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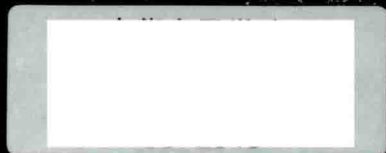
ER AND PSYCHOLOGY

书馆

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Deconstructing Feminist Psychology

edited by
Erica Burman



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Deconstructing Feminist Psychology

Gender and Psychology

Feminist and Critical Perspectives

Series editor: Sue Wilkinson

This international series provides a forum for research focused on gender issues in – and beyond – psychology, with a particular emphasis on feminist and critical analyses. It encourages contributions which explore psychological topics where gender is central; which critically interrogate psychology as a discipline and as a professional base; and which develop feminist interventions in theory and practice. The series objective is to present innovative research on gender in the context of the broader implications for developing both critical psychology and feminism.

Sue Wilkinson teaches social psychology and women's studies at Loughborough University. She is also Editor of *Feminism & Psychology: An International Journal*.

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Deconstructing Feminist Psychology

Erica Burman

This book emerges from a context where feminism is starting to have some impact in psychology, within the psychology curriculum and within professional practices. In northern, industrialized societies where psychological concepts and services form a daily part of our inner and outer lives (in the form of personally held precepts about relationships, mental health and well-being, as well as those explicitly regulating our lives via state apparatuses), feminist critiques of the white, middle-class, male, rational problem-solving subject of psychology are currently having some impact. This has been reflected in academic psychology in courses on gender and psychology, and especially 'the psychology of women', and in the statutory sector of health and welfare provision with the funding and organization of specialist services for women, including women's therapy centres.

But despite some success in putting gender issues on psychology's agenda, this book reflects concerns emerging about the forms this attention to gender assumes; the spaces it is accorded, and what this correspondingly excludes. The institutional arenas are constructed so that feminist work can easily be ghettoized, marginalized or otherwise treated as an optional extra, leaving the (non-feminist) body of psychology intact. Further, this construction of feminist psychology in relation to the dominant forms of psychology tends to limit the range and political nuances of the forms of feminism that gain institutional recognition. Familiar exclusions – of non-normative cultural and sexual identities – are reproduced within a model of woman that thereby threatens to become just as homogenizing and coercive as the model of man it claimed to challenge. It is the (actual and potential) reproduction of these exclusions that forms the topic for this book.

However, this book is not, or not only, about 'feminist psychology' and its discontents. Rather, the critiques presented here focus less on the limits of the category 'feminist psychology', but take this as a symptom of a more general problem to consider what its presence allows and disallows. They ask: what work does this arena perform for the discipline of psychology? What does this do for the

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existing social order, including the gender, cultural and sexual hierarchies psychology informs and maintains? What forms of political engagement and intervention does it promote, both in relation to the rest of psychology and in connection with feminist movements and campaigns elsewhere? Who does it speak for, and to? So in this book 'feminist psychology' is an object of critique in so far as it functions to contain rather than extend feminist interventions in psychology, and to reproduce the conceptual and political difficulties of psychology. That is, the value of the work so far conducted within the rubric of 'feminist psychology' is not in question. Rather, corresponding with the mood of self-reflection within women's studies generally, this book evaluates the extent of that contribution in relation to the shifting parameters of struggle within historically, geographically and politically diverse conditions.

This introductory chapter attempts to elaborate the contexts for varieties of feminist interventions in and around psychology and to explore the range of possible and actual relationships between feminist and deconstructionist critiques of psychology. This includes making the case for deconstruction as a form of feminist critique as well as acknowledging problems with deconstruction for feminist politics. The second half of the chapter outlines the structure of the book and summarizes the main contribution of each chapter. It ends by commenting on features arising from the process as well as substantive content of this book, for feminist politics in general as well as for feminist psychologists in particular.

Psychology of Women and Feminist Psychology

So far I have treated 'feminist psychology' and the 'psychology of women' as if they were equivalent, but this smooths over important areas of debate, or at the very least eclipses historical discontinuities. The psychology of women emerged as a reflection of 1970s Anglo-US feminism (see Matlin, 1993; Squire, 1989; and Unger and Crawford, 1992 for accounts). Its call for a woman-centred psychology (e.g. Baker Miller, 1976) aimed to speak of and for the specificity of women's experiences of psychology – as recipients or practitioners, as feminized objects of psychology's male gaze. But in claiming to speak for/about women, advocates of the psychology of women threatened to perpetuate mainstream psychology and recuperate feminist interventions into psychology's practices, in at least five ways:

- 1 By extending psychology's gaze into new arenas previously undisclosed to, or unrecognized by, psychology.

