

## SEX DIFFERENCES AND/IN THE SELF: CLASSIC THEMES, FEMINIST VARIATIONS, POSTMODERN CHALLENGES

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This article examines perspectives on and intersections between two recurrent themes in the history of American psychology: sex differences and theories of self. These themes and certain connections between them are considered in three eras: early American psychology, feminist psychology coincident with the second wave of feminism, and the recent postmodern turn in psychology. A contextual analysis of parallels and contrasts among theories of sex differences and of the self in these three eras highlights problems with modernist understandings, especially with essentialist construals of gender and individualistic understandings of self. The article presents relationally defined postmodern views of gender and self, and comments on their promise for the present era of globalization and the consequent increasing attention to interconnections among people.

My goal in this article is to explore two themes that have appeared recurrently in the history of American psychology and to use these themes and their intersections to spotlight the promise of certain invigorating trends in contemporary feminist psychology. The two topics are, first, psychology's persistent concern with questions of sex differences, and second, psychological approaches to the self. The aim here is not to attempt a comprehensive historical review of psychological considerations of these topics. Rather, a limited set of models, selected from three historical periods, will be presented as a means of examining historical trends in and contextual influences on these constructs.

The two topics addressed here share a common historical pattern: Both were matters of intense interest around the beginning of the 20th century among some of American psychology's pioneers; both came into focus anew with the rise of the second wave of feminism, where the two were explicitly linked in some models; and both are implicated in the recent postmodern turn in psychology. The self theory

of Mary Whiton Calkins, an early American psychologist, will be pivotal in this discussion. Her model will serve as a foil for analyzing historical changes in views of the self and of sex differences, and parallels between her theory and contemporary postmodern analyses will bring coherence to the historical flow.

This article will explore recurrences of these concepts and their intersections using a postmodern, social constructionist framework. A brief introduction to this approach is in order.

### POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism, the metatheoretical basis for this discussion, is one of a variety of postmodern approaches. Broadly, postmodernism challenges the central aims of the so-called "modernist" intellectual tradition, a tradition that stems from Enlightenment thought. The modernist position asserts that it is possible to achieve accurate knowledge of reality through appropriate methods. Access to truth is acquired over time through the gradual accumulation of factual information, which is derived from careful observation and elaborated by reason. The application of this process is presumed to lead to general laws that accurately describe and explain reality.

In contrast to this view, postmodern thought urges us to doubt our capacity to know anything with certainty and rejects the very possibility of grand theories that are capable of capturing the infinite variety of specific, located experiences. Postmodernism questions the presumption that we can characterize reality by straightforward

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discourse, urging that language does not simply describe but actually shapes and even establishes reality. Further, postmodernism refuses to privilege positivist epistemologies that hold out the promise of accurate knowledge, contingent only on orthodox methodological precision. Instead, postmodernism asserts that no methodology guarantees access to correct knowledge (see, e.g., Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Gergen, 1985, 1999; Harding, 1986; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Keller, 1980, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1988; Rorty, 1979; Sampson, 1985; Shotter, 1993; Toulmin, 1982; Unger, 1983).

Social constructionism, one form of postmodernism, argues that reality cannot be directly apprehended, for we necessarily view whatever there is from a particular perspective, through one lens or another, and that each such perspective is derived from social exchange (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1985, 1994, 1999). What we assume to be a description of a freestanding reality—that is, what we take for knowledge—is in fact a construction, a hypothesis, a model that is inevitably suffused with the particular context within which it was created. Such understandings—which, again, we may deem “knowledge”—are created and warranted not through evidence of their match to reality but through forms of social exchange that sustain a collective agreement about their “truth” or validity. Basically, we do not know that they are true; we simply agree that they are true. Importantly, when we invoke these constructs as truths we do not perceive them as models or hypotheses. Rather, to those immersed in their meaning, they appear to be self-evident truths, descriptions rather than hypothetical, situated constructions.

Understandings to which we come through such collective discourse cannot be weighed alongside other understandings to assess their relative validity, because there is no unconstructed standard against which to compare them. Thus, the determination of which idea is taken as legitimate must rest on factors other than its fit to reality. For this reason, constructionists are wont to ask questions such as “Why this answer instead of that?” “What are the implications of asserting one position instead of another?” “Why now?” “Who benefits?”

### Weak and Strong Constructionism

The relatively uncontroversial form of social constructionism, sometimes termed “weak” constructionism (e.g., Kitzinger, 1995), argues that it is the meaning of an event that is constructed. Thus, the same phenomenon viewed from different perspectives is understood differently and carries divergent meanings. Cross-cultural investigations of the meanings attributed by various groups to events that we would deem “natural phenomena” provide ample evidence of such divergent constructions of meaning. For example, what people from one culture regard with certainty as an icy comet, those from another perceive with equal certainty as a supernatural visitation.

An even greater challenge to modernist thought lies in “strong” constructionism, which suggests that phenomena themselves as well as the meanings attributed to phenomena are constructed, brought into existence precisely by the discourse that presumes to “describe” them. Reality is in essence spoken into existence by the means employed to name it; communications do not describe but rather generate experience. Thus, the forms of discourse available to us shape not only what we understand, believe, or “know” about our experience and ourselves; they also shape our experience and ourselves. For example, whereas contemporary western culture sees two sex/gender categories as a self-evident characterization of human variation, other cultures are equally certain of the existence of three or four such groupings. The categories available in each case shape not only linguistic understandings but also the overt behaviors and subjective experiences of that culture’s members (Bohan & Russell, 1999).

With this brief introduction to the epistemological tools I intend to employ here, I turn to a consideration of the two themes mentioned above: sex differences and the self, and to their intersection: the question of sex differences in the self.

## THE PREOCCUPATION WITH SEX DIFFERENCES

Since early in its history, American psychology has been preoccupied with questions regarding the nature and causes of differences between females and males. This theme recurs as a prominent one in each of the eras we will explore here: early American psychology, the emergence of feminist psychology in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and contemporary postmodern thought.

