
Teaching Psychology of Women With Accuracy and Optimism

Our Voices: A Psychology of Women

by Elizabeth A. Rider

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How can we best create a psychology of women that captures the reality, diversity, and meaning in women's lives? How can psychologists best convey this discipline to students with little or no experience in this area? With *Our Voices: Psychology of Women*, author Elizabeth Rider approaches facets of women's lives, including work, relationships, cognition, health, and communication, with self-awareness and complexity. For example, the discussion of women's friendships addresses cross-sex friendships, lesbian friendships, and friendships between women of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Our Voices presents in-depth treatments of its topics while remaining accessible to students without prior study in these areas. Just as important, the text consistently acknowledges differing viewpoints and interpretations, and it provides admirable models for evaluating psychological research and phenomena. These qualities instigate a complexity in thinking that reaches beyond the book's content. This ambitious, needed volume is also well-organized and readable,

qualities augmented by its clever format. Interwoven throughout the general text are Featured Studies, thorough descriptions of relevant research especially useful for advanced psychology students striving to devise research plans. A resource section follows each chapter, including selected references, InfoT-rac College Edition citations, and Web sites; an expansion of these sections would render them even more valuable. The text is also interspersed with Commentaries and Real Life sections that present individual viewpoints and experiences. The book's weak points reflect fundamental challenges of contemporary psychology: To what extent should psychologists endeavor to integrate their topics and to what extent should research be specific? How can psychologists cultivate cultural and geographic inclusiveness when psychology's foundations do not?

For the most part, *Our Voices* admirably integrates the important themes in the psychology of women. Examples of synthesis include a discussion of racism in the health care system, attention to sexism in psy-

chological diagnoses, a presentation of gender stereotypes and memory, and connections between trauma and substance use. On the other hand, *Our Voices* does not address some important interrelationships. Both the Media section of Chapter 5, "Assigning Roles to Women," and the Weight section of Chapter 11, "Health and Reproduction," address women's and society's drive for thinness, yet neither mentions eating disorders. Though eating disorders are meticulously presented in Chapter 14, their separation from the topics above precludes the presentation of data linking these topics (e.g., Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992). Similarly, responses to violence, including post-traumatic stress responses, although included in Chapter 13, "Violence in Women's Lives," are absent from the chapters on health and mental health. This omission impedes the discussion, central to feminist psychology, that women's responses to trauma, specifically gender-based trauma, are most often pathologized; they must be normalized if true recovery is to occur (e.g., Brown, 1992; DePrince & Freyd, in press; Herman, 1992). Though incorporating these themes across chapters may sound redundant, students reading the text over the course of the academic term will appreciate these connections.

The need for integration is addressed to some extent in the opening section of *Our Voices*, which articulates that gender interacts with other contextual variables, rather than operating alone. *Our Voices* helpfully frames its content with Points to Keep in Mind: (a) Meaning is Relative, (b) Gender and Context are Inseparable, (c) Biases are Everywhere, (d) Individuals Vary More Than Groups, (e) There's an Exception to Every Rule, and (f) Socialization and Culture are Crucial (pp. 19–

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25, 555-556). These themes are incorporated into the body of the text, though sometimes more convincingly than others.

Worldliness in the Psychology of Women

Though *Our Voices* attempts to address women's lives all over the world, it does focus on the United States. This imbalance is unavoidable, because most psychological research is limited to the United States and Western Europe, but becomes problematic when only some topics are examined through a global perspective. The opening section of *Our Voices*, All the Women in the World, presents a tantalizingly diverse portrait of women's lives. In this section, a Real Life inset describes a typical day for a man and a woman in rural Africa. This chapter proceeds with attention to the breadth of women's experiences. It demonstrates that the increase in women's life expectancy is geographically specific; it describes the "double burden" faced by women of color; and it addresses ethnocentrism, ageism, and heterosexism within psychology. Another excellent instance of the book's respect for diversity occurs in Chapter 12, "Sexuality," where a Real Life insert excerpts young people's responses from several countries, including Ghana, Japan, the Netherlands, and Lesotho, to the question, "Who should be responsible for contraception?" (p. 453).

Although *Our Voices* does a significantly better job at incorporating a global perspective than most psychology texts, its recognition and partial fulfillment of this goal create an even deeper longing for its achievement. Most chapters in *Our Voices* could make use of additional research exploring cultural variables. Chapter 13, "Violence in Women's Lives," should describe violence against women in countries besides the United States and the different meanings and consequences violence has across cultures (e.g., Fontes, 1995; Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996). Similarly, the text of the section Marriage and Partnerships could include economic

concerns and dowries, important elements of partnerships in many regions and cultures. The rest of Chapter 10, "Contemporary Life," and Chapter 11, "Health and Reproduction," would be improved in this manner. The section on sexist language in Chapter 6, "Communicating," misses the opportunity to investigate sexist language, or lack thereof, in languages besides English. *Our Voices* does not address religion and spirituality, issues personally important to many women and integral to women's social and political positions all over the world. These omissions reflect the inherent cultural biases that *Our Voices* discusses. Readers would benefit from a description of the paucity of psychological research involving most parts of the world and by an acknowledgment of the book's inevitable emphasis on American women in its Introduction.

Language and Communication in the Psychology of Women

Chapter 6, "Communicating," is one of the strongest chapters of *Our Voices*, providing a thorough look at many aspects of women through language and communication, including topics such as interrupting, intonation and pitch, nonverbal communication, and tentative speech. The text also showcases women's humor in communication, a discussion that hopefully will inspire readers to question how humor functions in women's lives. For example, humor in conversation is often used to affirm or dispute gender typing (Crawford, 1995).

