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Record: 1

Title: The market for feminist epistemology.

Authors: Baber, Harriet

Source: Monist; Oct94, Vol. 77 Issue 4, p403, 21p

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: *KNOWLEDGE, Theory of
*FEMINIST theory

Abstract: Focuses on the feminist paradigm of epistemology. Failure of traditional theories of knowledge to account for features of women's experience; Empirical assumptions about gender differences; Doctrines about psychological differences between men and women; Costs of feminist epistemology; Market for scientific fictions.

Full Text Word Count: 8911

ISSN: 0026-9662

Accession Number: **9502014945**

Persistent link to this record: <http://0-search.epnet.com.sally.sandiego.edu:80/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,uid&db=aph&an=9502014945>

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THE MARKET FOR FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

considerations:
Flawed data and
bogus explanations

The costs of feminist
epistemology

The market for
scientific fictions

REFERENCES

NOTES

At first blush, the notion a "feminist epistemology" appears, at best, peculiar--not, as Sandra Harding suggests, because "'woman the knower' (like 'woman the scientist') appears to be a contradiction in terms"[1] but because it is hard to see how an epistemology, a philosophical theory of knowledge, can be either feminist or anti-feminist since it is not clear how such a theory might benefit or harm women.

Advocates of feminist epistemologies however suggest that traditional theories of knowledge are male-biased insofar as they fail to account for features of women's experience which are different from the characteristic experience of males.

"Epistemology," writes John Pollock, "is 'the theory of knowledge' and would seem most naturally to have knowledge as its principal focus.

But that is not entirely accurate. The theory of knowledge is an attempt to answer the question, 'How do you know?', but this is a question about how one knows, and not about knowing per se. In asking how a person knows something we are typically asking for his grounds for believing it. We want to know what justifies him in holding his belief. Thus epistemology has traditionally focused on epistemic justification more than on knowledge....

Epistemic justification is a normative notion. It pertains to what you should or should not believe.[2]

A number of writers in the Continental tradition have rejected this paradigm of epistemology for a variety of reasons. Advocates of feminist epistemology however reject it specifically on the grounds that the norms it embodies are male norms and hence that their acceptance sets standards which women find it difficult, or impossible, to meet. In particular they hold that the traditional epistemic ideal of an objective, detached observer, conducting his investigations in isolation from any historical or social context, is alien to women's engaged, concrete, contextual way of knowing:

The female construction of self in relation to others, leads . . . toward opposition to dualisms of any sort, valuation of concrete, everyday life, sense of variety of connectedness and continuities both with other women's relationally defined existence, bodily experience of boundary challenges, and activity of transforming both physical objects and human beings must be expected to result in a world view to which dichotomies are foreign.[3]

The popular acceptance of traditional epistemological views, according to which this mode of reasoning is defective, they suggest, is bad for women insofar as it results in their being assessed adversely as knowers. The popular acceptance of epistemologies which recognize the legitimacy of women's way of knowing is good for women because it results in women being more highly valued. To this extent, presumably, such epistemologies are "feminist."

There are a great many different theories which purport to be feminist epistemologies and it may be a mistake to look for essential characteristics as distinct from family resemblances. Nevertheless advocates of feminist epistemology by and large seem to make two assumptions which are highly questionable.

First, they commonly assume that there are deeply entrenched differences in the ways in which men and women see the world which arise either from biological differences or from early developmental history and so are, at best, difficult to alter. Thus Jaggar notes,

Growing empirical evidence shows that women tend to conceive the world differently from men and have different attitudes towards it. The discovery of the precise nature and causes of these differences is a task for feminist psychologists and sociologists of knowledge. The task for feminist scientists and political theorists is to build on women's experience and insights in order to develop a systematic account of the world, together with its potentialities for change, as it appears from the standpoint of women.[4]

"Growing empirical evidence" it will be shown, suggests no such thing. Thus, for example, the thesis of gender differences in moral reasoning hypothesized by Carol Gilligan who, according to Jaggar, "demonstrated that the categories used to describe the moral development of children in fact fit the development only of boys"[5] [emphasis added] was early shown to be false on empirical grounds. Nevertheless, like a number of other "scientific fictions," including the myth of mother-infant bonding to be considered presently, the myth of women's way of knowing took on a life of its own within the literature, in which feminist theoreticians cited other feminist theoreticians and the highly speculative work of feminist psychoanalysts in support of claims about gender differences which had little or no empirical basis.[6]

Secondly, many advocates of feminist epistemology make a number of normative assumptions which are questionable and, in any case, in need of explication since they are largely tacit. Arguably, even if all the assumptions about women's distinctive way of viewing the world were correct, it would still not follow that we ought to reject traditional "androcentric" theories of knowledge, according to which women are assessed as epistemically defective, in favor of theories which legitimate and value women's way of knowing.