### Early American Psychology

Psychology emerged in this country in the midst of an ongoing cultural debate about what was then termed the “woman problem,” that is, the question of women’s “nature” and how best to understand and accommodate women’s peculiarities (Delamont & Duffin, 1978; Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Lewin, 1984; R. Rosenberg, 1982; Rossiter, 1982; Shields, 1975; Welter, 1966). That men and women were intrinsically different was not questioned. The socially constructed understanding of gender at the time—that is, the commonly held “truth” of the matter—reflected beliefs that would later be termed “maximizing” or “maximalist” (e.g., Mednick, 1989). That is, this construction clearly differentiated between male and female or masculine and feminine “natures,” and prescribed well-defined roles for each based upon these presumed differences.

This maximizing stance, which was grounded in the presumed biological basis of sex differences, was not itself new. These beliefs had long been ingrained in cultural wisdom, sustained by custom and religious belief. What was new around the turn of the 20th century was the justification of

these beliefs by an appeal to science, the new religion of 19th century America (C. Rosenberg, 1976). This faith in science as the arbiter of truth led to its invocation in “proving” the existence and intractability of sex differences. This maximalist position, not coincidentally, also served to justify persistent restrictions on women. It is noteworthy that this rhetoric regarding the limitations placed on women by their nature was especially vehement around the turn of the 20th century, just as women were enrolling in significant numbers in institutions of higher education and thereby threatening long-standing assumptions about the necessity for “separate spheres” of endeavor for women and men (Bernard, 1964; Lewin, 1984; R. Rosenberg, 1982; Rossiter, 1982; Solomon, 1985).

Appeals to biology were particularly common in this era enamored of biological determinism, but other sciences participated as well, including the new science of psychology. “Scientific evidence” supported beliefs such as the following: By biological dictate, women are inherently conservative, passive, and nurturant, ill-suited to life in the public sphere (Bagehut, 1879; Geddes & Thomson, 1889; Grant, 1889; Spencer, 1873, 1891). Men’s brains are larger than women’s, accounting for men’s greater intellectual prowess (Romanes, 1887; Walker, 1850). In particular, that portion of the brain devoted to reason is larger in men than in women (Ellis, 1934; Mobius, 1901), although as the presumed locus of reason shifted over time, anatomists found evidence for the appropriate—if changing—sex differences in brain anatomy (see Shields, 1975). Women are confined to the “mediocre” range of mental ability (Thorndike, 1906) and the restriction of their educational opportunities is therefore justified. In fact, participation in higher education risks damage to women’s reproductive capacity (Cattell, 1909; Hall, 1905). In these arguments, science reflected contemporary social constructions of gender; in so doing, science also served to legitimize and reinforce those understandings. Whether or not it was intentional, “science,” in Shields’ words, “played handmaiden to social values” (1975, p. 753).

As a growing number of women found their way into psychology despite such beliefs, several undertook to challenge long-held assumptions regarding sex differences, using tools of the new science of psychology to do so. Among those was Mary Calkins, who became the first woman president of the American Psychological Association. Joining in the opposition to restrictions on women deriving from assumed sex differences, Calkins rejected arguments for differential education for men and women: “Is it not as futile,” she queried, “. . . to differentiate feminine from masculine studies as to distinguish between women’s and men’s foods?” (Furumoto, 1990, p. 65). She also commented on the conflict between marriage and career for women, noting that, regardless of women’s abilities, choosing one almost inevitably precluded the other—for women, although not for men (Scarborough & Furumoto, 1987), and pointed out the variety of ways in which women’s achieve-

ment was hampered by cultural stereotypes (Furumoto, 1990).

Another of the women who railed against limitations imposed on women was Helen Thompson (later Woolley). Thompson’s research debunked the widely held assumption that women and men possess markedly different intellectual abilities, differences that were at the time considered secondary sex characteristics. Concluding that those differences that existed were readily attributable to differential experiences and opportunities, Thompson (1903) urged a focus on environmental origins of observed sex differences.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1914a) took to task the broadly held assumption that periodic disability accompanied women’s menstrual cycles, precluding their full participation in the public sphere. Hollingworth administered a series of tests to women, the results of which indicated that menses was unrelated to mental or motor abilities. Hollingworth also challenged the so-called variability hypothesis, which held that, while men and women have comparable intelligence on average, the range of women’s scores is narrower than that of men’s, meaning that there are more male geniuses as well as more men of very low intelligence. This hypothesis situated men as the source of variation—and therefore, following Darwin (1871), of progress for the species. It also undergirded the argument that higher education is wasted on women, since they are, in the words of Edward Thorndike, a prominent figure in early psychology, “confined to the mediocre grades of ability and achievement” (1906, p. 13). Hollingworth, like Thompson and Calkins, forged explanations for apparent differences between men’s and women’s achievement and intellectual functioning that were based in social rather than biological forces (1914b, 1916a, 1916b, 1918, 1922). Collectively, these several lines of work disputed existing assumptions about the inevitability of sex differences, asserting that the cultural certitude about them was a matter not of fact but of “flagrant personal bias, logic martyred in the cause of supporting a prejudice, [and] unfounded assertions” (Thompson, 1910, p. 340).

## Recent Feminist Psychology

Moving forward in history, a second snapshot of psychology’s concern with sex differences reveals this issue’s importance to recent feminist psychology as it emerged in the context of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Weisstein’s (1971) classic article set the agenda for this work. In her paper, tellingly entitled “Psychology Constructs the Female, or the Fantasy Life of the Male Psychologist (With Some Attention to the Fantasies of His Friends, the Male Biologist and the Male Anthropologist),” Weisstein argued that psychology’s approach to women depicted not scientific findings but “surprisingly transparent” reflections of “cultural consensus” (p. 363)—an assertion reminiscent of critiques of turn-of-the-century support of extant social values (Shields, 1975; Thompson, 1910). Weisstein’s article exposed the pervasive

gender bias of psychological theory, research, and practice, loosing a deluge of work directed at correcting such bias.

