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How Gender is Studied

1

Understanding Gender: Methods, Content, and Controversies

Michelle K. Ryan and Nyla R. Branscombe

Almost 40 years have passed since the publication of Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) seminal work *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. The book played a crucial role in bringing together the, until then, amorphous literature on gender differences within psychology, and in shaping research in the field in subsequent years. Maccoby and Jacklin's book is deservedly a classic within psychology, and as such it is a useful reference point from which we can examine the current state of the psychological literature in relation to gender.

In this first chapter we have the twin aims of introducing readers to the exciting contributions to be found in this *Sage Handbook of Gender and Psychology*, and also to take stock of the current state of the field by examining what has changed over the past 40 years and what has remained the same. In doing so we will identify new approaches and techniques used to examine the role of gender in social behavior, ascertain new questions that have captured researchers' imaginations, and explore some of the current controversies that have emerged within the field.

HOW WE STUDY GENDER: CONSTANCY AND CHANGE

Over the past 40 years, much has changed in the way in which we do psychology. We now study a broader sample of participants than ever before, new technologies have opened up a range of research questions and the means to address them, and new statistical techniques allow us to investigate more complex research questions. Much of this volume evaluates and integrates the knowledge that we gained, and details the increasingly sophisticated perspectives on gendered phenomena that have emerged.

Although *The Psychology of Sex Differences* was not a developmental volume *per se*, it did focus particularly on gender differences in children and adolescents. While this may have been, in part, due to the research interests of the authors, it is also likely that it reflected the consistent underrepresentation of adult women as the subject of psychological research at the time (Gannon, Luchetta, Rhodes, Pardie, & Segrist, 1992). Many psychological studies included few women or had exclusively male participants, but such underrepresentation of

female participants was less prevalent in developmental journals of the time (Hegarty & Buechel, 2006). Thus gender comparisons may have been easier to make with children and adolescents than with adults.

It is no longer the case, however, that research on gender concentrates on children. Nor are adult samples any longer limited to men. Indeed, often of late, due to the availability of undergraduate student samples, there is a focus on women, and it is male participants who are more likely to be underrepresented. Thus, as a whole, the chapters in this volume describe research that draws on a much broader sample of individuals than has been true in the past. Indeed, the psychology of gender is often either the psychology of women or the psychology of gender differences. While this may be a reaction to the traditional use of exclusively male samples, it has meant that it is only recently that psychologists have explicitly addressed issues concerning men and masculinity, a focus exemplified by **Bosson** and her colleagues in Chapter 8 with their discussion of precarious manhood, and by **Baumeister** in Chapter 17 in his discussion of men's distinct contribution to culture.

This widening (or deepening) of the psychological participant pool has also allowed for an expansion of our understanding of what is meant by the term 'developmental'. Developmental gender research is no longer restricted to the study of infants or children, although this period is obviously still important and is reviewed by **Bussey** in Chapter 6. More recently, and within this volume, developmental issues have been examined across the lifespan – and can include the gendered outcomes of (a) becoming a parent, as discussed in the context of the workplace by **Fuegen and Biernat** in Chapter 9; (b) of moving countries, as outlined in **Deaux and Greenwood's** discussion of the gendered outcomes of immigration (Chapter 15); and (c) increasingly important in our aging society, within older age, as discussed by **Kemper** in Chapter 10.

While this more inclusive sampling across the lifespan has certainly broadened the gender research agenda over the past 40 years, this is not to say that there is no room for continued improvement. As outlined by **Hegarty** and his colleagues in Chapter 3, research on gender is by no means immune to the androcentrism we see in other areas of psychology, where men or masculinity are seen as central, normative, and "normal". Moreover, our understanding of gender and its implications for behavior is still primarily based on an American or Western European perspective, as argued by both **Grabe** in Chapter 25 and **Kurtiş** and **Adams** in Chapter 16.

During the past 40 years we have also seen increasing complexity in the research methods available to us, both in the way in which data are collected and in the ways we analyze the information (see **Eagly**, Chapter 2). These include the examination of gender differences using new psychometric tests (see **Guimond** et al., Chapter 14; **Barreto and Ellemers**, Chapter 18) or expanding technologies to assess psychophysiological responses (see **Fischer and Evers**, Chapter 12; **Matheson and Foster**, Chapter 20) including fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging). However, as argued by **Fine**, in Chapter 4, such innovations are not without their limitations.

