An Interview with Carol Gilligan

Restoring Lost Voices

This Harvard professor tells Mr. Goldberg what she has learned from carefully listening to the voices of women and children.

BY MARK F. GOLDBERG

CAROL GILLIGAN is a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, the first holder of the Patricia Alberg Graham Chair in Gender Studies at Harvard, and the author or co-author of four books and dozens of scholarly and popular articles. She is best known for her landmark book In a Different Voice, published in 1982 and still in print after selling nearly 600,000 copies in 12 languages. This book established that girls and women often approach moral decisions in a way that is different from what male researchers had identified as the “norm.” It also established Gilligan’s reputation, among both academics and the informed general public, as a significant researcher, feminist thinker, and psychologist.

In 1974, 10 years after Carol Gilligan received her Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard, she was the mother of three young boys and the wife of a psychiatrist. She did not have, and wasn’t certain she would have, a full-time academic career. She had taught courses at the University of Chicago and Harvard, had been a principal investigator in a couple of research studies, had published several articles, and had even done some research and teaching with Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson at Harvard. But she was not in a regular faculty position that would lead to a permanent appointment.

In fact, Gilligan spent a great deal of time in the late Sixties and early Seventies as a social activist. At the University of Chicago, where she taught a course while her husband completed his medical internship, she was “one of the faculty members who refused to submit grades because they were being used as a basis for the Vietnam draft.” She participated in sit-ins and became “active in voter registration, the civil rights movement, the antinuclear movement, and the women’s strike for peace.”

The important issue of how people make moral decisions harked back to Gilligan’s doctoral work and continued to percolate in her daily life and thinking, but the subject was far from the center of any academic work that she was doing.

As an undergraduate at Swarthmore College in the middle and late 1950s, Gilligan had majored in English and was comfortable in small coed classes where her views were respected and where she studied great writers who rendered male and female voices with considerable accuracy and sensitivity. However, as a graduate student at Harvard, she studied psychology in the time-honored and unquestioned patriarchal tradition, focusing on male psychologists whose work was based largely on male subjects. She “felt a dissonance in the way my professors spoke about human experience. It seemed flat to me and off. My background was literature, where the human experience was more alive in its complexity and truth.” Gilligan understood that the graduate psychology lectures and conversations were different from what she had learned reading Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, and Chekhov, but she could not yet identify the beating heart of the problem.

When Gilligan returned to Cambridge with her family in the late 1960s, she was drawn to people like Erikson and Kohlberg because of their serious interest in the intersection of psychology with political choice, literature, and philosophy. Like Gilligan, both men were committed to the civil rights and antiwar movements. In 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War, Carol Gilligan taught a section of Kohlberg’s course titled Moral and Political Choice. Not long after, Gilligan began a study of Harvard students facing the Vietnam draft. She wanted to know how these young men would “act at that dramatic moment in their lives when they had to make a choice” about serving in a war many of them felt was neither legitimate nor moral.

President Nixon ended the draft in 1973, and that abruptly ended Gilligan’s study.

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but also in 1973 the Supreme Court ruled in Roe v. Wade that state anti-abortion legis-
lation was not legal. Gilligan immedi-
ately “picked up my study with the mo-
moment when women have to make that de-
cision. Roe v. Wade gives women the de-
cisive voice in a real moment of choice
with real consequences for their person-
al lives and for society.”

Everything began to converge for Gil-
ligan between 1973 and 1977. The voices
of women that she so often heard in literature
but failed to hear in the canon of graduate
school psychology began to come through.
Gilligan had been taught to consult the
work of Freud, Weber, Piaget, Kohlberg, and
Erikson as the touchstones against which
to judge psychological health and norma-
tive experience. The work of these men —
all brilliant, dedicated, and even fair-
minded — was rooted almost entirely in
studying white male behavior and experi-
ence. As Gilligan interviewed more and
more pregnant women, a different pattern
began to emerge. “I’m hearing something
from women for the first time. It became,
‘If I bring my voice into my relationships,
will I become a bad, selfish woman, and
will I end my relationships?’”