A large body of research grew up around the agenda initiated by Weisstein's scathing critique. As regards to sex differences in psychological and behavioral traits, its aim was to conduct systematic measurements of such traits with an eye to demonstrating that women are, in essence, not different from men, and that where differences do occur, they are products not of biology but of socialization. This was fundamentally the same agenda as the earlier aims of Calkins, Hollingworth, Thompson, and other pioneer women of American psychology. For the most part, feminist psychological research and theory dealing with sex differences has retained this minimalist focus—that is, a bent toward demonstrating both the absence of essential differences and also the social origins of what differences exist.

Some years into contemporary feminist psychology, however, a very different perspective emerged, one that emphasized rather than minimized sex differences. Models representing this perspective were aligned with other feminist psychologies in their commitment to honoring women's voices and women's experience. However, by emphasizing sex differences, these theories clearly distanced themselves from feminist psychology's long tradition of minimalist understandings. These maximalist positions, sometimes termed cultural feminism, made the argument for difference not by returning to long-standing notions of women's inferiority but rather by valorizing those qualities that were seen as distinctive to women, especially an identity grounded in connection or relationship. Best known among these models are Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), and work from members of the Stone Center at Wellesley College, beginning with Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976).

The exploration of differences between men and women, including the question of whether the focus is to be on emphasizing or minimizing such differences, has remained central to work in feminist psychology and in the psychology of women (Kimball, 2001). Indeed, a special issue of the journal *Feminism & Psychology* was devoted to the topic (Kitzinger, 1994b). Its title, "Should Psychology Study Sex Differences?" and several articles included in the issue (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994; Hollway, 1994; Kitzinger, 1994a) point to an emerging debate that brings us to the third historical era of interest here, recent postmodern analyses of the notion of sex differences.

### Postmodernism, Sex Differences, and Gender

A pivotal work in postmodern analysis of the topic of sex differences was the 1988 article by Hare-Mustin and Marecek. In this article (and elsewhere, e.g., 1990, 1994), Hare-Mustin and Marecek offered a constructionist perspective on questions related to sex differences. Their

analysis did not focus on whether such differences exist or what is their nature; rather their aim was a critique of the practice of using indices of difference as an explanatory mechanism for understanding gender. They suggested that a more fruitful direction for feminist psychology would be to examine gender as the enactment of a social arrangement rather than as a set of sex-related traits.

Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of the distinction between concepts of sex or sex differences, on the one hand, and gender on the other (see Butler, 1993; Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Deaux, 1993; Deaux & Stewart, 2001; Gentile, 1993; Unger, 1979, 1990; Unger & Crawford, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). However, it is worth mentioning here that a very large body of work has been devoted to investigating the nature, extent, origins, and meaning of sex differences, and this work has often been seen as a means of understanding *gender*. It is precisely this assumption—namely, that the study of sex differences constitutes a study of gender—that Hare-Mustin and Marecek and other postmodern scholars have challenged. They take issue not with the question of whether it is better to focus on similarities than on differences, a discussion that has generated a considerable literature (e.g., Deaux & Stewart, 2001; Halpern, 1994; Kimball, 1995, 2001). Rather, in a postmodern framework, the study of similarities is simply the other side of the sex differences coin; both approaches necessarily assume and focus upon the existence of qualities of individuals that are amenable to measurement and comparison. This framing of gender as a set of traits that reside within individuals and that can be employed to compare women and men is only one, albeit by far the most familiar, way of understanding gender.

In contrast, and to return to the central point here, Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988, 1990) operated from a postmodern approach that conceptualizes gender not as a constellation of measurable traits of persons but as a universe of enactments that reside in social transactions and are not intrinsically connected to individuals or to their sex—that is, to men or women or the similarities and differences between them. In this understanding, sex and gender are not matters of difference but forms of social organization (Bohan, 1993; Butler, 1993; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990; Hollway, 1994; Kitzinger, 1994a; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wilkinson, 1997).

Noting that psychology has consistently framed gender in terms of sex comparisons—that is, sex differences or similarities—Hare-Mustin and Marecek differentiated between those approaches that emphasize sex differences, which they termed "alpha bias" and those that minimize difference, termed "beta bias." The former include both traditional depictions of women's nature as fundamentally different from and inferior to men's, and also the woman-valorizing work of Gilligan, Miller, and other cultural feminists. Beta-biased or minimizing approaches include both the pioneering work of those early women

psychologists who challenged existing stereotypes about women's nature, and also more recent work that portrays women and men as fundamentally similar to each other (see also Kimball, 1995, 2001 and Mednick, 1989 for related distinctions).

As noted above, from a constructionist perspective, it is futile to attempt to establish the truth of either the maximalist or the minimalist stance, as there is no objective standard against which to judge the validity of any position. Even more important, Hare-Mustin and Marecek argued, is the recognition that neither position has produced useful insights regarding gender. Rather, both have led to odd paradoxes such that an allegiance to either can be turned to women's disadvantage. An assertion of important differences, for instance, can be invoked to justify differential treatment, often reproducing women's devaluation and oppression. To insist on an absence of differences, on the other hand, can lead to treatment that is identical but not equitable, because women's lesser social and economic power places them at a disadvantage where women and men are treated precisely the same (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, 1990). Above all, constructing gender in terms of sex comparisons—whether we suggest that those differences are large or small, whether we emphasize differences or similarities—obscures the role of social context and, especially, of power in human interactions and specifically in the social construction of gender (see also Fine & Addelston, 1996; Hollway, 1991; Wilkinson, 1997).