Similarly, new analytic techniques have come to the fore, or become more accessible to psychologists. These include more complex approaches to testing for moderation and mediation, multi-level analysis, and structural equation modeling. Such analyses allow us to ask more complex questions and come up with more nuanced explanations for gendered phenomenon. For example, with an increasing number of psychological studies examining gender and gender differences (either explicitly or by default), new analytic means of synthesizing whole bodies of research, such as the development of meta-analysis, outlined by **Eagly** in Chapter 2, allow us to obtain a more integrated picture of what the literature does,

or does not, tell us about gender and gender differences.

CHANGES IN THE QUESTIONS THAT WE ASK

Much social change has occurred over the past 40 years. As outlined above, there have been changes in the way in which we study the psychology of gender, but these changes have not occurred in a vacuum. During this time period, we have also experienced many societal shifts, especially in areas that are of relevance to gender researchers. These include the changing roles of women and men – especially the substantial increase of women in the full-time labor force, social movements such as third-wave feminism, and political and economic globalization. Together, these academic and social shifts have had a profound impact on our interests as researchers and have opened up a whole new array of research questions that we are able (and motivated) to ask.

Our research questions are clearly shaped by both the samples to which we have access and by the societal concerns that are salient at the time. For example, Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) focus on children and adolescents as their population of interest meant that examinations of cognitive ability focused on infant perception or school-related learning and memory tasks, as well as academic achievement and motivation. For the same reason, their examination of social behavior tended to focus on parent–child attachment, modeling, and play-activity. Similarly, while women tended to be underrepresented in psychological in the mid-20th century, those studies that did include women tended to concentrate on 'women's issues', such as mothering or sexuality, often from a psychoanalytic theory perspective (Unger, 2001). However, it is not only the topic of study that is shaped by time and place, but also the interpretation of the findings obtained from the studies conducted. For example, Maccoby

and Jacklin's interpretation of gender differences was very much representative of the trend in the 1970s, spurred on by second-wave feminism, to minimize gender difference.

In contrast, gender researchers today cover a much broader array of research areas, as demonstrated by the diversity of topics covered in this Handbook. While 'women's issues', such as sexual violence, are still of great interest to psychologists, they are often approached in very different ways, including the discursive approach outlined by **Kurz and Donaghue** (Chapter 5), the motivational approach taken by **Maass** and colleagues (Chapter 21), or methods of reducing gender-based violence described by **Ball Cooper** and colleagues (Chapter 22).

The research topics that we are drawn to are still, however, influenced by the context in which we, as investigators, are embedded. For example, as outlined by **Barreto and Ellemers** (Chapter 18), reductions in the acceptability of expressing overt sexism, together with the development of more subtle assessment techniques has led to a burgeoning area of research on subtle and benevolent sexism, while **Jetten** and colleagues (Chapter 19) describe the processes by which sexism and gender discrimination can be de-legitimized or legitimized depending on the norms operating in a given time and place. Similarly, an increasingly globalized world has led us to take a greater interest in the psychology of gender as it plays out in different cultural contexts (see **Guimond** and colleagues, Chapter 14), the psychological effects of context change via immigration (see **Deaux and Greenwood**, Chapter 15), and the role of physical attractiveness in marital relationships in different cultural settings (**Kurtiş and Adams**, Chapter 16).

Perhaps one of the greatest societal shifts that we have seen in relation to gender over the past 40 years is the changing role of women in relation to the family and the workplace. In many societies women have been entering higher education and the paid

labor force in increasing numbers. In Western countries specifically, women are now equally represented in higher education and in the workplace more generally (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). This shift in Western women's participation in higher education and the workplace has prompted researchers to examine women's performance once they get there. In particular, as **Betz** and colleagues discuss in Chapter 26, a large body of research examines the barriers to women's performance in the form of stereotype threat, particularly in male-dominated areas. Western women's greater participation in public life has also raised interest in understanding differences (and similarities) in the way in which women and men communicate (see **Carli**, Chapter 13) and in the way that they negotiate on behalf of themselves and others (see **Bowles**, Chapter 28). These authors dispel numerous myths concerning women's deficits in these domains, and illustrate how subtle contextual factors can both produce and eliminate gender differences in performance.

Nevertheless, despite Western women having entered the workforce in greater numbers, there is a clear realization that many women are failing to reach the top. For example, while women make up 46.6% of the US workforce, they make up only 16% of company board members and less than 4% of CEOs (Catalyst, 2012). Similar statistics can be found in the United Kingdom (with only 15% female board members) and Australia (with only 8% female board members; Catalyst, 2012). Such statistics have given rise to a body of research, and a myriad of metaphors describing and explaining women's underrepresentation (see **Bruckmuller** and colleagues, Chapter 27) and have prompted policy-makers and legislators to devise techniques to address inequality, such as affirmative action (see **Crosby** and colleagues, Chapter 29), and to reduce gender harassment (see **Maass** and colleagues, Chapter 21).

