Shifting Identities
Shifting Racisms

A *Feminism* —— *Reader*
Psychology

edited by *Kum-Kum Bhavnani*
and *Ann Phoenix*

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A Feminism & Psychology Reader

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INTRODUCTION

Kum-Kum BHAVNANI and Ann PHOENIX

Shifting Identities Shifting Racisms[1]

The title of this volume, *Shifting Identities Shifting Racisms: Issues for Feminist Psychology*, is an attempt to signal the questions which we consider to be important for feminist approaches to psychology at the present time, and in the near future. The four word phrase of the title is without punctuation in order that we may point to a relationship between multiple identities and multiple racisms — a relationship which travels in both directions, however apparently tenuous at times. The word 'shifting' is used deliberately also with two meanings. Firstly, we wanted to indicate that identities are constantly variable and renegotiable, as are racisms. The second sense we wished to convey through this phrase is that the shifting of identities, whether intentional or not, may also shift the boundaries of racisms, and vice versa. For example, as people of South Asian and African-Caribbean origin in Britain together embraced the word 'black', racist definitions of black, aimed at dividing these populations, were weakened. Similarly, as racisms have come to connote ideas associated with nationhood and belonging, the strength of sympathy and identification with black diasporic identities has increased from the 'first' world, to the 'second' and 'third' worlds, which means a development of obstacles or resistances to the apparently smooth processes of reproduction of racisms.

The forms of racism are varied and, indeed, racism itself is a set of processes whose parameters are shifting away from mainly biologistic considerations to include cultural and national ones (see e.g. Wetherell and Potter (1993) for a recent study on the content of this, arguably more recent, type of racism). To suggest and show that the forms of racism are varied and shifting is not to deny that racism as practice also provides points of stasis and moments of ignition when thinking about, and acting against, the inequalities which racism legitimates. However, we wanted this book to embrace both aspects of racism — the

seemingly enduring and fixed ones as well as its apparently newer and more fluid forms.

Similar processes, with rather different histories and content, may be apparent as gendered identities shift. The influence of the second wave women's movements in Europe and the United States has been considerable. In this period of negotiation and change, the consequent shift in identities — a refusal of the category 'lady' as a means of dividing women or a determination to insist that we are black (i.e. not white) women — may also be pointed to as examples of the two way relationship between identities and structured inequalities. In other words, we want to suggest, through the title of this volume, that the shifting of identities may contribute to a shifting of racisms, and vice versa, and thus provide a challenge to racisms, as well as an important set of issues for feminist psychology.

'Identity' is a word which is much used in both academic and political contexts. Its strength is that it captures succinctly the possibilities of unravelling the complexities of the relationship between 'structure' and 'agency'; perhaps, one could say it is the site where structure and agency collide. From the late 1970s, identity has become a term which is meaningful across disciplinary boundaries, and forms the site of many discussions, for example, within feminism (see e.g. Asian Women United of California, 1989), psychology (see e.g. Hogg and Abrams, 1988), sociology (see e.g. Giddens, 1991), literature (see e.g. Spillers, 1991), and contemporary cultural studies (see e.g. Chow, 1993; the Special Issue of *October* Number 61, 1992). It is now clear that to imagine the notion of identity as static, and therefore, unchanging, is one which is not fruitful in discussing the construction of, the reproduction through, and the challenge to unequal social relationships. Racism or, more accurately, racisms, is one means through which unequal social relationships are constructed and reproduced. It is for these reasons that we wanted the title to indicate that this collection was conceived as being one which contained articles that discussed the implications of racism for the development of feminist psychologies.

'Feminism' as a body of ideas, and as a set of political practices implies more than simply 'adding women in' to the subject matter of the human and material sciences (see Wood Sherif (1979) for an early exposition of this type of argument). Thus, when feminism is added on to psychology, so that they become one phrase, the phrase comes to imply not only an academic rethinking of that universe of discourse which is known as psychology but, also, a political project which may provide elements for this rethinking, as well as being itself rethought. It is for these reasons, the academic and the political, that we use *Shifting Identities Shifting Racisms* as the title.

