This chapter provides a selected review of literature on gender and learning with a specific focus on adults. The analysis draws on feminist perspectives that have explored whether or not women have a particular learning preference or way of acquiring knowledge.

Whilst feminism takes many perspectives, the emphasis here is on a poststructural stance that recognizes the complexity of gender analysis and tries to avoid creating fixed, binary divides between males and females. Particular knowledge perspectives are introduced, such as subjectivity, standpoint theory, and knowledge itself, before looking in more detail at the focus of many studies on gender and learning – that of the distinction between separate and connected knowing. Finally, some suggestions for further research are made, with reference to practice theory and its potential contribution to a more holistic understanding of the relationships between learning, gender and context. The core argument of this chapter is that gendered positions on learning are not fixed. They are mediated by time, space, situation and power relations.

Women and knowing

It is more than 25 years since Belenky et al. (1986) wrote their seminal work on Women’s Ways of Knowing. This was a study of 135 women in America – which resulted in five categories of knowledge perspectives representing the different ways in which women viewed the world and learned to make sense of it in relation to their lives. The arguments in this study have since been supported (Ortman, 1993; Nesbit, 2000; Lathrop, 2000), expanded (Goldberger et al., 1996), challenged (Tisdell, 1998; Le Cornu, 1999; Ryan, 2001; English, 2006, 2006a), and modified (Zohar, 2006). Aside from studies related to these debates, other experimental studies into gender and learning differences have proved equally inconclusive. Some claim that there are distinctive gender-related differences in learning preferences and patterns (Kim 2002; Alumran, 2008; Anglin et al., 2008), while others suggest that learning differences are less distinctive than patterns of social behaviour that lead to learning preferences (Price, 2006). Whilst there have been studies to suggest that differences can be physiologically determined, as articulated in Hayes and Flannery’s (2000) extensive exploration of the subject, there are as many psychological, anthropological and political explanations for gender differences in learning. Indeed, Hayes and Flannery (2000: 137) warn that we should be wary of overgeneralizing about women’s ways of knowing:
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We might do better to see particular ways of knowing as strategies that can be acquired and used by all people.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus that we do need to pay attention to women’s learning, since issues of gender inequality and male dominance over what counts as knowledge still prevail. Bearing this in mind, we start with the concept of gender.

**Gender:** According to Hayes and Flannery (2000: 15) gender is ‘a system of social relations that are continually re-negotiated, both at the level of daily interactions and at the level of the broader social structures’. This means that gender, our identities as men and women, and the way we operate as gendered social beings, are socially constructed. Gender analysis pays attention to the social determinants of gender roles and norms, but a gendered analysis of women’s learning means ‘looking for the influence of gender on whatever aspect of women’s learning is being studied’ (p. 226). So, for example, women’s activities have tended to be socially constructed around ‘activities of connection and care’ (p. 224), which in turn impacts on women’s attitudes to learning. The nature of a gender analysis, however, depends on what theoretical perspective one adopts. A feminist starting point has an emancipatory goal that aims to expose and address gender inequalities.

**Feminism:** In feminism women are the focal point of discussion. So a feminist study of learning will focus on trying to ‘understand and value women’s learning in its own right rather than in relationship to men’s learning’ (Hayes and Flannery, 2000: 142). This is in recognition of the fact that women’s lives are distinct from men’s in a number of ways and that, compared with men, women are less likely to have been able to control their lives. Women’s lives are often characterized by discontinuity as a result of following or responding to their spouse’s careers, adopting multiple roles of family, work and community, and holding a different set of relationships from men within the family itself (ibid.). The extent to which women may be oppressed, privileged or subjugated depends on context, in terms of time, place, culture, class and other forms of marginalization, such as having a disability.

Studies into gender and learning are often framed within, and reflect different positions within, feminism itself. Feminist theory itself takes many perspectives, ranging from the psychoanalytical to the Marxist. These studies have influenced our understanding of women’s learning in different ways. English (2006, 2006a) explains that feminist perspectives have gone through broadly three waves since the 1960s. Whilst the first two waves tended to identify the category of ‘woman’ as universal and distinctive (thus reflecting the Belenky et al., 1986 era), the third wave, since the 1990s, focuses more on differences between categories of ‘woman’ and how women and their roles in society are socially constructed. This latter perspective is characterized by a feminist poststructuralist approach to women and their learning, drawing in particular on Foucault’s (1980) notions of power, knowledge and discourse.

