

Carol Gilligan

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Carol Gilligan

Born: 1936 | **Died:** N/A

Nationality: American

Primary Field(s): Psychology, Moral Development, Feminist Theory, Ethics

1. Summary

Carol Gilligan is one of the most distinguished and influential American psychologists and academics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Her career has been dedicated to fundamentally reshaping the understanding of human moral reasoning, ethical development, and gender differences within the field of psychology. Gilligan is primarily recognized for her groundbreaking empirical work which challenged the established, male-centric paradigms of developmental psychology, most notably the stages of moral development proposed by her former mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg. Her research highlighted the necessity of integrating diverse experiences, particularly those of women, into universal psychological theories, arguing that previous models had systematically undervalued or misinterpreted female moral thought, thereby necessitating a complete theoretical revision.

The core of Gilligan's revolutionary contribution is encapsulated in her seminal 1982 text, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. This work posited that while men often prioritize abstract principles of justice, rights, and rules when addressing moral dilemmas, women frequently employ a distinct perspective rooted in relationships, responsibility, and context--a framework that became known as the **morality of care**. Gilligan meticulously documented how psychological assessments based solely on justice-oriented criteria, such as Kohlberg's framework, inaccurately categorized women's sophisticated relational reasoning as less developed or immature, despite its complexity and commitment to maintaining social harmony and bonds.

By validating the **care perspective** as an equally complex and mature form of ethical decision-making, Gilligan did more than just critique an existing model; she provided a foundational structure for a whole new branch of ethical philosophy and feminist thought. Her insistence on recognizing and valuing distinct gendered approaches to morality helped launch the school of thought known as **difference feminism**. Her continued scholarship addresses themes of identity, relational ethics, and the psychological impact of cultural expectations, maintaining her status as a critical voice advocating for inclusivity and complexity in psychological theory and methodology.

2. Key Contributions

The Critique of Kohlberg's Moral Development Stages

Gilligan's most direct and immediate contribution was her rigorous critique of the influential moral development theory advanced by Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg's stages, which emphasized a universal progression toward moral reasoning centered on abstract principles of justice and individual rights, were primarily derived from longitudinal studies conducted almost exclusively with male subjects. Gilligan observed that when women were evaluated using Kohlberg's methodology--specifically, their responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas--their contextual, relational responses were often relegated to lower stages, suggesting an arrested development compared to men who often reached higher, principled stages. Gilligan argued forcefully that this outcome was not a reflection of women's intellectual deficiency, but rather an inherent flaw and gender bias within the theoretical framework itself, which failed to recognize or value an alternative, equally valid, relationship-focused moral compass.

Development of Care Ethics (The Morality of Care)

In direct contrast to the justice orientation she criticized, Gilligan introduced and empirically explored the framework of **care ethics**, a revolutionary approach to moral psychology. This perspective posits that moral action is often driven by a sense of responsibility to others, a focus on maintaining social bonds, and an acute awareness of the specific situational context. Whereas justice ethics focuses on fairness, impartiality, and the enforcement of universal rules, care ethics prioritizes empathy, compassion, and the avoidance of harm through sustained connection and relational responsibility. Gilligan demonstrated that this relational approach, often observed more prominently in female subjects, represents a highly developed and systematic method of ethical thought that seeks comprehensive solutions that preserve the integrity of relationships rather than strictly enforcing abstract rights. The introduction of care ethics fundamentally expanded the field of moral philosophy, suggesting that morality is dualistic, encompassing both the voice of justice and the voice of care.

Foundational Work in Difference Feminism

Beyond psychology, Gilligan's work laid crucial intellectual groundwork for the rise of **difference feminism**. This philosophical branch contrasts sharply with equality feminism (which often seeks to minimize perceived differences between genders to achieve parity) by arguing for the recognition and valuation of distinct psychological and moral qualities associated with women. By articulating the "different voice" of women in moral reasoning, Gilligan provided a powerful theoretical justification for celebrating these differences, rather than attempting to fit women into standards defined by male experience. Difference feminism, fueled by Gilligan's empirical findings, argues that society and institutions should adapt to accommodate and appreciate diverse modes of thinking--especially the relational strengths highlighted by care ethics--rather than viewing them as

deviations from a masculine norm, thereby advocating for the inclusion of multiple legitimate perspectives in ethical life.