On the face of it, it seems reasonable that the acceptance of such accounts would benefit women. Presumably, if a trait which women possess (or are thought to possess) is valued, women benefit. This seems plausible because, more generally, we are inclined to accept the following argument:

- (1) Members of Group G have trait X
- (2) People benefit when traits that they possess are highly valued
- (3) Therefore, members of group G benefit when trait X is highly valued

(2) and (3) are however ambiguous since it is not clear whether the suggestion is that people benefit *ceteris paribus* when traits they possess are highly valued or whether the claim is that people actually benefit on net when traits they possess are highly valued. The former claim is plausible but is not adequate for the feminist epistemologist's purposes; the latter claim is, however plainly false, for it is not the case that people invariably benefit on net when traits they possess are highly valued. Consider the following argument:

- (1) Epileptics have fits
- (2) People benefit on net when traits they possess are highly valued
- (3) Epileptics benefit on net when having fits is highly valued

Some societies in fact have valued having fits along with other manifestations of altered states of consciousness as signs of divine favor and, presumably, in such societies epileptics gained a certain amount of prestige from their condition. Arguably however the prestige they gained in such circumstances was outweighed by the costs and epileptics are, on net, better off in circumstances where fits are not valued and where, as a consequence, researchers make aggressive and ultimately successful efforts to find means to control seizures.

Similarly, assuming (falsely as it happens) women really do "think differently" from men and speak in a different moral voice, to make the case that women would benefit by the acceptance of theories that value these modes of reasoning, we should have to show that the benefits of being recognized as epistemically and morally competent outweigh any costs associated with women's epistemic strategies and modes of moral reasoning. After all, it might turn out, when the costs are weighed against the benefits, that it was very much better for women to cure them of their "non-linear" thinking and proclivity for "caring," by psychotherapy, neurosurgery or, best of all, a solid course in logic, than to exalt women's way of knowing.

Empirical considerations: Flawed data and bogus explanations

Even if their empirical assumptions about gender differences were correct, advocates of feminist epistemology would still have to make a case for the benefit to women of their theories of knowledge. Their case however is all the more difficult to make because in fact many of the empirical claims about gender differences which they cite are false and the explanations given for those differences which do exist are implausible.

Consider Carol Gilligan's highly influential study of moral reasoning in boys and girls which Jaggar cites as not merely having demonstrated that boys and girls follow radically different courses of moral development but even as having shown that "basic categories of western moral philosophy such as rationality, autonomy and justice, are drawn from and reflect the moral experience of men rather than that of women."^[7] These would be apocalyptic results indeed if it were not for the fact that Gilligan's research methods were flawed and her results were disconfirmed by subsequent research.

Thus, Carol Tavis, citing an extensive body of empirical studies, notes

Research in recent years casts considerable doubt on the notion that men and women differ appreciably in their moral reasoning, or that women have a permanently different voice because of their early closeness to their mothers

When subsequent research directly compared men's and women's reasoning about moral dilemmas, Gilligan's ideas have rarely been supported. In study after study, men and women use both care-based reasoning . . . and justice-based reasoning. In study after study, researchers report no average differences in the kind of moral reasoning that men and women apply.... results confirm Gilligan's argument that people make moral decisions not only according to abstract principles of justice, but also according to principles of compassion and care. But they fail to support her notion that women have any special corner on that compassion.... [cites Stephen J. Thoma. "Estimating gender differences in the comprehension and preference of moral issues." *Developmental Review*, 6, (1986), pp. 165-80].

Two other psychologists in the field of moral development, Anne Colby and William Damon, likewise found little scientific support for Gilligan's claims. 'While her portrayal of general, sex-linked life-orientations is intuitively appealing,' they concluded, 'the research evidence at this point does not support such a generalized distinction.'

Similar efforts to pin down differences between males and females in the value they place on 'autonomy' versus 'attachment' have been unsuccessful. In one study of 130 college students--who were of an age where we might expect the most exaggerated sex differences--psychologists Susan Cochran and Letitia Anne Peplau found no average differences in students' desire for attachment. . .[8]

If the task of feminist theorists in sociology, psychology, political science and the hard sciences is, as Jaggar suggests in the passage cited above, "to build on women's experience and insights in order to develop a systematic account of the world, together with its potentialities for change, as it appears from the standpoint of women" these feminists are out of a job.

Similarly, Tavis cites additional empirical data which undermines what have become commonplace assumptions about gender differences as regards attachment/connection, cognitive abilities, dependency, emotions, empathy, moods and 'moodiness', need for achievement, need for love and attachment, need for power, nurturance, pacifism/belligerence, sexual capacity, verbal aggressiveness and hostility.[9] At the very least, the theses about psychological differences between men and women which Jaggar and others believe to have been "demonstrated" and which have become commonplaces in pop psychology and self-help literature, have not been established.

To explain male-female differences which she thought she had discovered, Gilligan invoked speculative theories of development espoused by feminist psychoanalysts including Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker Miller.

Gilligan's work was, at first, an important correction of bias in the study of psychological development, which had been based almost entirely on men's lives. In particular, she showed that earlier psychologists, finding that women did not seem to reason like men in evaluating moral dilemmas, concluded that women were somehow morally deficient, lacking in moral reasoning skills, and developmentally retarded. 'I cannot evade the notion,' Freud had written, 'that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men.'

Gilligan agreed with Freud that women and men differ in what they regard as 'ethically normal,' but she maintained that women's ways are just as moral....

The origin of women's different voice, according to feminist psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker Miller, lies in the psychodynamic consequences of being raised primarily by mothers. Girls may continue to stay attached to their mothers as they form their identities, but boys, in order to develop a male identity, must separate themselves psychologically at an early age. The result in this view, is that adult women find comfort and solace in connection and are frightened of separation; adult men find security in independence and are frightened of attachments, which they fear will swallow them up and obliterate their identity as males. 'Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, 'Gilligan summarized, 'male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation.'....