The articles in this book were originally sought for a Special Issue of the journal *Feminism & Psychology*, a journal which first appeared in February 1991. A brief history of the journal is therefore important in the contextualization of this volume. The earlier publication in 1984 of *Changing the Subject* and, in 1986, of *Feminist Social Psychology*, helped to create an atmosphere which would make

the project of producing *Feminism & Psychology* more feasible. The possibilities of setting up the journal were initiated by Sue Wilkinson and discussed with other feminist social psychologists between 1987 and 1990, a period when *Significant Differences* (1989) and *Feminists and Psychological Practice* (1990) were also produced. In the first issue of the journal, Sue Wilkinson, along with the rest of the Editorial Group, argued that the aim of the journal was to move away from being only a critique of psychology to a reconstruction of the subject/discipline. She also indicated that the journal would want to pay particular attention to forms of inequality other than gender, such as sexuality, 'race' and class (Editorial, *Feminism & Psychology*, 1991). For example, the journal adopted the policy of not having South African links while universal suffrage was absent in that country. This judgement, based on the African National Congress' call for an academic boycott between South Africa and other nation states also followed in the wake of heated and furious debates within the British Psychological Society about this academic boycott (Henwood, 1989). In the second issue of the journal it was announced that, in addition to keeping constantly at the forefront, issues of 'race' and sexuality as particular forms of inequality, the journal would also be producing Special Issues on these topics. It was soon after that decision that we decided to accept the invitation to be Guest Editors for a special edition of the journal and a book on the same issue. We signal these points in the journal's history to indicate that to discuss racism was always one element of the journal's aim.[2]

Within many feminist discourses such a sympathetic awareness of some of the problems of racism has not always been present. The arguments and debates, in the United States between women of colour and white women, and in Britain between black women and white women have often been sharp and, at times, bitter (see Anzaldua and Moraga (1981) for an example from the USA, and, in Britain, *Many Voices One Chant* (1984), a Special Issue of *Feminist Review*). These arguments often included aspects of class as well as racialization, and issues of sexuality were never far removed from any of these discussions (see e.g. Carmen et al., 1984). Many black women and black feminists in Britain felt unhappy both with white socialist feminists, and with radical feminists, for both of these seemed determined to ignore 'race' as one key organizing principle of inequalities amongst women (see e.g. Carby, 1982; Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986; Bryan et al., 1985, for further discussion of this point). It was argued, often, that white feminists refused to see that theories produced within feminisms were specific to, for example, white women, or white women who were middle class, or heterosexual women, or able-bodied women, or a combination of all of these (see e.g. Lorde, 1984; Parmar, 1982; Phoenix, 1988). Such arguments and the insistence of many black feminists that we were making these points from within the feminist movements, rather than from outside, gave rise to a productive rethinking of what is meant by the category 'woman'. The tensions generated by these debates served to move feminist theorizing away from its implicit assumption of a universal woman

towards a recognition of differences amongst women, with the consequent complexities and contradictions that such rethinking implies (see e.g. Bhavnani, 1993; Essed, 1990; Hill Collins, 1990; Phoenix, 1991). Thus the idea that feminist work should begin not only from identity but also from difference, not only from agreement but also from conflict began to take hold, and forms the basis of some recent invigorating writing (e.g. Frankenberg, 1993; Grewal et al., 1988; Haraway, 1989; Sharpe, 1993; Ware, 1992).

