004): (1) the threat of violence or the potential to harm; (2) economic power or control of resources; (3) the ability of the powerful group to promote

ideologies that tell others what they should desire (e.g., expensive cosmetics to make yourself look beautiful) or disdain (e.g., fat or even slightly overweight women); and (4) relational power, in which one person in a relationship needs the other more than the reverse. These sources of power can operate between any two unequal groups, such as between White and Black Americans in the United States, and you can see how directly they apply to relations between men and women. We will return to each of these sources of power in later chapters; for example, Chapter 15 is about gender-based violence.

Intersectionality

Feminists argue that attention to gender alone is not enough. Recall from Chapter 1 that intersectionality considers the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage simultaneously. Intersectionality is a concept that emerged and evolved largely within Black feminism (Collins, 2019; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; May, 2015). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), a legal scholar, first coined the term *intersectionality* and described how

analyzing only gender or only race would exclude or ignore the unique experiences of women of color. Many scholars and activists have contributed to intersectionality theory. Indeed, since at least the 19th century, Black feminists had described how they were marginalized within anti-racism movements (which put Black men at the helm) and also within the first and second waves of feminism (which prioritized the needs of White women). Black women, they maintained, were marginalized by “interlocking” systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1982) in which racism and sexism (among other systems of oppression) worked hand in hand. Although intersectionality was first used to talk about women of color, it is an important feminist approach throughout the psychology of women and gender and applies to all of us (Rutherford & Davidson, 2019).



PHOTO 2.5 Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term *intersectionality*.

Jemal Countess/Getty Images for Congressional Black Caucus Foundation

Because intersectionality is a critical theory and not a scientific theory that should be held to the standard of falsifiability, it is best to evaluate intersectional research according to how well it adheres to the essential elements of intersectionality theory (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). The first element is that intersectional research focuses on the experience and meaning of simultaneously belonging to multiple intertwined social categories, such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. For example, how are cisgender women’s experiences of gender identity similar to and different from transgender women’s experiences? Such a question explores diversity among women.

The second element is that researchers must examine how power is connected to belonging in each of those intersecting categories. For example, what role does social inequality play in the different experiences of gender identity among cisgender and transgender women? Both groups are oppressed *as women*, but cisgender women have privilege relative to transgender women. An important point of intersectionality is that one intersecting category may confer disadvantage while another may grant privilege.

The third element of intersectional research is that social categories are examined as properties of a person as well as their social context, so those categories and their significance may change. For example, how does a transgender woman’s gender identity develop within a

particular culture and historical period? Are there times or situations when the importance or salience of her being transgender is heightened, such as when serving in the military?

The new questions and perspectives that intersectionality inspires are limitless. The point is that social categories like gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation (among others) are highly complex, and social justice and equality are always the goals of intersectional approaches.

Queer Theory

Today, many use the word *queer* as an umbrella term for anyone who is not heterosexual, but the word was long used to mean “strange” or “odd” and then became a heterosexist slur in the early 20th century. By the 1990s, the word had been reclaimed by feminist theorists within lesbian and gay studies, such as Michel Foucault (1978), Eve Sedgwick (1990), and Teresa de Lauretis (1991), who questioned the social construction of gender and sexuality as binary and fixed (Halperin, 2003). **Queer theory** proposes that one’s gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation are not stable, fixed, biologically based characteristics, but rather fluid and dynamic aspects of individuals shaped by culture. Queer theory challenges binaries, especially the sexual orientation binary; thus, being queer isn’t about being gay or lesbian, but rather about rejecting rigid categories or preconceived norms about one’s sexual desire. Similarly, queer theory critiques the gender binary, challenging the notion that people are either female or male and that these categories are fixed and biologically determined. In addition, drawing on the meaning of *queer* as odd, peculiar, or deviating from the norm, queer theory challenges concepts like heteronormativity and other ideas about what is “normal” versus peculiar. Queer theorist Judith Butler explained,

My understanding of queer is a term that desires that you don’t have to present an identity card before entering a meeting. Heterosexuals can join the queer movement. Bisexuals can join the queer movement. Queer is not being lesbian. Queer is not being gay. It is an argument against lesbian specificity: that if I am a lesbian I have to desire in a certain way. Or if I am gay I have to desire in a certain way. Queer is an argument against certain normativity, what a proper lesbian or gay identity is. (quoted in Michalik, 2001, para. 5)

Queer theory has made important contributions to the psychology of women and gender, particularly with regard to questioning the stability of gender and sexuality (Carr et al., 2017). We will revisit queer theory in Chapter 6.

