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## COMPETING EPISTEMOLOGIES AND FEMALE BASIC WRITERS

In her proposal for a new model of psychological and moral development in women, Carol Gilligan argues for a distinct female epistemology, one which conceives of "knowing as a process of human relationships" (173). The question of epistemologies, or ways of knowing oneself and the world, is one factor which drew our research team to undertake a study of female basic writers. Rather than studying groups of men and women, we focused on female students only; therefore, we cannot extend to male basic writers the conclusions we draw from our research, even though some of our conclusions may hold true for males as well as for other groups not defined by gender. Other studies, some referred to below, have described the differences between discourse produced by males and discourse produced by females; our study attempts to describe how the female language characteristics (as reported by those studies) affect the writing processes and written products of female basic writers.

One goal of our study was to seek ways of enabling female basic writers to coexist with the often alienating linguistic expectations of the academy. Another goal was to attempt to describe the epistemological foundations of the female basic writers in our study and to clarify thereby the epistemological assumptions and expectations that should be articulated in basic writing instruction. We were interested in Patricia Bizzell's statements about the "world views" of basic writers:

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[Basic writers'] difficulties, then, are best understood as stemming from the initial distance between their world views and the academic world view, and perhaps also from the resistance to changing their own world views that is caused by this very distance.

To understand basic writers' problems in these terms, we need to ask three questions: what world views do basic writers bring to college? What is the new world view demanded in college? And do basic writers have to give up the world views they bring to college in order to learn the new world view? (297)

The results of our study posit the following answers to Bizzell's questions: First, the world views of the female basic writers in our study may best be characterized as personal and relational. Second, the academic world view may be characterized as mechanical and formal, consonant with the distinct male epistemology described by Gilligan as viewing "knowledge as correspondence between mind and form" (173). Third, the basic writers in our study appear to perceive, at some level, that they are being asked to abandon a familiar way of knowing (through personal experience and the subjective sharing of that experience) in favor of an alien way of knowing (through analytical reasoning and win-or-lose argumentation). Thus, these basic writers are faced with competing epistemologies.

Before we describe our study, we want to explain what we mean by competing epistemologies. We turn to Barry Brummett, who differentiates three types of epistemologies: mechanical, subjective, and intersubjective. He rejects the mechanical because "Observation cannot be value-free" (26). Though mechanical epistemology is the dominant world view of the academic community, it is now being challenged in many fields, both in the sciences and in the humanities. Brummett also rejects the subjective because "in its pure form [it is] solipsism" (30). In the group of female basic writers we studied, we observed dependence on subjective epistemology, but we observed that it was a pragmatic subjectivism focusing on their relationships with others, not the "pure form" of subjectivism which Brummett rejects as focusing on only the self. In their writing, the female basic writers struggle to bridge the gap between their own subjectivism and the mechanical expectations of the academic discourse community, but for most the gap is not bridgeable. Brummett proposes the third, intersubjective (or "process") epistemology, as the most appropriate for our age. "Participation in shared meanings" (31), Brummett writes—participation which reconciles the private and the public—is the hallmark of intersubjectivity.

To set a context for reporting our study, we need also to explain our interest in women's language in academic life. Ever since Robin Lakoff's study of women's language was published in 1975, feminist researchers have sought to point out not only the distinctive characteristics of language produced by women but also the sexist bias that occurs when a male paradigm of language is used to judge female language as deficient. In one study, Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker contrast the ways in which females and males learn to use language: females to create and

maintain relationships, males to assert dominance; females to criticize in acceptable ways, males to control an audience; females to interpret accurately the words of others, males to assert themselves when others are speaking (205-207). The differences pointed out by Maltz and Borker help explain why women and men experience higher education differently. As Paula Treichler and Cheri Kramarae observe:

The university can be viewed as a subculture that men and women experience and relate to differently. This subculture typically fosters interaction patterns more compatible with men's established interaction patterns than with women's, and it is this fundamental inhospitality to women's talk that helps account for the "chilly climate" that significant numbers of women experience. (118)

Several studies of college students have described six of the "interaction patterns" referred to by Treichler and Kramarae:

