

LETA HOLLINGWORTH AND RHODA UNGER:

A CONVERSATION THROUGH TIME

Comment [e1]: Great job with this conversation! I really like how you wove quotes and ideas from their research into their discussion and thus get at a bit of the different perspectives of the times. My only complaint is I would have liked to hear a little more about LH's life. Score = A

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The study of individual differences of males and females has not lost its relevance since the days of mental testing. Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Rhoda Unger are two psychologists who examined this very issue, but in very different ways in very different times. Leta Hollingworth was born in 1886 and died in 1939. She worked and studied during the age of mental testing, receiving her Master's degree in education in 1913 and her PhD in educational psychology under E.L.Thorndike at Columbia (Feminist Voices). Hollingworth's research used mental tests to empirically challenge popularly held beliefs like functional periodicity and the variability hypothesis, which supported stereotypes about women and reinforced their inferior societal position and privileges. She emphasized the differential effects of environment, culture, and social expectations on men and women in any explanation of presumed or demonstrated sex differences (Pickren & Rutherford, 2010).

Comment [e2]: Good summary.

Rhoda Unger was born in 1939 and received her Masters and PhD at Harvard in 1964 and 1966 respectively. Despite the fact that she studied in a period of significant advances in the feminist movement, she did not initially embrace the feminist identity (Feminist Voices). She did eventually become a women's activist within psychology, becoming an early member of several women's and social groups (AWP, APA Division 35 and SPSSI) (Feminist Voices). She has openly challenged psychology's understanding of the concepts of sex and gender, as well as the way they are used in research. Unger critiqued research on sex differences, which she said diverted attention away from ways men and women were similar, the situational constraints on behaviour and development, and the unique aspects of women's lives (Pickren & Rutherford, 2010).

I have chosen to put these women in conversation with each other because they were/are both revolutionary thinkers of their respective times concerning the same

issues—but the conclusions they come to are heavily influenced by their time and place in history. It is interesting to see how the study of male and female differences has evolved over time and how it is so strongly influenced by the social context in which it is studied.

Comment [e3]: Sounds promising!

R: Well hello Leta! It is lovely to meet one of feminist psychology's foremothers. You know, women have come a long way both in psychology and society in general within the last few decades. And it was all because of women like you!

L: Thank you, it's nice to meet you too Rhoda. That is fantastic to hear! How exactly have things changed?

R: In the 1960s and 1970s there was huge women's movement, which really brought issues of equal opportunity, education, respect and power to the forefront. Also within psychology feminist psychologists demanded that androcentric theories be acknowledged and reformed and that sexist institutional practices be eliminated (Pickren & Rutherford, 2010).

L: That is unbelievable... When my husband and I moved to New York I was not able to teach because I am a married woman. What was it like living through this movement?

R: You know I didn't initially embrace a feminist identity or recognize the institutionalized sexism that surrounded me. But once I became aware of the activism growing around me I became very excited. Teaching Psychology of Women classes in the '70s was an amazing experience since we had so many women coming back to college or who had never gone. Everyone was so eager, and we were all learning together since the field was so new (Feminist Voices). Did you envision such a future for women as you conducted your research?

L: Absolutely, “feminism demands the removal of restrictions imposed on women’s activity” (Lowie & Hollingworth, 1916). It is a natural result of the conclusions of my research and others like me. From an ethnographic standpoint, historical cultures have had occupations for men and women that contradict current stereotyped sex roles. There is no physical evidence to support male dominance in studies of brain size and weight, and a sex difference in variability has never been scientifically demonstrated. Based on all this research, no rational grounds have been established that should lead to artificial limitation of woman's activity on the grounds of inferior efficiency (Lowie & Hollingworth, 1916). You ladies must have come to the same conclusion in your work.

R: Well yes, to an extent. We tend to look at the issue from less of a biological sex differences perspective though. In fact, I’ve tried to move away from the feminist empiricist method of drawing from theory, and ask questions with social meaning (Unger, 2006).

L: How do you mean? Don’t you think that rigorous, objective scientific research will naturally undermine these biased assumptions about women?

Comment [e4]: Good! I’m liking the way that you’re contrasting their perspectives on psychology.

R: I think the type of questions you ask make a big difference. For example, I have argued that many issues can be resolved and more fruitful questions generated by reevaluating some of the ways that psychologists have defined the terms “sex” and “gender”; sex being biological maleness and femaleness and gender being the socially constructed sets of characteristics and traits that are considered appropriate to males and females (Unger, 1979). Looking at it this way, we can begin to see how people and processes become gendered rather than seeing masculinity and femininity as some essential, unchangeable quality of being biologically male or female (Pickren & Rutherford, 2010).

L: Ah I see. So I suppose my mental testing methods were only just the beginning....

R: Well the investigation had to start somewhere. The issue with it is when an assumed sex difference is investigated and found to be nonexistent, the argument simply shifts to another ground. This leads to a question, the understanding and answering of which is central to the whole area of sex and gender. For example, what does finding a given sex difference in behavior tell us? What are the mechanisms that produce such differences (Unger, 1979)?

L: Yes I understand. I was correct then in saying that through formal and informal education, society's laws, customs and beliefs women were taught to view their role in a limited way. Their options were so obscured that most women failed to see their freedom to choose, say, a professional life *and* motherhood (Shields, 1975).

Comment [e5]: Excellent connection to LH's work

R: Precisely. And moving away from studying sex differences will allow us to illuminate these social mechanisms you mentioned that create such differences. Situational determinants of behaviour are often ignored when simply looking at biological bases of behaviour.

L: I see, I see. Do you have to deal with the same challenges that women of my time did? Because we have trouble even getting into certain colleges, gaining respect from male peers, attaining jobs after we graduate, and having to choose between motherhood and a professional career.

Comment [e6]: It would have been nice if you could have made this a specific example from LH's life.

R: The field is far more accepting now, but there are still many challenges. Initially women's presence at psychological conferences was minimal and also, "the conferences were extremely sexist, so you got hit on all the time. If you went out with a group of mostly men and paid for your own meal, it would still be assumed that you would go back and sleep with one of them" (Unger, 2006). But we began to form women's groups

Comment [e7]: Yikes! I'm glad times have changed. (And good use of quote)

like the Association for Women in Psychology, where we could feel comfortable and discuss current issues. The APA also eventually granted Division 35 of the Society for the Psychology of Women. I think our greatest challenge was remaining present and relevant and not falling back into the fringe element we once were.

L: It is amazing how engrained these prejudices are in society, even after such drastic steps have been taken toward equality.

R: You know, I have found that many influential feminists have a certain contradictory view of the world that gives them the wisdom to understand social injustices and the energy to challenge them. Things like recognizing that authority is not necessarily synonymous with truth and that people are not always rational (Unger,1998). You definitely demonstrate this ability and I think it is why you have been such an influential figure in feminist psychology.

Comment [e8]: Mmm, good point!

L: It's true, you definitely need to look at things that way in order to deal with these issues on a daily basis and not lose hope. Luckily there are women like you who are continuing to challenge these injustices!

R: I'm sure there always will be those men and women who do, even if they shy away from the feminist label. It has been a privilege hearing about your experiences Leta, thank you.

L: Thank *you* Rhoda, I am happy to learn about advances in the field and that you are always questioning and re-thinking the theories of past-feminists. All the best in the future!

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