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Psychological Theory, Research, Methodology, and Feminist Critiques

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In conventional (Western) psychology the typical, normative subject has been conceptualized as the white heterosexual able-bodied male. Against this backdrop, psychological theory and practice have been subjected to sustained critiques from, amongst others, multiple feminisms. Traditionally, feminist critiques of psychological research and methods focused on three particular aspects: the invisibility of women, both as researchers and as participants; the ways in which men's experiences are taken as the norm against which women are judged; and the ways in which women are pathologized in psychology. More recently critiques have highlighted epistemological issues that focus on the very essence of psychology's attempts to constitute itself as a science.

BACKGROUND

Psychology has been a particularly successful discipline in the Euro-American context in the last half century. Psychologists work in many different locations and settings and it is unquestionably one of the most popular areas for undergraduate study. Over this period, the gender composition of psychology has changed dramatically. In what has been referred to as the "feminization" of psychology, the number of psychology PhDs awarded to women in the United States grew

from 20 percent in 1970 to 72 percent by 2005 (Cynkar 2007).

There is no one unified approach to psychology that might be clearly understood to reflect a single conventional psychological theory. Psychology, almost since its inception, has entertained diverse and differently inspired approaches to understanding the human subject from psychophysics (the relationship between physical stimuli such as light or sound waves and perceptual and cognitive processes) to psychodynamics (the interaction of conscious and unconscious drives within a person). What has tended to be consistent across dominant approaches has been the understanding of the individual as a unitary, bounded subject. Resonant with this understanding, the dominant methodology has relied essentially on a hypothetico-deductive approach to knowledge creation. The proliferation of the "psy" disciplines, which conceive of the individual in this way, has become inextricably linked with the consolidation of neoliberal accounts of self and other.

Challenges to psychology's claim to "describe" and "explain" women have existed virtually from the beginning of its life as a discipline in the work, for example, of Mary Whiton Calkins and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. However, it was not until the 1960s that these critiques became formalized and institutionalized through, for instance, the formation of the Association for Women in Psychology in 1969. Latterly, psychology has come to encompass a number of perspectives that include biological, cognitive, phenomenological, psychodynamic, and constructionist/poststructuralist approaches. Feminisms have both critiqued and aligned themselves with each of these approaches.

TRADITIONAL CRITIQUES

In 1968, Naomi Weisstein stated that “psychology constructs the female” in that the “woman” that had been described and studied within the discipline reflected not “women’s true nature” but rather the nature of psychology. In practice, Weisstein argued, conventional psychology knew very little about what it was like to be a woman. Indeed, she clearly stated in her original paper that “psychology has nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need and what they want, especially because psychology does not know” (1993, 197). The debates around this issue amongst others led to the establishment of a “psychology of women,” which lent its name to numerous professional associations and journals, not least of which, in 1973, was the founding of the Division for the Psychology of Women of the American Psychological Association (APA) – the largest professional body of psychologists in the world.

Three intertwined critiques of conventional psychology were prominent up to this time. The first was the way in which women had been made invisible in psychology. As researchers, women were often not mentioned or listed as part of research teams, edited out of photographs, or credit was given primarily to their male partners. Much of the research conducted in conventional psychology experiments was carried out using only male participants, for instance Kohlberg’s theory of moral development or Erikson’s theory of identity development, which not only failed to describe female experience, but established criteria for assessment based on the incomplete data.

A second important feminist critique focused on the judging of women against a norm developed around men’s experiences in psychology. Tavris, in discussing the mis-measure of women by psychology, has argued

that “In any domain of life in which men set the standard of normalcy, women will be considered abnormal” (1993, 149). She provides as an example the description of psychological findings indicating that women have lower self-esteem than men, rather than that men are more conceited than women, or that women do not value their own efforts as much as men do, rather than that men overvalue their own work (1993, 152). Other examples abound, such as research on helping behavior which initially seemed to indicate that women were less helpful than men, until it was pointed out that this was an artifact of the way in which the term “help” has been defined in these studies.