As Chodorow put it, 'The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate.[10]

Such theories, however, are highly speculative and do not appear to be confirmed by empirical data which suggest that those psychological and behavioral differences which do exist are explained not by early development and relations with one's primary care-taker so much as by one's current situation in life--and that, far from being deeply entrenched and virtually ineradicable, they are subject to modification.

New studies find that the behavior that we link to gender depends more on what an individual is doing and needs to do than on his or her biological sex. For example, sociologist Barbara Risman compared the

personality traits of single fathers, single mothers, and married parents. If biological predispositions or childhood socialization create stable personality differences between men and women, she reasoned, then fathers should differ from mothers in their baby-care skills and nurturing talents in general, regardless of marital status. Instead, Risman found that having responsibility for child care was strongly related to 'feminine' traits, such as nurturance and sympathy, as being female was. The single men who were caring for children were more like mothers than like married fathers. These men were not an atypical group of especially nurturant men, either. They had custody of their children through circumstances beyond their control--widowhood, the wife's desertion, or the wife's lack of interest in shared custody.

Similarly, a study of 150 men who were spending up to sixty hours a week caring for their ailing parents or spouses found that the men provided just as much emotional support as women traditionally do....

In the 1970s, the sociologist and business consultant Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in studies of men and women in corporations, showed conclusively that conditions of employment, not qualities of the individual, determine what most people value about their work.... When men and women hold the same prestigious jobs, their values and behavior are similar.[11]

In addition to doctrines about psychological differences between men and women which allegedly make it difficult for women to meet the requirements' of traditional theories of knowledge, and psychoanalytic accounts of their origin, most advocates of feminist epistemology hold also that such epistemologies are male-biased to the extent that they assume a mind-body dualism of some sort and denigrate the body in favor of the mind. According to the received view women are "associated with nature . . . and the body" in such a way that what Jaggar calls "normative dualism, the excessive value placed on the 'mind' at the expense of the body," is detrimental to women's interests.

Of course, both men and women have both minds and bodies but, through the western philosophical tradition, women have been seen consistently as being connected with (or entangled in) their bodies in a more intimate way than men are with theirs . . . The traditional view, in short, is that women are more closely associated with nature and men with culture; women with the body and men with the mind.

The association of women with body and men with mind has been reinforced if not generated by a sexual division of labor in which (some) men have dominated the 'intellectual' fields of politics, science, culture and religion while women have been assigned the primary responsibility for many day-to-day tasks necessary for physical survival.[12]

The suggestion that women are, in this sense, archetypally and universally associated with the body is simply implausible. The association of women with the body does indeed seem to be a feature of Greek culture which, as a consequence, found its way into the philosophical literature.[13] The Victorians, however, whose attitudes are far more influential on the general public than the opinions of Greek philosophers, associated men with the body and brute nature and regarded "culture" as the domain of ladies. Men, indeed, monopolized the highprestige leadership roles in religious, literary, and artistic activities, but even such men were regarded as perhaps a trifle effeminate, not truly men's men. Religion and culture then, as now, were regarded as feminine domains.

In addition, the suggestion that women by and large do "physical labor" while men ("at least men of a certain class") monopolize "mental" work is plainly false--unless we gerrymander the distinction between "mental" and "physical" work in such a way that all low-prestige jobs typically done by women count as "physical." Otherwise it is hard to see how, e.g., clerical work, which occupies almost one third of all women who work outside the home, counts as "physical labor." Indeed, arguably, one of the most egregious injustices against women which feminists ought to work to rectify is women's defacto exclusion from most jobs which are ordinarily understood as "physical work"--from carpentry, plumbing, and other construction work, from house painting, from mining, from auto mechanics and other skilled trades, from ditch-digging and the operation of heavy machinery, and generally from work that is mobile, involves physical exertion or is done out of doors.[14]

In addition to questionable claims about the association of women with the body, Jaggar suggests women fare better in societies where the importance of the body and of natural, mutualistic relationships are recognized, than in those which embody ideologies that trivialize or denigrate the body and conceive of society as an "atomistic" association of rational egoists. Women, writes Jaggar, would be unlikely to have developed ideologies like the liberal theory of human nature which regard "mental" activity more highly than physical work, embody an atomistic conception of society and place the highest value on individual autonomy.

It is easy to see how certain features of the liberal theory of human nature are far more likely to have been

produced by men than by women. For instance, it is easy to see how men, at least men of a certain class, would be likely to place supreme value on 'mental' activity and to ignore the fact that such activity would be impossible without the daily physical labor necessary for survival, especially the physical labor of women. It is even harder to imagine women developing a political theory that presupposed political solipsism, ignoring human interdependence and especially the long dependence of human young. Nor would women be likely to formulate a conception of rationality that stressed individual autonomy and contained such a strong element of egoism as the liberal conception.[15]

As a matter of fact, despite highly speculative accounts of primitive matriarchy, historically women appear to have done better in communities where the body, the family and the material world were regarded as suspect or positively evil.[16] Thus, in his account of sexual practices and sex roles in the ancient world, Richard Posner suggests that women were better off in early Christian communities, whose members were more distrustful of the body and material nature than pagans, than in Greek society generally.