**Poststructuralism and Foucault:** Power, in Foucauldian terms, is not simply a force for oppression. It is an all-pervasive relationship in which everyone plays a part, whether wittingly or not. Discourses are the mechanisms through which power flows. They are expressed through language, behaviour and attitudes, or internalized rationales that give an appearance of stability. But, in themselves, they are precarious and are always open to resistance by other discourses. What counts as valuable knowledge is a manifestation of power relations and dominant discourses that claim privilege over certain forms of knowledge. Thus, science, objectivity and impartiality are hegemonically dominant discourses for knowledge production. These arguments provide the groundwork for demonstrating that everything is potentially fluid, socially constructed and context bound.

A poststructuralist analysis of power, discourse and knowledge itself unearths the how and why of these uncertainties, how meanings and identities are potentially fluid and always shifting.

**Feminist Poststructuralism:** This perspective focuses on understanding:

[H]ow each of us is at once oppressed and privileged and how this experience continually changes according to the contexts in which we find ourselves … understanding the intersections of multiple
systems of oppression and privilege … how individual women respond to their unique and particular experiences.

(Hayes and Flannery, 2000: 13)

A feminist poststructuralist analysis emphasizes the complexity of these experiences and the consequent identities of individuals connected to those experiences.

The concept of positionality suggests that women’s (and men’s) identities and behaviours are not fixed, but are conditional upon how they interface with a range of intersecting relationships, experiences and worldviews. As Connell (2002: 4) states, ‘being a man or a woman, then, is not a fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction’. This means that our attitudes to learning are also subject to reconstruction. The extent to which people choose to reconstruct themselves depends upon the experiences they encounter and also how they respond to the relationships of power that reinforce the status quo. These relationships are held in place by potentially unstable discourses (Ryan, 2001; English, 2006a).

So, we cannot think of gender differences in womanhood or manhood as fixed by nature. But neither should we think of them as simply imposed from outside, by social norms or pressure from authorities. Indeed, people construct themselves as masculine or feminine through a form of ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1980, English, 2008) whereby people behave in certain ways as if they are being watched: ‘Power operates through disciplinary practices or techniques that give rise to self-surveillance’ (English, 2008: 270).

This theoretical perspective informs our understanding of women’s ways of knowing and their learning preferences. It provides us with the tools to examine how and why women may appear to learn in different ways from men, but also provides us with the ammunition to explain that stereotypes of learning are social constructions, and gender related, rather than biologically determined or fixed. It also explains why different social contexts reveal different observations about women’s learning.

Feminist analysis in this regard has challenged some of the assertions of learning and pedagogical theorists such as Mezirow, Habermas and Freire. Hayes and Flannery (2000) and Ryan (2001): for example, question Mezirow’s overemphasis on rationality and omission of historical and sociocultural context in relation to his perspective on transformative learning theory, since it ‘does not allow for the investments that people make in certain positions or in certain kinds of knowledge’ (Ryan, 2001: 68). Similarly Freire is criticized for assuming that it is possible to reach consensus on oppression based on rational talk: ‘assumptions of a collective experience of oppression do not adequately address the realities and complexities of students’ lives’ (ibid.: 67).

More recent feminist perspectives, therefore, do not take an oppositional, either/or stance towards learning, but they emphasise the need to take a broader view of learning. In particular, they challenge the positivist, separatist ‘rationales’ that do not take account of the emotional and connected side of learning.

Similarly, Burke and Jackson (2007): amongst others, argue that learning is always an emotional process, since it involves the construction of identities, even though we are taught, especially in Western thought, that learning is something that can be learned externally from the emotions.

These feminist positions bring us to the use of some common concepts related to gender and learning. They include: subjectivity/objectivity, standpoint epistemology, and connected/separated knowing. Not all of them hold equal weight in recent discussions, but they have all contributed to highlighting the notion that learning is gender related, as well as class, race and culture related.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity is the collective identity that constitutes our individual sense of self and how we relate to the world around us. In poststructuralist terms our concern with subjectivity refers to a concern with the different forms of power that interface with our socially constructed selves and govern who we are (Ryan,
Subjectivity relates to knowledge because it suggests that our subjective selves influence what counts as knowledge, so that, ‘knowledge is neither value-free nor value-neutral; the processes that produce it are themselves value-laden; and these values are open to evaluation’ (Code, 1991: 70). As Code asserted in a later work (1993: 40), ‘knowledge is always relative’ and reflects a perspective or standpoint, indicating that ‘objectivity’ is never innocent – it is always situated.