Women historically had been unable or
unwilling to express what they felt. When
they emphasized relationships and care
over logic and justice, they were thought to be
morally inferior, and they feared that they
would lose their important relationships.
An unmarried pregnant woman consider-
ing abortion might feel that she very much
wanted the baby but that having it would
cost her a relationship with a man she loved
very much. Women’s important moral de-
cisions were typically based not on their
own deepest feelings but on the highly re-
spected rules of the patriarchal culture that
enveloped them.

At her kitchen table, Gilligan began to
write an article on what she had learned
about women’s conceptions of self and
morality. “Suddenly a new landscape be-
gan to form around women’s relationships
with themselves and the world they lived
in. The key issue is one of absence versus
presence, and morality for women had been
aligned with absence, with being selfless.”

If women took their cues from the domi-
nant culture when making decisions about
raising children, casting a vote, or even deal-
ing with their own sexuality and pleasure,
how could they be responsible for what
they “decided” and how could they feel
mature? “It all crystallized, and now I
knew why I didn’t feel present in gradu-
ate school, in psychology.”

Gilligan submitted her piece on wom-
en’s voice and the abortion decision to the
Harvard Educational Review, which ini-
tially rejected it. But after Gilligan agreed
to some compromises over the organiza-
tion and style, the journal finally published
the article in 1977 under the title “In a Dif-
ferent Voice: Women’s Conception of Self
and Morality.” This publication rapidly cata-
pulted Gilligan “from an on-the-edge perch
to ‘Who are you?’ and lots of inquiries
from psychologists.” The article became a
citation classic and was followed in 1979
by “Woman’s Place in Man’s Life Cycle,”
also published in the Harvard Education-
al Review. Both articles in revised form
would become important chapters of In a
Different Voice.

Gilligan now understood that the “arc
of developmental theory” she had learned
in graduate school did not include what
she was learning from women and that
“the problem might be with the theory —
and that starts my work.” She also conclud-
ed that part-time teaching, raising children,
political activism, the arts, and tending an
organic garden would not be enough for
her. Her ideas were controversial and not
yet completely developed. She needed to
find a comfortable institution “that would
allow me to find myself in work, give merit
to my life, allow me to write about what I
was learning, and eventually grant me ten-
ure.” That institution was Harvard, where,
indeed, she was granted tenure in 1986.

In a Different Voice is grounded in three
thoughtful studies that required close lis-
tening. The first study was of college stu-
dents who had dropped out of a course on
moral and political choice. Of the 20 stu-
dents who had dropped the course, 16 were
women. The second study focused on the
abortion decisions of 29 women ranging
in age from 15 to 33 and representing a
variety of ethnic and social backgrounds.
The third study was the rights and responsi-
bilities study, in which a group of males
and females were interviewed across the
life cycle, ages 6 to 60.

Often in the book, Gilligan, the un-
dergraduate literature major and lifelong
reader of classic literature, balances the
voice of Freud or Piaget with that of
Chekhov or Shakespeare. She contrasts
the differing views of men and women in
The Cherry Orchard and The Merchant of
Venice to make her points regarding the
relationship between power, voice, and
gender. It is Portia in The Merchant of
Venice, played by a young male in Shake-
spere’s time, dressed as a female when
in character but dressed as a male judge
in the resolution scene, who brings the
plea for mercy (“The quality of mercy is
not strained”) into the male citadel of jus-
tice. It is this female solution that allows
resolution without hurt. In another case,
a blended male/female solution or a male
view might properly predominate. In this
case, a woman must use a male voice to
deliver a female resolution that males will
find acceptable.

Without question, In a Different Voice
was revolutionary and struck a powerful
chord in both men and women. Men be-
gan to see the limits of using only male
samples for studies and only male think-
ning as the basis for moral decisions.
Scholars wanted to know, “Is this true?
What’s your sample? How do you know
this?” Men and women sought Gilligan
to say, “You saved my marriage” or
just to tell her that the book rang true with
them. The responses came from the clerk
in the Cambridge supermarket and the
cousin of Gilligan’s typist as well as from
students and many academic colleagues.
“I got very strong signs that I was in touch
with something real; this was not rocks in
Siberia.”