Companionate marriage . . . signified marriage between at least approximate equals, based on mutual respect and affection, and involving close and continuous association in child rearing, household management, and other activities, rather than merely the occasional copulation that was the principal contact between spouses in the typical Greek marriage....

Despite its fulminations against woman the temptress and the devil's helper, Christianity seems to have been, on balance, more solicitous of women's interests than the pagan religions had been. By praising celibacy, the Church gave women other options besides marriage.... In forbidding divorce, the Church protected married women from being cast off by husbands who had tired of them--and losing their children in the process, since, under both Greek and Roman law, in the event of divorce the children remained with their father. And by insisting that marriage should be consensual--that a man or woman should be free to reject the family's choice of mate--the Church not only promoted companionate marriage but made indissoluble marriage more tolerable.[17]

Women did still better in communities that were even more hostile to 'tine body and to natural, mutualistic relationships than the Church at large, such as monastic movements within the church and gnostic communities without. Thus Ross Shepard Kraemer in her history of women's religious practice in the ancient world notes grudgingly that dualistic cosmologies benefited women:

The specific belief systems that provided women in antiquity with autonomy and alternatives are enormously problematic. Ascetic and monastic women from the Therapeutics to Thecla to the desert mothers found it necessary to repudiate the body and its female associations, becoming male both in theory and in aspects of appearance in order to achieve self-determination. Splitting the body from the soul, dualist cosmologies such as those advocated by gnostics frequently provided women with alternatives denied them by those (men) who insisted on the integral connection of body and spirit. Conversely, cosmologies that value embodiment seem then to need to constrain and confine women as a necessary corollary. The notion that self-determination for women is only available at the cost of psychic self-destruction, at the cost of the repudiation of the feminine, is hardly comforting.[18]

In general, women have been attracted to movements that have been antinomian, gnostic, individualistic and distrustful of both sexuality and of the body. In *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a history of "revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages," for example, Norman Cohn documents the participation of women in such movements as the highly individualistic, anarchistic and dualistic heresy of the Free Spirit. More recent religious movements founded by women have rejected sexuality and denigrated materiality, e.g., the Shakers, who were celibate, and Christian Science and Theosophy, based on the assumption that material reality is, in some sense, "unreal." More generally it has been in just those religious groups that were the most distrustful of materiality, the Quakers for example, where women first exercised leadership roles; by contrast, within Christianity, it has been those traditions which are the most sacramental and "incarnational," and to that extent, the most "materialistic"--the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican Churches--which have been slowest to accept women in leadership roles.

There is good reason for this. To the extent that disabilities and constraints attach to being female, ideologies which denigrate the body trivialize gender differences and so liberate women from the disadvantages that have traditionally attached to the condition of being female, as Kraemer suggests. It is hard to see, however, why this "repudiation of the feminine" represents an act of "psychic self-destruction" for women. It may be that for some, if not most women, femininity itself, quite apart from any social, economic or political disabilities attached to it, is itself oppressive, is something which women happily repudiate. In any case, whether the repudiation of "femininity" is intrinsically beneficial or costly to women, dualistic ideologies which enable women to detach

themselves from it appear to benefit women.

In short, although the thesis that women are "connected with (or entangled in) their bodies in a more intimate way than men are with theirs" is too woolly to be conclusively refuted, and unless one relies quite heavily on sociological data about the ancient Greeks (mediated through the philosophical tradition), there is little reason to believe that this connection--whatever it may come to--holds universally. Moreover an historical survey of the position of women in the West beginning with the Greeks of antiquity strongly suggests that dualism is good for women. Is it any wonder that Descartes, the villain of the feminist epistemologists' story, was sponsored by Queen Christina?

On the face of it, it may be puzzling how a large body of academic work could be built around claims, like Gilligan's thesis of women's "different voice" or Jaggar's suggestion that "women have been seen consistently as being connected with (or entangled in) their bodies in a more intimate way than men are with theirs" which were simply false. And yet books and articles in support of the views considered above boast extensive bibliographies of academic work by like-minded authors. Surely, one wishes to object, where there is so much smoke there must be some fire.

This is however to underestimate the power of scientific fictions which can be put to service in support of entrenched ideologies and institutional policies. Consider, for example, research during the past 20 years on the supposed phenomenon of mother-infant bonding among humans. "By the early 1980s," writes Diane Eyer in her recent study *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction*, "research on the bonding of mothers and their newborns had been dismissed by much of the scientific community as having been poorly conceived and executed."^[19] Yet in the decade prior to this an extensive academic literature had been generated in an attempt to examine and explain this bogus phenomenon. Moreover, even when the scientific community had largely dismissed this body of research, at the popular level, doctors, nurses and social workers continued to accept it as factually accurate. In materials given to pregnant women, by doctors and Larnaze educators, bonding was described as if it were an uncontroversial, plain fact like the dilation of the cervix during labor.^[20] Bonding, in spite of its lack of empirical support, became widely accepted because it had been "pulled into the maelstrom of popular belief and the institutional goals that inspire science."

The research on bonding was inspired by the popular belief that women, one and all, are inherently suited for motherhood. This belief coincided with a number of institutional goals, including the needs of the psychological and medical professions.... New mothers, whether feminist or traditional, also embraced the ideology of motherhood at a time when their sex role was being challenged. Bonding promised insurance against the psychological damage that might be caused by women's increasing involvement in work outside the home....