**Standpoint theory**

The rationale behind standpoint theory comes from the philosopher Hegel’s notion that a slave had a more complete view of the world than his master because the slave could see the world from his subjugated position as a slave as well as from his master’s dominant, articulated position. Standpoint theory was discussed particularly amongst Black feminists during the 1990s as a challenge to the dominant discourse of feminism amongst white theorists. Experience was an important claim to authenticate knowledge, and the experiential credentials of the speaker or knower were based on ‘How do you know?’ Hill Collins (1991), cited in Hayes and Flannery (2000: 127), explained that this was because a person’s knowledge should be judged ‘not solely by the internal logic of her arguments’. This kind of knowing for Black women was also associated with ‘motherwit’ or ‘wisdom’ in recognition that Black women had to learn how to survive in an oppressive world. Their knowledge, or wisdom, was born out of that experience and was socially situated.

Hill Collins (1990) argued that these observations created two interrelated levels of knowledge – the commonplace, everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge and the specialized knowledge that emerged from intellectuals. But from Black women’s standpoints, these two types of knowledge were interdependent and grounded in Afro-centric roots that embraced notions of caring, empathy, personal accountability and personality as necessary to validate knowledge production. In this way she challenged the process of truth production unless it passed those experientially constituted tests. In other words, an Afro-centric audience would not be satisfied with simply hearing the knowledge imparted by a speaker unless the speaker also revealed their social situatedness – what personal history led to their understanding and construction of that knowledge.

Harding (1993) argued that this position of being marginalized enabled people to understand and explain things from a stronger objectivity than knowledge that was created unproblematically through apparently detached science or rationality. ‘Strong objectivity’, therefore, was linked to ‘strong reflexivity’ (p. 69), that is, reflecting on where we are coming from with our arguments.

While Skeggs (1997) points out that standpoint theories were able to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a disinterested knower: ‘the positions from which we speak are a product of our own positioning’ (p. 26), she also asserts that, ‘standpoint theory can be seen as a product of its time’. The use of experience as an authenticator of knowledge is no longer sufficient in feminist analysis. Experience also needs to be interrogated and understood in Foucauldian terms as a historical product of power and discourse, so no experience can be assumed to offer an absolute truth.

This brings us to the argument that knowledge itself is bound by context and time (Code 1991; Skeggs 1997; Weiler and Middleton 1999; Hayes and Flannery, 2000). It is therefore value laden and not constructed separately from the emotions.

**Knowledge**

The notion of connection has been an ongoing theme in the way feminists discuss knowledge. Weiler and Middleton (1999): for example, argue that knowledge is interrelated with language and subjectivity. Zohar (2006: 1583), drawing on Miller (2000), goes further to explain that knowledge, according to feminist epistemology, is interconnected through thinking in several ways:
[B]etween the phenomenon to be understood and its context ... between themselves and the phenomenon to be understood ... [t]hinkers’ mental representations of knowledge are interconnected among themselves in the collaborative co-construction of knowledge.

This interconnectivity between the self and mind was described by Belenky et al. (1986: 15) as the end-point of a series of stages or ways in which women viewed reality in their original study. Five categories, drawn from Perry (1970): were presented as ‘stages in self growth’. The first three stages were: Silence – where women experience themselves as voiceless in the face of external authority; Received knowledge – where women felt capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge from external sources; and Subjective knowledge – which primarily focused on women’s trust in their own intuition and mistrust of externally produced knowledge. The final two stages (Procedural and Constructed knowledge) suggested the women were now applying different forms of critical thinking in their acquisition of knowledge. Procedural knowers favoured either separate or connected knowledge. Constructed knowers were able to integrate the two approaches. Analysis of these remaining stages highlighted that women were more likely to be ‘connected’ as opposed to ‘separate’ knowers. It is the distinction between these latter concepts that will be discussed here.

Connected/separated knowing

Belenky et al. (1986: 15), and also in their subsequent edited volume (Goldberger et al., 1996), claim that at the procedural-knowledge stage learners may be connected (using subjective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge), or separate knowers (relying on objective procedures). The final stage of constructed knowledge is where, ‘women are able to value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing’.

It is the procedural knowledge stage that has attracted most investigation and discussion into gender-related ways of knowing, though it was not categorized as gender specific. Connected knowing has been interpreted as more relevant to female knowing and separate knowing as more associative with male knowing.

Connected knowing: Connected knowing (ibid.: 112) builds on the conviction that ‘the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities’. It is closely linked to standpoint epistemology and related terms such as subjective knowing and global knowing.

Subjective knowers, according to Hayes and Flannery (2000: 117) and citing Clinchy (1996), respect views that differ from their own; but they are less likely to criticize these views. For their own sources of information they rely on personal feelings:

Connected knowers are aware that they cannot accurately know another’s world because the experiences belong to the particular person. At the same time, connected knowers use their own experiences to understand the other person.