The third critique, around the way in which women are pathologized, brings together the previous two. When psychological research is “womanless” and psychological norms are set in reference to men, women become pathologized as a result. Karen Horney, an early and prominent critic of Freudian psychoanalysis as androcentric, argued that insufficient attention was given to the socio-cultural determinants of gender differences. She argued that penis envy, if it existed at all, was rooted, not in a wish to possess a penis but, rather, in a desire for the status and recognition afforded to men by the culture. Clinical judgments have similarly pathologized women in the differential diagnoses they are given in comparison to men reporting identical symptoms. Feminist researchers have further argued that diagnoses such as premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and post-partum depression pathologize women’s everyday experience.

A number of feminist challenges to conventional psychology followed these critiques. The first, and possibly still the most dominant feminist approach, was the promotion of good scientific practice by removing research design bias. However, this approach risked reinforcing psychology’s aspirations to

be an objective “science” at the cost of other ways of developing legitimate knowledge. Another challenge to psychological claims to women’s inferiority was to accept that women were indeed less successful; however, this was attributed not to their “inferiority” but to the internalization of oppression. This approach has many resonances with current popular media versions of feminist politics where women are encouraged to “lean in.” However, many feminists see this strategy as victim blaming, arguing that its focus on the individual rather than social and political pathologies reinforces already existing biases of mainstream psychology.

Whilst feminist analyses have exposed biases in method and interpretation, they are themselves subject to feminist critique. For example, Carol Gilligan (1982) countered Lawrence Kohlberg’s highly influential theory of moral development wherein women were held to be deficient in moral reasoning by postulating an ethic of care, identified through listening to women, as an alternative to the ethic of justice. A number of issues have been raised with this approach, primarily that it reinforces the idea that women “naturally” exist as a homogeneous and distinctive group, speaking with the same voice in spite of age, ethnicity, (dis)ability, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference. Similarly, Sandra Bem’s (1974) work aimed to address the issues of women’s “inferiority,” displacing the question of sex differences by conceptualizing femininity, masculinity, and androgyny as traits. However, Bem’s Sex Role Inventory was seen to underwrite the very notions of masculinity and femininity that it purported to challenge, as well as shifting focus away from questions of social structure and power differentials that might be seen to shape “appropriate” male and female behavior.

Some feminists further argued that it was psychology’s “scientific” approach in itself that was problematic due to the insistence of

the hypothetico-deductive approach on the stripping of context and the naïve positivist belief in a “value-free” science. This more essential feminist critique of psychological research methods was closely intertwined with that being produced through the crisis in social psychology. Its concern was not on correcting error within psychological research; rather, it was an attack on the experimental method itself. Feminists argued that because the experimental method looks at behavior rather than the person as “subject,” it ignores the context – social, personal, cultural – in which this behavior takes place and is, as a result, blind to meaning. It lacks, thereby, any claim to environmental validity. Feminists and critical social psychologists argued together that the context was indeed meaningful and reproduced the existing disadvantages in society.

MORE RECENT CRITIQUES

The early critiques and challenges to conventional psychology were firmly rooted in positivism and relied on an essentialist epistemology. Consequently, conventional psychology was prepared to incorporate them into the dominant practices of the discipline. This allowed commentators from within and outwith conventional psychology to argue that feminism had made some impact on psychology within teaching and professional practice. But there were many different feminisms with varying approaches and epistemologies. The feminist psychology that was beginning to impact was primarily the “psychology of women,” which had been championed institutionally. The concept and practice of a “psychology of women” was politically difficult for the conventional discipline to resist and, as Wilkinson (1997) noted, it was possible for feminist psychologists to make strategic use of the label “psychology of women” as a less politically contentious

euphemism. The term was championed by Jean Baker Miller, who promoted a “relational” approach and critiqued the individualized approach psychology took. However, others, such as Mary Brown Parlee, were more skeptical of this designation, considering it to be a “conceptual monstrosity” (1975, 120). By the 1990s, the psychology of women, which had originally been used as a less politically charged euphemism for feminist psychology, had become so depoliticized that it was seen by many to be facilitating the perpetuation of conventional psychology.

