

EDUCATION

Studying the Issues of Gender

Interview with Abby Gelfer

BY DONNA IVERSON

Last month, OITM contributor Donna Iverson spoke with Abby Gelfer, a licensed clinical social worker and Chair of Psychology, Human Services and Gender Studies at Burlington College, a small progressive liberal arts college located in Burlington's Old North End. Their conversation follows.

OITM: Could you give a simple description of what gender studies covers?

AG: The full title of the major at Burlington College is Gender Studies: A Study of the Sexes. The program is intended to cover different aspects of gendered behavior, including if and why men and women behave, feel, and think differently, and what outcomes those differences create.

OITM: Why did Burlington College decide to add gender studies to its curriculum this year?

AG: There's been an increase in interest in feminist issues and gender studies among students in recent years, mostly around third-wave feminist ideas and theorists. There seems to be a desire to discuss gender issues with less defensiveness and more open curiosity than in the past decade or two. Also, the interest seems to be from a more interdisciplinary perspective - biological, psychological, philosophical. The committee that proposed the major felt it was important to include a variety of disciplines and not use one dominant perspective.

OITM: Is "gender studies" the new name for women's studies?

AG: No. They are different programs; however, there is a great deal of discussion and disagreement about how they differ. Women's studies usually look at issues specific to women, and gender studies examines both genders and the question of what creates gender. There is some political tension between the two, as some people see the adoption of gender studies as a way to co-opt the specific study of women. Sandy Baird, another faculty member; Cristin Tanner, a student who helped start the program; and I spent several hours discussing what to call the major. Personally, I think using the title "gender studies" gives us an opportunity to explore gender construction and biology, as well as feminist issues, so the broader title appeals to me.

OITM: Does the study of gender now include the areas of race and class?

AG: The study of gender issues includes racial and socioeconomic inequalities, and definitely must consider unequal distribution of power. Some overarching theories incorporate the study of race, class, and gender, including feminist theories such as Jean Baker Miller's analysis of dominance and submission. However, the concept of gender has its own unique properties, such as the active discussion of biological predisposition relating to gender, the question of construction, and what effect technology will have on gender.

OITM: A number of courses you teach involve sex, desire and gender. What is the relationship here?

AG: Actually, I only teach one course with a focus on sex and desire - the course I am currently teaching, Sex and Desire. The other gender studies course I teach is Psychology of Women. I became interested in teaching this course after I read



PHOTO: ANTHE ATHAS

ABBY GELFER

Naomi Wolf's book, *Promiscuities*.

Because younger women, and certainly the current media, often frame feminism as no longer necessary, and sometimes see second wave feminism as having accomplished its goals, I find myself looking for examples of places in the culture

where this assumption is clearly incorrect. One obvious (to me) place is the definition of, and often repression of, women's sexuality.

OITM: Have you read *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine, who writes that girls are wired prior to birth to be "approval seeking" and boys are not?

AG: I haven't had a chance to read *The Female Brain*, although I've read about it. I'm using David Buss' evolutionary psychology book, *The Evolution of Desire*, in my Sex and Desire class, so I have been thinking a lot about the hardwiring of gender lately. My general feeling about most behavioral issues is that though biological influence is present, it is over-stated.

OITM: What recommendations would you make to counter gender stereotyping?

AG: For me, what gets us into trouble is dehumanizing or objectifying other people. When we see others only as objects with which to advance our own desires, we are dehumanizing them. I stumbled upon MTV's reality show, "Next," the other night, and was simultaneously horrified and captivated. In this climate of unapologetic objectification, we are all trained to treat each other as means to an end, without empathy, understanding, kindness, consideration of motives, or concern. In that situation, one is susceptible to treating others, men or women, as things that can be manipulated, abused, controlled. So I guess my recommendation would be to look at individual characteristics, consider motivation, treat others with empathy.

OITM: How did you get interested in gender studies?

AG: My most recent interest in developing a program came from teaching the psychology of women to a particularly engaged class a few semesters ago, and from the interest of several students in establishing a formal major. But I was involved with women's issues in my previous career as a clinical social worker. I was a pregnancy counselor at a women's health collective for many years and then saw individual women and ran groups for women with eating disorders in my private practice. As a college instructor for the past 15 years, I've noticed the extreme changes in responses to feminism, women's issues, and gender identification during this time period. It is encouraging to see a generation interested in talking about these issues, although they frame the discussions with more emphasis on gender construction. ▼



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