1. In classes with male instructors, student-teacher interactions involving male students are much more frequent than those involving female students (Sternglantz and Lyberger-Ficek 345).
2. In classes with female instructors, student-teacher interactions involving male or female students are more equal than in classes with male instructors (Sternglantz and Lyberger-Ficek 345).
3. Male students exhibit significantly more aggression (interruptive behavior) than do female students in both male and female instructors' classes (Brooks 683).
4. Student participation, regardless of sex, is significantly higher in female instructors' classes (Kajander 3).
5. Male students are the majority sex more often in male instructors' classes, but an equal number of male and female students are usually found in female instructors' classes (Sternglantz and Lyberger-Ficek 345).
6. Female students visit female instructors' offices more often than they visit male instructors' offices (Boersma 775).

These studies suggest that communication is much better between female students and their female instructors than it is between female students and their male instructors and demonstrate concretely the "inhospitality to women's talk" noted by Treichler and Kramarae.

Let us turn now from speech in the academy to writing in the academy. Several feminists conclude that formal academic discourse has been designed, as Julia Stanley puts it, "by men for the edification of other men" (800). Dale Spender explains that, over the last several centuries, women have been expected to write only "about feelings and emotions" but not about "the more significant intellectual issues" (199). Consequently, the social status quo is maintained "by permitting women to write for a *private* audience (which can be extended to encompass other women) but discouraging them from writing for a *public* audience, that is, men" (192; our emphasis). Spender concludes that "the woman writer

who intends her words for the public confronts a different set of problems from a man when she begins to write" (197).

Pamela Annas makes explicit the "different set of problems" pointed out by Spender. Annas notes that the academic environment values "hierarchy, competitiveness, detachment, and objectivity" (361), qualities corresponding to male uses of language and to mechanical epistemology, while female uses of language are more likely to exhibit "an emphasis on the particular, the contextual, the narrative, the imagistic" (371). Noting that "what sometimes has been perceived as the weaknesses in women's writing . . . are in fact some of the strengths of women's writing" (371), she argues for reform in writing instruction. She calls for writing which "brings together the personal and the political, the private and the public" (370), though she admits that such writing "may or may not be outside the range of what we are accustomed to recognize as strong expository writing" (370). To paraphrase Annas with Brummett's epistemological classifications, writing springing from intersubjective epistemology may or may not be consonant with the mechanical epistemology of the academy.

Several of the generalizations of Spender and Annas are made more concrete by Susan Peterson's analysis of the argumentative compositions of male and female university freshmen, an analysis in which she describes a number of sex-preferential linguistic features. For instance, her finding that the women's compositions use "I" over 50 percent more often than the men's indicates a greater female emphasis on personal experience. Second, her finding that the women's writing uses "you" 200 percent more often than the men's indicates a greater female emphasis on sharing experience and on giving advice. Third, her finding that women's writing exhibits higher *kinesis* (the presence of action in clauses) indicates that it is more anecdotal than men's writing. In short, several of Peterson's findings suggest to us that the writing of the female university freshmen in her study corresponds less closely to the mechanical epistemology of the academy than does the males' writing. Peterson, Annas, Spender, and Stanley all seem to agree that the language of mechanical epistemology is more likely to alienate women than to alienate men.

We turn now to our study which examined whether the sex-preferential linguistic features reported by Peterson are more or less frequent for female basic writers than for female freshmen writers. Also, in order to reach some conclusions about the types of topics found alienating by female basic writers, we examined what kinds of linguistic patterns developed when the women responded to different types of topics and also when the women revised their writing.

We observed the writing processes and analyzed the written products of twenty female students—ten from basic writing classes and ten from freshman composition classes—as each composed nine drafts. Of the twenty students, most were mature women (over 26); four were Black, four Hispanic, ten nonHispanic Caucasian, and two had been educated overseas (one in the Middle East, one in Europe). According to nationally normed reading tests, the Nelson and the Nelson-Denny, the freshmen

read over the twelfth grade level, while most of the basic writers read well below college level, half of them below the fortieth percentile for ninth-graders. Of the basic writers, eight were drawn from a special class for welfare-dependent mothers (a component of a special job-training program) and two from regular basic writing classes.

