

## **BELENKY ABSTRACT**

Noting of a lack of research in how women come to understand truth, knowledge, and authority, Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues undertook the task of studying and creating a taxonomy focused specifically on women. They address how women grapple with knowledge and authority in an attempt to “claim the power of their minds” (Belenky, 1986, p3) thereby creating their own unique voice. Similar to the structure of other taxonomies, they present women’s “ways of knowing.” (Belenky, 1986, p 3-10)

### **Important Terms**

#### **Silence**

Women in this first stage are without a true voice. They fear that speaking out will only make them appear ignorant or bring negative repercussions. They lack confidence in their own abilities, which makes it difficult for them to learn from their own experience. Authority is seen as all-powerful and overbearing. These are women who “see themselves as remarkably powerless and dependent on others for survival.” (Belenky, 1986, p28) They do not have a real sense of self. (Belenky, 1986, p24-34)

#### **Received Knowledge**

Women in this second stage start to see words as having the power to bring them knowledge. They become listeners to other’s ideas and tend to follow what William Perry termed absolute dualism (Perry 1970) believing in either the absolute right or absolute wrong of what they hear. What they haven’t yet developed is the “confidence in their own ability to speak. Believing...truth comes from others...” (Belenky, 1986, p37) This truth is something that is passed down from person to person. Knowledge receivers have not yet come to realize that truth/knowledge can be generated/created. Therefore, while women in this stage are starting to come to a sense of self, it is a self that must be given from without, not generated from within. (Belenky, 1986, p35-51)

#### **Subjective Knowledge**

In the subjective knowledge stage women start for the first time to look inside themselves for answers. There is still a sense of dualism but this new dualism allows for truths that need not come from outside authority. Public truth is “...remote, mysterious, and inaccessible.” (Belenky, 1986, p60) They distrust traditional ideologies such as logic and abstraction, believing them to be the realm of failed male authority. These women look for authority within their own spheres. Through this approach they start to realize that their own experience may be of value; the first emergence of voice and reliance on self appear. However, their sense of self, once given from outside, is in flux while reliance on voice and self are so new. (Belenky, 1986, p52-86)

#### **Procedural Knowledge**

Women in the procedural knowledge stage start to question their once held beliefs about dualism and inner truth. There has come an understanding that truth/knowledge must be sought and

gained. They "...engage in conscious, deliberate, systematic, analysis." (Belenky, 1986, p93) Focusing so intently on the procedure or methodology, the reasons behind acquiring the knowledge in the first place can be pushed aside. They gain a sense of control over their surroundings and develop multiple ways of looking and seeing. (Belenky, 1986, p87-99)

### **Constructed Knowledge**

Women in this last stage "...integrate knowledge... they felt...personally important with knowledge they had learned from others" (Belenky, 1986, p134) This process of mixing the personally important with the learned, to construct knowledge and its frame of reference, gives each woman in this stage her own unique voice and sense of self. They believe that truth depends on context, knowledge can be built, and experts can't exist without evaluation. In order to maintain their sense of self, those in constructed knowledge need to be actively reexamining, remixing, and adding to their constructed knowledge. (Belenky, 1986, p130-144)

### **Resources**

Belenky et al (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books

Perry, W. Jr. (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston

### **Further Reading**

Belenky et al. (1996) *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*. New York: Basic Books

Belenky et al. (1991) *A Tradition that has No Name: Women's Ways of Leading*. New York: Basic Books

Clinchy, B. & Zimmerman, C. (1982) Epistemology and Agency in the Development of Undergraduate Women. *The Undergraduate Woman: Issues in Educational Equality*. MA: D.C. Heath

Goldbergr, N. (1978) Breaking the Educational Lockstep: Simon's Rock Experience. *The Early College in Theory and Practice*. MA: Simon's Rock Early College.