

**Baxter Magolda's
Epistemological Reflection Model**

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Baxter Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection

Much has been written about student developmental theory since I completed my master's work in 1993. Many new perspectives on theories include an exploration of gender, ethnicity, and age that has enhanced the traditional theories that dominate the student development literature. Of particular interest to me is Marcia Baxter Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection. Because I worked at Miami University (Ohio) about the time her book, *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development* (1992) was published, I was interested in furthering my understanding of this relatively new model. This paper will describe the theory's development, outline the four patterns or stages of development in Baxter Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection, summarize implications for student affairs and will conclude with a brief critique of the theory.

Theory Development

Baxter Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection was developed from a five-year longitudinal study of students at Miami University. Using student interviews, 101 students described their experiences with knowledge development from their first year in college through one year after graduation. Participants were predominantly white (only three non-white students participated) and were evenly split along gender lines. (Baxter Magolda, 1992)

In the development of her model, Baxter Magolda makes several broad assumptions about cognitive development. First, ways of knowing and patterns of knowing are socially constructed. Second, the best way to explore these patterns is

through naturalistic or qualitative inquiry. Third, reasoning patterns are fluid. Fourth, patterns are related to gender, but not dictated by gender. Fifth, the context of student stories is important. Finally, ways of knowing are presented as patterns rather than stages because of her belief that this will vary by individual experience. (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

The Model

There are four stages in Baxter Magolda's Model for Epistemological Reflection: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. The first three stages each have two patterns that reflect some gender differences in ways of knowing. Each stage and pattern is describe below.

Absolute knowing describes a development stage where knowledge is viewed as certain. Teachers are absolute authorities; learning is about reciting facts. The two patterns in this stage are receiving knowledge and mastering knowledge. Receiving knowledge is more private, more used by women and involves emphasizes collaborative peer relationships, a comfortable learning environment, and opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Mastering knowledge is more public, used more by men, and is characterized by verbalized learning, a more critical approach to instructors and knowledge, and may be seen as competitive by looking for challenge from peers. Baxter Magolda described these patterns as different in voice, in identification with authority, and in the type of peer interaction they desire. Absolute knowing is most prevalent in the first year of college (68%).

The second stage, transitional knowing, reflects that some knowledge is uncertain. Authorities are not all-knowing and are expected to provide more information regarding

the applicability of knowledge. Students in this stage are focused on understanding knowledge rather than simply acquiring knowledge and have found a more confident voice in expressing their knowledge than at the absolute knowing stage. The two patterns in this stage are interpersonal knowing and impersonal knowing. Used more by women, interpersonal knowing is characterized by rapport with instructors and peers through gathering and sharing ideas. An emphasis on the individual differences and personal judgment are important in knowledge at this stage. Impersonal knowing, used more by men, emphasizes fairness and practicality in evaluation, debate in order to share views, and the desire to think critically about issues. The primary differences between interpersonal and impersonal knowing again relate to the value of the relationship to authorities (interpersonal prefer distance; impersonal reflect authority values) and to peers (important to interpersonal; impersonal value challenge over relationships). Half of sophomores and close to eighty percent of juniors and seniors were transitional knowers.

The model suggests that students at the third stage, independent knowing, recognize that knowledge is mostly uncertain. Instructors are expected to provide a environment for learning that rewards thinking and logic over particular views that may be different from the text or the teacher. Interindividual (seen more in women) and individual (used more by men) are the two patterns within this stage. Interindividual knowing accepts both one's own ideas and the ideas of others. Individual knowing focus's more on the individual's own thinking while valuing the thinking of others at a distance. Baxter Magolda emphasizes that the ways of knowing are actually coming closer together in spite of the recognition that one pattern prefers connection and the

other prefers separation. Independent knowing was seen most frequently in the first year past graduation (57%).

The final stage is contextual knowing and demonstrates the combining of previously mentioned gender-related patterns. “Contextual knowing involves the belief that the legitimacy of knowledge claims is determined contextually. The individual still constructs a point of view, but the perspective now requires supporting evidence.”

(Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 156).

Implications for Student Affairs

In the second half of her book outlining this model, Baxter Magolda offers some implications for practice in student affairs. The dominant patterns within the theory relate to the emergence of voice for students, the evolving relationships with peers, and the changing in approach to authority. Finding ways to challenge and support students in developing their voice, in learning from their peers relationships, and in developing appropriate relationships with faculty and staff based on mutual respect and autonomy are important implications of this model. For absolute knowers, she emphasized peer relationships and student responsibility. For transitional knowers, she suggested focusing on diversity, leadership development, practical experience through student organizations, internships, employment, study abroad/international experiences and residential learning communities. For independent knowers, she added encouraging balance of personal needs and the needs of others, assisting with the processing of experiences, reinforcing self-confidence and exploring values and beliefs through in-depth experiential learning like study abroad and internships. For contextual knowers, she emphasizes autonomy of

choice, freedom to develop one's own voice, and reinforcing peers as a legitimate source of knowledge.

Critique

As Baxter Magolda acknowledged, there are some obvious limitations of this developmental theory. While her inclusion of both men and women is a strength, the lack of other diversity in her research study makes the generalizability to broad campus populations difficult. Miami University students are largely white, middle-upper class, traditionally aged students making it difficult to know whether this theory applies to students of color or the adult learner. Baxter Magolda also recognized that ways of knowing may be socially constructed so limiting her research to one institution may also create some difficulties. Finally, while her theory sought to expose some differences in cognitive development for men and women, she ignored the differences of gender development in her implications for student affairs.

References

Baxter Magolda, M. (1992) *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S, and Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998) *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.