A more fundamental critique gained leverage in the 1980s and 1990s as psychology encountered the postmodern turn to language that was developing across the social sciences. Feminism recognized the relationship between language, power, and the social construction of sex/gender (and other) differences. What is taken to be “true” and “real” is understood as a product of social practices. Sex/gender differences such as the biological categories of “men” and “women” are socially made and attempts to show that women are the “same as” or “different from” men are seen to reproduce those categories. Psychological perceptions of difference (such as measures of inferior capacity) are understood as principles of social organization, not inherent qualities of individuals.

Psychology is a particular target for this critique because of the way it has privileged the individualized subject, and both claimed and promoted the concept of objectivity and neutrality epitomized in its reliance on the experimental method. What psychology has been reluctant to take on are the intellectual and methodological resources made available by new theorizations of human subjectivity.

The postmodern reading of psychology has been simultaneously a powerful challenge to the authority claimed by its conventional psychological antecedents, and strongly resisted by some feminists because of several

key features. The notion that deeply felt beliefs and emotions are neither “real” nor “natural” is for some an unintelligible and even anti-feminist refusal of “intuitive” knowledge and “commonsense” understandings of the world. Moreover, the theoretically sophisticated anti-realist stance can be difficult to translate into practical political action, either within psychology or beyond it in the wider social world. Nevertheless, this approach has impacted psychology in terms of epistemology and methodology, challenging concepts of empirical rigor and transparency. Qualitative and experiential approaches have become more common in feminist psychological research. These usually involve the use of reflexivity, which conceptualizes positioning and an inescapably situated perspective as a resource rather than a bias to be weaned out.

Despite, or possibly in response to, the postmodern challenge, biologically informed approaches to psychology are again becoming more dominant, due both to the increased popularity of evolutionary understandings of psychological development and to the technological advances in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology that allows us unprecedented access to brain activity. Advances in neuro-imaging techniques have posited technological developments as a route to an objective understanding of human behavior and experience. Whilst powerful, this research does not escape the issues inherent to the experimental method and feminists have pointed out that early interpretations of neural activity and implications for behavior have been heavily dependent on gendered stereotypes.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANSNATIONALISM

A recognition of the multiplicity of feminisms that engage psychology has become

a key component of the feminist narrative. Critiques that engage notions of intersectionality have developed to address issues around the dominance of a feminism, adopted by conventional psychology, that responds only to the interests of white, middle-class, educated (primarily Western) women. Attending to intersections of ethnicity, class, (dis)abilities, sexualities, age, and other forms of identification and subjectification challenges both conventional psychology and forms of feminism that homogenize women and elide consequential markers making oppressive practice possible. Postcolonial feminism (e.g., Mohanty 1984) has been one response that attempts to create a space not only for race and ethnicity in feminist thought, but a multiplicity of (post)colonial experience to be incorporated in understanding human subjectivity.

Feminist critique of conventional psychology has developed independently outside of, and often in relation to, the Anglo-American context – each location having its own history and specific characteristics (Rutherford et al. 2011). However, this critique has often been less visible for a number of reasons, including the dominance of US psychology in publishing as well as the enrollment of feminist activism into other political struggles such as those for democracy (e.g., South Africa) and liberation (e.g., Chile).

The relationship between psychology and feminism creates an inherent space for conflict and cooperation given that psychology is by definition the study of the individual and, in its conventional form, claims to be objective science, whilst feminism is explicitly concerned with social structures and institutionalized oppression and claims to be overtly political. This is a productive encounter. What feminism offers psychology is a critical appraisal of the scientific method,

a different set of interpretive lenses, and it enables a “different voice” to be heard. Psychology has responded with a growing diversity in research methods and reinvigorated theories of subjectification, and offers a set of empirical research strategies to support critical, political, and practical interventions.

SEE ALSO: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), Feminist Critiques of; Essentialism; Feminist Epistemology; Feminist Methodology; Gender Bias in Research; Intersectionality; Masculinity and Femininity, Theories of; Neuroscience, Brain Research, and Gender; Postmodern Feminist Psychology; Reflexivity

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