The nine drafts produced by each student consisted of three series of three drafts, each written one week apart. The first draft in each series was *reflexive*, a term used by Emig and by Perl to describe writing that is more personal and more private than traditional academic writing. The second topic was *extensive*, the opposite of reflexive; its subject corresponded to the previous week's reflexive draft. For instance, one of our reflexive topics asked students to, "Describe how well you were able to make friends in school earlier in your life. How much did your friends help you enjoy going to school?" The corresponding extensive topic asked, "Discuss the importance of making friends in school. How important is friendship in education?" In both sessions, the students were observed by a researcher who recorded the frequency and type of the writers' pauses. Also, the students were told in both sessions not to worry about correcting errors. The third draft in each series was a revision of the extensive draft; here the students were not observed.

Our comparison of the two groups reveals four important patterns:

1. Both the basic writers and the freshman writers *paused more frequently when composing extensive drafts* than when composing reflexive drafts. The *basic writers* demonstrated *more hesitation* than did the freshman writers.
2. In both groups, use of *first person pronouns* dropped dramatically when writers shifted from the reflexive draft to the extensive draft but *rose during revision*. The decrease was similar in both groups, but the *increase* was *much greater among the basic writers* than among the freshman writers.
3. In both groups, use of *second person pronouns* *rose dramatically* when writers shifted from the reflexive draft to the extensive draft but *dropped during revision*. Again, the *increase* was *much greater among the basic writers*, but the decrease was similar in both groups.
4. In both groups, *kinesis*—the presence of action in clauses—*dropped* when writers shifted from the reflexive draft to the extensive draft but *rose during revision*. This was equally true of both groups.

Our findings indicate that both groups showed hesitancy when confronting an extensive topic even though they had written a reflexive theme on a corresponding topic the previous week. Part of their hesitancy, we surmise, was a search for extensive language. When responding to an extensive topic, students started to use second person pronouns in an advice-giving mode, the basic writers to a greater degree than the freshman writers. When revising, both groups tended to edit out the "advice language"; however, they returned to the first person pronouns and

the higher kinesis more characteristic of the reflexive drafts. Thus, both groups, but especially the basic writers, depended on the female language patterns described earlier: sharing personal experience, giving advice, relying more on anecdotes than analysis.

To return to Bizzell's questions, what do we think our study says about the world views of basic writers? Though our sample is small and our conclusions are tentative, we find strong evidence of a subjective epistemology: a way of knowing based on personal experience and relationships with others. Not only does this subjective epistemology seem to pervade the private/reflexive discourse of the basic writers in our study, it also pervades their public/extensive discourse, even after revision. The freshman writers in our study, on the other hand, were able in their revisions of extensive discourse to produce prose which resembled more closely the language and reasoning of intersubjective epistemology, language which brings together and reconciles the private and the public.

The cases of Maria and Brenda provide specific illustrations of our procedure and our claims. Maria, a single Hispanic mother in her late teens, is representative of the basic writers. She reads at the sixth grade level and, according to the writing apprehension scale developed by John Daly and Michael Miller, is "highly apprehensive," as were most of the basic writers in our study. Brenda, a single Black mother in her early thirties, is representative of the freshman writers. She reads above college level and is "moderately apprehensive" about writing, as were most of the freshman writers in our study.

The shift from reflexive to extensive writing, as we reported earlier, is characterized by diminished first person perspective, increased second person perspective, and a drop in the presence of action in clauses. Brenda's writing illustrates all three:

*Reflexive:* I remember belt lashes across my behind, feet, and elsewhere below the waist as I ran, tried to hide and retreat from the punishment.

*Extensive:* The first thing that is learned is that you have authority over your child.

Maria's extensive writing also shows a shift to second person perspective; however, she seems to grow tired of it and returns to first:

*Reflexive:* When we were dating we weren't careful on whether or not I was going to get pargnet again. After 3 months had pass I had told my husband that I was expecting another baby. Then after that he decided not to see me or Cindy again.

*Extensive:* Before deciding if you want a relationship you will have to know the person real well. If you decide that you want a relationship to go as far as marriage. You would have to be even with doing cleaning and working and helping out with my two kids . . . . This person that I plan to get involve with would have to take on responsibility as well as any thing else for our marriage to be success and for it to last a long time also.

