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## Aspects of Women Psychology: An Overview

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### Abstract

Individual differences are the fundamental in psychological studies. Various reasons underpin for these individual differences. Gender is one such factor in individual differences. Gender is a social construct which widely influences human behavior. Psychology has studied distinct aspects of women's life experiences. Present paper addresses the brief historical aspect of psychology of women. It is very interesting to look upon the development of this field and the shifting paradigms of thoughts from beginning to present modern era. Again, in various ways the recent advances had changed the direction of study in this field. These study trends have been briefly discussed in this review. Women psychology, as it gained wide interest of researchers also had unfolded different dimension of this field. Some aspects of women psychology such as, biological, social and health had been discussed in this paper. This review provides a simple and synthesizing view of the development of the field of women psychology. Additionally, it provides a few glimpses of the wide area of women psychology. This study will add in understanding of this field and a direction for future research.

**Keywords:** Psychology, gender, women, women psychology

### Introduction

Psychology in itself is a study of human behavior. Women psychology, as the name suggests is study of this particular gender within the discipline of psychology. The psychology of women is also defined as the field which includes all psychological issues pertaining to women and their experiences (Denmark, 1977) <sup>[6]</sup>. This field possesses a very fascinating historical account. Some of such facts are discussed below-

### Early Studies

Historical roots of psychology of women can be traced back since 1800s. This era led to two strong, yet illogical, belief that women are inferior in the traits and capacities in comparison to man. Two historical men who led this belief about women were Darwin (1871) <sup>[5]</sup> and Freud (1905, 1931) <sup>[8, 9]</sup>. Since 1850s we can see that the scientist and psychologist had opposed this prevailing notion about the women.

### Refutation of Earlier Notion about the Women

Hollingsworth (1914) <sup>[14]</sup> through her research, found no evidence to support the variability hypothesis, which mistakenly concluded that the higher status of males was based upon their greater variability. Jacobi (1877) <sup>[12]</sup> argued against the widespread belief of her time that menstruation was so debilitating that women should refrain from physical activity. Jacobi's research found that exercise and higher level of education correlated with less discomfort during menstruation. Mary Bissell argued against the popular notion that in females, emotional fragility was the norm, and, therefore, part of femininity (Bissell, 1985) <sup>[3]</sup>. She pointed out the social factors that accounted for some of the emotional "fragility" of women Helen Thompson studied sex differences in mental ability (Morse, 2002) <sup>[16]</sup>. Often, she found similarities rather than differences between female and male subjects. When differences did occur, she was able to show how experience and environment, rather than biology alone, would account for them. Calkins (1896) <sup>[4]</sup> also disputed the popular social Darwinist myth that women's mental capabilities were less varied than men's.

Various psychologist who opposed and gave their opinion against Freud's work are Alfred

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Adler, Carl Jung, Karren Horney, Clara Thompson, Christine Ladd-Franklin, Margaret Floy Washburn, Mamie Phipps Clark, and Viola Klein. These psychologists had proposed various thoughts and theories related to women which were mostly highlighted that women are not inferior than men. Women naturally had some virtues and wired as such by nature which make them stand different than men.

### Emergence of the new discipline: Psychology of Women

An official indication of the acceptance of the psychology of women as a legitimate field of study within psychology came in 1973, when the Division of the Psychology of Women was established as Division 35 of the American Psychological Association (APA). Track of research studies has been significantly changed since then. Under the same division, Sage publishes a journal named "Psychology of women quarterly" since 1976 till date. This journal deals with the topics revolving around the life of a women. Such as feminist approaches, violence against women, body image, sex stereotyping, discrimination, sexuality, lifespan development and changes including both physical and mental, etc.

Denmark (1977) <sup>[6]</sup> has done most significant research and extensive publications have emphasized women's leadership and leadership styles, the interaction of status and gender, aging women in cross-cultural perspective, and the contributions of women to psychology. Strickland (1985) <sup>[18]</sup> published extensively about mental health of women. Marilyn Safir (1983-1993) pioneer of Israel's new Women's Movement, also served as the director of Project Kidma, the Project for the Advancement of Women, which, in addition to programs for women from disadvantaged communities and villages, runs workshops for leadership training for multicultural and mixed socioeconomic groups.