- 2 By colluding with positivism in retaining a commitment to existing methods and tools of investigation, rather than throwing the whole enterprise of scientific psychology (with its ethic of instrumentality, manipulation and control) into question.
- 3 By colluding with psychology's efforts to exclude and ghettoize attention to gender issues in its creation of a separate area in psychology for women's experiences and positions.
- 4 In its privileging of gender it is in danger of colluding with malestream psychology's tendencies towards abstracting and reifying social categories and identities. In doing this it remains allied with, or functions as a variety of, psychology and could thus be read as producing an ahistorical account that treats women's experiences and qualities as inherent or essential, rather than as emerging in relation to definitions of masculinity.
- 5 Within a set of psychological models which treat categories of identity as separate, stable and additive, and in subordinating other structuring parameters of identity to gender, it is in danger of ignoring how other marginalized positions enter into experiences of gender.

These difficulties have been rehearsed elsewhere (Bohan, 1992; Burman et al., 1996a; Squire, 1989) and reflect more general difficulties in presuming commonality between women (Riley, 1988; Spelman, 1988).

Feminist Psychology

Unlike the (strategically named) 'psychology of women', feminist psychology, with its change of gendered agency from object ('of women') to subject ('feminist'), is an explicitly politicized arena. It is correspondingly less easily relegated to the position of a psychological area of study (although this was once an important tactic, see for example, Wilkinson and Burns, 1990). 'Feminist psychology' names a strategic space between feminism and psychology; it is not a stable topic area, but rather identifies a site of contest (over what counts as knowledge, who defines this, and how it is arrived at). Important work has been done challenging psychology's traditional devaluation or pathologization of qualities culturally associated with femininity (in relation to such diverse topics as methods, motherhood, education and mental health). But for all that feminist psychology manages to ward off the psychology of women's tendencies towards marginalization from the rest of psychology and essentialism of what women are supposed to be, it still tends to leave relatively unexamined the forms of feminism it takes as its reference

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point. Squire (1989) shows how the main strands of liberal/egalitarian, radical/cultural and psychoanalytic feminisms have found their reflections in the forms feminist psychological interventions have taken. While outside psychology feminists have been increasingly challenged to address the marginalization of working-class, black and lesbian perspectives ((Charles), 1992; Wilton, 1993), feminist psychology has yet to address these claims consistently, although this work is now beginning (e.g. Bhavnani and Phoenix, 1994; Walkerdine, 1996; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993).

Post-feminist Psychology?

Advocates of post-structuralism and especially postmodernism have suggested that traditional frameworks for envisaging and mobilizing for social progress and for emancipation are now outmoded and irrelevant. While directed towards the confinements of Enlightenment thinking, and linked politically with disillusionment in marxism (over stalinist repression and more recently the break-up of the former Soviet Union), challenges to modernity also apply to feminism (Flax, 1991; Fraser, 1992; Lovibund, 1989; Soper, 1991). They acquire still more relevance in helping to ward off aspirations for a single, unitary feminist psychology. Rather than becoming enlisted into the pressures towards academic empire-building, these critiques invite us to attend to the diverse, multiple forms that feminist psychology can take. The untidy, unruly disorder of the proliferation of feminist psychologies can no longer be contained within the polarities of outside or inside psychology, or crude notions of masculinity and femininity. Rather than remaining within the monological mode by setting feminist psychology against the main/malestream, post-modern ideas refuse to allow such easy juxtapositions and highlight how more wide-ranging conceptual and political transformations need to take place. Postmodernist and deconstructionist ideas are therefore drawn upon in this book not to disallow the emancipatory project of feminism, but to strengthen feminist interventions, especially in relation to psychology.

Feminism and Deconstruction

Claims of a postmodern condition have found support from some feminists for the critique of dominant western and male models of subjectivity that have ignored or devalued the multiple, fragmentary and contradictory modes that characterize women's experiences (e.g. Charles and Hughes-Freeland, 1996; Weedon, 1987). Postmodernist ideas have equally evoked strong feminist hostility, not least for their

appropriation of feminist ideas and their claims to deconstruct subjectivity at the precise political moment when, within northern industrialized countries at least, feminism is beginning to make some headway (Brodribb, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Lovibund, 1989). Further, while postmodernist and feminist approaches are increasingly informed and fuelled by post-colonial critiques, postmodernist approaches threaten to disavow the very recognition of the power hierarchies they highlight by imposing a uniform dispersal of subjectivity on very diversely organized and positioned individuals, movements and peoples. Feminists have not been slow to point out the hidden return of the western male ego within such formulations, and the consequent denial of the power this continues to exert even when assuming a rhetoric of postmodern fragmentation and pluralism. The contributions in this collection speak from an engagement with the politics of deconstruction. As such, the chapters address two different, but not unrelated, feminist arenas: feminist engagements with deconstruction, and feminist psychologists in particular. Later in this chapter I identify specific interventions authors make within these two projects. The point I want to highlight now is that the question of how to retain a sense of feminist agency as well as acknowledging multiplicity figure strongly in this book.

