

Introduction: “In a Different Voice” at Forty-Five: Reflections on the Word That Launched a Revolution

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In the winter of 1975, Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) assistant professor Carol Gilligan was completing a study that would stand conventional psychology on its head. While teaching part time, Gilligan had been searching for a situation where people would have to make a choice—one where issues of identity and morality were at stake and where they’d have to live with the consequences of their decision. Gilligan had found that situation and was writing the results of her study.

Gilligan’s desire to do such work began in 1970 when she was a section leader for HGSE professor Lawrence Kohlberg’s “Moral and Political Choice” course. Kohlberg’s University of Chicago 1958 doctoral dissertation had rocketed him to academic stardom, with its six stages of moral development grounded in the work of Piaget. A departure from previous psychological approaches to morality, his work was very new and *very* engaging. Comprised of interviews with white boys in Chicago, Kohlberg’s dissertation and subsequent work was done exclusively with boys and men. Thus, male development was said to be human development. Responding to the demand of undergraduates in 1970 that their education address pointed moral and political questions of the time—the Vietnam War and the murder of four Kent State University students by the National Guard, to name two—Harvard College (to name one) asked Kohlberg to teach a course on moral and political choice.

That course proved to be, in Gilligan’s words, “both unsettling and life-changing” (Walsh, 2000, 39). In an interview with the *Harvard Education Bulletin*, Gilligan recounted how

the young men refused to talk about their own draft dilemmas, aware that there was no room in Larry’s theory for them to talk freely about their concerns without

sounding morally undeveloped, “like women,” in their thinking about relationships and other people’s feelings. Uneasy about taking a stand in public that was at odds with what they were feeling in private, finding no room for uncertainty and indecision, they chose silence over hypocrisy. (Walsh, 2000, 39)

Intrigued by this, Gilligan decided to follow these male students and interview them when they were seniors and as the draft loomed over them. But then Richard Nixon ended the draft.

On January 22, 1973, the US Supreme Court ruled (7–2) in *Roe v. Wade* that unduly restrictive state regulation of abortion was unconstitutional and recognized “that the guarantee of ‘liberty’ in the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution, which protects individual privacy, includes the right to abortion prior to fetal viability.” With this landmark decision, Gilligan shifted her thinking, focusing her study instead on abortion decisions, on a situation where people would come to a public place and a decision would have to be made within a limited time frame. At the time, it wasn’t apparent to Gilligan that all the participants in the draft decision study had been men and those in the abortion decision study were women. Her initial interests lay in identity and moral development.

Between 1973 and 1975, Gilligan, together with graduate student Mary Belenky, interviewed 29 women who were in the first trimester of a confirmed pregnancy and considering abortion. The women were referred to the study from store-front clinics in Boston’s South End, pregnancy counseling services (Preterm and Planned Parenthood), and university counseling services. Some of them, the teenagers especially, were referred by counselors who were concerned about repeated abortions; others came because they were unsure about the decision and welcomed the opportunity to talk; and some joined the study because they wanted to contribute to research. The women ranged in age from fifteen to thirty-three and were diverse in race, ethnicity, and social class. Of the 29 women, 4 decided to have the baby, 2 miscarried, 21 chose to have an abortion, and 2 were undecided at the time of the interview and could not be contacted at the time of the follow-up study. Of these 29 women, complete interview data were available for 24, 21 of whom were interviewed again a year after their choice.

In her latest book, *In a Human Voice*, Gilligan (2023) recalls the journey of that piece to publication. The write-up of the interviews traveled among Gilligan’s students—who sent it on to other students, who sent it on to still other students. And then one student, who just so happened to be on the *Harvard Educational Review* (HER) Editorial Board, asked if he could show the paper to *HER* for possible publication. Gilligan agreed and off it went.

After a time, however, the paper was returned to Gilligan marked “rejected”—with no request for revision or any sort of editing, save for one solitary statement: “We don’t know what this is.” So Gilligan added headings and then resubmitted the piece. The paper was returned a second time with

editorial comments declaring, with perfect authority, “This is not social science,” followed by a request that Gilligan rewrite it in an impersonal voice and from an “objective standpoint.” Gilligan wrote back dryly, reminding *HER* of the piece’s title, “In a Different Voice.” “And for whatever reason,” Gilligan (2023) noted, “I suspect because by that time they were tired of dealing with me, or perhaps because I was determined to be heard, they decided to publish the paper and be done with it” (7).

In November 1977 *HER* published “In a Different Voice: Women’s Conceptions of Self and of Morality.” This essay has become a best-selling reprint for the journal, not to mention a “citation classic,” and was the centerpiece of Gilligan’s 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, which its publisher, Harvard University Press (n.d.), describes as

the little book that started a revolution . . . [one that makes] women’s voices heard in their own right and with their own integrity, for virtually the first time in social scientific theorizing about women. The book’s impact was immediate and continues to this day, in the academic world and beyond, translated into twenty languages [most recently into Ukrainian] with more than 700,000 copies sold around the world.

