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# Can Feminist Educational Theorists Reappropriate John Dewey's Philosophy?

by

Ana M. Martínez Alemán

Feminism's renewed interest in the American pragmatic philosophical tradition has implications for feminist educational theorists. As a feminist educational theorist, I address social and educational issues which affect women in particular and humanity in general. For me to consider reappropriating the American pragmatic philosophical tradition, I must specifically consider John Dewey, American Pragmatism's educational voice.

Dewey's pragmatic philosophy was social criticism and, like other pragmatists, called for the inclusion of multiple and varied perspectives (Seigfried, 1991, p. 14). Present day feminists such as Maria Lugones, bell hooks, and Trinh T. Minh-ha echo these very concerns. But it was Dewey who recognized that philosophy and education were one and the same. John Dewey reasoned that in order to solve social problems, philosophers and theorists must actively engage themselves in educational discourse. In his autobiographical essay titled "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" Dewey addresses this very point:

Although a book called *Democracy and Education* was for many years that in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded, I do not know that philosophic critics, as distinct from teachers, have ever had recourse to it. I have wondered whether such facts signified that philosophers in general, although they are themselves usually teachers, have not taken education with sufficient seriousness for it to occur to them that any rational person could actually think it possible that philosophizing should focus about education as the supreme human interest in which, moreover, other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head. (Dewey, 1960, p. 14)

Dewey valued education because it was that concrete experience where all theories were tested. His pragmatism, unlike other philosophical traditions which did not emphasize concrete experience as the grounds for knowledge, positions education as the center of a philosophical circle.

Given that feminist analyses of social issues are women-centered, the fact that John Dewey wrote little directly addressing the education of girls and women and, as a rule, that his commentaries neglected women's experiences is of concern. Though Dewey wrote about birth control, suffrage, and co-education, it can't be said that the central theses in these works concerned themselves specifically with the quality of girls' and women's experiences, and as Robert Westbrook notes in his book, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, because Dewey wrote so little about the "woman question," it becomes difficult to "assess the full dimensions of his thinking on this issue" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 167). The absence of direct attention paid to gender in Dewey's works is suspect, to be sure.

Dewey's attempts to address gender and girls' and women's experience were either critical responses to the political climate ("Symposium on Women's Suffrage," 1911), or to social conditions ("Education and Birth Control," 1932), or to educational policy ("Is Co-Education Injurious to Girls," 1911). In each of these articles Dewey, like many philosophers before and after him, examined a particular issue but kept gender as a secondary, if not absent, concern. Women and girls, or more specifically, their experiences *as women* and *as girls*, are discussed as *objects* to the *subjects* of



politics, social policy, and education. Gender issues like birth control and voting rights are discussed in the context of their impact on the greater human condition and not as “gender” issues. Though he does recognize that women’s experiences differ from men’s (Dewey, 1929, p. 846), John Dewey’s writings were never explicitly dedicated to an intellectual examination of the female experiential world. Granted, though not his experience, though not his world, and though he may have encouraged women to engage in such an examination as a philosophical concern (birth control and suffrage, for example), I cannot say that gender was a primary concern for Dewey.

Dewey’s failure to place women at the center of his philosophical focus throughout his long life and many writings should be admitted but should not, I’ll insist, foil my attempts at a consideration of his pragmatic educational philosophy. But, though I can, in a sense, “forgive” John Dewey’s failure to place women as the center of his philosophical focus, can I ignore the absence of gender in his philosophical and educational treatises? I must ask: Did Dewey consider bodies to be gendered? If Dewey’s ideal democratic education is grounded in the “necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1938, p. 20), what role do women’s and girls’ experiences play in schooling and how does he assess their worth?

In 1911, as part of an ongoing series aimed at considering the issues which “touch[ed] the interests of women and the family life,” *The Ladies Home Journal* published John Dewey’s article, “Is Co-Education Injurious to Girls?” It is in this article that Dewey peels back the layers of his educational convictions to reveal his estimation of women, their capacities, potentialities, character, and place in education.

What Dewey reveals in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* narrative, together with his ideas on the nature of humans, suggests that he believed that the differences between the sexes were the consequences of both biology and culture. For example, at the same time that he credits the idea of “weak and dependent femininity” as an ideal for girls and women to 18th century “sentimentalism,” he talks about “natures” and “instincts” unique to the sex. Dewey equips girls with “feeling instincts” and “ultra-feminine weaknesses” which can be “worked out,” “steadied, clarified, and purged” through the proper environment (Dewey, 1911, pp. 22, 60-61).