Over the past 40 years, psychology as a discipline has also experienced shifts and expansions in the research topics that are seen as relevant or popular. The growth in popularity of health psychology reflects renewed interest in the link between physical and psychological health, and the question of whether the relationship between physical health and well-being differs for women and men has been brought to the fore. This revitalized interest in the mind–body link has resulted in investigations concerning the role that gender plays in the onset of disease and maintenance of health, as exemplified by the discussion of mortality and women's health risks by **Goldenberg** and colleagues (Chapter 24). Likewise, **Grabe's** discussion of body objectification and the potential parallels between different forms of body modification found in the Western world (e.g., breast augmentation) and that found in Africa especially (e.g., genital mutilation) (Chapter 25) serves to remind us that gender and health need to be understood as embedded within existing cultural norms and practices.

In addition to new areas of study, this volume also showcases a range of theoretical frameworks from which gendered differences and similarities can be understood. For example, the development of the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) provided a theoretical approach from which to examine gender in terms of identity processes and their implications for intergroup relations. For example, identity can be used to understand such diverse psychological issues as (a) the legitimization of discrimination (**Jetten** and colleagues, Chapter 19), (b) how individuals might cope with inequality and gender discrimination (**Matheson and Foster**, Chapter 20; and **Morton**, Chapter 23), (c) how social change comes about (**Batalha and Reynolds**, Chapter 11), and (d) the motivations underlying sexual harassment (**Maass** and colleagues, Chapter 21). Similarly, the development of terror management theory (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) paved the way for a model of health that helps to explain when women seek or avoid medical tests, including breast examinations (**Goldenberg** and colleagues, Chapter 24).

Social role theory too provides a general framework whereby role changes that occur as people age can be understood (**Kemper**, Chapter 10), when and why communication differences emerge (**Carli**, Chapter 13), whether emotional expressions vary as a function of social structural position (**Fischer and Evers**, Chapter 12), and how role shifts as a result of immigration (**Deaux and Greenwood**, Chapter 15) can affect identity and behavior.

NEW EXPLANATIONS AND NEW CONTROVERSIES

In their 1974 book, Maccoby and Jacklin argued that 'before we can understand the "why" and "how" of psychological sex differentiation, we must have as accurate and detailed knowledge as possible concerning the nature of existing difference' (p. 1). For this reason, they concentrated on documenting evidence for gender differences (and similarities) and exploring the magnitude of those differences. Such an approach can be considered a 'main effects' approach – that is, the goal is to demonstrate whether there is or is not a gender difference in 'behavior X'. However, more recently our research questions have become more complex, both because of the progression of the literature and because of the sophistication of our statistical analyses. Thus, we now not only want to understand 'what gender differences exist', but we also want to understand the 'why and how' outlined by Maccoby and Jacklin. If we are to think of the description of gender differences as main effects, one useful way of conceptualizing the why and the how is through the distinction between mediation and moderation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In this way, understanding 'why' gender differences occur can be addressed best through a mediational approach, where we try to identify the variables or the processes that underlie or account for such differences. For example, we can look to biological factors (**Byrd-Craven and Geary**, Chapter 7) or social stereotypes (**Betz** and colleagues,

Chapter 26) as means of accounting for why women and men might differ from each other. Seeking an understanding of 'when' gender differences will be present and when they will not be can be seen as a moderation approach, whereby we examine the way in which gender interacts with other variables. In this way, gender differences may occur in particular contexts but not in others, such as in certain cultures (**Grabe**, Chapter 25; **Guimond** and colleagues, Chapter 14; **Kurtiş and Adams**, Chapter 16), historical periods (**Jetten** and colleagues, Chapter 19), when gender is salient (see **Batalha and Reynolds**, Chapter 11) or in the presence of certain audiences (see **Betz** and colleagues, Chapter 26; **Carli**, Chapter 13; **Fischer and Evers**, Chapter 12).

Within Maccoby and Jacklin's volume, there was certainly some exploration of the origins of psychological sex differences – the 'why' question. While the title of their book seems to focus on 'sex differences' this is not to say that they looked exclusively at biological differences. Indeed, given the focus of their work was on children, the explanations considered were predominantly developmental in nature – sex typing, role models, and socialization. Given the politics of the day, it is not surprising that these were much more nurture than nature (see **Morton**, Chapter 23, for a discussion on the politics of essentializing gender).