Bonding appeared to give women more control over their birth experience, and it supported their wish to have their newborn infants and other family members with them in what had previously been a lonely and often demeaning experience.^[21]

The myth of mother-infant bonding is by no means the only scientific fiction that has enjoyed undeserved success in virtue of its apparent confirmation of popular assumptions about gender and gender differences. Relatively shoddy research which purported to demonstrate a neurological basis for psychological differences between the sexes has also been given undue favorable attention. Why?

Because the study of sex differences is not like the rest of psychology. Under pressure from the gathering momentum of feminism, and perhaps in backlash to it, many investigators seem determined to discover that men and women 'really' are different. It seems that if sex differences (e.g., lateralization) do not exist, then they have to be invented.^[22]

The costs of feminist epistemology

Similarly, in spite of a lack of empirical support, Gilligan's book and other works which constructed and elaborated scientific fictions about psychological differences between men and women became popular among both academics and the general public. Tavis suggests that their appeal was due to their apparent confirmation of folk wisdom about gender differences: they embodied claims which many people found "intuitive." Nevertheless, she notes,

One problem with intuitions, of course, is that what feels right to one person may feel entirely wrong to another. A friend of mine, a professor in a law school, was discussing Gilligan's theory with her class and met vociferous resistance from the students, male and female. Many of the males felt resentful that their very real affections

and attachments were being overlooked or disparaged. Many of the females felt resentful that their professional abilities were being compromised or questioned. 'These women are planning to be litigators,' said my friend, 'and they don't consider themselves "naturally" soft or pliable, or less capable of a justice-based form of moral reasoning.' [23]

In addition to being unintuitive and offensive to men and women who have, to a great extent, broken free from traditional sex roles, giving the academic seal of approval to folk wisdom about male-female differences seems to provide justification for policies which reinforce traditional sex roles.

The idea that women operate on a different moral wavelength and speak in a different voice has made its way into many fields and into common consciousness. In business, many employers and managers are using Gilligan's theory to account for sex differences they observe in the workplace. Clinical psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner, describing her experiences as a consultant to organizations, says, 'I frequently hear Gilligan's research interpreted as demonstrating that women on the job care primarily about people's feelings and personalities, whereas men, in contrast, think in rational, logical, and abstract terms and are primarily oriented toward the task at hand.' [24]

The popular acceptance of such doctrines, particularly by management consultants and managers involved in personnel decisions, may be highly detrimental to women's interests. So, for example, the author of a popular journalistic account of the achievements of female executives in her introduction cautions readers aspiring to emulate them to "beware of 'experts' on working women":

The legitimization of the notion of the schizophrenic working woman, torn between career and kids--or what we call 'safe sexism' practiced by so-called experts on the workplace--has probably done more to sully the positive image of women in business than any backward attitude manifested by a male manager....

The practitioners of 'safe sexism' whether in the form of management consultants or advice-book authors, also defame women by legitimizing the notion of women as the second sex; that they have a distinct 'management style' that emphasizes 'nurturing,' 'building consensus,' and 'empowerment' while men are better at being leaders.

Not surprisingly, it's this very simple-minded stereotyping of women that has relegated them to the soft, fluffy pink ghettos of human resources and public relations instead of being put in charge of running factories, leading sales teams, and heading up mergers and acquisitions departments. [25]

While the myth of women's peculiarly feminine "management styles" may, to some extent, have benefitted women in business--to the extent that it provided some women with a way out of the typing pool and into what were at least nominally management positions--the overall result of myth was harmful to women in business.

Similarly, during a period when women were entering the sciences, while myths about women's "unique skills" and "special talents" opened doors, as Margaret Rossiter suggests in her study of women scientists in America, the creation of "women's work" within the sciences, the justification of which was grounded in such myths, was ultimately detrimental to the interests of women in the sciences.

Even though women could claim by 1920 that they had 'opened the doors' of science, it was quite clear that they would be limited to positions just inside the entryway....

Henceforth when better-educated and more qualified women tried to move beyond this territorial demarcation or up the hierarchy, they were met with strong resistance . . . In their attempts to get around these artificial barriers and inconsistencies early women scientists developed a great many strategies. These tended to be of two sorts. One was the idealistic, liberal-to-radical, and often confrontational strategy of demanding that society reject all stereotypes and work for the feminist goal of full equality....

The alternative strategy was the less strident and more conservative and 'realistic' tactic of accepting the prevailing inequality and sexual stereotypes but using them for short-term gains such as establishing areas of 'women's work' for women. Strategists for this approach emphasized that women had 'unique skills' and 'special talents' that justified reserving certain kinds of work for them....

If success can be judged in numbers, women scientists had done very well indeed, for by 1940 there were thousands of such women working in a variety of fields and institutions.... This great growth, however, had occurred at the price of accepting a pattern of segregated employment and underrecognition, which, try as they might, most women could not escape. [26]

If this is correct then the doctrine that there are profound and deeply entrenched psychological differences along the lines suggested by advocates of feminist epistemology is neither true nor beneficial to women. It is therefore, on the face of it, puzzling why a great many feminists eagerly accepted and promoted this view.