Gender Roles and Socialization

Feminists have highlighted the importance of gender roles and socialization in our culture. American society has well-defined roles for men and for women, particularly for European Americans. From their earliest years, children are socialized to conform to these roles. In this regard, the feminist perspective is in close agreement with social learning theory. The feminist perspective sees these roles as constricting to individuals. Essentially, gender roles tell children that there are certain things they may not do, whether telling a girl that she cannot be a physicist or a boy that he cannot be a nurse. Because gender roles limit individual potentials and aspirations, feminists believe that we would be better off without such roles, or at least that those roles need to be radically revised.



PHOTO 2.6 Queer theorist Judith Butler. Queer theory has made important contributions to the psychology of women and gender.

Agencja Fotograficzna Caro / Alamy Stock Photo

Anthropologists like Margaret Mead (1935, 1949) noted that other cultures have gender roles considerably different from those in the United States; for example, in some cultures men are reputed to be the gossips, and women are thought to be the appropriate ones to carry heavy loads. But despite all the cross-cultural diversity in gender roles, one universal principle seems to hold: Every known society recognizes and elaborates gender differences (Rosaldo, 1974), a point that is consistent with feminists' emphasis on the power and pervasiveness of gender roles.

External Versus Internal Attributions of Problems

Aliyah is suspended from high school; Sara is depressed after having a baby. Traditional psychological analyses focus on the internal nature and causes of these women's problems. Thus, Aliyah might be viewed as having deserved the suspension for being "difficult." Sara might be viewed as having personal problems of adjustment. Feminists are critical of analyses that assume girls' and women's problems are caused by internal or personal factors, instead viewing the sources of those problems as external. Aliyah's problem is recast as having its roots in schools' disproportionately harsh punishments inflicted on Black girls. Sara's problem is recast as having its roots in a society that provides little support for the hard work of motherhood. This theme of external factors will recur in Chapter 16 in the discussion of feminist therapy.

Consciousness Raising

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the second-wave feminist movement gained momentum, consciousness-raising groups were popular. Ideally, such groups begin with a few women sharing their personal feelings and experiences; they then move to a feminist theoretical analysis of these feelings and experiences, and from this should flow action, whether it involves an individual woman restructuring her relationship with her partner or a group of women lobbying for a new law to be passed. In short, this process helps to reveal how the personal is political.

A great deal of consciousness raising now occurs on social media. Consider, for example, the #MeToo movement: In 2006, activist Tarana Burke shared on social media her experience of sexual harassment, and in 2017 actor and activist Alyssa Milano reignited the thread. Within hours of Milano's Twitter post urging women to share their experience of sexual harassment and assault, hundreds of thousands of women posted on social media. Demonstrating the enormous magnitude and extent of this problem, the movement raised consciousness and identified how the personal is political. That is, survivors could recognize that they were not alone or personally to blame for being harassed or assaulted because the problem was much too widespread and clearly linked to power. In turn, this consciousness raising has helped hold some men accountable for sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo activism continues, with millions of social media posts to date.

The process of consciousness raising remains central to feminism and is a common feature of many gender and women's studies courses. It is a means for people to reflect on their experiences and understand themselves. It also involves a theoretical analysis or lens through which to view their lives. Because of consciousness raising, many come to see that what they had perceived as isolated and individual problems are actually common and are rooted in external causes.

Diversity of Feminisms

One of the difficulties in writing this section on feminism is that there are many different kinds of feminism, differing in everything from their theoretical analysis to their model for social change to their vision of the ideal society. One way to approach this diversity is to conceptualize

the major types of feminism: (a) liberal feminism, (b) cultural feminism, (c) Marxist or socialist feminism, (d) radical feminism, (e) existentialist and postmodern feminism, (f) women of color feminisms, and (g) ecofeminism (Tong & Botts, 2024). Although a diversity of feminist perspectives exists, and I cannot possibly detail them all here, all feminist theories advocate for gender equality.