From the time she was a child, Gilligan
was always around issues far more real
than rocks in Siberia. “I was a child dur-
ing the Holocaust. My parents were very
involved with refugees from Europe.” Gil-
ligan’s preschool and high school experi-
ences were in New York City’s progres-
sive Walden School, where moral decisions
were emphasized and discussed. Her fa-
ther, William Friedman, the child of Hun-
garian immigrants, became a very success-
ful lawyer and took “lawyers fleeing Hit-
tler into his law firm.” Gilligan’s mother,
Mabel Caminot Friedman, the daughter of
Ukrainian and German immigrants, “was
very involved in helping refugees get set-
tied in New York.” In fact, In a Different
Voice was dedicated to Gilligan’s parents,
people she referred to several times in our
interview as important moral influences
on her. Studying moral issues and deci-
sions strongly appealed to Gilligan. In her
preface to the 1993 edition of In a Differ-
ent Voice, Gilligan makes the point that,
after the Middle Passage and the Holo-
caust, social scientists cannot adopt a position of neutrality on moral issues.

Indeed, Gilligan’s next work was to continue and deepen her study of female thinking and moral decisions, this time concentrating on adolescent girls. In the 1980 Handbook of Adolescent Psychology, edited by Joseph Edelson, there was “not enough material for a chapter on girls.” Over the next several years, 1983 to 1992, Carol Gilligan and her students set out to repair the omission of girls’ voices in the literature of adolescence. Gilligan began her research in the Emma Willard School, an all-girls’ school in Troy, New York, with strong support and funding from the Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge Foundation. This work resulted in the 1990 book Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School. Her research continued in Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs in three ethnically different Boston neighborhoods as well as at independent and public schools in the Boston area. In the middle 1980s, Gilligan did a five-year longitudinal study of girls aged 6 through 16 at the Laurel School in Shaker Heights, Ohio. In 1992, Meeting at the Crossroads, based on work at the Laurel School, appeared and was selected as one of the New York Times’ notable books of the year.

What Gilligan and her colleagues did during those years was “to revisit the psychology of adolescence, but this time listening carefully to girls without putting the interpretive frame on them that had been derived from boys.” She discovered that something happened to girls between the ages of 11 and 15 or 16. During this time, it often became “dangerous” for a girl to know or say what she actually felt. The younger girls were remarkably honest and confident and courageously outspoken. Just two or three years later, they become ambiguous and timid in their answers, covering up what they knew. “This was marked in the interviews by the phrase ‘I don’t know.’ If you stayed with them, gently probing and leaving room for answers, you found out that they did know.”

When girls are initiated into the adult world, they find that most of the values are rooted in the experience of successful men. It is a world that attaches great value to independence, separation, and autonomy and not a lot of value to relationships and connection. Often, when girls struggled for connection, they were seen as too immature to achieve separation. “Girls’ resilience in elementary school is suddenly boys and girls must be encouraged to develop their natural voices if they are to mature into adults who can help “eradicate such crimes as violence and genocide,” which blighted the 20th century.

When I asked Gilligan about the role of schools in all of this, her immediate response was that we must “amplify the voices of children.” She emphasized that this is not a simple Rousseauean approach, whereby we just tell children to speak freely. Rather, we must provide extremely engaging curriculum, train teachers, and then “talk to the children, create a resonant space, and help them understand what they are saying and seeing,” as she did in her work primarily with girls in Boston and other places. The teachers need to be given staff development opportunities to hear their own voices on subjects of great importance and to revisit those times when their voices were muffled. In Gilligan’s experience working with schools, when the teachers felt that their work and subject matter were important and that both they and their students were expressing themselves authentically and thoughtfully, “there was a decline among the teachers of headaches and depression.” When the teachers began to express themselves more honestly, the structure of the school began to change.

As Gilligan completes her new work with boys, she sees the outline of a careful “developmental map, one that will help save a huge amount of money by doing preventive work” just at those times in children’s lives — ages 4 to 6 for boys and early adolescence for girls — when intervention is the most crucial and effective. Gilligan is optimistic about what schools can do but does not underestimate the difficulty. "Gilligan is optimistic about what schools can do but does not underestimate the difficulty."

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