Our Voices explains the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language influences our thinking (Hardin & Banaji, 1993) and alludes to this principle throughout the text. A generous instance is the author's admission that she considered calling Chapter 13 "Victimization" instead of its final title, "Violence in Women's Lives," and her address of the implications of the word *victimization*. This theme promotes consideration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in other topics as well. For instance, in the term *domestic*

violence, the qualifier "domestic" seems to soften the word "violence." It is possible that the term's linguistic effects could exacerbate legal decisions punishing domestic violence less severely than nondomestic violence.

The ways language and communication affect women is also central to Chapter 5, "Assigning Roles to Women." The chapter highlights women's unequal representation in terms of media and literature, citing, for example, Kortenhuis and Demarest's (1993) identifying a ratio of two to three male characters for every female character in children's books. The chapter's data allow the reader to wonder, for instance, would J. K. Rowling's (1999) book *Harry Potter* have been such a success if the series' protagonist were female? The chapter also addresses the complexity of women's representations in the media with descriptions of media practices such as dismemberment, advertising's practice of showing only, for example, women's legs or breasts, and canting, the use of unnatural body positioning, which portrays women as uncomfortable or embarrassed.

The Scope of Feminism

Our Voices excellently articulates the main concept of feminism, explaining, "According to most definitions, a feminist is someone (female or male) who believes in the economic, political, and social equality of women and men. Others would add to this definition that social changes need to occur for women to lead equal and satisfying lives" (p. 11). In recent years, feminism has also come to signify the struggle to end all forms of oppression. Although incorporating this element of feminist theory into the book's definition necessitates a framework beyond women's psychology, its inclusion could augment the text's scope of feminist thought. Understanding the ways sexism relates to racism and heterosexism provides insight into the nature of power and oppression. Furthermore, an understanding of power structures is cen-

tral to understanding women's context. *Our Voices* often attends to the complexity of power issues. For instance, the text explains that most lesbians wish for an egalitarian relationship but frequently identify power imbalances in their relationships (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). It also examines the ways women's lack of power or control may contribute to sex differences in depression.

In discussing the negative connotations of "feminism," *Our Voices* might also explore how feminism became a bad word. The text should mention not only Faludi's (1991) book *Backlash*, but also the theory and phenomenon. In what ways have women been punished when they have asserted their rights and needs? How does this occur on a personal level as well as a political one? Women's rights have not followed a smooth trajectory. For example, women in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia once enjoyed more freedom than they do today. Though the text includes a commentary on Schneider and Fein's (1996) book *The Rules*, it might go on to explore how this book could only exist in a postfeminist or antifeminist culture.

Our Voices' history of feminism is very much from a U.S. perspective and would benefit from information about feminist movements in other countries. For example, the 1978 founding, by a group of women in Dehli, India, of *Manushi: A Journal About Women and Society* is an achievement that needs to be recognized along with Gloria Steinem's beginning *Ms.* magazine. *Manushi*, published and edited by Madhu Kishwar, boldly addresses women's issues in India, South Asia, and the diaspora, including political representation, health, artistic achievements, violence against women, women's history, fiction, and poetry, women's rights, and reader responses, in a manner that is intelligent, compassionate, and inspiring (see the Web site: <http://www.freespeech.org/manushi>).

Liberation or Celebration?

It is important to celebrate qualities and characteristics of women that have too often been devalued and pathologized (Brown, 1992). It is also important to question the assumed basis of these traits. Chapter 9, "Personality and Social Interactions," discusses women's characteristics in areas including empathy and proclivity for competition but does little to consider possible reasons for sex differences concerning these qualities. *Our Voices* remarks that women score lower than males on measures of competitiveness and questions the ways society values competition above cooperation. Another set of questions could address how these qualities in women vary cross-culturally and why women might develop cooperative instincts rather than competitive ones. Similarly, the discussion of empathy would be significantly deepened by looking at the possible reasons for sex differences. One explanation is motivational: Klein and Hodges (2001) discovered that paying participants for empathic accuracy caused sex differences in performance to disappear. Perhaps we can celebrate valuable personal qualities such as empathy while recognizing that women have often been socialized to develop these qualities.

In discussing the future of women's psychology as a discipline, *Our Voices* explains three possibilities, as offered by Kahn and Jean (1983). One direction considers sex differences as resulting from socialization and predicts that they will dissipate once people are treated equally. Somewhat similarly, the next trajectory sees status and power disparities as the cause of sex differences and also holds that sex differences will disappear when inequality does. The third view considers the sexes as fundamentally different and maintains that the field will continue to be unique and needed. These differing viewpoints lead to the question, Can we continue to celebrate women as "other" while trying to ameliorate that sta-

tus? One concern would be that psychology of women, and courses with names such as Cross-Cultural Psychology, Cultural Psychology, or Multicultural Psychology, will always be separate classes and not ever fully incorporated into the canon of introductory psychology.

Given the current status of the psychology of women, its instructors struggle with dismantling essentialism and balancing the tension between educating students about the depressing reality of women's lives while fostering hope through providing strong and positive role models. Many students begin their study in this area expecting to learn about the differences between men and women as well as ways to manage these essential differences. These students are often frustrated when they realize the course is not going to be a how-to course along the lines of John Gray's (1992) pop-psychology best-seller *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. *Our Voices* will serve these students well, as it bridges part of the divide between introductory psychology topics and advanced gender analyses such as Sandra Bem's (1993) excellent work *The Lenses of Gender*. Though *Our Voices* does cover some extraordinary women whose thinking and actions affect the psychology of women, showcasing these women further through pictures and stories will help students retain hope in the face of disillusionment.

Our Voices fulfills the ambitious task of providing a forward-thinking text for a psychology of women. An excellent resource and teaching text, *Our Voices* will be most effective when used in courses that continually interweave its concepts and by readers diligently conscious of its Points to Keep in Mind. □

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