

# **Whose knowledge is of most worth?**

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with Ellen Hall, Susan Horner, and Marian Dodds**

*Awareness of gender inequities in education has been with us for the past two decades, yet inequities still remain between girls and boys in the education they receive in schools. This is the first in a series of articles which examines gender inequities as they occur and may be changed in home economics classrooms.*

Who can tell me what are people's most basic needs?" asked the teacher. "Food, shelter, clothing" were the students' replies. Ming, one of the more quiet boys at the back table raised his hand, "I put family because if you have family, you always have food." "No," said the teacher elaborating on the students' earlier answers, "the most basic needs are physiological food, shelter, and clothing."

This student teacher interaction was part of a family living lesson which included an introduction to human needs and values by considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy is often a part of discussion in grade eight lessons on basic human needs and wants. It is often a lesson component in foods and nutrition, clothing and textiles, housing, and family relations. This hierarchy is often contained in family studies texts and is even present in many home economics curriculum guides (see Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 23).

Those concerned with gender inequities recognize that some "theories" such as Maslow's are limited in the extent to which they can be generalized to all people and may be biased depending on the particular interests and experiences of the person who develops the theory. Critical and feminist theorists propose that all ideas that are passed on to others as "knowledge" should be interrogated and questioned in terms of "Whose knowledge is this?" They go further in claiming that much knowledge perpetuated in educational institutions is partial and biased. Thus, we can ask, "Whose theory is this?" and, "In whose interest is it?"

If we recall Maslow's theory of human development, it suggests that basic needs are physiological and the ultimate at the top of the pyramid model is self actualization, implying an unattached human being realizing full potential and autonomy. Maslow's theory is one example of human development theories that have dominated psychological theorizing. Other theorists such as Erickson, Freud, and Piaget are common in home economics texts and courses as well. In recent years women psychologists have examined why it is that men's theories have been dominant. Walsh (1992) reviews historical analyses that show that early in the twentieth century, women psychological researchers were marginalized in the university and research communities, and their research ignored. Others argue that male researchers have ignored women's experiences by basing their research only on men/boys, then generalizing that research to all people (women and men).

Shakeshaft and Nowell (1984) criticize Maslow's theory for being based on traditional male values which place self esteem and self actualization needs on higher planes than affiliation needs. Nancy Chodorow has been very critical of Freud's theories of girls' development that describes girls as having "weaker ego boundaries"(when compared to boys), for example, and in her own research casts girls' development in a positive light, stating "irls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own"(in Gilligan, 1982, p. 8). In a similar way, Carol Gilligan critiqued Kohlberg's theory of moral development (a theory developed from research on boys) and concluded that for women "Identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care"(1982, p. 160); whereas for men, "descriptions of self, [and] involvement with others is tied to a qualification of identity rather than to its realization" (1982, p. 163). Both Gilligan and Chodorow illustrate that observations and interpretations from research may indeed look very different depending on whether the researcher/theorist is a man or a woman. They also point out that we ought to be cautious of research which is based on a small or select group of subjects and generalized broadly.

#### Re-thinking Maslow

If Chodorow and Gilligan are right about women's/girls' development being different than men's/boys', then Maslow's model of human needs is also more true of men's/boys' lives than women's/girls'. Theories such as Maslow's, contribute to inequities when they become a dominant view posing as truth or portraying reality when alternate theories and critiques of theories are disregarded. Such a treatment of theories can contribute to cultural as well as gender inequities. A white, western male viewpoint evidenced in many psychosocial theories cannot help us understand other cultures. For instance, Maslow and Kohlberg may not help us to understand Asian, Indian, and First Nations' values regarding moral decision making or hierarchy of needs. Any differences between or within cultures are silenced by considering only one view. When one view dominates, people's experiences that do not fit the model are silenced.

One way to include Maslow and others in the classroom is to analyze and critique their theories. This enables students to learn about "the best theories we have" and to be critical of them and creative in their own thinking. Students and teachers can be critics of theories presented in textbooks and curriculum materials. Questions that can be asked include: Does this theory apply equally to boys/men and girls/women? Who proposed this theory and whose voice (culture, class, gender, etc.) is represented? Students and teachers can be researchers by investigating the knowledge claims of theories, and then theorizing from their own personal experiences to provide alternative understandings and explanations. Lessons might best begin with students' existing knowledge and interpretation of experience rather than teacher delivered theory-as-truth. This critique of psychological and sociological theories suggests a particular organizational frame for any lesson on human relations and development:

- a. Begin with individual awareness of students' own interpretations and understandings.
- b. Recognize others' interpretations and understandings (using class

discussion, interviews, video, etc.).

- c. Examine relevant theories to consider why there may be differences.
- d. Reconstruct personal understandings in relation to others and existing theories.

Teachers in dialogue with students can construct alternative theories to explain differences due to gender, class, or culture. Students along with teachers then become the source and creators of theories presented in the classroom. Rather than being silenced, voice can be given to different understandings, and students are able to construct more comprehensive and enriched understandings of human development. When students' own experiences can be theorized, theories can then become inclusive and sensitive to gender, culture, and class differences.

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