The “proper environment” Dewey advocates is the co-educational school. His portrait of boys’ behavior suggests that boys have traits peculiar to their sex as well. But what is important to note, however, is that Dewey seems to imply that, though the influences of association positively affect both sexes, boys’ “natural attraction” to girls makes them live up to their best potentialities, while girls’ association with boys can lead them only to traits more “functional” and masculine (Dewey, 1911, p. 22). One of the inferences then is that, though both sexes grow through the influences of association, the ideals of growth are masculine. Dewey also claims in this commentary that boys’ associations with girls make them mannerly, courteous, and civil and that girls’ associations with boys make them more productive. It appears then that, since masculine traits are valued, and since “production” is a masculine trait, the successful citizens of Dewey’s democracy must be engaged in “production” oriented lives. What form “production” assumes in Dewey’s democracy is of consequence for feminists.

Dewey stipulates that the co-educational environment provides the opportunities for attaining effective social ends. In Dewey’s mind, “the significant tasks of society—remedial and constructive” will be carried out by both sexes. Thus, a co-educational environment will supply the conditions necessary for both sexes to grow as individuals in a democracy. To become better individuals, cooperation between the sexes becomes a necessary enterprise, one which Dewey



viewed as an "intellectual and moral necessity in a democracy." What is problematic for feminism in this conceptualization is Dewey's emphasis on the "importance of right family life for all social ends" (Dewey, 1911, pp. 60-61).

Though Dewey acknowledges that "the part of women in industry outside the home" could possibly increase and that women could be given the right to vote, his insistence on the great value of the "right family life" and that "as wife the woman is in relation to a man," makes one suspect that woman's role in his democracy is limited. Despite the fact that in the Dewey School occupations were for the most part not divided along gender lines, Dewey "never challenged the notion that homemaking was women's special sphere" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 111). Even as participants in higher education, Dewey entrusts women to the co-educational universities because they alone can give women the "scientific preparation for the responsibilities of parenthood and household management." Women's colleges' curricula, he notes, only prepare women for the vocations (Dewey, 1911, p. 62). Dewey seemed to want women to be schooled in the same ways that men were schooled. In a letter Dewey writes to William Rainey Harper dated January 16, 1902, he makes the argument for co-education at the University of Chicago by saying that the "proper basis of the relation of the sexes [is] the serious pursuit of truth in mutual competition and cooperation" (Gordon, 1990, p. 115). Dewey seems to suggest that women's exclusion from men's intellectual worlds devalued them in some way.

It seems then that women, though certainly capable of entering the "vocations," must also play a specific role in order to complete the "right family life." Is Dewey relegating women to particular roles within the ideals of the "right family life?" Dewey may value family because he sees it as a social necessity, but he sees it as containing sex-specific roles. Is he suggesting that women enlist in what Adrienne Rich describes as "institutionalized motherhood" (Rich, 1976)? Do all women have those "feminine instincts" necessary for the "right family life" to be guaranteed? Is Dewey suggesting that there is a "maternal" instinct in all women? Can women be both vocational and motherly?

Inherent in all of these questions that surround Dewey's judgment of the "right family life," of "natures" and "instincts" unique to each sex is the hint of a biological determinism which is problematic for many feminists. If biology is the infrastructure of experience, then social roles must logically be sex-determined and specific. Consequently, it becomes important to understand what Dewey insinuates when he refers to "instincts," "natures," and "tendencies."

In *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey (1922) considers the psychology of conduct. Within this text he unravels his theory of "impulses and instincts." As original, unlearned activity, instincts are merely interests whose meanings are acquired. Dependent on interaction with social media, an instinct or "phenomena" is expressed as a result of reactions to variable and multiple stimuli. Native tendencies, Dewey notes, are complex, active "realities" and not a singular or "separate psychic force or impulse" (Dewey, 1922, p. 150). What Dewey is suggesting is that behaviors, responses to socialization, are not the results of a peculiar, biologically determined source. Instead, they are an "accumulation of stresses" which when effected "evoke reactions of favor and disfavor" (Dewey, 1922, p. 151).

As "realities" which are the result of responses to multiple interactions with the environment, Dewey's instincts can be neither natural nor inevitable. He defends this contention by pointing out that, because humans are biologically consistent, only socialization can be the cause of the "great diversity of institutions and moral codes."

When we recognize the diversity of native activities and the varied ways in which they are modified through interactions with one another in response to different conditions, we are able to understand moral phenomena otherwise baffling. (Dewey, 1939, p. 156)

But in order to negate the assumption that human beings are biologically predisposed to certain behaviors, Dewey must reveal the falsity of the assumption. He does this by stressing that the whole organism is involved in interaction and that reactions to associations are not a singular inborn feature. For example, when one is afraid, it is not that "fear," a singular, native tendency, is released, but rather that the whole organism is reacting to associations. No two reactions, no two fears are the same, Dewey adds. Fear of the dark is different from fear of the dentist, which is different from the fear of ghosts, and so on. But each is "qualitatively unique" because it is the result of "its total interactions or correlations with other acts with the environing medium, with consequences" (Dewey, 1939, p. 155).

