

**A sociocultural perspective of knowing:  
A grounded theory of epistemological development of Malaysian women.**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the epistemological development of Malaysian women in Peninsular Malaysia. Based on constant comparison analysis of 14 in-depth interviews, a substantive theory of epistemological development was identified, including the process of that development and cultural factors that promote changes in epistemology.

**Introduction**

Learning and development do not occur in a mental vacuum; cognition is structured by an individual's sociocultural milieu (Lave, 1993). But the study of adult learning and development, particularly cognitive development, has focused mostly on the psychological aspects of human change over time, ignoring this sociocultural context (Dannefer, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Epistemological development, concerned with how individuals know their reality and how they construct and use that knowledge, is particularly susceptible to the influence of context. Theorists are beginning to question prior assumptions about the nature of personal epistemology (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Luttrell, 1989). How individualized—or perhaps, social and cultural—is epistemological development? What factors stimulate more mature ways of knowing? What is the role of education in epistemological development?

Theories of adult development have failed to provide a comprehensive view of human change over time. In particular, the dominant literature generally has excluded the female experience of development (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982/1993), as well as the impact of sociocultural factors on the process of that development (Dannefer, 1984). The gender bias in traditional models of human development has been well-documented. Women's developmental experiences generally have been subsumed within male-biased theories of development (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982/1993). Recent feminist approaches to this topic have broadened our understanding about human cognitive development by including the experiences of some women (Belenky et al., 1986; Luttrell, 1989).

Cognitive processes are played out in a sociocultural context that incorporates culture, social interaction, history, setting, and individual psychology. But the study of cognitive development has focused mostly on the psychological aspects of changes in cognition over time, ignoring this sociocultural context (Dannefer, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). This traditional view of

learning and development as purely psychological is giving way to a more complex and contextual understanding of cognition (Lave, 1993).

To adequately study the phenomenon of human change over time, then, the experiences of diverse individuals should be included in the canon of adult development. Malaysia, because of its pluralistic society, was chosen for this cross-cultural study of human development. The majority of Malaysians are Malay, about 30 percent are Chinese, and almost 10 percent are Indian. Each ethnic group has a relatively intact subculture, co-existing within the larger national culture.

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the epistemological development of Malaysian women in Peninsular Malaysia. Research questions included: (a) What is the process of epistemological development among Malaysian women? (b) What is the role of culture in defining that process? and (c) What is the role of educative activity, both formal and informal, in defining that process?

### **Methodology**

The phenomenon of epistemological development was investigated from the perspective of cultural constructivism. Because of the lack of cross-cultural or transcultural theory concerning women's epistemological development, this investigation was a grounded theory study.

Fourteen interviews were conducted with Malaysian women from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and multi-ethnic backgrounds. Theoretical sampling guided sample selection, while the general criteria for inclusion were nationality, ethnicity, gender, and educational level. The women in this study represent diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu. Their ages range from 23 to 52, and half has considerable international experience. The educational level of the participants is quite varied, including drop-outs, high school graduates, and university graduates. The participants are employed in diverse careers—about half are university lecturers and professors, three are full-time students, two are housekeepers, and one is a police officer. The semi-structured interview guide for this study was adapted from Belenky et al. (1986), but the guide was modified extensively during a pilot study and throughout the study.

### **Findings**

Based on constant comparative analysis of the data, the process of epistemological development and the factors that promote that development were identified, resulting in a substantive theory of epistemological development.

#### **The Process of Epistemological Development**

Culture provides a blueprint of expected behavior and affect, creating a cultural model of self. This model of self incorporates both a sense of identity (self portrait) and control of that identity (epistemological control). This cultural model of self is a template for a woman's personal model of self, regulating to some extent her options about her personal sense of identity and control of that identity. For the women in this study, the process of epistemological development is the

definition of one's personal model of self *in relation* to one's cultural model of self. This process of epistemological development involves three phases: distinguishing a personal model of self from the cultural model of self, negotiating conflict between the models, and defining the personal model of self.

**Distinguishing a personal model of self from the cultural model of self.** Culture dictates expected behavior and affect through the construction of a cultural model of self which frames individual behavior and affect as normal or deviant. But a woman's sense of self is not a pure reflection of the cultural model. Aishwarya notes that Indian culture shapes a woman's life from beginning to end, yet she acknowledges her own personal model of self. "Basically, Indians practice arranged marriages. I come from a very strict family, and it is expected there will be arranged marriages. . . I am quite an outspoken person since I was young. So when they started arranging, I said, 'Not for me!'"