Martha Mednick one of the founders of that division as well as serving on the APA Committee on the Status of Women (1978), addressing the "new" psychology of women, described the field as young, interdisciplinary, and in some disarray, which she found desirable as it could stimulate new ideas (Mednick & Urbanski, 1991) <sup>[14]</sup>.

### The Field from 1990s onwards

After the establishment of division 35 this field has been flourished. Different psychologist, practitioners and authors have contributed to field of Women Psychology. Dorothy Canto has published numerous articles and books about gender and psychology including 'Finding Your Voice: A Woman's Guide to Using Self-Talk for Fulfilling Relationships', 'Work and Life', 'The Psychology of Today's Woman: New Psychoanalytic Visions', 'Women as Therapists: A Multi-Theoretical Casebook', and 'Women in Power: The Secrets of Leadership'.

Sharon Stephens Brehm (1945-2018) published extensively on gender research, developmental psychology, and social psychology. Feminist psychology has moved beyond finding fault in previous research to conducting sound research in its own right. It has produced a great deal of valid and important research and continues to create such research as well. A Feminist positivist empiricist approach utilizes conventional scientific methods to produce "factual" knowledge about a particular question related to something observable and measurable in the external world (Wilkinson, 2001) <sup>[20]</sup>. Thus, feminist empiricists proposed that the problem of gender bias in research can possibly be solved by advocating strict adherence to science (Riger, 2002) <sup>[17]</sup>.

A contextual approach looks at the psychology of women within a multidimensional framework that takes into account sociological and cultural factors when creating research questions (Wilkinson, 2001) <sup>[20]</sup> also help to make the psychological research to be more inclusive in nature. The current field of the psychology of women is interdisciplinary in nature, including the areas as varied as biology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, religion, media studies, political science, economics, business, education, and linguistics. This field has grown so much from perceiving women inferior than men to fight these illogical believes to constructing different paradigm of study and research focusing the strength, cognitive abilities, their lives, needs, challenges, physical and mental health and so on.

### Aspects of women psychology

Three main aspects of psychology of women can be illustrated as:

1. Biological Aspect
2. Social Aspect
3. Health

### Biological Aspect

In gender studies, the difference between sex and gender is commonly understood as sex is a biological identity of someone, whereas, gender is a social construct. Biological identity of a woman is always female. Then comes the term woman which in itself is a social construct thus it comprises a variety of topics which will be later. Being a female includes various differences from a male body. Psychology helps to understand the similarities and differences among both. Lifespan development deals with the physical as well mental growth over the time. At the same time, neurological aspect highlights how the female brain works differently than male.

- Physical changes: Female body not only designed differently but undergoes the drastic changes over the lifetime. These changes includes both physical and hormonal changes. Physical changes occurred at the age of puberty. Hormonal changes also start at this time but it goes till the menopausal age. Women psychology studies these issues in detail and promotes the well-being of female during these stages of life.
- Neurological differences: Based on the result of thousands of studies we can state that on average, males and females showed greater volume in different areas of the cortex, the outer brain layer that controls thinking and voluntary movements. Females had greater volume in the prefrontal cortex, orbitofrontal cortex, superior temporal cortex, lateral parietal cortex, and insula. Males, on average, had greater volume in the ventral, temporal and occipital regions. Each of these regions is responsible for processing different types of information.

The two hemispheres of a woman's brain talk to each other more than a man's do. In a 2014 study, University of Pennsylvania researchers imaged the brains of 428 male and 521 female youths and found that the females' brains consistently showed more strongly coordinated activity between hemispheres, while the males' brain activity was more tightly coordinated within local brain regions.

