SOFTWARE & TECH

Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice

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Introduction: A Landmark in Moral Psychology

In 1982, psychologist Carol Gilligan published a slender but profoundly influential book titled **In a Different Voice**. The work challenged the foundational assumptions of moral development theory, which until then had been dominated by the research of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg's stage model, based almost exclusively on studies of boys and men, positioned justice and abstract principles at the apex of moral maturity. Gilligan, listening carefully to the voices of women who had been left out of those studies, heard something else: an orientation toward care, responsibility, and relationship. Her book did not simply add women to the existing framework; it questioned the framework itself. Today, **Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice** remains a touchstone in psychology, ethics, gender studies, and education—a work that continues to shape how we understand moral reasoning, human connection, and the very idea of voice.

The Context: Kohlberg's Justice-Centric Model

To appreciate the significance of **Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice**, one must first understand the landscape of moral psychology in the mid-twentieth century. Lawrence Kohlberg, building on Jean Piaget's earlier work, proposed that moral development proceeds through six invariant stages. These stages move from a pre-conventional focus on punishment and obedience (Stage 1) to a conventional focus on social order (Stage 4), and finally to a post-conventional orientation toward universal ethical principles (Stage 6). The highest stage—often illustrated by hypothetical dilemmas like the famous "Heinz dilemma"—emphasizes abstract justice, impartiality, and individual rights.

Kohlberg's data came primarily from longitudinal studies of boys. When he applied the same scoring criteria to women, they consistently scored lower, clustering at Stage 3 (interpersonal concordance). The implication, though rarely stated bluntly, was that women were morally less mature than men. Gilligan, a doctoral student and then colleague of Kohlberg at Harvard, began to suspect that the scoring criteria—not women's moral reasoning—were the problem.

The Core Thesis: A Different Moral Voice

In her book, Gilligan argued that women tend to approach moral problems through a **care-based ethic** rather than a **justice-based ethic**. This is not an inherent biological difference, she emphasized, but rather a difference in socialization and lived experience. The justice orientation prioritizes rules, rights, and fairness; it seeks to resolve conflicts by applying impartial principles. The care orientation, by contrast, prioritizes relationships, empathy, and responsibility; it seeks to preserve connection and avoid harm.

Gilligan illustrated this contrast through interviews with women facing real-life moral conflicts, such as deciding whether to have an abortion. Unlike the hypothetical dilemmas in Kohlberg's studies, these decisions were embedded in complex webs of relationships, emotions, and practical constraints. Gilligan's subjects did not

speak in terms of universal rights; they spoke about their responsibilities to partners, parents, and unborn children, and about the need to act with care in a world where no perfect solution existed.

The title **In a Different Voice** captures this core insight: the voice of care is not deficient or inferior—it is simply different. By expanding the definition of moral maturity to include both justice and care, Gilligan offered a more inclusive and psychologically realistic account of human morality.

The Three Stages of the Care Ethic

Gilligan also proposed a developmental sequence for the care orientation, parallel to Kohlberg's stages but with distinct content:

1. Pre-conventional care – Focus on individual survival. The self is the primary concern; relationships are instrumental.
2. Conventional care – Focus on self-sacrifice. The person equates goodness with caring for others, often at the expense of their own needs. Social approval is paramount.
3. Post-conventional care – Focus on responsible care. The individual recognizes the importance of both self and others, achieving a balance between caring for others and caring for the self. This is the most mature orientation.

This framework gave women's moral voices a developmental trajectory of their own, one that did not require them to abandon relationality in favor of abstract principle.

The Impact: Transforming Feminist Psychology and Ethics

Upon publication, **Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice** ignited passionate debate. Many feminist scholars celebrated it as a long-overdue corrective to androcentric bias in psychology. Carol Tavris, in *The Mismeasure of Woman*, noted that Gilligan's work "gave women a moral language of their own." The book became a foundational text in feminist ethics, care ethics, and relational psychology. It influenced education, prompting teachers to value collaborative learning and relational pedagogy. In psychotherapy, it encouraged practitioners to attend to clients' narratives of relationship and responsibility.