Liberal feminism holds that women should have opportunities and rights equal to those of men and that it is possible to achieve this equality by working within the system. The liberal feminist position is exemplified by organizations such as NOW (National Organization for Women), which is the major group that lobbied for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The notion here is that American society is founded on basically good ideals, such as justice and freedom for all, but the justice and freedom need to be extended fully to women. Some would argue that liberal feminism can be credited with many of the educational and legal reforms that have improved women's lives in the United States over the last several decades (Tong & Botts, 2024).

Unlike the claims of liberal feminism, which sees men and women as basically alike but in need of equal rights, *cultural feminism* (sometimes called *care-focused feminism*) argues that women have special, unique qualities that differentiate them from men. The crucial task is to elevate and value those unique qualities, which have been devalued in our patriarchal society. The qualities include nurturing, connectedness, and intuition. Carol Gilligan's theorizing about moral development (see Focus 2.1) is a clear example of cultural or care-focused feminism.

Marxist or socialist feminism argues that the liberal feminist analysis of the problem is superficial and does not get to the deeper roots of the problem. Marxist feminism is grounded in the works of philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and views the oppression of women as just one instance of oppression based on class—oppression that is rooted in capitalism. Marxist feminists such as Heidi Hartmann theorize that patriarchy exists within capitalism, pointing out the extent to which the capitalist system benefits from oppressing women in ways such as wage discrimination. What would happen to the average American corporation if it had to start paying all of its secretaries as much as plumbers earn? (Both jobs require a high school education and a certain amount of manual dexterity and specific skills.) The answer is that most corporations would find their economic structure ruined. Women's situation will not improve, according to this point of view, without a drastic reform of American society, including a complete overhaul of the capitalist economic system and the concept of private property. Marxist and socialist feminists also argue that unpaid domestic work should no longer be “women's work” and that men must perform an equal share of such work.

Radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1970), Kate Millett (1969), and Andrea Dworkin (1987) view liberal feminism as entirely too optimistic about the sources of women's oppression and the changes needed to end it. Patriarchal values have saturated society to such an extent that radical change is necessary in everything from social institutions to patterns of thought. Radical feminists are split between *radical-libertarian feminists*—who argue that femininity limits women's development and instead advocate for androgyny among women—and *radical-cultural feminists*—who argue that femininity and feminine values (such as interdependence and community) are preferable to masculinity and masculine values (such as autonomy and domination) and that men should strive to be more feminine. Given the difficulty of changing social institutions, radical feminists sometimes advocate separatist communities in which women can come together to pursue their work free of men's oppression.

Existentialist feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, and *postmodern feminists*, such as Hélène Cixous, have been influenced by existential philosophy and the postmodern movement, which

questions rationality and objectivity as methods for getting at truth. Language and binaries are also topics for postmodern critique. Postmodern feminism has tended to be less focused on social action; rather, it has largely been an academic movement that seeks to reform thought and scholarship. It is particularly concerned with the issue of epistemology, which is the question of how people—whether laypeople or scientists—know. How do we know about truth and reality? Traditional science has been based on positivism as its epistemology. Positivism claims that we can know reality directly through rational, objective scientific methods, a clear contrast to the social constructionism advocated by postmodern feminists.

Women of color feminisms highlight the unique experiences of women of color as members of multiply marginalized groups and thus promote a more inclusive and intersectional feminist perspective. Thus, these types of feminism are often critical of White feminists for focusing on “universal” female experiences such as reproductive justice and neglecting the diversity of women’s experiences (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016; Enns & Sinacore, 2001). We will discuss women of color feminisms in depth in Chapter 5.

Ecofeminism links women’s oppression to human beings’ domination of nature and is articulated by activist/scholars such as Ynestra King and Vandana Shiva. Women are often culturally tied to nature, and ecofeminists point out that patriarchy—which is hierarchical, dualistic, and oppressive—harms both women and nature (Tong & Botts, 2024; Warren, 1987). Ecofeminism has deep roots in the environmental justice movement and the work of environmentalists such as Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, as well as in activism regarding the disproportionate burden of poor people and people of color. Thus, issues such as climate change and sustainable development are understood as intertwined with gender, racial, and class equality and well-being, as well as colonialism. There are multiple perspectives within ecofeminism, but values such as interdependence and interconnection are central to all of them.

The point here is that not all feminists and not all feminist theories are alike. Instead, there is a wide spectrum of theory and practice. Most of the academic feminist psychologists who have contributed to the psychology of women and gender would be classified as liberal feminists or postmodern feminists, but certainly there is a diversity of feminist approaches within the discipline.

