
Growing Up Intellectually: Issues for College Women

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About the Authors

Blythe Clinchy is an Associate Professor of Psychology, and Claire Zimmerman is a Professor of Psychology at Wellesley College. In 1981-82 they were named Mina Shaughnessy Scholars under a program sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. They are presently at work on a book describing the results of a six-year longitudinal study of women's intellectual development during the college years.

Abstract

Excerpts from interviews with college women are used to illustrate two modes of knowing, separate and connected. Separate knowing emphasizes objective criteria, critical examination of propositions and the construction of logical arguments. The orientation is toward impersonal rules and procedures. In connected knowing, on the other hand, one attempts to enter another person's frame of reference to discover the premises for the person's point of view. Connected knowers value first-hand experience and try to use their own experiences as a means of empathizing with the experiences of others.

Although college women become skilled in separate knowing and recognize its power, many also experience disillusion and anomie with it. Having learned all too well how to "extricate themselves" from their thinking, they find their intellectual work mechanical and unrelated to personal truth. These women also have difficulty becoming accomplished connected knowers. Although often predisposed toward understanding the other's point of view, they lack the sense of self that is necessary in connected knowing.

Some implications of these findings for college teaching are discussed.

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Two stories

In this paper we want to tell two stories about intellectual development in college. The first story is one William Perry (1970, 1981) tells. Perry's story grew out of longitudinal studies of intellectual and ethical development he and his associates conducted at Harvard in the 1960's and 1970's. We conducted a similar study between 1976 and 1982, interviewing a random sample of Wellesley College undergraduates each year during their stay at the College and in some cases after they left Wellesley. We have also interviewed some women students from other small liberal arts institutions. The story we hear in our interviews with these women is very like the one Perry heard in his interviews with men. We hear another story, too.

To illustrate the first story, Perry's story, listen as a woman we call Naomi tells us how her views of art history have changed. The first time she talks about it she says:

There are certain questions that you have to answer for yourself, where there isn't just a right and wrong. Especially in a subjective course like art history. It's a matter of tastes. You can like a piece that someone else doesn't like, and you have to decide for yourself.

But Naomi finds that her professors do not want her simply to express her personal reactions to paintings in her papers. They want her to analyze the paintings, and they provide a five-page guide to aid her in her analysis.

They give us a way to analyze paintings. Then we analyze the painting and come to a conclusion. There are certain criteria that you base your evaluation on — the composition, texture, color, lighting, how the artist expresses his feelings, and what the medium is.

At first, Naomi worries that teachers are trying to foist their opinions upon her, but she finds that this isn't so. Teachers are not trying to tell you *what* to think, she says. They're trying to teach you *how* to think. You can take any position you want, "so long as you substantiate what you're saying. They're teaching you a method, and you're applying it for yourself."

Another student makes the same discovery:

I think a teacher can get a paper with which he disagrees strongly but if it's well written and well argued, then he can't give that person a bad grade because he disagrees with it. (What makes a paper well written and well argued?) Well, just the fact that the ideas are structured, that they're in logical sequence, that there aren't any contradictions between what you said in Paragraph 1 and what you say in Paragraph 4 -- that you thought about it well, that you considered all the possibilities and have looked at it from several angles and then maybe taken one point of view but made clear that you did consider other points of view.

Notice several things about this story. First, students learn to use objective criteria, rather than relying upon personal feelings. Second, they learn to consider events from more than one angle. Third, they learn to reason in order to please Authority. The student uses the teacher's methods to construct arguments which will meet the rigorous standards of powerful authorities.

The irony, as Perry points out, is that through conformity to Authority's desires, the student becomes capable of independent critical thinking. Although, at first, she exercises her new abilities only at Authority's behest, ultimately she uses them spontaneously to construct her own arguments and to examine other people's reasoning. She is no longer at the mercy of other people's arguments. Another student reports:

I never take anything I read or what someone says for granted. I just tend to see the contrary. I like playing devil's advocate, arguing the opposite of what somebody's saying, thinking of exceptions to what the person has said, or thinking of a different train of logic.

As Perry tells the tale, the student discovers that this kind of thinking is not just how "They" (the Authorities) want you to think. It is how they (the authorities, now dethroned to lower-case "a") think too. Having demonstrated at last that she can think as They do, the student is initiated into the community of scholars, confirmed as a thinker. She becomes one of

them. This, of course, is true only if all goes well. And, of course, it doesn't always go well. (If it did, we might find more women among the tenured professorial ranks and in the board rooms of corporations. Most of them are male.)

Although Perry's story does appear in our interviews, we also hear a different story, one which does not appear in his account. Often, the same Wellesley student tells both kinds of stories. Here is an alumna describing her "most powerful learning experience" at Wellesley.

I had lived in the same small town for eighteen years. Going to Wellesley — there was a real diversity of people there. You'd meet all kinds of people from all kinds of walks of life, from all across the country and the world, who have all kinds of different opinions and views on life. Just sitting around and talking with these people — I think that made me *really start listening to people and comparing and contrasting views on things* . . . I'll always sit down and at least hear the other person out, regardless of how vehemently I disagree . . . If you listen to people and listen to what they have to say, maybe you can understand why they feel the way they do. There are reasons. They're not just being irrational.

An undergraduate says:

I think I'm a good empathizer in that if I were to sit down with a convicted criminal in his or her jail cell and have a discussion of this person's motives, who knows, maybe I would be able to see their point of view. I might not be able to agree. But I might be able to see that this person's background, parents, or, environment had been particularly stressful and I could understand that. And I would not feel superior. I don't think I could give you many examples of when I would feel morally above or separate from someone else to the extent that I wouldn't make the attempt to understand.

A third student describes how she studies a philosophy essay:

I try to think as the author does . . . It's hard, but I try not to bias the train of thought with my own impressions. I try to just pretend that I'm the author. I try to really just put myself in the person's place and feel why is it that they believe this way.

These students are learning a new mode of