Scott (1988) has offered a thought-provoking illustration of how a deconstruction of our discourse regarding gender might reveal the uses of power that the sex comparison frame disguises. Scott, a historian, pointed out that despite rhetoric to the contrary, "different" and "equal" are not opposite poles on a single continuum. The opposite of different is same, not equal; the opposite of equal is unequal, not different. Thus, it is logically indefensible to contend that equal treatment must be predicated on the absence of difference. This deconstruction reveals the often unexamined implication of arguments for or against difference: Findings of either sort can be mustered to whatever ends are desired by those who possess the resources to do so.

Rather than asking about the existence or magnitude or origins of sex differences, postmodern positions assert, our explorations would do well to address questions that frame gender as a social system: What does gender mean? How is the very concept of gender socially constructed? What does gender do? How does it operate—as a construct rather than as a trait—to structure identities and social relations? What functions does it serve? For whom? Thus, a postmodern approach challenges the very practice of considering sex differences or similarities as a legitimate topic, arguing on both methodological and theoretical grounds that such work paves a road to nowhere, insofar as either a clearer understanding of gender or a feminist politic is concerned.

## PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SELF

Let us now turn from the first theme, sex differences, to a consideration of the second, the psychology of the self, and trace its appearance in selected models from the same three historical eras.

### Early American Psychology and the Self

In American psychology's early years, many theorists focused on the notion of the self. I will explore one of these models, selected both because of its extensive elaboration and because of its implications for the intersection of questions of sex differences and questions of self. Mary Whiton Calkins, one of American psychology's most prominent pioneer women, developed a theory of self that was arguably the most thoroughly articulated among the plethora of self theories of the era. As mentioned above, Calkins was among the cadre of early women psychologists who opposed the then-prevalent belief in sex differences in psychological functioning. Indeed, her theory of self is entirely in keeping with this position, as she draws no distinction between the nature of the self in women and in men.

More than any other psychologist of her time, and in stark contrast to the emerging behaviorist bent of the discipline, Calkins made the self the heart of her psychology, arguing that the proper domain of psychology is the science of selves. For Calkins, this self is present in all experience; all consciousness is self-consciousness. This sense of self is difficult to articulate, Calkins argued, precisely because it is so omnipresent as to go unnoticed; an inchoate awareness of oneself as the agent of behavior and the referent of experience permeates all psychological functioning. She maintained that the rapidly fragmenting field could be unified under such a definition, as all schools of thought—from Structuralism to Gestalt, from Psychoanalysis to Behaviorism—contained some notion of self, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g. Calkins, 1921, 1926a, 1926b; Calkins & Gamble, 1930). In numerous articles (e.g. 1908a, 1908b, 1908c, 1915) and several editions of a major text (1901, 1910, 1912), Calkins explored the application of her construal of the self to a wide range of psychological questions.

The self that Calkins depicted is distinguished by certain fundamental characteristics (e.g. Calkins, 1930), most of which parallel closely the notions of her mentor, William James (1890). One fundamental quality of the self, however, that marked Calkins' theory as distinctive among contemporary psychological theories of self was her assertion that the primary, indeed the constitutive quality of the self is its essential relatedness. Relatedness is, for Calkins, the very essence of the self; without relationship there is no self. Thus, the self exists always and only in relationship.

Furumoto (1988, 1991, 1996), who examined Calkins' theory, focusing on the centrality of the self's relatedness, suggested that this view of the self can be understood at least

in part as a product of Calkins' personal, professional, and socio-historical surround. The social construction of femininity at the time of Calkins' work primed a relational focus, emphasizing as it did women's role as family-centered nurturers. Further, Calkins' personal life was much influenced by relationships, especially with her parents; her desire to remain with them in the family home even influenced the direction of her professional path. In addition, Calkins spent her career at Wellesley College, a women's college where, in what Palmieri (1983) has dubbed an "Adamless Eden," women students and faculty formed a close-knit community that included personal and social, as well as academic relationships. Such a setting, combined with prevailing social beliefs about gender and with the framework of Calkins' personal life, may well have predisposed her to see human experience through a lens of relationship.

This is not to suggest that Calkins has been the only theorist to stress the importance to the self of relationships. Other theories of the self that emerged roughly contemporaneously with Calkins' work, especially outside psychology, also emphasized the importance of social relations (e.g. Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Calkins' mentor, William James (1890), included a "social self" as one element of his theory; however, his primary emphasis was on the individual, a myopia for which he has been criticized (Hilgard, 1987) and which Calkins' model rejects. Yet, during Calkins' era, psychology was striving mightily to disassociate from philosophy and from sociology, defining itself as the science of the individual and invoking modernism's self-contained individual as the locus of its subject matter, be that consciousness in the earliest years or behavior as the 20th century progressed. The emerging cultural emphasis on individualism as well as the competitive worldview characteristic of most male-dominated institutions of higher education (Furumoto, 1991) fostered psychological views—such as James's—that portrayed the self as more independent and self-contained. Further, Calkins maintained this emphasis on the centrality of subjectivity and intersubjectivity even in the face of the rising hegemony of behaviorism, which strove to excise subjective notions such as the self from psychology. Thus, although others saw social exchange as important, none granted the centrality to relatedness that Calkins did, and none persisted with her tenacity in the face of such opposition.

Similarly, many of the theories that resurrected the self in mid-20th century psychology portrayed the self as developed and expressed in relation to others (e.g. Allport, 1943; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951; Sherif & Cantril, 1947). However, as was true for James, the defining characteristic of the self in these models was its individuality, its striving for self actualization rather than relational fulfillment. Thus, although attention to the importance of relationships is not unique to Calkins' theory of self, her singular emphasis on relationships as constitutive of self and her refusal of a core identity held within is, at minimum, a far different empha-

sis than other psychological theories of the self (Cushman, 1995; Gergen, 1999, 2001; Sampson, 1993).