Maccoby and Jacklin's explanations for the origins of gender differences can be seen as a relatively proximal approach to the 'why' question in that they addressed how gender is learned. On the other hand, their approach could also be considered relatively distal in that the factors they identified were those occurring relatively early in life. This is in contrast to many of the social contextual analyses described in this volume where the critical proximal factors responsible for gender differences (and similarities) can vary throughout adulthood and beyond. Such origin questions are indeed still of great interest, and of growing popularity, especially in the

area of sexual and other forms of close interpersonal behavior, where explanations based on an evolutionary perspective, as outlined by **Byrd-Craven and Geary** (Chapter 7) are emphasized. Other biological approaches to gender, as outlined by **Kemper** (Chapter 10) and **Baumeister** (Chapter 17) have also flourished.

Rather more proximal explanations of gendered behavior (see Deaux & Major, 1987), emphasize the psychological processes that activate gendered attitudes and behaviors, *in situ*. Indeed, many chapters in this volume take this more proximal approach and address social and contextual factors that determine when and how gender differences are expressed. For example, in her examination of gendered differences (and similarities) in communication, **Carli** (Chapter 13) pays particular attention to why and when such differences may occur, rather than simply the difference itself, as does **Bowles** in her discussion of negotiation (Chapter 28). Similarly, looking at gender differences in personality, both **Batalha and Reynolds** (Chapter 11) and **Guimond** and colleagues (Chapter 14) look to explain the circumstances under which differences occur, rather than simply the differences themselves.

Importantly, many of the examinations of gender difference within this volume tend to acknowledge the operation of both proximal and more distal factors. Yet this sets researchers in this field a particularly complicated task; they must not, as Fausto-Sterling (2012) advises biologists, 'get stuck trying to divide nature from nurture. Remember that living bodies are dynamic systems that develop and change in response to their social and historical contexts. This is as true for rodents as it is for humans. Just because rats do gender one way, doesn't mean that prairie voles or Japanese macaques or humans do it the same way' (p. xiii). Nonetheless, several approaches, such as those based on social role theory (**Eagly**, Chapter 2, **Carli**, Chapter 13), social comparison (**Guimond** and colleagues, Chapter 14), and the social identity approach (**Batalha and Reynolds**, Chapter 11; **Jetten** and

colleagues, Chapter 19; **Morton**, Chapter 23) all integrate both distal and proximal approaches. For example, in his chapter, **Baumeister** (Chapter 17) focuses on the interplay of both biological and motivational explanations in his exploration of gender differences in sexuality.

In addition to questions of why, we can also ask questions about 'when'. In this way many of the chapters in this volume examine the way in which moderating variables influence gendered behaviors and attitudes. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) lamented the lack of research into when gender matters or leads to behavioral differences and when it does not. Specifically, they note that 'it is regrettable that so few research studies have been deliberately directed towards the discovery of [moderating factors] …. the time has come for research focusing directly upon manipulation of the conditions that ought to elicit differential behavior between the sexes' (pp. 5–6).

This focus on the why and the when is exemplified by the work on stereotype threat. Not satisfied to examine whether men really were better than women at mathematics, research addressing stereotype threat has provided both a clear mechanism to explain the 'why' and exploration of the moderators of the phenomenon has helped us understand the 'when' (**Betz** and colleagues, Chapter 26). Similarly, research on social comparison (see **Guimond** and colleagues, Chapter 14) helps us understand not only why gender differences exist, but also when they will be magnified and when they will be attenuated.

As we have noted in the previous section, using an identity framework to understand gender has become increasingly widespread in recent years. Such a theoretical approach tends to consider gender as a social, context-dependent aspect of the self. From this perspective, it does not make sense simply to describe the general magnitude of gender differences in any particular domain overall, but rather such an approach is more likely to investigate the circumstances under which gender has an effect and when it does not.

Consistent with this approach, the research outlined in this Handbook indeed recognizes that gender is not simply a demographic or biological property of the individual. Gendered behavior occurs within complex social contexts, and such gender differences and similarities in behaviors and attitudes are moderated by social circumstances. For example, gendered communication (**Carli**, Chapter 13), emotion (**Fischer and Evers**, Chapter 12), and negotiation (**Bowles**, Chapter 28), to name just a few, most often occur in interaction with other people, and as such are subject to moderation by audience.

Moreover, gender does not exist in isolation; it intersects with other identities or demographic variables, including culture (**Grabe**, Chapter 25; **Guimond** and colleagues, Chapter 14; **Kurtiş and Adams**, Chapter 16), age (**Bussey**, Chapter 6; **Kemper**, Chapter 10), nationality and immigrant status (**Deaux and Greenwood**, Chapter 15) and parental status (**Fuegen and Biernat**, Chapter 9). In this way, interactions with other group membership variables (intersectionality) suggest that gender modifies behavior in some contexts, but not others, and differentially so, depending on ethnic and national origin.

