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Postmodern Feminist Approaches to Psychology

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Abstract

Whilst the discipline of psychology has an indigenous critical and feminist tradition, postmodern feminist approaches have developed from, as well as alongside, the broader philosophical and theoretical critiques generated initially in other disciplines. The focus of postmodern feminist work in psychology is on the construction of gender and relations of power. It seeks to unpack the discursive practices which create the grand narratives of mainstream psychological work. By rejecting the possibility of universal objective truths, postmodern feminist psychology can ask questions about the operation of gendered power relations and how these become played out in and through knowledge.

Postmodern feminism brings together a number of feminist approaches which, broadly speaking, question the epistemological premises of realism and universal truth-finding which characterise the development of conventional psychology within the modernist epoch. It is against this backdrop that postmodern feminist approaches to psychology have been played out. Whilst the discipline of psychology has an indigenous critical and feminist tradition with roots in the late nineteenth century, postmodern approaches are not primarily indigenous to psychology having developed from, as well as alongside, broader philosophical and theoretical critiques generated initially in other disciplines.

Modernist and postmodernist approaches to the study of gender in psychology raise crucial differences in the conceptualisation of what it means to be a 'woman' or a 'man'. Conventional (modernist) psychology, in its attempts to map and pin down the nature of sex/gender, has produced the characteristics of sex as a fixed and fundamental entity or 'essence' of a person (laid down either through social or biological processes) and much research has been dedicated to identifying the differences between gendered groups. This stands in stark contrast to postmodern feminist ideas in that, far from being a foundational category, gender is construed as continuously (re)produced in and through social interactions and processes.

The focus of postmodern feminist work is on the construction of gender and the ways in which aspects of gender and gendered experience become understood as a truth. From this perspective, the construction of truth is inevitably situated, "based upon and inextricably

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intertwined with the contexts within which it was created” (Bohen 2003,13). More precisely, postmodern feminist psychology seeks to unpack the situated discursive practices which create the grand narratives of mainstream psychological work. By rejecting the possibility of universal objective truths, postmodern feminist psychology can ask questions about the operation of gendered power relations and how these become played out in and through claims to knowledge.

A key tool for unpacking construction in postmodern feminist scholarship is deconstruction. This analytic tool focuses on breaking down dichotomies (e.g. man/woman, dominant/submissive, active/passive) to highlight the ways in which they are created and how they represent artificial categorisations that are embedded within power relationships and the accomplishment of privilege. This kind of analysis underscores the absence of universal truths as well as problematizing the notion of essential differences between men and women, and indeed the simplistic concept of binary sex (male or female).

Postmodern feminist psychology is closely related to feminist post-structuralism and the two are often conflated because of a shared basis for critique of the grand narratives and hegemony of positivist scientific knowledge as well as a focus on the constitutive aspects of language and representation. Whilst Conflation is not necessarily a problem, it may skim over contentions between theoretical perspectives.

Epistemological Challenges and Feminist Politics

Feminist thought in general has offered a significant critique of the discipline of psychology, pointing to the ways in which women have been marginalised, ignored or otherwise rendered invisible (see for example, Weisstein 1968, 1993). Whilst postmodern feminist scholarship has undoubtedly contributed to the critique of psychology’s treatment of women, it has also raised specific questions around the compatibility of the postmodern epistemological stances described above and feminist activism/ theoretical challenge in psychology.

This question of compatibility is raised in debates around the divide between frameworks which either essentialise or focus on the construction of gender. Feminist psychologists working within the modernist tradition, in common mainstream psychology, adopt an essentialised view of gender. This involves a conceptualisation of gender as a property of, and fixed within, the individual. For many feminists, working with an essentialised view of gender was crucial for reappropriating feminine traits that had been implicitly and explicitly denigrated in much mainstream psychological research (Gilligan 1982). In this feminist tradition then, the emphasis was on celebrating women’s difference from men by valuing those points of separation. Starting with the realist premise that gender has an objective material existence, provided feminist scholars and activists with a potentially stable base on which to build solidarity and claim a legitimate voice around objectively shared experiences.

This essentialist view has come under heavy criticism from feminist psychologists drawing on postmodern theorising. As Bohan (1993) points out, essentialist versions of feminism tend to homogenise women and so ignore important points of difference between them. It can also make specific kinds of collective action difficult because the problem of gender is rooted in the individual. Therefore change is centred at the level of the individual rather than in oppressive systems. Bohan goes on to argue that postmodern constructionist stances circumvent such problems. For example, by rejecting the idea of universality of womanhood, postmodern feminism is able to engage with women’s diversity and

acknowledge that women's identities and experiences are organised around many points of sameness and difference. Therefore it allows psychology to engage with the complexities framing gendered ways of being. In addition, the tenets of postmodernism allow for collective action based on the problematising of oppressive social structures rather than individual change because gender is located, shaped and reproduced within the social context rather than as a property of persons.

Postmodern feminism's emphasis on diversity and the specificity of context is not without problem. There is a danger of particularising women to the point where there is no basis for commonality (Bohan 1993; Butler 1990,1993). This highlights the key problem identified by some feminists in the field – the translation of postmodern thought to feminist action. The problems faced by feminists attempting to ground postmodern theorising for the purposes of political action are summed up by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995):

1. Postmodern emphases on diversity makes it difficult to mobilise around a coherent single voice/identification
2. The emphasis on discursive diversity may mask power differentials in those diverse discourses
3. Stress on micro-politics in some close interactional discursive analyses may minimise the importance of macro/structural inequalities
4. The postmodern position of an absence of any unified truth, gives rise to relativism and 'all versions being equal' displaces the grounding on which to make cogent political action.