The origin story of Gilligan’s 1977 essay is also an emblematic parable about publishing as well as psychology—particularly for otherwise easily daunted graduate students and/or for those who discover today, to their astonishment, that Gilligan’s book *In a Different Voice* had such an odd beginning. But in telling this story, Gilligan (2023) said that she came to see “that at the very outset *In a Different Voice* was recognized for what it was: a disruption: ‘We don’t know what this is!’” (7). Yet, the essay “In a Different Voice” opens with the following statement: “The subject of this essay . . . seeks to identify in the feminine experience and construction of social reality a distinctive voice, recognizable in the different perspective it brings to bear on the construction and resolution of moral problems.”

There it is. November 1977.

Since Gilligan’s groundbreaking use of *voice*, that word and the phrase “finding my voice” have become ubiquitous in popular culture. The phrase is a frequent stand-in for something like “newly-arrived-at confidence,” as are the ways proffered to foster it—far afield from the moral and psychological implications of Gilligan’s initial study and her discovery of “a distinctive voice” in women pondering Kohlberg’s hypothetical moral dilemmas and the very real dilemma of whether or not to have an abortion.

During the four years in the 1980s when I was leading sections of Gilligan’s “Adolescent Development” course at HGSE, she repeatedly said that the work on girls and women would one day lead to a reexamination of the research initially done with boys and men. In 2022, the forty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Gilligan’s article, I submitted a paper proposal to the annual conference of the International Coalition of Girls’ Schools. I offered that a

reexamination of the use—and misuse—of *voice* has had profound implications for the education of girls and young women and that what was initially defined by Gilligan (1977) as a “different voice” is better defined as a human voice, what Gilligan (2023) calls in later work a “disruptive voice”—the voice of resistance to patriarchy—for women and men alike.

Titled “Girls Voices at 45: A Look Back and a Look Ahead” (Testa, 2022), the proposal was accepted. And while grateful for the opportunity to present, I nonetheless found myself asking, Why am I, a gay man, presenting an attempt to clarify the origin of the word *voice* at a conference of people—mainly women—working in girls’ schools? I felt a little bit like Tiresias, the blind male prophet of Greek mythology who was turned into a woman for seven years. Out of that wondering, I contacted the *Harvard Educational Review* to see if the anniversary of Gilligan’s formative essay had prompted any plan to revisit her work.

So here we are. This symposium extends the thinking of Gilligan’s groundbreaking piece, offering an examination of where the 1977 *HER* touchstone study of women considering an abortion has led us and what has been launched or set in motion as a consequence, particularly the implications for education and the safeguarding of resistant voices in human beings.

The symposium has added relevance in light of the recent US Supreme Court decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022), in which the Court upheld the constitutionality of a Mississippi law banning abortion at fifteen weeks, overturning both *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992). The three dissenting Justices, Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayer, and Elena Kagan (2022), wrote:

One result of [this] decision is certain: the curtailment of women’s rights and of their status as free and equal citizens. Yesterday, the Constitution guaranteed that a woman confronted with an unplanned pregnancy could [within reasonable limits] make her own decision about whether to bear a child, with all the life-transforming consequences that act involves. And in thus safeguarding each woman’s reproductive freedom, the Constitution also protected “the ability of women to participate equally in [this Nation’s] economic and social life.” *Casey*, 505 U.S., at 856. But no longer.

With the erasure of *Roe v. Wade*, the work related to gender, sexuality, and equity that this symposium highlights is now prescient and urgent. Five women, all former students of Gilligan’s—two at HGSE, Niobe Way and Deborah Tolman, and three at New York University, Leoandra Onnie Rogers, Tonya Leslie, and Naomi Snider—share insights both personal and professional. These women now work in the disciplines of education, psychology, and/or gender studies.

Onnie Rogers notes in her essay that Gilligan modeled how to listen for politics, power, and positionality in psychological processes—a persistent challenge for “a field that has upheld neutrality and objectivity as necessary—and operated as if these are achievable (and desirable) ends.” Tonya Leslie

describes the journey of learning to listen to her own “voice of resilience” when, amid a challenging doctoral process, Gilligan called her to say, “I won’t vote for you not taking a stand for yourself.” Deborah Tolman details some of the less obvious ways that Gilligan’s work, “and working with Carol, set [her] on a path within and beyond the ivory tower and its hallowed halls.” After rereading Gilligan’s 1977 paper in preparation for this symposium, Naomi Snider explores in her trenchant essay “just how different the voices captured in the 1977 paper are from the voices that dominate contemporary public discourse around abortion.” And in a fitting conclusion to the symposium, Niobe Way’s piece names and discusses those five truths. She writes of her realization that “Gilligan’s body of research suggests that rather than starting from a story that conflates idealized masculinity with maturity and thinks that ‘man’ can represent all humans, we should start from the . . . five fundamental truths.” Having been in Longfellow Hall with Gilligan on the day she first wrote the five truths on the blackboard, I found Way’s discussion to have added resonance.

When Carol Gilligan began listening to women, she realized she was listening to humans, and that some of them were speaking in a different voice—in a distinctively different way about self and about morality, about what it means to be human, and about human development itself. In publishing her work in 1977, the *Harvard Educational Review* started a revolution. And in this symposium featuring five of Gilligan’s former students, we hear the ongoing relevance and resonance of that work—which is to say, the revolution continues.

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