### Recent Feminist Psychology

Let us move forward to the 1970s and 1980s when the notion of self emerged as central to certain feminist psychologies. The cultural feminist models mentioned previously focused especially on sex differences in identity or the self, arguing for an intrinsic relationality as central to women's self structure. These maximalist models, often referred to as self-in-relation theories, were a sharp contrast to the prevailing minimizing cast of most of feminist psychology. Miller's (1976) *Toward a New Psychology of Women* initiated this body of work, urging that women possess "extremely valuable psychological qualities" (p. 26) and that among these is "women's great desire for affiliation" (pp. 88–89). Extending this basic position, Chodorow (1978) provided an underlying theoretical rationale for this focus on relationships: Given parenting patterns where the primary caretaking activities are carried out by mothers, a girl develops her identity through connection with her mother, so that identity comes to be defined by connection. In contrast, a boy must separate from his mother in order to develop his masculine identity, so that his identity becomes grounded in separation and independence.

Beginning from the principle that women's identity is based on relationships and interpersonal connection, Miller (1976) and others, especially at Wellesley College's Stone Center, elaborated self-in-relation theory, articulating its meaning for women and its implications for psychotherapy (e.g. Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surry, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Others explored the importance of this relational framework for other areas of women's lives. Gilligan (1982) applied the frame to the topic of moral development, asserting that women speak "in a different [moral] voice" than do men. Specifically, Gilligan argued, women's judgments are guided by a morality of caring which focuses on mutual connection, whereas men employ a morality of justice based on individual rights. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) applied a relational model to women's cognitive functioning, suggesting that "women's ways of knowing" tend to derive from connection to rather than separation from the subject of knowledge.

The shared emphasis on relationship that appears both in recent self-in-relation theories and in Calkins' earlier work raises a provocative question: Might women, in this case, Calkins and self-in-relation theorists, see human experience in ways that are intrinsically more relational? Might such a relational emphasis reflect an essentially "feminine" mode of seeing reality? This question brings us directly to postmodern understandings of the self, to which we will now turn.

## The Postmodern Self

Postmodern analyses have challenged long-standing assumptions about the nature of the self, as they have assumptions about the notion of sex differences. Recall the basic constructionist position that there is no free-standing truth, no essence of reality to be discovered. Rather, "truth" or reality is fluid, formed and reformed at each moment, constructed through discourse and dependent on ever-evolving contexts. When applied to the notion of identity or self, this approach directly challenges fundamental assumptions of western psychology, indeed of western thought in general, which has been grounded, at least since Descartes, in the concept of a core, persistent, individual identity, a free-standing and enduring self.

The self about which western psychology has spoken is this Cartesian self: the "I" that persists over time, acting as the agent of behavior, the referent of experience, the owner and operator of the body, which in turn serves as a container for the self, identity, and psychological processes. The self is construed as existing independent of or prior to the social order; the social order, in turn, comprises separate and autonomous persons or selves, each of whom possesses the agency to enter into and leave—and thereby constitute or dismantle—social groups. Groups, then, are simply aggregates of self-contained persons, each acting upon her or his independent agency to participate in the group. At the core of each self-contained individual resides an identity, a persistent self that transcends particular contexts and comprises the essence of the person (e.g., Cushman, 1990, 1995; Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1999; Sampson, 1989, 1993; Shotter, 1993; Wilkinson, 1997).

Many have noted that this celebration of the autonomous, rational individual serves to legitimize the power of those whose ascribed identity is defined in such terms—namely White, privileged, heterosexual men. The gender bias—and, indeed, the privileging of affluence, heterosexuality, and Whiteness as well as masculinity—inherent in psychology's embrace of the self-contained individual as the prototype of psychological well-being has been the subject of numerous critiques (e.g. Code, 1991; Fee, 1986; Gergen, 1994, 1999; Harding, 1986; Kitinger, 1994a; Sampson, 1993; Scheman, 1983; Wilkinson, 1997) and will arise again when we return to the topic of sex differences later. For now, it is important to note that this conception of a core identity or selfhood intrinsic to the individual and apart from the social order is a modernist, Western construction, just one of many ways that persons might be construed.

Postmodern thought has deconstructed this modernist self, arguing that there is no core, essential self that moves through time and persists across situations (e.g. Cushman, 1990, 1995; Geertz, 1979; Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2001; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harre, 1984; Sampson, 1977, 1985, 1989, 1993; Shotter, 1993). In its place, postmodernism posits a self that is not an autonomous and continu-

ing entity but rather is perpetually connected and in flux; the self is constituted and reconstituted in ever-changing social contexts, especially in the discourses that are the vehicle of social exchange. In other words, the self is inextricably related; its very existence resides in and is interwoven with the fluidity of social exchange.

This argument is not simply the assertion that the self is an outcome or product of social exchange, something that exists outside of that exchange once shaped by it. Such an argument would not be particularly stunning, as it is common across much of the self literature, both currently and historically. Rather, for postmodernists the self is *in* the exchange. In fact, the exchange *is* the self; the two are inseparable, even conceptually. There is no self as we commonly characterize it—no entity caused by, influenced by, responsive to, or intersecting with the social environment. The self exists only in its thorough integration with the process of relationship. It is an emergent phenomenon that is present only in the context of the communal.

Thus, in a postmodern construal, different selves emerge in differing circumstances of relationship. To suggest that a new self emerges in a new context is not simply to say that an individual or identity acting as agent manifests different aspects of her/his autonomous, continuous core self in varying circumstances. Rather, because social interchange between and among people is coextensive with selves and because social exchange or conversation is always shared—whether in person, in text, or in fantasy—the self belongs as much to the other(s) as to oneself. The self does not exist within the individual but in the space between and among people, in conversational exchange.

A moment's reflection reveals that the implications for Western psychology of this view of self are profound. Many of psychology's central concepts and foundational practices presume that individuals carry within themselves an essential self, an identity. Indeed, in the absence of some such vision of persons, Western psychology as we know it simply makes no sense, for there would be no definable subject and no identifiable client (see, e.g. Cushman, 1995; Gergen, 1999; Kitinger, 1997; Sampson, 1993). We will return to this notion later after collecting a few more conceptual threads.