Zain also recognizes the influence of family in determining her own sense of self. "I guess my identity is very much tied up with my parents. I don't have my own family that I've set up myself, so I'm very much tied up with what happens to my natal family." But Zain, like the other women in this study, does not conform completely to the model of self exemplified by their culture. At 36, she remains unmarried while pursuing her doctoral degree.

**Negotiating conflict between the models of self.** The cultural model of self is a benchmark of how a woman is expected to define herself and her identity. But no-one in this study accepted the cultural model of self without changes. Sometimes these changes were compromises between a woman and her culture; sometimes there was a direct confrontation with cultural expectations. Divergent viewpoints are incorporated into a personal model of self which blends sociocultural expectations with individual ideology. The personal model of self, then, emerges in a conflictual relationship with cultural expectations.

As a young woman, Noor was dissatisfied with cultural expectations of girls and women, particularly in her own family. "I realized there was always this discrepancy within the family and how different people had different privileged positions. And I think I became aware of my gender then." This conflict, Noor says, compelled her to become independent and resolute. "I realized then you have to live your life on your own and fight for your own survival. The kind of lessons I learned from my society really taught me a lot about fighting for survival as a woman."

Geetha, whose family was arranging her marriage at the time of the study, is hoping to complete her education before she marries because "the culture is such that, since you have to be married by a certain age, from about 20 [years old] until 40 [years old] a lot of your role is in the house."

Noor confronted her cultural model of self, deciding to seek an abortion while pregnant with her third child. "I went to several clinics, and they told me they didn't want to do [the abortion] because I was a Muslim woman and didn't want to tamper with religion." Seen also dealt with the issue of abortion and religious power and authority. After counseling a pregnant fifteen-year-old student who was a victim of incestuous rape, she decided to by-pass religious authority and arrange an abortion for the girl. "Of course abortion is illegal in this country, but we decided that

sometimes you just have to do things. . . . So we had to take a hard position, though we knew we were doing something illegal."

The emerging personal model of self is a process of negotiation. Each of these women negotiates which traditions she will accept. For some, that acceptance is a compromise—Geetha will allow her culture to dictate her program of study and her impending marriage, but she will step outside of tradition to further her education. For others, tradition and custom are to be constantly questioned—Noor despises conformity to a cultural identity.

**Defining the personal model of self.** The negotiation of this conflict results in a choice to adopt one's cultural model of self without question, adapt one's personal model of self in a compromise with the cultural model of self, or construct one's personal model of self that ignores cultural expectations. Only two of the women in this study adopted their cultural models of self. Janet believes that "the responsibilities of a woman are to take care of the family." She adds that "Chinese people don't have this idea of equality. . . . We Chinese, we have to serve the man. It is our Chinese way." Like Janet, Fatimah believes it is a woman's duty to care for her family. "We have to do our part. It doesn't matter if the husband is bad."

Most of the women in this study adapt their personal model of self, conceding some personal desires and beliefs to cultural expectations. For example, Geetha says that if her opinion disagrees with a cultural tradition, she will consider changing her opinion. "I like some things that are not part of the Indian culture, [but] I have in the past had to leave some of them because they were too contradictory."

Two of the women in this study constructed their personal models of self, disregarding cultural expectations. They are not outside of their culture; yet they do not answer to their culture. "I'm not confined by any sort of cultural boundaries," Noor claims. "I'm very marginal. Maybe because of that, I don't see myself pressured to conform to a cultural identity. I'm just what I am." Like Noor, Seen has decided that personal choice is not inferior to cultural tradition. "I'm one of those that, unless it can be justified, I will not accept anything."

### **Factors that Promote Epistemological Development**

For the women in this study, three factors promote epistemological development: family support of education for women and girls, learning experiences, and extended international opportunities. Certain experiences stimulate epistemological development by exposing a woman to diverse ideas and lifestyles, and other experiences support epistemological development by providing an atmosphere of encouragement.

The women in this study noted three types of family support that contributed to changes in knowing: equal access to educational opportunities for girls and women, financial support for higher education, and emotional support of personal development activities. Zain's father taught her that education is her inheritance: "For my family, education is the most important thing. . . . [My father] said, 'I don't need property; the best property is education.'" Geetha, like many of the women in this study, could not have attended college without the financial support of her

family. She also notes that her family encouraged her to participate in nonformal learning activities, promoting her personal development since early childhood.