In their differing ways, the contributions in this collection elaborate a critical analysis of the methods, topics, models and cultural-political presumptions that structure such work as would broadly be considered 'feminist psychology'. But what is really thrown into question here is the very distinction between feminist and (supposedly non-feminist?) psychology, and correlatively between feminist psychology and feminist activism. If we approach psychological practices with the feminist suspicion they merit, then how can we intervene without also perpetuating those same practices of exclusion and oppression? Are those of us who would assume (or presume the viability of) the designation 'feminist psychologist' deluding ourselves about the extent of critique and space for contest that we can initiate?

Distributing Feminist Psychology?

On this score it is instructive to consider the complexity and variegation of forms feminist interventions in psychology take in particular contexts, a significant cultural-political matter that my trawl for authors powerfully reiterated. While the descriptor 'feminist psychology' has gained some currency in Anglo-US psychology (and here, by virtue of Anglo legacies and hegemonies, I include also Australia and New Zealand), elsewhere in Europe, in Africa, in

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India, in South America there is no such identifiable area of psychology. In so far as I have been able to gain some insight into the topology of (what I, within the limits of my Anglo categorial system, would want to see as) feminist psychological interventions, this arises for (at least) two reasons. First, some feminist critics of psychology conduct their interventions from other disciplines, most notably women's studies, but also sociology, history, philosophy, literature, cultural studies and economics. That is, they gain a critical distance from psychology by operating from a different academic or professional disciplinary base.

Secondly, of the women I approached to write in this book, those women who were prepared to identify as feminist did not necessarily see their work in psychology as feminist, although they did identify this as being concerned with gender. Some women were openly hostile and suspicious of the limits of an arena called 'feminist psychology' as operating to contain or silence their interventions in the main/malestream. Others, within the context of their work, preferred to identify themselves as social psychologists, either strategically so as not to be marginalized by being labelled 'feminist', or because they genuinely considered that their work was not particularly feminist, although they, in their lives outside the academy, were. That is, their identification with psychology was not structured through a feminist critique of its practices. This was true of feminist academics and psychologists from various countries who declined my invitation to write for this book and from whom I had the sense that they did not recognize or identify with the category of feminist psychology. This includes women I contacted in as diverse (from each other and from my own) contexts as Scandinavia and India. In the absence of such contributions, it is only possible to speculate about the limits and silences within the contents of this book.

This range of practices (and its absences) could well reflect different opportunities for feminist work in psychological practices in particular regions, or an acceptance of dominant Anglo-US conceptualizations of psychology. Certainly, there is no reason to assume that just because a feminist, or even a feminist who works in psychology, lives outside psychology's 'centre' or in a post-colonial country that her engagement with psychology is somehow automatically endowed with critique. This would be to romanticize or exoticize the 'periphery' in just the same way as dominant psychologies have ignored or devalued non-western peoples and cultures. If 'we' (those of us who are western-based feminists) set out to export the 'good news' about psychology (feminist or otherwise) worldwide, are we not still reproducing the classic dynamic of colonialism by assuming that 'we' can provide the authoritative

critique? But, equally, are we not subscribing to an equivalent orientalist phallacy if we assume that there is some untouched feminist resource of authentic resistance to colonial psychologies ready to be discovered? (See Frankenberg and Mani (1993) for an equivalent discussion of the politics of feminism and 'post-coloniality' outside psychology.)

Rather than assuming either of these invidious positions, our task is to document the particular forms the traffic in ideas between feminism and psychology has taken, and the different consequences their varying arrangements have for progressive political intervention. This is the project that this book begins. But it by no means finishes this. As indicated earlier, this book is inevitably partial and incomplete. Indeed, to think of this project as final and achievable would, according to current post-structuralist thinking, be to foreclose its radical potential and render it fundamentally ahistorical and abstracted from place and space.

This book addresses a range of very different arenas in which the project and politics of feminist psychology is under contest. All the chapters in this book are situated commentaries in the sense that they necessarily speak from and to particular contexts, and in the process of editorial comment and revision, further contextualization has been provided. Further, some (Chapters 4 and 9) take as their primary topics the specific character of feminist psychology in circulation in a particular cultural-geographical arena. Clearly, these commentaries can only be indicative, since any claims to representation would not only be inadequate but also tokenistic. Nevertheless, they are highly suggestive of the range and character of issues posed for feminist psychology within diverse contexts.

Hence, an extreme formulation of the starting position of this book might be as follows, that there can be no feminist psychology without either distorting feminist commitments beyond all recognition, or else by transforming psychology into a differently constituted arena. So who is this book for? Who do we address in this enterprise of 'deconstructing feminist psychology'? It would seem that, by its title, this book sets out to alienate its most obvious allies – those who would identify themselves as feminist psychologists. But it is important to distinguish between category and position: deconstructing the category 'feminist psychology' does not disallow or discredit the speaking position or identification of 'feminist psychologist'. Indeed, most of the contributors would probably assume some such identification. Rather, what is put under critical scrutiny here is the structure, organization and reification of feminist psychological work into an arena sporting the title 'feminist psychology' or some such associated label.