## SEX DIFFERENCES AND/IN THE SELF

And now we come to the heart of this discussion, the relationship between emerging views of the self and evolving understandings of sex differences. To close the circle, let us return to Calkins' theory of self, which in very different ways foreshadowed both recent, self-in-relation theories and contemporary postmodern notions of self. The parallel between Calkins' model and recent self-in-relation theories lies in the fact that both regard the self as intrinsically related in nature. It is tempting to suggest, and I have frequently heard it suggested in discussions of Calkins' work, that this shared emphasis on relationality derives from the fact that

women developed both models, and that the similarity in focus demonstrates that women inevitably understand the world in a relational manner—which, of course, is itself a key assertion of self-in-relation models.

The hypothesis that an intrinsic gender-related worldview underlies the apparent parallels we see here bespeaks an essentialist understanding of gender. Gender essentialism construes gender as consisting of a constellation of internal attributes that are associated with one's sex and that shape one's personality, cognitive processes, moral judgment, and so forth (Bohan, 1993). In this understanding, gender is a shared trait, common to members of a particular sex/gender category. Thus, it would reflect gender essentialism to assert that women share an intrinsically "feminine" mode of experiencing, such as a focus on relationship. If we embrace this assertion, we might come to the essentialist conclusion that women theorists develop models grounded in a relational emphasis because this is how women intrinsically understand human experience.

Essentialist approaches to gender, such as that suggested by this interpretation of theoretical similarities, have drawn substantial criticism, too extensive to detail here (for a summary, see Bohan, 1993). Of particular relevance for our purposes are two central challenges. First, gender essentialism homogenizes women, implying that all women experience life in the same way. Second, gender essentialism links this commonality of experience to women's being women rather than to social arrangements. Critics of these models argue that all women do not experience reality in the same way, that there is no universally representative woman. Rather, women's experiences vary widely depending on historical, cultural, political, and personal circumstances. Further, challenges to gender essentialism argue that the construal of gender as a set of traits within the individual risks victim blaming and diverts attention from the social and historical origins of the qualities that are culturally defined as "feminine" and from the constraints that shape women's experience toward these qualities (see, e.g. Crawford, 1995; Crawford & Chaffin, 1997; Davis, 1994; Fine, 1985; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Lott, 1985, 1990, 1997; Sampson, 1993; Squire, 1989; Westkott, 1997; Wilkinson, 1997).

Entirely apart from any conceptual shortcomings of gender essentialism, the bottom line in the ledger of research on this topic reveals no clear evidence that women are indeed more relational in psychic structure than are men (e.g., Broughton, 1983; Crawford, 1989, 1995; Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Friedman, Robinson, & Friedman, 1987; Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Kerber, Greeno, Maccoby, Lana, Stack, & Gilligan, 1986; Mednick, 1989; Tavris, 1992). Thus, there is no empirical support for—and there is considerable theoretical and political impediment to—assuming that the similarities between Calkins' theory and recent self-in-relation models have to do with any essentially "womanly" relational perspective on the self.

### A Constructionist Interpretation: Calkins, Gender, and the Relational Self

If appeals to gender essentialism do not explain the apparent similarities between Calkins' and self-in-relation theories, perhaps the tools of social constructionism can provide a more satisfactory understanding. Within a constructionist framework, gender is not a quality of persons at all but simply a construct identifying particular transactions that are understood to be appropriate to one sex or another; "femininity" or "masculinity" are not resident in individuals but are simply terms we apply to those transactions that we have agreed to construe as gendered (Bohan, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). From this stance, similarities in behavior—or, in the context of this article, similarities in psychological theories—are better understood as the product of similarities in context than as reflections of intrinsic qualities of individuals—or theorists. In particular, we might more profitably look to similarities in the social construction of gender in these two periods rather than to characteristics presumed to abide in women. This position would suggest that any similarity in thought is not an indication that all women intrinsically perceive the self in relational terms but that these theorists worked in and their work was shaped by contexts that emphasized relational understandings of women's experiences.

Previously, I described the relational context of Calkins' life and work, which Furumoto (1988, 1991) has linked to Calkins' emphasis on the self as fundamentally related. A close look at the historical context of Calkins' life also reveals a certain paradox in how women of her time responded to the social construction of women as intrinsically relational. Despite systematic efforts to confine women to their prescribed sphere, some women began to oppose such limiting expectations and to make progress toward more active participation in the public sphere. This progress, however, was met by resistance, much of it couched in terms of dire warnings to women that such violations of their prescribed role would damage their reproductive capacity and endanger society as a whole (e.g. Cattell, 1909; Hall, 1905; Thorndike, 1906).

If we compare the context of Calkins' life with that of recent cultural feminist theorists, we find that in many respects circumstances were remarkably similar. In examining the latter era, Mednick (1989) has suggested that the period centering on the decade of the 1980s was witness to a number of concepts, which she termed "bandwagon" constructs, having to do with gender: androgyny, "a different voice," and fear of success. While these various notions have markedly different theoretical and empirical groundings, they share the quality of serving well—if entirely inadvertently—a maximalist agenda where women's experiences of oppression are attributed to qualities within themselves: a self-initiated avoidance of achievement, a deficit in the more highly valued "masculine" elements of androgyny, or interpersonal styles that hamper leadership. Such

interpretations, according to Mednick, reify experiences that may be better understood as socially constructed than as essentially feminine and intrinsic to individuals (see also Lott, 1990); they also border on victim blaming (see also Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

These “bandwagon” notions leaked into the popular media as well as being widely embraced in psychology and related disciplines. Mednick suggested that these constructs enjoyed such broad acceptance, despite the absence of evidence for their validity, precisely because they were compatible with the social and political context in which they emerged. Sociopolitical agendas of the 1980s included a backlash against the progressive movements of the 1970s, including women’s slow progress toward equality (Faludi, 1991). In the domain of gender, popular rhetoric—that is, widely held social constructions of gender—touted a return to the “traditional family,” one where women’s role was in the home, as an antidote to the devolution of contemporary society. In Mednick’s analysis, portrayals of women as intrinsically relational meshed nicely with this rhetoric.

