

Lie, Suzanne, Malik, Lynda, & Harris, Duncan, (eds.), *World yearbook of education, 1994. The gender gap in higher education*. London: Kogan Page, 1994, Pp. x, 250, price £34.

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It has been little more than a century and a quarter since the first few women were admitted to Canadian universities. Today, more than half of the undergraduates in the Canadian university system are women. Yet despite this dramatic reversal in the overall percentage of male and female students attending institutions of higher learning, gender inequality is still very much a part of higher education culture.

This volume of the World Yearbook of Education series, entitled *The Gender Gap in Higher Education*, suggests that the Canadian experience has been replicated in many countries throughout the world. It examines the relative position of men and women in higher education, in other words, the gender gap, in 17 countries. It focuses on the position of women as students, faculty and administrators, examining the gender gap in terms of its size, characteristics and development in different historical and cultural contexts.

An aim of the volume "is to see whether structural/cultural variations are related to variations in the nature and extent of the gender gap" (p. 4). To achieve this objective all of the investigators asked the following common questions which enabled them to examine the dimensions of the phenomenon from the perspective of their own countries (p. 4):

1. Is there a gender gap in higher education in the country?
2. If yes, what conditions are leading to the increasing or diminishing nature of the gap?
3. How is the gap connected with economic, legislative, political and religious conditions of the country?
4. Can particular combinations of cultural, societal or individual characteristics best explain current needs?
5. Are there national or university policies aimed at achieving gender equality?
6. Is there any relationship between the changing size of the gender gap and the emergence of the women's movement?

The investigation surrounding each question was guided by a theoretical framework which has its intellectual roots in the work of Talcott Parsons, Karl Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu. This framework directed the inquiry of each

contributor by identifying cultural, social and personality variables which might be significantly related to the gender gap in higher education in their country. One advantage of this approach is that it allows for comparison across national boundaries of the relationship of selected factors, such as political and economic patterns, to the gender gap. It also permits the determination of the relative importance of various societal institutions for the existence and size of the gender gap within each country.

The use of guiding questions and a common conceptual framework by each author ensures that each chapter addresses similar substance. Each, for example, begins with a brief historical and cultural depiction, identifying predominant values and setting the national context for the status of women, particularly with regard to education. Much of each chapter focuses upon the place of women – as students, faculty, and administrators – within postsecondary institutions, particularly universities. The 17 countries reported on in the yearbook were chosen “because they are theoretically interesting as their cultures and social structures vary greatly” (p. 4). They range from highly developed nations such as the United States and Germany, to developing countries such as Botswana. It is unfortunate, however, that no Central or South American countries are included. This omission is a definite weakness in the book.

Like most good comparative studies, this book seeks to identify both similarities and differences among the countries examined. But, as the yearbook’s editors acknowledge, attempts to make meaningful comparisons of the gender gap, between and among cultures, are often frustrated by definitional problems and uneven available data.

The yearbook concludes with the editors attempting to extrapolate trends in the gender gap in higher education from the 17 national examples. There are no real surprises. “Unequal distribution of wealth, rank, and power are found currently in all higher education systems” (pp. 205-206). Further, the “ascribed” characteristic of gender is very much related to one’s position in the hierarchy, despite the rhetoric common to the higher education culture, which says that distribution with regard to wealth, rank, and power should be based on “achieved” criteria.

An important insight that emerges from the analysis in this section is that the gender gap is far from being uniform across countries. When it is viewed from the perspective of any one nation’s size, history, ideological and contextual parameters, it is apparent that the dimensions of the gender gap are a product of each nation’s history and culture, and vary considerably across cultures. This is a strength of the book, the recognition of the importance of the historical

and cultural context of each nation as a basis to understanding what factors influence the gender gap. If there is one point made, it is that while a higher education gender gap appears to be a phenomenon found in all of the countries studied, there is no common explanation for its existence and relative size. Thus, while there are certain observations which may hold "globally" regarding the gender gap, global explanations for these observations are not as readily identified.

There are areas of encouragement to be found in the conclusions. For example, the authors note that while traditions are important, altered societal circumstances and the phenomenon of diffusion can lead to changes in norms and values. One can hope that as egalitarian norms become more widely accepted, the position of women in higher education will improve. The study's evidence that women students are close to achieving parity in higher education in many countries supports this view. This egalitarian trend, however, has yet to be extended to women as faculty members and administrators.

The fact that the book covers 17 different countries means that of necessity each national description is brief. There is much left unsaid. The brevity of the pieces and their descriptive nature means that the concluding overall analysis is also somewhat brief, but perhaps not too brief to achieve some of the editors' goals. At the outset, they indicated that they wished to depict the dimensions of the gender gap in each country. As well, they were seeking to identify similarities and differences among countries regarding the gender gap. This latter objective, they suggested, would permit them to develop some low-level theoretical propositions. It is clear that they have achieved some of their aims. They describe the gender gap and identify similarities and differences among the countries studied. In addition, their analysis generates questions and suggests future directions for research. What is absent from the concluding section, however, are theoretical propositions of any order.

While the yearbook cannot lay claim at one level to making any great contribution to the theory surrounding the concept of gender gap in higher education, it can be credited with at least one important theoretical contribution. The conceptual framework contained within the first section of the book can be used to extend the study to countries not included within this text, perhaps to Central and South American nations.

The text can occupy a useful niche within the literature related to gender and education. In addition to the material related to each nation covered in the chapters, there are several useful tables in a statistical appendix which provide descriptive cross-cultural data related to the status of women in general and

women in higher education in particular. There is also an extensive bibliography included. The book is very readable and can be readily assimilated by newcomers to the fields of Women's Studies, sociology, and education. *The Gender Gap in Higher Education* is an important addition to the World Yearbook of Education series.

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- Cameron, B., (Ed.). (1993). *Teaching at the University of Manitoba: A handbook*. Winnipeg, MB: University Teaching Services. Pp 109.
- Friesen, J.W. (1993). *When cultures clash* (2nd edition). Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd. Pp 208, price: \$21.95.
- Gibson, D. (1992). *Gibson's guide to graduate and professional programs at Ontario universities*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pp. 202, price: \$19.95.
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- Profile of Post-Secondary Education in Canada* (1993 Edition). Education Support Branch, Human Resources Development Canada, April 1994.
- Portelli, J.P. & Bailin, S. (1993). *Reasons and values: New essays in philosophy of education*. Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd. Pp. 228, price: \$20.95.
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- Thom, D.J. (1993). *Educational management and leadership: World, spirit and deed for a just society*. Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd. Pp. 250, price: \$20.95