Yet the book also drew sharp criticism. Some scholars argued that Gilligan risked reinforcing gender stereotypes by associating women with care and men with justice. Others pointed out that her sample—mostly white, educated, middle-class women—was not representative. Still others questioned the empirical basis of her three-stage model, noting that it was derived from a small number of interviews and lacked the rigorous longitudinal data of Kohlberg's work.

Gilligan herself later clarified that she did not intend to claim an essential gender difference. In subsequent writings, such as *The Birth of Pleasure*(2002), she reframed the "different voice" not as a female voice but as a human voice that has been suppressed by patriarchal culture. She argued that both men and women are capable of care reasoning, but that the care orientation has been devalued and silenced in a society that prizes independence and rationality.

Key Concepts in the Book

Voice and Listening

A central methodological innovation in **In a Different Voice** is Gilligan's emphasis on voice. She argues that psychological theories have historically been built by listening to certain voices (white, male, Western) while ignoring others. Giving voice to women is not about claiming superiority but about correcting a distortion. This concept anticipates later work on epistemic injustice and standpoint theory.

The Web of Relationship

Gilligan contrasts the “ladder” of Kohlberg’s stage theory with the “web” of relationships. Moral problems, from her perspective, are not like math problems with a right answer; they are dilemmas that require navigating among multiple, conflicting responsibilities. The imagery of the ladder (hierarchical, individualistic) versus the web (interconnected, contextual) has become a powerful metaphor in feminist thought.

The Self in Relation

Another key idea is the relational self. Whereas traditional psychology often treats autonomy as the hallmark of healthy development (think of Erik Erikson’s emphasis on identity formation), Gilligan suggests that a self defined solely by separation from others is impoverished. Healthy development involves both separation and connection. This resonates with later work on attachment theory and relational-cultural theory.

Criticisms and Revisions

No influential book escapes critique, and **Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice** has been interrogated from multiple angles. Empirical studies in the decades since have produced mixed results: some find gender differences in moral reasoning, others find none, and still others find that the context of the dilemma (hypothetical vs. real-life) matters more than gender. Many researchers now agree that the care and justice orientations are not exclusive to one gender but are both available to all people, though they may be differentially socialized.

Postcolonial and intersectional feminist critics have also pointed out that Gilligan’s framework, while challenging dominant narratives, may still assume a universal “woman’s voice” that does not account for race, class, or culture. For example, African American scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have emphasized that the experience of Black women often involves a “both/and” approach that combines care and justice in ways Gilligan’s binary may not fully capture.

Gilligan has addressed some of these critiques in her later work. In *Joining the Resistance* (2011), she writes about the importance of listening for a plurality of voices and resisting the pressure to simplify. She also acknowledges that her original study was exploratory and that the care ethic should be seen as one dimension of a more complex moral landscape.

Legacy and Continued Relevance

Despite the criticisms, **Carol Gilligan In A Different Voice** remains a landmark. It reshaped psychology by making the case for inclusive research methods and by revealing the hidden biases in what counts as “development.” It inspired a generation of scholars in moral philosophy, where care ethics—pioneered by Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and others—now stands as a major ethical framework alongside deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics.

In education, Gilligan’s work has been used to argue for more relational and cooperative classroom environments. In leadership studies, it has informed models of “servant leadership” and “transformational leadership” that value empathy and connection. In healthcare, the care ethic has been applied to nursing ethics and patient-centered care.

The book also anticipated the contemporary interest in emotional intelligence, trauma-informed care, and the psychology of voice. Phrases like “finding your voice” and “giving voice” have become common in popular discourse, but Gilligan’s work gives these ideas a theoretical grounding. She showed that voice is not just an individual attribute but a political and relational one: whose voices are heard, whose are silenced, and how we listen matters for justice and care alike.

Conclusion

Carol Gilligan's book, In a Different Voice, invites us to listen differently. By refusing to accept that women's moral reasoning was inferior, Gilligan opened a door to a richer, more nuanced understanding of human development. She reminded us that moral maturity includes not only the ability to reason about rights but also the capacity to care for others, to maintain relationships, and to take responsibility in a messy, interconnected world. Whether one agrees with all of its claims or not, the book's impact on psychology, feminism, and ethics is undeniable. It continues to challenge us to hear the voices that have been left out—and to recognize that listening is itself a moral act. In a time of polarized discourse and fractured relationships, the call to hear a different voice may be more urgent than ever.

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