Upon reflection, we see that this was a situation in many ways similar to the world in which Calkins lived and worked. In both circumstances, socially constructed understandings of gender couched women in relational terms that served to limit their opportunities. In response, women resisted these limitations—Calkins and others in early psychology, feminist psychologists more recently—and in so doing, generated significant change in society and in psychology. These changes, in turn, triggered a backlash in each historical period, a movement seeking to return women to their traditional roles. A constructionist interpretation would suggest that this similarity in sociohistorical contexts goes farther toward explaining the parallels between Calkins’ and recent self-in-relation theories than does an appeal to gender essentialism that postulates inherently womanly ways of experiencing and explaining reality. And, perhaps of greater importance, it calls attention to the material circumstances of women’s lives.

Further, there are critical differences between Calkins’ model and those of self-in-relation theorists, differences that are hard to accommodate within a gender essentialist framework. These discrepancies also make more sense within such a contextual analysis. The most striking difference is that Calkins did not assert, as do recent cultural feminist self-in-relation theories, that the relational quality of the self characterized women more than men. Calkins’ position in this was completely commensurate with the then-emerging women’s movement, bent on broadening girls’ and women’s educational and social opportunities by arguing for their equal potential. Further, her stance was very much in keeping with her personal penchant for a minimalist approach to sex differences (e.g., 1896). In contrast, recent cultural feminist self-in-relation theories, which begin from a maximalist position emphasizing sex differences, proffer a vision of the female self, but not the male self, as essentially relational.

Given the presence in both eras of a feminist discourse that was minimalist in tone, we might well ask why recent cultural feminist models rejected that discourse in favor of a maximalist one. Conversely, many women in Calkins’ time supported then-prevalent public representations of women as intrinsically suited to caregiving roles rather than the minimalist discourse that Calkins embraced. The observation that Calkins’ work defies the gender essentialism of her cultural milieu and that recent self-in-relation theory can be seen as compatible with gender essentialism raises myriad questions that are beyond the scope of this article. However, the discrepancy serves to point up the inadequacy of gender essentialism as an explanatory tool to account for the similarities between the two in their relational focus.

### Calkins and the Postmodern Self

Subtler and also more provocative than the parallel between Calkins and recent self-in-relation theories is the similarity between Calkins’ model of self and contemporary, postmodern construals. Postmodern approaches to self, like both Calkins and recent self-in-relation theories, highlight the intrinsically interdependent, inter-related quality of the self, thus challenging psychology’s long-standing allegiance to the notion of the self-contained individual as the unit of discourse. However, for postmodern theorists as for Calkins before them, this inescapable relatedness of the self is not differentiated by gender; that is, the selves of persons of every sex/gender are constituted by relationship. This position is in direct contrast to the cultural feminist notion of the distinctive relational quality of women’s selves. Thus, Calkins and postmodern theories of self join in disrupting both the Cartesian reification of the self-contained individual implied by the notion of a core self and also the gender essentialism that underpins the relational self seen as a “feminine” quality.

To carry this postmodern position another step, it is possible to view both gender and the individual self not as actual phenomena—that is, not as freestanding intrinsic characteristics of human experience—but as products of social exchange. Thus, gender is not a trait of individuals but a form of discourse; self is not the core of individual identity, but a phenomenon emerging within social exchange. To embrace this understanding rather than the usual construals of gender and of self requires that we recognize traditional, well-ingrained psychological understandings of identity as but one possible construction of human experience.

A similar analysis can also be applied to other identities that psychology has typically understood in essentialist terms. For example, sexual orientation has been examined as a social construct rather than as an essential quality of individual selves; this construction is commonly embraced by individuals as a core element of personal identity and by the communities they compose as a basis for community cohesion and identity politics (e.g., Bem, 1993; Bohan, 1996; Bohan & Russell, 1999; Greenberg, 1988;

Hart, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; McIntosh, 1968; Richardson, 1984, 1987; Schippers, 1989; Stein, 1996). From a postmodern stance, the notion of sexual orientation, the very idea of defining one's identity in terms of the sex of one's partner is a historically and culturally situated understanding; the same phenomena have also been conceptualized in vastly different ways—that is, by very different socially constructed understandings. Similarly, the construct of race has been analyzed in constructionist terms (e.g. Colker, 1996; Diamond, 1994; Gould, 1981, 1994; Gutin, 1994; Lopez, 1997; Sampson, 1993; Shreeve, 1994; Wills, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990), pointing up the arbitrary and empirically ambiguous criteria by which race is defined, as well as its use as a tool of social control. In each case, a characteristic widely held by contemporary psychology to be a fundamental definer of identity is revealed as a temporally and culturally situated construct, one of many possible understandings imposed on the vast variety of human experience. Each is also recognized as a tool of social control, in that the categories so constituted and the attributes associated with them have profound implications for individual experience and social policy.

Constructionist analyses of these constructs—the self, gender, sexual orientation, and race—find convergence in the postmodern rendition of self as inextricably interconnected. In this framework, it is social relations rather than internal characteristics that generate each of these experiences/categories/identities. To invoke strong constructionism, the social exchange that generates these categorical identities also shapes individual experience. People are not only identified socially by their race, gender, or sexual orientation, they also experience themselves in those terms. We would expect that, given different patterns of social transaction, different identity experiences would emerge. Indeed, there exist cultures where the qualities regarded as differentiating sex/gender categories are radically different than in our own; there are others where the very notion of identity grounded in one's sexual partner is inconceivable; and even in this country, the complex questions recently raised by multiracial identities reveal the impossibility of employing race as a straightforward identity category, despite our psychological and political reliance on just such divisions.