In the period discussed above, the crisis of knowledge, which is part of the heritage of current poststructuralist theorizing, was also gaining ground. In the social sciences, the critiques of positivism were intensifying (see e.g. Parker (1989) for an outline of this crisis of knowledge, and its implications for psychology). In the humanities, the work of Derrida (1978, for example), and others, forced a reflection on the nature of a text, its authority and the way in which its meaning is constructed. The claim that a particular text is objective — either as a scientific or as a literary work — lost much of its power, and the argument that standpoint is a necessary ingredient in the development of insights into human relationships has become almost commonplace in feminist work. Nancy Hartsock (1983), in one of the first discussions of feminist standpoints, demonstrated that a key effect of feminist standpoint work is that it provides a means of grounding our insights into social relationships by locating those insights themselves within structures of power inequalities (of gender, 'race', class, for example) and inequalities of resource distribution (see Haraway, 1988; Hill Collins, 1990; Harding 1987, 1991; Lather, 1991 for further development of these ideas).

The development of the idea of feminist standpoints urged further movement on points of identity, ideology and cultural practice. As a result, difference emerged as an important matter and, thus, came into the foreground of feminist theory and politics. If objectivity, in the sense of being a taken-for-granted essential aspect of analysis, as it was within positivism, could no longer be accepted as a viable concept in feminist and poststructuralist accounts of the world (but see Harding (1993) for a recent argument about 'strong objectivity'), it meant that discussions had to occur on how to understand the standpoints of writers and of analysts. Identity — the concept and the process — appeared to provide one site, a crucial one, from which to discuss these issues (see e.g. Ferguson et al., 1990).

The current interest in identity also follows social psychological concerns with social identity, which developed from earlier discussions of identity within psychology. These earlier discussions located identity in the apparently broader area of 'personality', and viewed identity as 'a person's essential, continuous self, the internal, subjective concept of oneself as an individual' (Reber, 1985: 341). It was this notion of a continuous and essential personality trait, limited to subjective definitions of its content that the social identity researchers were trying to challenge when developing their theories and studies about identity and social relationships. For example, Tajfel's pioneering work (1978), developed

by Brown (1984), Reicher (1984), Turner (1982) and Williams (1984) became one area within psychology which attracted many who were interested in shifting psychology away from its individualist frames to ones which made up structural axes of inequality. It was only in this way that it was thought that it would become possible to discuss psychic processes (see e.g. Armistead (1974) for an early collection of writings which implied the need for this movement in social psychology). Feminist interest in issues of identity have been rekindled both through discussions of identity politics (Bourne, 1987; Adams, 1989) and the re-examination of psychoanalytic approaches to issues of subjectivity (see e.g. Brennan, 1989; Mitchell and Rose, 1982). While the languages used in these different areas of academic specialism vary considerably, for example the empirical (and often empiricist) approaches within social psychology, as well as the sometimes abstract and obscure terminology used in analysing identity, along with the experiences that identities seem to engender, the point is that it is this issue, identity, which has captured the political imagination of the present time.

One consequence of these discussions is that the notion of identity as a static and unitary trait which lies within human beings, rather than as an interactional and contextual feature of all social relationships, has been laid to rest. Identity as a dynamic aspect of social relationships, is forged and reproduced through the agency/structure dyad, and is inscribed within unequal power relationships. In other words, identity is not one thing for any individual; rather, each individual is both located in, and opts for a number of differing, and at times, conflictual, identities, depending on the social, political, economic and ideological aspects of their situation — 'identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space ... between a number of intersecting discourses' (Hall, 1991: 10). This conception of identity thus precludes the notion of an authentic, a true or a 'real self'. Rather, it may be a place from which an individual can express multiple and often contradictory aspects of ourselves (see e.g. Griffin, 1989, 1991; Condor, 1988, 1989 for examples of how two feminist psychologists have discussed this point).