Maria seems to believe that the second person perspective, an advice-sharing mode, is more appropriate for the extensive topic than is the first person perspective, but she appears unable to sustain her discourse in second person perspective. Later in the semester, Maria stopped her efforts to shift perspective when composing an extensive draft:

*Reflexive:* When I was a child I was disciplined for all the things that I did bad. My parents would hit me was [with] belt a board or anything in handy.

*Extensive:* Well I know this much if they [Maria's two children] did do something wrong, I would find some kind of punishment for them. I will still have to way [wait] a minimum of time to really know what kind of punishment I will give my children for the bad things that they do.

Like most of the basic writers in our study, Maria tried early in the semester to shift the perspective of her discourse to respond to the extensive topic, but the effort was difficult and unsuccessful. In the final series of her drafts, there was no noticeable difference between her reflexive and extensive drafts; both were personal, anecdotal, and subjective.

Revision of extensive prose was characterized in both groups by diminished second person perspective, increased first person perspective, and increased level of action in clauses—especially among the basic writers. Maria's *unrevised extensive prose* often exhibits shifts in perspective. For example, in the following three-sentence passage her perspective changes with each sentence and her prose quickly loses its ability to communicate:

Another responsibility that I have is that I have to get to the places I need to get to on time. If you don't do this there will be a great chance that you might not be able to see whoever you are going to see. People should try to stay with their responsibility so that there will be things worked out and not be responsible for others.

Her revision avoids incoherence by shifting back to first person perspective and by becoming more anecdotal; however, she no longer attempts to draw generalizations:

My ex-husband broke a promise when he said that he would get me my wedding band, but he never did. We always had disagreements when I wanted to do something and he didn't. We also had a disagreement on me trying to get him to take me to my check-ups when I was pregnant with the girls. He didn't want to take me to the hospital when it was time.

Brenda's revision, representative of the freshman writers' revisions, also illustrates diminished second person perspective, increased first person perspective, and increased level of action in clauses, but unlike Maria's revision, Brenda's does not avoid drawing a generalization:

*Unrevised Extensive:* Friends are such a needed part of school—but especially in grades 4-12. They are needed so that you can collaborate on assignments.

*Revised Extensive:* I imagine that when kids recognize they're different, they retreat to a corner to find another child with a similar "condition" whom they can befriend. I was a different child and there was not one other child in school like me. I didn't know how to be accepted, so I just resigned myself to just work hard at my school work and become smart.

Brenda's revision seems more intersubjective than Maria's; Brenda generalizes then illustrates with an example from her own experience. Maria's revision, however, seems to avoid generalizations in favor of anecdotes; such revising was typical of the basic writers in our study.

Overall, in our sample of 20 female students and their 180 written drafts, the compositions of basic writers exhibit several sex-preferential linguistic traits to a greater degree than the compositions of freshman writers do. Also, the basic writers demonstrate more difficulty than do the freshmen in producing and revising extensive discourse. We suggest that the two phenomena are related. Writers whose world view is highly subjective cannot be expected to respond successfully to topics which seem to come from "another world"—that is, from a discourse community with a different epistemological base. The basic writers in our study seemed to recognize the difference between a reflexive topic and an extensive one, but they tended to interpret the extensive topics in ways that would allow them to respond in a personal, advice-giving mode. Their use of language strikes us not as deficient, but as characteristic of the female epistemology described by Gilligan as a way of knowing based on relationships with others rather than on formal and abstract rules.

Since women like those basic writers described here are not in the least uncommon in open admissions colleges, we suggest that basic writing instruction attempt to address with sensitivity the difficulties these students are likely to encounter. We do not suggest that women's language be "corrected" or that subjective world views be criticized. On the contrary, basic writing instruction—without regarding subjective epistemology as deficient—should attempt to guide female students toward an intersubjective epistemology. Also, basic writing instruction should help female students learn to coexist with the often alienating linguistic expectations of the academy without upholding the characteristics of language produced by males as the preferred paradigm. Indeed, basic writing instruction, in trying to achieve these two objectives, can help to effect epistemological and linguistic changes in the academy as a whole—changes that are, as both Gilligan and Brummett argue, both necessary and overdue.



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