Given this view, would social roles in Dewey's democracy be sex-determined and sex-specific? It is true that Dewey's view of instinct would assure that social roles be determined by sex if the governing mode of socialization is sex-biased and/or sex-based, but could the case be otherwise in a Deweyan educational democracy? Will sex still be a difference that makes a difference?

In discussing instincts Dewey uses "maternal love" as an example of conduct inappropriately believed to be a pre-determined, singular, psychic force. If we understand Dewey correctly, such a native tendency is the result of environmental consequences, not the result of a fixed nature. How and when and by whom "maternal love" is exhibited is the net effect of the organism in time. The whole of "maternal love" is the compilation of reactions to interactions with ever-changing, ever-modifying environments. If women are those whose "maternal love" tendencies or interests are encouraged, fostered, and rewarded, they will undoubtedly be the sex assigned the "mothering" role. Should Dewey's democracy sanction such socialization, sex will clearly determine social roles.

But Dewey suggests that sex may indeed be the biological difference that makes no difference when he considers women's sexual desire as "instinct." He dismisses the psychoanalytic view of women's sexual desire on the grounds that it "transform[s] social results into psychic causes."

Writers, usually male, hold forth a psychology of woman, as if it were dealing with a Platonic universal entity, although they habitually treat men as individuals, varying with structure and environment. They treat phenomena which are peculiarly symptoms of the civilization of the West at the present time as if they were the necessary effects of fixed native impulses of human nature. (Dewey, 1939, p. 153)

He goes on to discredit the anti-feminist notion of Libido as an "original psychic force," believing that social conditions, not biology, have determined such "libidinal" dispositions (Dewey, 1939, p. 154).

Thus it appears that, given sexism-free socialization, women in Dewey's democracy are eligible for all roles. But given the reality of a Western culture steeped in sexism, what roles can women play in a real-life Deweyan democracy? If feminism is to consider Deweyan education as a philosophical vehicle, this question becomes very critical. From his early 20th century comments in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, it would seem that those roles Dewey finds necessary for democracy will limit women's experiences. Does Dewey ever expand his notions of women's roles and experiences?



In 1930, Dewey reinforces his philosophy based on "experience as the sole authority in knowledge and conduct" in his essay "What I Believe," cited in Kennedy (1950). In it, he stresses the importance of change in human existence, change which affects the many meanings and purposes of human existences, change which brings about individual growth. He writes:

It is assumed, in spite of evident flux in the actual situation, that the institutions of marriage and family that developed in medieval Europe are the last and unchanging word. (Kennedy, 1950, p. 26)

He goes on to add:

It is clear that the codes which still nominally prevail are the result of one-sided and restricted conditions. Present ideas of love, marriage, and the family are almost exclusively masculine constructions. Like all idealizations of human interests that express a dominantly one-sided experience, they are romantic in theory and prosaic in operation. Sentimental idealization on one side has its obverse in a literally conceived legal system. The realities of the relationships of men, women, and children to one another have been merged in this fusion of sentimentalism and legalism. The growing freedom of women can hardly have any other outcome than the production of more realistic and more human morals. (Kennedy, 1950, p. 29)

Though he never explicitly addresses the value of women's experiences per se, Dewey comments on the uses of play and work in the curriculum in such a way that one gets the impression that women's traditional roles and experiences are not "arresting," but "liberalizing."

Dewey's "active occupations" contain a "liberalizing quality" (Dewey, 1916, p. 199) making them educationally significant. Their significance lies in the fact that they are occupations which "tap instincts at a deep level" (p. 200) and which "typify social situations" (p. 199). Gardening, cooking, sewing, weaving, painting, drawing, singing, and dramatization are a few of the "active occupations" which, when employed in the curriculum, appeal to students and introduce qualities and skills transferable to other contexts. Growth through involvement in these occupations is inevitable.