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Global learners are referred to by Hayes and Flannery (2000: 116), amongst others, as perceiving information ‘in a subjective manner, connecting it with their own personal experience. If the information does not connect to what is personal to them, they discard it as unimportant.’ They suggest that the literature tends to relate this kind of learning more to women than men, since women ‘tend to connect and interconnect ideas, events and people in whole pictures rather than focusing only on one part of a picture’ (ibid.).

These perspectives lead to a dominant pedagogical theme that women prefer to learn with others and prefer a mutually supportive and caring relationship with other learners. But we shall see later that this dominant perspective has been vehemently challenged by English (2006): not only for its essentialist
perspective but also for its lack of attention to the discourse that frames women in this way in the first place, thus hegemonically leading them to behave accordingly.

Zohar (2006: 1594) suggests that connected knowing needs to be interpreted in relation to more current theories that talk about deep and surface learning, where surface learning relates more to the stage of received knowledge, while deep learning relates more to procedural and constructed knowledge. Deep learning looks for ‘understanding’ that can be interpreted subjectively, ‘in the sense that the pre-existing conceptual framework is unique to each individual, and consequently so are the connections created between old and new concepts’. She uses this perspective to analyse how females in mathematics and science classes tended to look for relationships between concepts through discussion and enquiry, rather than enjoying rote learning. Here again, however, she suggests that, although gender related, such preferences were not gender specific.

Separate knower: On the other hand, separate knowers favour traditionally scientific, positivist approaches to knowledge, based on impersonal procedures for establishing truth (Belenky et al., 1986): ‘at the heart of separate knowing is critical thinking or … the doubting game’ (p. 104). This is suggested as an adversarial approach ‘entailing reasoning against the other’ (Zohar, 2006: 1581). In connected knowing, feelings are considered to illuminate thought, while in separate knowing they are seen as clouding one’s thinking (Clinchy, 2002).

The different forms of knowing have been related to different pedagogical practices, so that connected knowing favours collaborative, supportive learning procedures, while separate knowing favours more clinical observation and individualistic investigation. Examples of such advocates include Smith (2002): who used collaborative enquiry as a means of enabling women learners to move from mere receivers of knowledge to constructed knowers. Similarly, Lathrop (2000) argued that teaching based on collaborative learning and small group teaching, sensitivity to group cohesion and encouraging listening skills, facilitated more equitable seminars in her college context. Price (2006) argued that women learners in an online study context were no less confident or competent than their male counterparts, but they appeared to interact differently from male students and placed more value on pastoral learning support.

These dichotomies are now highly contested, as the introductory paragraph indicated. The differences have recently been applied more critically to the social construction of gender roles and it has been argued that they must be seen in the context of how women are often positioned in society culturally, socially and psychologically, potentially leading them to see themselves as positioned proportionately in contexts where strategies for facilitating connected types of knowing may be more attractive.

Criticisms

Contested arguments on the above lines are demonstrated by a number of writers. They all highlight the dangers of over-generalizing the differences between men’s and women’s learning preferences and suggest that there needs to be more attention to what causes these differences (see Hayes and Flannery, 2000: for example). The emphasis should be on the structural causes of women’s oppression and how women’s learning orientations are explained in relation to their societal positioning, rather than as a reflection of their ‘natural’ preferences (p. 11). Indeed it should be recognized that men, too, can be victims of oppression in different contexts.

A number of these writers specifically critique Belenky et al.’s (1986) study for its lack of attention to the complexities of women’s structural inequalities. Ryan (2001): for instance, comments on how the authors unwittingly position women’s early learning stages as deficient, rather than looking at the complexity of the women’s experiences and how that interfaced with their learning modes. By failing to analyse structural inequalities in educational environments, such as abuse, the authors do not analyse how this happens: ‘They do not address women’s knowledge as socially and politically organized, but as something intrinsic to women’ and overlook ‘the importance of politically conscious resistance experiences’ (Ryan, 2001: 71).
Similarly, Tisdell (1998) argues that gender difference is not the only form of positionality that should be considered. Indeed, Lekoko and Modise in this volume demonstrate how other cultural factors can come into play. Moreover, research by Tomasello and Rakoczy (2003: 127) suggests that humans, irrespective of gender or culture, possess ‘uniquely human skills of social cognition’ and that any form of knowing requires a shared understanding of interaction in terms of communication, an asset which other primates do not possess. The implication of this finding is that all other forms of learning, beyond this intrinsic one of mutual recognition in terms of communication, are culturally or socially situated.

