A GENDERED SELF OR A GENDERED CONTEXT?

A SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH TO GENDER DIFFERENCES

Michelle K Ryan

A thesis submitted for the

degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

The Australian National University

August 2003

Declaration

The research reported in this thesis is my own
and has not been submitted for a higher degree
at any other institution.

Michelle Kim Ryan

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe thanks for their support and encouragement during the course of this thesis. First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Barbara David for her unflagging support, both at an intellectual level and an emotional one. Barbara's guidance more than exemplified an ethic of care and her approach to supervision fostered in me a sense of interdependence and an appreciation for a connected way of knowing.

I also appreciate the guidance and direction of my advisory panel John Turner and Kate Reynolds, along with the rest of the social psychology group at The Australian National University, Penny Oakes, Alex Haslam, Craig McGarty, Mike Smithson, and Rachael Eggins. Together, this group has set an outstanding example of academic excellence and has had a tremendous influence on my research. No less important are my cohort of PhD students. In particular Rachael, Diana, Janet, Karen, Mark, Ruth, Kris, and Girish have provided endless intellectual stimulation, support, commiseration, and celebration over the years, and it has been an honour to share this experience with such a great group of friends.

My parents, Ling and Ken, have given me 30 years of unwavering encouragement and support, and this achievement has only been made possible by their faith in me over the years. Thanks also to my friends for feigning interest in all my psychobabble, in particular to Matt and Damian. Finally, much love and thanks to Julian for accompanying me on the last lap of this long journey, for providing me an excellent home in which to write, for the intellectual debates, for the emotional support, and for going far beyond the call of duty by reading this thesis from beginning to end. And of course, many thanks to my best friend and constant companion Zac.

Summary

This thesis examines the way in which traditional accounts of gender differences in the self-concept have relied on distal explanatory factors, and have thus conceptualised the gendered self as stable across both time and situation. This notion of a stable, gendered self has been implicated as underlying of a range of psychological gender differences (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), such as those in moral reasoning (e.g., Gillian, 1982) and ways of knowing (e.g., Belenky et al., 1989). As a result, these behaviours are also seen to be stable across time and context.

An alternative perspective is investigated, which looks to social identity theory and self-categorisation theory for a conceptualisation of both gender and the self-concept as being malleable and context-dependent (e.g., Turner et al., 1987). The social identity perspective describes the way in which proximal aspects of the social context affect the *expression* of gender-related behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs. In this way, the social identity perspective provides an analysis of group membership, group norms, and social influence which can not only account for the differences that are observed between men and women, but can also offer an analysis of the context-dependence of these difference and an approach by which gender differences can be mollified.

A series of nine empirical studies are reported, investigating the way in which individuals (a) define themselves, (b) approach moral reasoning, and (c) approach knowledge and learning, across a number of different social contexts. Together, the results suggest that the self-concept, moral orientation, and ways of knowing are neither stable nor inherently gendered, but are malleable and dependent on the nature of the self-other relationship as defined by the proximal aspects of the social context. The implications for traditional theories of gender differences are discussed, as are the broader implications for feminism and social change.

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