In light of these indications that a relationally defined self may prove meaningful, perhaps a reconsideration of the details of Calkins' theory is in order. The notion that her work foreshadowed contemporary cultural feminist self-in-relation theory by nearly a century is noteworthy, particularly given psychology's tendency to ignore or minimize the work of women pioneers in the field. But her anticipation of postmodern notions of the self is even more remarkable. The postmodern construal of self, and by extension, Calkins' detailed examination of the related self, is potentially transforming to the field. It prepares us to set aside the persistent and intractable question of sex differences—such as between women and men in their respective sense

of self—as well as other categorical markers of psychological identities, such as race and sexual orientation.

Transcending our standard identity categories might free us to ask more productive and timelier questions about human experience. For example, what benefit derives from one or another understanding of the self—as autonomous or as intrinsically related, as essentially gendered or as gendered entirely through socially constructed understandings? In a parallel manner, what benefit derives from understanding race and sexual orientation as intrinsic qualities of individuals or as understandings generated by discourse and employed as tools of social control? In Gergen's words, “who gains, who loses, and how do we wish to build our future together?” (Gergen, 1999, p. 58).

Calkins' charge to define psychology as the science of the related self is echoed in the postmodern insistence that the image of the self-contained individual is inadequate to a full understanding of human experience, and that a psychology for the present must take into account the rapidly burgeoning global connections among people (Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2001; Sampson, 1989; Shotter, 1993). A psychology that takes as its subject matter the related self seems well-suited to an increasingly interdependent global community, to a world where revolutionary changes in information and communications make of us all what Gergen (1991) has termed “saturated” selves, thoroughly enmeshed in ever-shifting webs of connection.

To accept this charge, of course, means accepting radical dislocations in the nature of the discipline, since psychology, as we know it, is anchored firmly in the construct of a freestanding, self-contained self. Further, because this individualistic notion of self is deeply connected with our understandings of other identity constructs—such as sex/gender, race, class, sexual orientation, developmental status, and so forth—its dismissal also threatens a disruption of many common understandings both within and outside of psychology.

Within psychology, for instance, consider the methodological dilemmas raised by our interest in sex and race differences if we reject the assumption that individuals carry intrinsic gender or racial identities. In psychotherapy, how can a therapist help a client to “discover” her/his “true self,” “feminine/masculine” side, true gay/lesbian identity if there is no true self, no internal gender, no essential sexual orientation to be discovered? If each of these identities—in fact the very notion of identity itself—is a creation of discourse rather than a free-standing event, if there is no self-contained individual, then what is psychology's subject matter? How do we incorporate such fundamental notions as the developmental emergence of identity, the presumed advantage of individually defined moral standards, the importance of boundaries and the threat of enmeshment, the value attributed to independent thought and resistance to conformity, or the importance of self-esteem? How can psychology pursue its long-standing interest in individuals—a position that even frames the social as aggregations of

individuals—if the individual does not exist except as an epiphenomenon of the social?

Beyond psychology, the potential quandaries are tremendous, as well. In the political realm, consider the paradox that a postmodern view of self creates for identity politics. How can there be a feminist movement if there is no essential quality that joins women together, a gay rights movement without a community joined by a shared sexual orientation, a civil rights movement if there is no concept of race? How do we establish and enact public policy initiatives that demand such groupings? How do we work toward gender or racial or sexual equality if we cannot define the groups whose equality we envision? A profound conflict emerges if we recognize essentialist construals of identity both as the catalyst for identity politics and as tools of social control employed by others. The simultaneous urge to claim and to resist provides a fascinating study in the paradox of identity in a postmodern world (see e.g. Bohan & Russell, 1999; Gergen, 2001; Kitzinger, 1987, 1997; Sampson, 1993).

Daunting questions arise on a more personal level, also. How do we understand groups if not as aggregates of individuals; is it possible to join or resign from a collective self? How do we define the parameters of this collectivity if not by identifying individuals as members? Are we all participants in every self? Might it be better to understand us as a collective self? Might the appropriate pronoun for the self be not “I” but “we?” Consider what this does to our understanding of our social roles. Does “we” collectively earn whatever any of us earns; how can that be if there is no singular “any” who does the earning? How does we reward or punish our collective self for success or sin if there are no individuals enacting right or wrong conduct? Should we change our language so that there is no “I,” so that pronouns are only plural, although verbs are singular? We are sure this would be a difficult transition, but probably one more true to ourself.

Taken seriously, the questions raised by such analyses are unavoidably disorienting, but they are also freeing. What would psychology be if we took as our aim a comprehension of the convoluted webs of relationship, the intricacies of social and historical context and their impact on psychological thought, both disciplinary and personal? Such an aim opens the possibility of a clearer and more nuanced vision of human experience, one free of essentializing and categorical identity distinctions that distort through homogenization and that mask the impact of context and the role of power in human relations.

The direction of this perspective seems entirely in keeping with the current state of human endeavor. At this moment in history, we are entwined in a complex mélange of social exchange, in a world saturated with instant, pervasive, and increasingly multicultural communications. In such a world, our “identities” are surely not fixed, self-contained entities but fluid complexities that exist ephemerally within

interpersonal exchanges and that change with the same rapidity as the interactions. A postmodern rendition of the self, perhaps enriched by a better understanding of Calkins’ prescient construal of the self as constituted by relationship, may make space for the emergence of a psychology more suited to our times.

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## NOTE

1. One can argue that these internal experiences derive from what were initially external events, namely cultural messages about and environmental consequences of women’s actions. However, the argument here is that women internalize these messages so that the cultural messages become elements of their view of self. The result is that, change strategies focus on changing women rather than altering their sociopolitical circumstances. Postmodern notions of self (e.g., Sampson, 1993), on the other hand, reject this division between external and internal as artificial. A postmodern understanding of synergy between the two might provide a way out of this endogenic-exogenic impasse.

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