3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Carol Gilligan's pivotal research was situated at a crucial juncture in the late 20th century, coinciding with the rise of comprehensive feminist critiques across academic disciplines. Psychology, particularly developmental theory, faced mounting scrutiny regarding its history of male bias in theoretical constructs, subject selection, and interpretation of results. Gilligan's initial collaboration with Lawrence Kohlberg provided her with intimate knowledge of his research design, allowing her to identify its specific limitations concerning female subjects. Her subsequent divergence from Kohlberg was not merely an academic disagreement but a profound commitment to broadening the scope of psychological inquiry, ensuring that theory accurately represented the full spectrum of human development and moral capacity, irrespective of gender. This intellectual environment, coupled with her rigorous methodology, allowed *In a Different Voice* to achieve immediate and widespread disciplinary influence upon its publication in 1982.

The impact of her work was transformative, sparking an intensive global debate that fundamentally redefined developmental psychology, moral philosophy, and feminist ethics. By offering an alternative framework to the dominant justice model, Gilligan compelled scholars to abandon the notion of a single, universal, and linear path to moral maturity. Her work necessitated a nuanced approach that considers context, relational dynamics, and emotional intelligence as fundamental aspects of ethical competence. This shift encouraged researchers to adopt more inclusive methodologies and theoretical frameworks, leading to a richer understanding of how morality operates in various social and familial contexts, moving beyond abstract hypothetical dilemmas to address real-world relational responsibilities.

The legacy of Carol Gilligan extends far beyond the confines of academic discourse. The concept of care ethics has been adopted and applied across diverse professional and institutional fields, including education, counseling, law, and corporate ethics. In these areas, the focus shifted from solely applying abstract rules to considering the relational consequences and specific needs of those affected by decisions, leading to more context-sensitive practices. While her work has consistently navigated significant criticisms, particularly concerning the risk of essentialism, its enduring power lies in its persistent demand that scholars and society listen attentively to historically marginalized "different voices." Gilligan's scholarship successfully challenged entrenched hierarchies of thought, paving the way for frameworks that recognize and value the inherent diversity of human psychological and ethical experiences.

4. Major Works

In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982)

Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education (co-edited, 1988)

Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development (with Lyn Mikel Brown, 1992)

The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love (2002)

Kyra: A Novel (2008)

5. Criticisms and Debates

Despite its revolutionary contributions, Carol Gilligan's work, particularly the stark dichotomy presented between justice ethics and care ethics, has generated significant academic controversy. The most persistent critique centers on the issue of **gender essentialism**. Critics argue that by linking the morality of care predominantly to women and the morality of justice to men, Gilligan's theory risks reinforcing traditional, potentially biologically deterministic, gender stereotypes. Opponents fear that this framework could inadvertently strengthen the societal perception that women are inherently more emotional, relational, or passive, thereby limiting their professional roles or undermining the broader feminist goal of achieving gender neutrality and equality across all domains. This debate highlights the inherent tension between recognizing genuine gender differences and avoiding the pitfalls of essentialist generalization within social theory.

Another major area of scholarly concern revolves around the **empirical validity and generalizability** of her core findings. Critics have questioned whether the observed differences in moral reasoning are consistently and causally attributable to gender alone across varied populations. They point out that differences might instead be explained by sociological factors such as prescribed social roles, historical power imbalances, socio-economic status, or cultural background, rather than an intrinsic gender-based moral orientation. Some meta-analyses and subsequent studies have shown inconsistent or weak correlations between biological sex and the preference for care versus justice, prompting calls for more diversified and rigorous cross-cultural research to validate the universality and distinctness of the "different voice" articulated by Gilligan's original research base.

Furthermore, many contemporary theorists object to the **dichotomous framing** of moral reasoning. Critics contend that the human moral landscape is far more integrated and fluid than suggested by the strict separation into justice and care orientations. They argue that individuals, regardless of gender, routinely access and employ both justice-based principles (e.g., fairness, equality) and care-based considerations (e.g., empathy, context) simultaneously, depending on the specifics of the moral dilemma presented. This viewpoint suggests that framing these two approaches as distinct, oppositional "voices" risks oversimplifying the intricate and dynamic process of moral judgment, proposing instead that moral maturity involves the flexible and effective

integration of both fairness and relational responsibility.

Further Reading

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4316047>

Britannica. (n.d.). *Carol Gilligan*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carol-Gilligan>

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