This critique has been challenged by feminists taking a postmodern approach to psychology. For instance, Hepburn (2000) responds to the four points above as follows:

1. Singularising what people are 'really' like is part of psychology's oppressive power. Postmodern emphasis on plural identities avoids replicating problems associated with homogeneity and related power dynamics which work to position all women as universally inferior.
2. The emphasis on function of versions or accounts allows for an analysis of power
3. Micro-politics and macro/structural inequalities are inextricably interconnected. Macro/structural issues are constructed in and through micro practices.
4. Relativism allows us to call into question traditional terms and categories. This allows for reflective and critical consideration of taken-for-granted discourses which may allow for political stances/aims to be honed, reimagined or redefined. Instead of politics being grounded in appeals to a pre-discursive female identity, it becomes grounded in context.

For many feminists, postmodern thought provides a means to transcend questions of essentialism as well as reimagine the boundaries around sameness and difference which are threaded through debates on feminist identity politics (e.g. Fine & Addeleston 1996)

Changes over Time

This shifting from feminist essentialist positions, which broadly characterise feminist theory and debates in the 1970s, to consideration of what postmodernism could offer feminism occurred largely in the 1990s. The nineteen seventies and eighties saw an emerging and sustained critique of much feminist work as reflecting the perspectives and concerns of women that were enabled to take up spaces of power to voice their politics – those included

the subject positions of western, white middle-class women. Postmodern feminism, with its emphasis on fragmented and shifting identities, contributed to this critique and seemed to resonate with a developing body of work on intersectionality. Originating in the voices of black women who drew attention to how their experience of subordination was not only gendered but raced, the concept of intersectionality questions the reduction of women's experiences of oppression to a primary or single identity category or point of difference (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, intersectionality has been used to highlight how women's lives are organised around multiple axes such as sexualities, race, (dis)ableism, age and social class to name but a few; and as such may experience intersecting points of oppression. Importantly, the move away from singular models of gendered power (such as patriarchy) in intersectional theories fitted with the fluid, dispersed tectonics of power envisioned by postmodern feminist theory.

In a similar vein, postmodern feminism's engagement with the complexities of the multiplex configurations of women's identities resonates with ideas emanating from queer theory which uses sexualities as a central point of reference to question the fixity of identity. Queer theory has problematized identity categories, drawing attention to how identity labels regulate and reify categories. As Butler (1990) notes, "Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations?" (5). Of particular importance is the critique offered by queer theory of the presumed naturalness of heterosexual identities and how this works to exclude other sexualities as well as (re)producing men and women with reference to heterosexualised relationships. This insight features in a body of postmodern feminist work that makes sense of the complexities of, for example, the operation of power in women's sexual relationships and sexual violence (e.g. Gavey 2005).

The recognition of multiplicity has undoubtedly opened up critical spaces to explore the complexities of fragmented often contested identities and subjectivities that women become (re)produced by as well as negotiate. While this critical space can be attributed to the disavowal of an essential and prediscursive self, it has opened up a set of tensions around women's materiality. The appeal of moving away from locating political claims in the prediscursive is understandable given that feminism more generally has problematized the reduction of women to a biology that was rendered inferior to its so-called male counterpart. However, the lack of a prediscursive grounding has raised questions about the role of corporeality in postmodern feminist theorisation when the body appears inextricably tied to women's experiences in general and oppressions in particular. Engagement with the idea of embodiment - how one lives their acculturated body - has been used to interrogate some of the tensions between bodily oppressions and postmodern thinking in the theoretical literature. Butler's troubling of the gendered body has been hugely influential in thinking through how we might conceptualise women's bodies in much of the scholarship in postmodern feminist psychology. Influenced by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic writers, Butler argues that the gendered body is 'performatively' (re)produced through stylised repetitive acts - it is not simply the case that social meanings are written onto a passive body or that an individual chooses to perform, rather that the gendered body is produced in and through taken-for-granted regulatory everyday practices (see Butler 1993, for a more detailed examination of these issues). In keeping with the emphases on multiplicity, it becomes possible to interrogate the many ways in which women's bodies become constituted.

Recent Directions

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The 1990s onward has seen the opening up of critical dialogues between postmodern feminist approaches and 'other' areas of scholarship attempting to theorise specific trajectories of marginalisation. Postmodern feminist debates around embodiment, for example, have expanded with the interweaving of ideas with critical disability studies and health psychology. The interplay of ideas from across these areas of scholarship has opened up examination at the intersection of dis/abled and gender identities, the ways in which this becomes played out in different contexts across the lifespan, and the implications that this has for reading abilities of the gendered body. In a similar vein, conversations across postmodern feminisms and postcolonial psychology has allowed for developments in the unpacking of colonial and postcolonial discourses shaping the (re)production of gender identities.

Cross-references

Conventional Psychological theory. Research and Method, Feminist critiques; Feminism and postmodernism; Feminisms, Postmodern; Feminisms, Poststructural; Gender Identity and Gender Identity Theories and Debates; Intersectionality; Masculinity/Femininity; Psychological Theorizing; Trans and Queer psychologies.

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Further Reading

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Feminism & Psychology

Feminist Theory

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