The market for scientific fictions

The answer, I think, is that while in the long run the doctrine of La Difference was detrimental to the interests of women as a group, in the short run invoking the doctrine (and so entrenching it all the more deeply in the popular imagination) was beneficial to individual women. Thus, for example, women having babies could invoke the myth of "bonding" and other dogmas of the natural childbirth movement to secure more humane treatment in hospitals and a greater measure of autonomy during the birth process and immediately afterward. Most women who bought into these views did not recognize their role in promoting traditional views about the nature and duties of women which were detrimental to women's interests.

Similarly, women in business and in the sciences stood to gain by promoting the idea that there were uniquely feminine talents and "management styles" since these were an entre into management and the professions that they would not otherwise have had: better to be a manager in a "fluffy pink ghetto" (where "feminine management styles" were deemed appropriate) than a secretary; better 'women's work' in a scientific area in which one had been trained than no work at all. The suggestion that women had "special talents" to offer businesses which would benefit their employers opened doors for women that appeals to fairness could not budge. Rhetorically, it was effective to promote the idea that hiring women was "good business."

The difficulty with such a strategy however is that in many cases using gender stereotypes for short-term gains generates vicious circles which lock in policies that are detrimental to women's interests. Arguably, the promotion of feminist epistemology is pernicious because it helps to generate such vicious circles. To make this out, however, we need first to provide a brief account of how vicious circles are generated.

A vicious circle of the sort with which we are concerned arises when the following state of affairs obtains:

- (1) Conditions, C, actually obtain.
- (2) Under conditions, C, the best policy for members of group G, is P.
- (3) Under conditions, C', the best policy for members of group, G, is P'
- (4) Pursuing P' under C' is preferable to pursuing P under C
- (5) Pursuing P contributes to the persistence of C

Consider, for example, the plight of computer buyers in the mid-80s when IBM and compatibles dominated the market and the newly emergent Macintosh was seen as little more than an expensive toy. Because it was advantageous to own a computer that was compatible with as many other computers as possible, all other things being equal, it was to the advantage of computer buyers to buy the computer that most other computer buyers had bought: Within the computer market, success bred more success. Apple, because it entered the market with the Mac relatively late, was almost caught in a vicious circle since conditions (1) to (5) obtained and, arguably, the Mac was only saved from extinction by the fierce, uncompromising and, in many respects, irrational and obnoxious loyalty of its fans.

- (1) In the mid-80s, IBM dominated the market. There was relatively little software available for the Macintosh and no convenient way to transfer data created under DOS to a format that the Macintosh could digest. Moreover, while IBM-compatible users could easily upgrade, with cheap cards and chips available at local computer-users groups, the Mac was a closed box, upgrading was expensive, and hardware was monopolized by Apple. Finally, IBM-compatible users did not take Macintosh users seriously.
- (2) Under the conditions described in (1), the best policy for computer buyers was to go IBM.
- (3) Under different conditions, in a more Mac-friendly environment, going Mac would have been preferable. If the Mac had been competitively priced, if there had been a wide range of software available for it, and if it, and not IBM had been the "industry standard," going Mac would have been the best policy for computer buyers.
- (4) Since (as all Macintosh users know) the Mac is intrinsically far superior to IBM and compatibles, buying a

Mac in a Mac-friendly environment is preferable to buying an IBM in an IBM-friendly environment.

(5) But, the fact that IBM and compatibles dominated the market, contributed heavily to making IBM and compatibles desirable from the consumer's point of view and to perpetuating the Mac-hostile conditions described in (1). Indeed, when the Mac first came out, potential consumers worried that it might be orphaned or abandoned like the Osborne and other early CPM machines, or like Apple's own Apple III and Lisa. So consumers continued to favor IBM and compatibles and by buying them further contributed to the IBM-friendliness of the environment.

The Apple/IBM competition in fact is a classic example of the phenomenon of increasing returns which operates in some parts of the economy, particularly where high technology products are involved. In such systems, economists suggest, "small chance events early in the history of an industry or technology can tilt the competitive balance" in many cases toward products that are intrinsically inferior. Markets where increasing returns operate are not efficient.

Conventional economic theory is built on the assumption of diminishing returns. Economic actions engender a negative feedback that leads to a predictable equilibrium for prices and market shares. Such feedback tends to stabilize the economy because any major changes will be offset by the very reactions they generate....

Such an agreeable picture often does violence to reality. In many parts of the economy, stabilizing forces appear not to operate. Instead positive feedback magnifies the effects of small economic shifts . . . [which] makes for many possible equilibrium points. There is no guarantee that the particular economic outcome selected from among the many alternatives will be the 'best' one. Furthermore, once random economic events select a particular path, the choice may become locked-in regardless of the advantages of the alternatives.[27]

The labor market for women is another market in which increasing returns operate and where, arguably, sex-segregated employment, a sub-optimal equilibrium, has become locked-in as a consequence of the vicious circle in which most female employees are caught.

Consider the situation of women who work outside the home.

(1) The overwhelming majority of women in the labor force are still employed in traditionally female occupations which are boring and underpaid. In addition, as most women know, such positions offer little chance for advancement. Women still make on the average .71 to every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Discrimination against women in hiring and promotion is the norm and sex segregation in the labor force is the rule rather than the exception.