This burgeoning of new approaches and new explanations has also thrown up new controversies and debates in the field (see **Eagly**, Chapter 2, for an update on these debates over the past 20 years). Some of these are related to the 'teething problems' of new technologies, or in the utility of applying new technologies to the study of gender. For example, **Fine** (Chapter 4) describes the phenomenon of neurosexism that has arisen from the application of new neuroscience technologies to the study of gender. Similar debates arise from the application of theories from other disciplines to the psychology of gender – such as the development of evolutionary psychology (**Byrd-Craven and Geary**, Chapter 7) or psychobiology (see **Baumeister**, Chapter 17 or **Kemper**, Chapter 10).

Finally, there has also been discussion concerning the need for more nuanced and more subtle investigations and methods in the way we look at gender. For example, our understanding of the psychology of gender needs to be informed by how we speak about gender, both in our everyday discourse (**Kurz and Donoghue**, Chapter 5) and in the metaphors we use (**Bruckmüller** and colleagues, Chapter 27). Similarly, **Barreto and Ellemers** (Chapter 18) argue that the processes reflecting gendered treatment are becoming increasingly subtle.

POLITICS AND OBJECTIVITY

One clear debate that has continued over the past 40 years is the politics inherent in the study of gender and gender difference, and the problems that this might entail for scientific objectivity (see **Eagly**, Chapter 2). Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) directly acknowledged the political nature of their work:

> We are both feminists … and although we have tried to be objective about the value-laden topics discussed in this book, we know that we cannot have succeeded entirely. We doubt … that complete objectivity is possible for anyone engaged in such an enterprise, whether male or female. If our own interpretation bears the marks of feminist bias, this will be detected soon enough by hawk-eyed readers with points of view different from our own. We expect to be challenged. We can promise … that we have attempted to set forth the reasoning behind our positions as clearly as possible, so that future argument will not be diverted into irrelevancies. (p. 13)

We too are unashamedly feminist. And we certainly make no apologies about this. Does this necessarily mean we are or are not objective? Certainly in terms of our agreement that the scientific method should be applied to the questions we raise, we believe we are objective. But, perhaps not in the sense that the research questions that interest us are clearly driven by the politicized social issues of our time, with an eye toward understanding the conditions that will enable social change aimed at bringing about greater equality. We are not simply interested in describing sexism and its effects; we are interested in reducing sexism. We are certain we would prefer to

live in a more gender-equal world than the one in which we are embedded at the present time. Indeed, a number of the chapters in this volume explicitly outline the way in which psychological research on gender has played an instrumental role in bringing about real change in social policy and practice (see, for example, **Ball Cooper** et al., Chapter 22; **Bowles**, Chapter 28; **Crosby** et al., Chapter 29; **Maass** et al., Chapter 21). For us, it is the political nature of these questions and the consequences of the answers generated that makes this volume so important, and it is what makes the study of gender and its implications for behavior so fascinating. All of the chapters included in this volume speak to real social issues that affect the lives of men and women everyday. When our authors speak of the implications of the research, it is not simply a couple of cursory paragraphs before the conclusions; they raise real implications that may affect all of us.

CONCLUSIONS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE HANDBOOK

As we hope that you can see from this introductory chapter, there are many different ways in which one can approach the psychology of gender. We have examined the field in terms of the methodologies that are used, the theoretical frameworks from which research questions are approached, the social issues that motivate the research, and the debates that evolve from research concerning gender. It is clear that the many different ways of seeing the psychology of gender are constantly in flux. Much has changed in the 40 years since Maccoby and Jacklin's seminal book, but much will continue to change. Indeed, even within this volume, readers will be able to see the debates unfolding – both within chapters, and between them.

We have divided the volume into five distinct parts – (1) How Gender Is Studied; (2) Development; (3) Gender Differences and Similarities in Context; (4) Conflict and Coping; and (5) Gender and Social

Issues – but we recognize that these are relatively arbitrary groupings. Accordingly, we encourage you as the reader to develop your own narrative around gender, making your own connections between the chapters and following your own interests. To help facilitate these connections, within each of the chapters we have included cross-references to other relevant chapters. So we encourage you, the reader, to jump around, to dip in and out of the various sections, or to follow the story of gender and psychology as we have organized it. But most of all, we encourage you to see the politics as well as the science, and above all else, to engage in these lively debates with the stellar authors of the chapters in this Handbook.

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