- **Cognitive abilities:** Women excel in several measures of verbal ability, except for verbal analogies. Women's

reading comprehension and writing ability consistently exceed that of men, on average. They outperform men in tests of fine-motor coordination and perceptual speed. They're more adept at retrieving information from long-term memory. Men, on average, can more easily juggle items in working memory.

- **They have superior visuospatial skills:** They are better at visualizing what happens when a complicated two- or three-dimensional shape is rotated in space, at correctly determining angles from the horizontal, at tracking moving objects and at aiming projectiles (Halpern, 1991) <sup>[10]</sup>. Infant girls respond more readily to faces and begin talking earlier. Boys react earlier in infancy to experimentally induced perceptual discrepancies in their visual environment. In adulthood, women remain more oriented to faces, men to things.

### Social Aspect

#### “One is not born a Woman, But Becomes One”

Philosopher Simone De Beauvoir in her book titled ‘The Second Sex’ (1956)

This quotation perfectly presents the real picture of womanhood which is not innate but being attained. The word mentioned here ‘becomes’ is very important. This becoming involves certain things. Female do not construct themselves rather this work is done by the society. What society simply means is a kind of social and cultural norms that makes us unite and different from other groups of people in preliminary observations. While saying society constructs, women implies all the idealized characteristics, behavior, and image of a women. From the very beginning period of life what she should wear, how she should walk, talk, eat, what colour of toys she should play with, which kind of skills she should acquire- all of them mostly decided according to societal norms. This discriminatory behavior led females to think about themselves more deeply that they were certainly very different from men not just in biological traits but in other ways also. Thus, society not only makes a clear demarcation between male and female but highlights the gender roles as well tries to stick with it. These ‘must be followed norms and roles’ decided by society for a particular gender leads to stereotyping of females which is full of biasness and prejudices.

- **Women and family:** Early learning of gender roles begins in the family itself. Typical household presents an image of men doing all the field work and bread winning while portraying women as a house care taker whether employed or not. Girl child learns from her childhood to play with soft toys, wearing different and more colourful clothes, looking and helping her mother doing house chores etc., somewhat these situations lead to a burden upon women to care for her family beyond anything else, whether it be her career or mental/physical health. Psychology plays a crucial role here to help a woman coping among various roles while taking care of herself along with her family.
- **Women and work:** Employment of women becoming more common in these days. But the workplaces are still not that women friendly or should be said only men friendly. Discrimination in wages, occupational choices, workplace harassment, domestic workload along with employment, multiple role shifts are some common issues are the important study area of women psychology. It also suggests what we can do to make the

workplace more women friendly, domestic sharing, on the job support, providing equal opportunities to women in workplace, etc.

- **Intimate Relationships:** Relationships are integral part of life. Intimate relationships has been explored with identity development of a person along lifespan by psychologist such as Erikson, Havighurst, and Freud. Again attraction, love, marriage, long-term relationships, divorce and separation are some topics covered through the research of women psychology.

### Health

- **Physical health:** Women’s physical health issues go beyond the reproductive health. Research data reports the inequalities in health care besides the frequent use of health services by the women. lifestyle disorders have also become a part of women life these days, as well eating disorders and body image related disorders. Then comes chronic health problems such as cardiovascular disease are prominent part of women health psychology.
- **Reproductive health:** It deals with menstruation, attitude towards menstruation, Menarche (the first menstruation), Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), Dysmenorrhea (used to describe the uterine cramps, headaches, backaches, and other unpleasant symptoms that may occur during menstruation), contraception, abortion, pregnancy, birth, infertility, motherhood, and menopause.
- **Mental Health:** Prevalence of psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, agoraphobia (afraid to leave the environment they know or consider to be safe), substance abuse and dependence, personality disorder, stress and gender role strain, and impact of violence on women’s mental health etc. are the another important issues studied in women psychology.

Thus, there are various aspects of women’s life which can be explored through the lenses of psychology. The psychological theories provide a depth understanding of women’s life experiences, and their psychical and mental health. A deeper understanding will help to create such environment which is more empathetic and appropriate for women. Their quality of life can certainly be enhanced with such understandings and little efforts.

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