Feminist theories span many disciplines and were not specifically proposed as scientific theories that could be tested, but rather as critical theories that articulate a prescription for social change. This means that some of their propositions are difficult to evaluate scientifically. Yet many scientific theories have been reformulated with a feminist approach or perspective, and research on those reformulated theories appears throughout this book. The notion of men as a class having power over women will recur in several studies mentioned later in this book.

In Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered diverse theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain gender development. They work from vastly different underlying assumptions and provide considerably different views of women and gender. As in much of psychology, the roles of nature and nurture are debated by theories of gender development, and interactionist theories, such as cognitive-developmental theory and social role theory, tend to gather the most evidence. There is no denying that biology is relevant to gender (indeed, that’s the focus of Chapter 12!), but humans are extremely plastic and adaptable to their environment, so nature is rarely the full story. Our experience of that environment, including the social and political context of our lives, also plays an indisputable role in gender development.

EXPERIENCE THE RESEARCH

GENDER SCHEMA THEORY

Ask six friends to participate, individually, in a memory study that you are conducting. Collect the data in a quiet place that is free from distractions. Then give the following set of instructions to the person:

I am going to read to you a list of 12 words. As soon as I finish, I would like you to recall the words for me, in any order. I want to see how many words you remember.

Then read the following words out loud, in exactly this order:

1. gorilla (M) stepping (N) ant (N)
2. Michael (M) butterfly (F) Maria (F)
3. blushing (F) trousers (M) bull (M)
4. hurling (M) bikini (F) dress (F)

Read the words slowly and clearly, with about one second between each. Write the words down as your friend recalls them, in exactly the order they are recalled. If the person responds quickly, you may need to abbreviate the words.

Does the pattern of results for your friends look like those that Sandra Bem obtained for her research on gender schemas? That is, did people cluster the words into groups based on gender associations (*butterfly* and *dress* close together, *trousers* and *bull* close together) or based on other categories (*trousers* and *dress* together, *butterfly* and *bull* together)?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

There are diverse theoretical perspectives from which we can study the psychology of women and gender. Each has strengths and weaknesses to consider. Psychoanalytic theory was first formulated by Freud, who theorized that gender differences in the development of the superego stem from girls' incomplete resolution of the Electra complex. Theorists such as Horney and Chodorow offered feminist approaches to psychoanalytic theory.

Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes the roles of reinforcement, punishment, observational learning, and imitation in the process of gender typing. Bandura's reformulation of this theory incorporated cognitive processes such as attention, self-regulation, and self-efficacy.

Cognitive-developmental theory emphasizes the development of gender constancy—the understanding that gender is a stable and consistent part of oneself—in gender typing. Bem's gender schema theory proposes that children develop gender schemas—a set of gender-linked associations that filter and interpret incoming information—which are essential to gender typing.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology apply Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to social behaviors. These theories emphasize parental investment and sexual selection in the development of gender differences. By contrast, social role theory, proposed by Eagly and Wood, emphasizes not cross-cultural universals, but rather the variability across cultures in patterns of gender differences. This perspective proposes that a society's division of labor by gender fosters the development of psychological gender differences.

A diversity of feminist theories exists, but they share common themes and the goal of gender equality. Feminist theories emphasize men’s power over women and the ways that other social categories, such as social class, race, and sexual orientation, intersect with gender. Gender and sexuality are understood as socially constructed, as in queer theory.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer. (2024). *Father Time: Natural History of Men and Babies*. Princeton University Press. A departure from her past works on mothers, feminist sociobiologist Hrdy focuses her attention on fathers and their nurturing behavior

Tong, Rosemarie, & Botts, Tina Fernandes. (2024). *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (6th ed.). Routledge. A clear and comprehensive introduction to the diversity of feminist theories.

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Care perspective | Oedipal complex |
| Electra complex | Parental investment |
| Erogenous zones | Phallic stage |
| Evolutionary fitness | Phallocentric |
| Evolutionary psychology | Psychoanalytic theories |
| Gender constancy | Queer theory |
| Gender identity | Schema |
| Gender schema | Self-efficacy |
| Gender typing | Sexual double standard |
| Imitation | Sexual selection |
| Justice perspective | Social role theory |
| Modeling | Sociobiology |
| Natural selection | Superego |
| Observational learning | Womb envy |