Zohar (2006: 1593), on a different point, and drawing on Harding’s (1998) concept of ‘dynamic objectivity’ suggests that we need to take a more sophisticated look at the notion of objectivity. Dynamic objectivity recognizes the role of subjective experience in knowledge construction through personal critique and questioning of the phenomenon at stake.

Perhaps most significantly, English (2006a) produces a postructuralist analysis of Canadian women learners. She demonstrates that procedures that favour certain ways of behaving can be self defeating – so that women either discipline themselves to ‘fit in’ – or choose not to take part and feel excluded from the stereotypical expectations of behaviour. She draws on Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power to highlight how women, either consciously or not, were socialized to behave in relational, caring and connected ways because of the environment that was constructed to facilitate those relationships. Other women in the group became ‘silenced’ if they felt unable to conform to expectations:

We do need to pay attention to women’s learning but must recognize that stereotypes are as much to do with socialization as anything else … we need new lenses and a fresh perspective that is more complex, has fewer binaries or polarities, and is inevitably more challenging.

(p. 19)

Some suggested ways forward include the need to ‘analyse how women experience and express shifting identities that reflect multiple social influences … how power operates among and between all learners and educators … how we govern ourselves in the learning situation’ (p. 21).

Potential new research directions

The above-mentioned debates are followed by requests for a different kind of research – that looks in more detail at ‘gender as a type of social relation that is constantly changing’ (Hayes and Flannery, 2000: 4). The principal argument is that:

Women and men can be found in both cultures but these cultures shape women’s and men’s experiences in different ways, giving them the opportunity to acquire different sorts of knowledge and abilities … the system of gender relations may also lead women and men to develop different ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

Moreover, ‘these gendered knowledge systems, like gender relations, may differ by society, culture, ethnic group, locality and so on … within the cohort of all women as well as between women and men’ (p. 5).

English (2006a) emphasizes the need to see women’s learning as a larger picture – to ‘move our emphasis from a list of gender differences to larger issues’. This would help educators and learners focus less on the individual person and more on understanding the meaning and complexity of women’s learning, especially the role that power relations play in how that learning takes place.

Hayes and Flannery (2000: 18) suggest that there should be more focus on women’s narratives and personal stories of learning. We need to look at the significance for women’s learning of social contexts – for example, the community, home, workplace, religious associations, leisure and more formal educational
settings. Indeed, narrative learning as a research focus generally is becoming more topical in relation to researching transitions into lifelong learning (Lynch and Field, 2007).

These observations resonate with many of the arguments over the past 20 years in relation to literacy studies. Street (1995); Barton and Hamilton (1998); Prinsloo and Breier (1996) and many others have claimed that literacy practices are socially situated and linked to relationships of power. There are many literacies that challenge the dominant model of literacy as a unitary skill that can be applied across different contexts. These arguments have been reinforced by evidence from ethnographic studies that explored literacy as social practices in different domains such as home, work and the community. Their findings draw on theoretical perspectives that emphasize the need to explore how and why people use literacies in the way that they do. If ‘literacies’ were interchanged with ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge’ in the above arguments, one can see parallels that could inform and develop our understanding of gender relations and gendered situations in relation to knowledge construction and learning. It may be useful, therefore, to explore how practice theory can enlighten us – drawing on the experiences of social practices’ approaches to literacies. A starting point is usefully summarized by Jonassen and Roher-Murphy (1999: 62) in their explanation of activity theory:

Activity cannot be understood or analysed outside the context in which it occurs. So when analysing human activity, we must examine not only the kinds of activities that people engage in but also who is engaging in that activity, what their goals and intentions are, what objects or products result from the activity, the rules and norms that circumscribe that activity, and the larger community in which the activity occurs.

Again, if ‘activity’ were replaced with ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge’, this would provide a useful analytical framework for ethnographic studies into learning that probe and question how and why people choose to acquire and use knowledge in a way that is useful for them.

Summary

This chapter has explored some of the basic principles behind feminist perspectives on gender and learning. It has argued that learning preferences should not be regarded as gender specific, though they may be gender related. But analysis of gender and learning should take account of the socially constructed circumstances surrounding gender itself and not assume that all women prefer a particular style of learning. Further research is needed into the complexities surrounding learning preferences in order to maximize learning opportunities and so that no-one is disadvantaged by context-specific circumstances and experiences. An ethnographic approach is suggested, using activity theory as an analytical framework. The chapter has addressed literature relating to adults and learning, rather than children.

References


Julia Preece