It appears, then, that Dewey valued many of the "occupations" in which women have been traditionally engaged, but one can venture to say that their value to Dewey lies in their "productive" virtue, and not in their association with women. Dewey finds significance in these "occupations" because they "typify social situations" (Dewey, 1916, p. 199). Their purposes satisfy needs Dewey labels "human":

Men's fundamental common concerns center about food, shelter, clothing, household furnishings, and the appliances connected with production, exchange, and consumption. Representing both the necessities of life and the adornments with which the necessities have been clothed, they tap instincts at a deep level; they are saturated with facts and principles having a social quality. (Dewey, 1916, pp. 199-200)

Though feminists would agree that the need for food, shelter, and clothing are part of women's experiences, it is likely that the dispositions of the "instincts" Dewey's "occupations" tap are masculine. Instead of "production, exchange, and consumption," why not "reproduction, sharing, and cultivation"? The nurturing qualities necessary for child-rearing and teaching appear absent from these "occupations." Has Dewey ignored those occupations which are not "production"

oriented? Has he ignored the reproductive processes Jane Roland Martin defines as conception, birth, child rearing, tending the sick, caring for family needs, and running the household (Martin, 1985, p. 6)? It seems that such is the case.

Though feminists would not classify the reproductive processes as “active occupations,” their absence from Deweyan thought is both conspicuous and incriminating to a degree. When the reproductive processes of society are deleted, and the productive processes emphasized, women’s experience is devalued. As Martin comments:

Viewing education as preparation for carrying out societal roles, [philosophers] tie their proposals to some vision of the good society. (Martin, 1985, pp. 5-6)

Dewey’s good society, practical and free of the ills of private profit (Dewey, 1916, p. 201), appears to require an education solely emphasizing the practical, utilitarian human endeavors largely carried out by men. Even when he does comment specifically on the reproductive processes, Dewey’s focus is on the sensible and the functional.

In 1932, Dewey is one of several prominent figures asked to submit to *The Nation* commentary on the birth control movement. In his essay he calls for the removal of the “arbitrary restrictions” of the law and cultural sentimentality which forbid birth control education. Educating individuals on methods of birth control assures Dewey that the “intelligent control” of the reproductive processes will be exercised, resulting in a “supreme” quality of life. Families with “too many children and those badly spaced” cannot provide for children the opportunities necessary for physical, moral, and intellectual growth. Dewey’s concern is not that birth control will grant *women* “intelligent control” over “blind natural processes.” His uneasiness is with the actuality that quantity is in this case impractical. Is Dewey saying, in effect, that what is “practical” is what is valued? It appears that this is the case. The irony here, of course, is that the “practical” for a pragmatist is what is necessary for physical, moral, and intellectual growth, yet here Dewey does not extend that pragmatic reasoning to women.

What is a feminist educator’s response to this? The first question that emerges relates to the idea of social efficiency. If the goal of our teaching is to shape social policy, and social policy is characterized by efficiency, what are the implications for subject matter? for entire curricula? for method? for the social roles our students occupy now and those for which they are schooled?

If we hold social efficiency and utility as educational goals highly valued, are girls and women at risk of being schooled for those roles in which we can be truly functional? Will *both* men and women be educated for those roles to which they are particularly suited? What characteristic, what aspect of their personhood will determine their roles? And what does this mean in Deweyan terms?

In an Aristotelian tradition this means that we would educate girls and women to enter those roles that best fit their natures because it is from their true natures that education follows.

Both children and women must be educated with an eye to the constitution. (*The Politics*, Book I, Chapter XIII, p. 97)

The “constitution” for Aristotle is first determined by sex, the primary distinction of nature. Dewey, on the other hand, believed that we discover a person’s nature, a discovery whose aim is not the identification of some absolute, fixed, and complete essence. On the contrary, human nature should be understood in terms of a progression and movement through time, a course that is always in



relation to other people and things. Consequently, Dewey could not suggest that we deduce our educational aims from the idea of a fixed universal human nature and could not take girls' and women's natures as a given. He had to acknowledge socialization in the make-up of natures. In his article on co-education, for example, he does so. Those traits traditionally considered part of the female nature, such as dependence and weakness, he attributes to the social context of the 18th Century.

All seems to suggest that Dewey did not view sex as the primary distinction of human nature, but there remains the thorny point of sex and social efficiency and utility. From what we read in "Is Co-Education Injurious to Girls?" it appears that the best education for women is that which will enable us to assume "the responsibilities of parenthood and household management" (Dewey, 1911, p. 62), responsibilities which Dewey views as part of an efficient social scheme. Women will run their households with scientific efficiency, let's remember. But why can't men do the same? If they too are schooled in the scientific method, could not the "house husband" be as efficient as the "house wife"? Probably not because, despite the fact that boys can learn to be mannerly, courteous, and civil, traits which we can submit may be necessary in running a household, there remains the question of reproduction. And the question of the place of reproduction in the social sphere and its implications for women is a question John Dewey doesn't ever answer.

If the American Pragmatic educational ethos is to be found suitable for feminist reappropriation, we must inject into Dewey's treatise a treatment of the reproductive processes which bring women to the center of the philosophical and educational circle. Until we do this, until we restructure Deweyan education, we will be unable to give Deweyan educational philosophy the feminist nod.

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