Another factor that promotes epistemological development is education—formal and informal. "Education opens up the thinking," says Aishwarya, and "the thinking woman will become more exposed to the other side." Geetha agrees, claiming that education "changes your thinking." Khoo, like Aishwarya and Geetha, believes that "education is important because it constructs our thinking, our minds, especially in decision-making."

Extended international opportunities were another factor in epistemological development. Half of the women in this study had studied abroad, earning their degrees from foreign universities. For Geetha, her international experience encouraged "thinking in dual ways." Noor says her international experiences contributed to her multicultural, global perspective. Seen and Zain both describe their international experiences as a type of freedom, allowing them to disengage from social expectations. "I gave myself that space by being away from the family, being away from male control," Zain says.

### **A Theory of Epistemological Development**

The central theme, or theoretical core, that emerged from the data is the antagonistic relationship between the cultural model of self and the personal model of self. The process of defining the personal model of self originates in conflict, but epistemological development flourishes in a supportive, nurturing environment. Exposure to diverse ideas and traditions often triggers conflict between the models of self, and those women who have supportive families or some other supportive network feel safe to explore nontraditional viewpoints.

The first category in the process of epistemological development, distinguishing the personal model of self from the cultural model of self, begins with an awareness that culture structures an ideal model of self. The women in this study came to realize that culture defines appropriate affect and behavior, and that they are expected to think and behave according to this cultural model of self. The two properties of this category are (a) organization of the self portrait and (b) location of epistemological control. The self portrait incorporates a woman's sense of identity and is organized into dominant and subordinate identities. Control of the self portrait is manifested as epistemological authority (the right to define one's identity) and epistemological power (the ability to define the behavioral and affective dimensions of one's identity).

The second category, negotiating conflict between the models of self, involves confronting cultural expectations about appropriate behavior and affect. The two properties of this category are (a) conflict between the personal and cultural models of self and (b) conflict about the location of epistemological authority and power. Conflict between the personal and cultural models of self concerns reorganization of the self portrait, with gender and personal aspects of the identity displacing the culturally-dominant relational identity. Conflict about the location of epistemological authority and power involves internalizing or sharing control of the identity.

The third category, defining the personal model of self, results in a personal epistemology. The two properties of this category are (a) strategies for defining the personal model of self and (b)

the nature of epistemology associated with these strategies. Three strategies were identified: adopt, adapt, or construct. Adoption of one's cultural model of self involves little or no reflection and results in no epistemological change. Women who adapt or construct their personal models of self negotiate a new epistemology. The findings emphasize development within each strategy, not development from one strategy to another—they are different paths of epistemological development.

The nature of epistemology associated with these three strategies reflects the individual's perception of authority, truth, and knowing. Development toward more inclusive, more complex ways of knowing does not occur if a woman chooses to adopt her cultural model of self. However, epistemological development does occur whether a woman chooses to adapt or construct her personal model of self—the process of development is defined by the strategy.

These findings suggest the following hypotheses:

- 1) Diverse learning experiences and extended international opportunities, along with lifelong family support of education for girls and women, foster epistemological development. Women who are highly educated and have studied abroad are more likely to question tradition and the cultural model of self, concluding that reality is—to some degree—culturally constructed.
- 2) Points of conflict within the self portrait that involve the culturally-dominant identity are more likely to trigger epistemological development than points of conflict between culturally-subordinate aspects of the identity. Women who have experienced conflict between gender and personal aspects of their identity (for example, gender discrimination at work) acknowledge the conflict, but it does not affect their personal epistemology. However, a woman whose relational identity conflicts with either gender or personal aspects of her identity feels compelled to choose between them.
- 3) Because the personal and cultural models of self continue to interact, the personal model of self is subject to a lifetime process of review and redefinition. Culture and tradition continue to confront the newly-defined personal model of self in this cyclical perspective of epistemological development. At any point, a woman may choose to reorganize the components of her self portrait or relocate epistemological control of her identity. This action would lead to negotiation of the conflict and redefinition of the personal model of self.

## **Discussion**

Epistemological development has been identified in prior studies as unidirectional, linear, and hierarchical. The findings of this study allow for more than one path to development; and for the women in this study, the process of epistemological development is cyclical, not linear. Further, the value of a particular way of knowing is found to be in relation to its context—adapting or constructing a personal model of self occurs within an arena of personal and cultural influences. Further, this study provides a cultural perspective of changes in epistemology and includes cross-cultural experiences of epistemological development. Through this study, the participants defined their own epistemology and the cultural factors that influence that epistemology. Not surprisingly, this study supports the idea that learning fosters epistemological development. Also,

this study found that international experiences and study abroad influence epistemological development.

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