(2) In such circumstances, it does not pay women to invest too heavily in their careers: It is advantageous to opt for the Mommy Track. Men's earning potential and prospects are more promising than women's; hence, where resources are limited, a rational woman will invest in marriage and in her husband's career in preference to her own because this strategy is likely to have the better payoff for her as well as for him. Moreover, a rational, self-interested woman in a boring pink-collar job who recognizes that her chances of advancement are negligible will take full advantage of the questionable features the Mommy Track--extended maternity leave, part-time work, job-sharing schemes and other arrangements which provide immediate benefits to working women at the cost of undermining their value as workers.

(3) If women had the same opportunities as men in the labor market, it would not be advantageous to opt for the Mommy Track.

(4) Being off the Mommy Track under conditions of male/female equity in the labor market is preferable to being on the Mommy Track under conditions of inequality.

(5) Opting for the Mommy Track promotes inequality. Notoriously, women don't invest in work because employers don't invest in women, but employers don't invest in women because women don't invest in work--thus women's rational, self-interested choices help to perpetuate discrimination, which is ultimately detrimental to women's interests.

It is just because women's situation in the labor market is viciously circular in this respect that feminists disagree about the desirability of the Mommy Track. Whatever the long-term costs, the Mommy Track does benefit women who take advantage of it. As many feminists have recognized, expecting women to behave like men in the workplace is, in most cases, actually demanding more of them than of their male counterparts and is, to that extent, unfair. Unlike men, most women cannot count on their spouses to take on the responsibility of child care;

unlike men, women cannot count on their spouses to take care of entertaining or day-to-day domestic responsibilities. Women in the labor force, unlike men, notoriously work a "second shift" in the home. On balance, however, one would hope that women would behave nobly rather than rationally and reject the benefits of the Mommy Track.

Similarly, the promotion of feminist epistemology benefits women, particularly academic women who gain from the acceptance of it and other areas of "feminist scholarship" at the cost of re-enforcing stereotypes of women and policies that are ultimately detrimental to women's interests. Women in the general population also benefit because, under conditions in which myths about gender differences are deeply entrenched and where men and women as a rule play different roles in social and economic transactions, women benefit to the extent that the traits they are thought to possess and the roles they play are valued as equal to, or even superior to, what are perceived as characteristics and roles appropriate to men. So, Tavis notes,

In generating public reaction, Gilligan clearly struck a nerve: Thousands of women have seen themselves in her book.... One reason for this enthusiasm, I believe, is that Gilligan and others finally recognized and validated the long disparaged, unpaid work that women do: the work of day-to-day caring for children, the work of keeping extended families together with calls, letters and gifts, the work of worrying about everyone's feelings, the work of monitoring relationships to make sure they are going well....

It was encouraging and life-affirming to read that intimacy and an ethic of care are as valuable as, indeed more valuable than, typical male aloofness and men's ethic of justice.[28]

Similarly, in circumstances where most people believe that "men and women think differently," in particular that women are "intuitive" and prone to "non-linear thinking" that defies the canons of conventional logic, it was "encouraging and life-affirming" for women to be told, by feminist epistemologists, that this special women's way of knowing was equal or superior to men's way of knowing which had been taken to be normative by traditional epistemology.

Nevertheless the market for feminist epistemology, like other markets where increasing returns operate, is inefficient insofar as it creates a vicious circle.

(1) It is generally believed that women "think differently" from men.

(2) Under conditions in which it is believed that women think differently from men the best policy for women is to promote the idea that women's way of thinking is equal or superior to men's way of thinking, that is, to promote feminist epistemology.

(3) Under conditions in which it is not believed that women think differently from men the best policy for women is not to promote this idea: feminist epistemology is at best pointless and potentially harmful.

(4) A state of affairs in which people reject the view that women think differently from men is preferable to one in which people accept this view. For one thing, all other things being equal perhaps, a state of affairs in which people hold true beliefs is better than one in which they accept superstitions, myths and falsehoods.

(5) Promoting feminist epistemology contributes to the persistence of the myth that men and women "think differently."

Thus women gain some benefits from the popularity of feminist epistemology, given prevailing myths about gender differences. Ultimately, however, the wide-spread acceptance of feminist epistemology is detrimental to women's interests since women suffer when myths of gender difference are rehearsed and given the academic imprimatur.

Academic women in particular lose insofar as the growing industry of "feminist scholarship" facilitates the construction of academic pink-collar ghettos. To see how and why academic pink-collar ghettos are constructed it may be instructive to compare the rise of feminist scholarship during the past two decades with the invention and development of home economics, perhaps the quintessential academic pink-collar ghetto, a hundred years earlier.

The founder of 'home economics,' and one whose leadership and character touched her contemporaries deeply, was Ellen Swallow Richards, Vassar 1870 and MIT 1873.... As a student at MIT she had reared how to make a place for herself (and other women) by capitalizing on woman's traditional role or, as she put it in 1871, 'Perhaps the fact that I am not a Radical or a believer in the all powerful ballot for women to right her wrongs and that I

do not scorn womanly duties, but claim it as a privilege to clean up and sort of supervise the room and sew things, etc., is winning me stronger allies than anything else.'....

By 1911 many [agricultural colleges of the Midwest and West] . . . had already formed programs and even departments of home economics and others were eager to do so.... Yet the very success of this kind of 'women's work' on major campuses helped to harden the sexual segregation for future generations still further. Rather than being accepted for other scientific employment once the pioneers had shown women could handle this employment, the women found themselves more restricted to 'women's work' than ever. Since women were finding such good opportunities in this field, many persons (including the first vocational guidance counselors, a new specialty around 1910) urged ambitious young women interested in science to head for home economics. It was the only field where a woman scientist could hope to be a full professor, department chairman or even a dean in the 1920s and 1930s.[29]

Unlike many contemporary feminist philosophers, Ellen Swallow Richards never claimed that her acceptance of traditional views about gender differences on her creation of a separate sphere within Academe for women was "Radical." Nevertheless, as the above considerations suggest, the popularity of home economics in the early part of the century benefited academic women in the sciences in much the way that the current popularity of feminist philosophy benefits women in philosophy. And, of course, in light of these benefits it has not been unknown for graduate school faculty to advise female grad students in philosophy to "do feminism" so that they can put it on their vitae. Arguably, however, the association of women in philosophy with "feminism" thus understood is harmful to all women in the profession, including those who do "do feminism."

Shortly after I had successfully defended my dissertation, which included a rousing defense of Relative Identity, I attended an APA function wearing a tee shirt I had made in honor of the occasion which proclaimed, "Repeal Leibniz' Law." An earnest male philosopher approached me and asked whether that motto "had something to do with feminism." When I expressed bewilderment he explained that he assumed that it had something to do with feminists' rejection of "Western male logic." Mercifully, once I began expounding the virtues of Relative Identity and explaining the more interesting logical moves in my dissertation he went away.

Granted that, even if "doing feminism" is merely a temptation for women in the profession and no woman is forced into the academic pink-collar ghetto, the visibility of "feminist philosophy," including "feminist epistemology," makes it difficult for women in the profession to avoid guilt by association unless they actively distance themselves from this enterprise by ignoring issues that concern women, remaining aloof from women's organizations in the profession and even by denying that they are feminists. These seem to me to be some of the worst consequences of the rise of "feminist philosophy." Even if "doing feminist philosophy" is, at best, a questionable business, doing philosophy as a feminist, in particular bringing analytic expertise to bear in the discussion of ethical and political issues that concern women, and exposing misconceptions about women, is extremely important. Worst of all, "feminist philosophy" has provided grist for the mill of conservatives in the profession--including some who claim to be feminists--who lampoon it in order to exploit anti-feminist backlash.

For these reasons I suggest that, on balance, quite apart from the intrinsic intellectual merits of what are currently understood as "feminist epistemologies," the identification of these theories as "feminist" motivated by unsubstantiated assumptions about psychological differences between men and women, is detrimental to women's interests.

NOTES

[1.] *Harding, p. 47.*

[2.] *Pollock, p. 7.*

[3.] *Hartstock, "The Feminist Standpoint," p. 23 cited by Jagger, p. 376.*

[4.] *Jagger, p. 376.*

[5.] *Jagger, p. 372.*

[6.] *For an empirically based summary of gender differences see Tavriss, p. 296.*

[7.] Jaggar, p. 372.

[8.] Tavis, pp. 83-86.

[9.] Tavis, p. 296. *This is Tavis's list of "where the difference aren't."*

[10.] Tavis, pp. 80-81.

[11.] Tavis, pp. 63, 88-89. *Numerous studies by Arrow, Blau, Bergman and other economists confirm Kanter's result. In general, labor-force attachment and behavior on the job, including most notably absenteeism and quit behavior, are a function of the nature of the job and not the sex or race of the worker. Although women in the aggregate behave differently from men in the labor force, the differences are accounted for by the differences in the work that men and women in the aggregate do.*

[12.] Jaggar, 46.

[13.] See Posner, esp. pp. 38-45 for a discussion of sexual mores and sex roles in the Mediterranean world during the period.

[14.] For a discussion of the characteristics of women's work, see, e.g., Game and Pringle, esp. ch. 1, "Masculinity and Machines." *Taking as representative the sexual division of labor in the whiteware (appliance) industry, the authors suggest that, at least in manufacturing, women's work is characteristically unskilled, "light," perceived as "less dangerous" than men's work, "clean" rather than dirty, boring, and immobile. Although women's work within this context is less prestigious than men's work, it is also insofar as it is light, clean and immobile, less "physical."*

[15.] Jaggar, p. 46.

[16.] See Tavis's account of "the search for the feminist Eden," pp. 71-79.

[17.] Posner, pp. 45, 47.

[18.] Kraemer, p. 208. *It should be noted that neither Posner nor Kraemer is sympathetic to Christianity. Thus Kraemer writes:*

[19.] Eyer, p. 3.

[20.] As the mother of three children born during this period, I can vouch for this.

[21.] Eyer, pp. 1-2.

[22.] Marcel Kinsbourne. "If sex differences in brain lateralization exist, they have yet to be discovered" in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3, p. 242 cited by Tavis, p. 53.

[23.] Tavis, p. 83.

[24.] Tavis, pp. 81-82.

[25.] Jane White. *A Few Good Women*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), p. 26.

[26.] Rossiter, pp. xvii-xviii.

[27.] Arthur, p. 92.

[28.] Tavis, p. 82.

[29.] Rossiter, pp. 68-70.

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**Source:** Monist, Oct94, Vol. 77 Issue 4, p403, 21p

**Item:** 9502014945