Feminist work on deconstructing the category of 'woman' — necessitated by the charges of racism levelled at much feminist writing often by black feminists (but see e.g. Spelman (1988) for an exception) — combined with the development of ideas on standpoint, and on identity largely discredited essentialist explanations for human behaviour within the academy. The reliance on social constructionism as a total, and therefore adequate explanation is also not considered satisfactory however (e.g. Brah, 1992; Burman, 1989; de Lauretis, 1987; Fuss 1989, 1991). The reasons provided by writers for their reservations about social constructionism and deconstruction as totalizing narratives are varied, and include issues of politics and subjectivities. These arguments, about not viewing social constructionism or essentialism as opposite ends of a spectrum but rather as a couplet each of whose parts contains the seeds of the other, also echo a debate which occurred in the late 1960s, and in the early 1970s. At that time, 'heredity and environment' or 'nature and nurture' were discussed in this way — namely, there was some agreement that a totally environmental approach to

human development (as in B.F. Skinner's work) was not an adequate means for understanding individual differences amongst human beings. Rather, it was shown that the two processes of 'heredity' and 'environment' were related dialectically to each other. This attempt at describing the interactional aspects of 'nature' and 'culture' was much discussed by anti-racist psychologists, biologists and some feminists who were trying to challenge the writings of Jensen (1969), of Eysenck (1971), as well as of writers like Buffery and Gray (1972) and Corinne Hutt (1972) (see e.g. Griffiths and Saraga, 1979; Richardson et al., 1972). In addition, some women anthropologists were also discussing similar issues, most frequently as 'nature' and 'culture': this can be seen in the highly influential collection of chapters edited by Rosaldo and Lamphère (1974).

Thus, the debate which began by using 'environment/nurture' (that is, social constructionist) arguments to challenge the 'heredity/nature' (that is, essentialist) thesis moved on to question the very basis of the distinction between 'environment' and 'heredity' in the first place, that is it entailed what can be referred to as a double move between studying both modes of construction and already constructed categories. In short, these debates created possibilities for both deconstruction and reconstruction simultaneously.[3] A concern to examine 'heredity and environment', or essentialism and social constructionism within this double move, and, therefore, as *processes* of human development and inter-action is often expressed in discussions of identity — influenced as these are by postcolonial and feminist writings and politics. In other words, feminist writings on standpoint, on identity and difference, and on racisms seem to us to be worthwhile points from which we can discuss human behaviours. It is those key axes which this collection seeks to address.

While the articles in this issue are written mainly by feminist psychologists, we did not intend to ignore the point that inter-disciplinary approaches have contributed significantly to developing thinking about these issues. Therefore, the articles include writers who rely not only on psychological perspectives alone but also on sociological perspectives (Yuval-Davis) and on the intersection of critical psychology and cultural studies (e.g. Räthzel and Squire). It is thus, from a variety of different perspectives, as well as two continents, that the articles in this volume address a range of themes pertinent to issues to be considered by, and engaged with, in feminist psychology. The fact that a number of themes recur across articles reflects the current theorizing in the area, and the concerns of feminist psychologists. We would like to highlight five of these cross-cutting themes.

PSYCHOLOGY AS REPRODUCER AND AMPLIFIER OF RACISM AND SEXISM

A recurrent focus is on the discipline of psychology, itself. It is no longer novel for feminist authors to produce analyses of psychology which demonstrate its shortcomings or the crises in which it finds itself at the end of the 20th century.

However, several articles in this book are innovative in demonstrating the implicit ways in which psychology has served to reproduce societal power relationships in which racist and sexist inequalities are maintained, even in explicit attempts to change the subject.

Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Donna Haraway depict ways in which the clear-cut focus on black people's intelligence in the 'race' and IQ debate has constituted a key form of racism which has been influential beyond the bounds of psychology. Two other authors illustrate the more indirect racist impact of psychology. Karen Henwood documents the ways in which the British Psychological Society's responses to calls for an academic boycott of South Africa served, in the name of neutrality and professionalism, to undermine resistances to racism within psychology. L. Mun Wong analyses journal articles to illustrate how apparently innocuous investigations of the impact of 'race' on cognition themselves operate to perpetuate stereotypical constructions of black people, and the domination of white people.

Even perspectives which developed within a spirit of critique, and which attempted to address racial prejudice and discrimination, such as Social Identity Theory, have not proved progressive since they have, for example, omitted black people's experiences of racism — see Karen Henwood's article. In a similar way, Erica Burman cautions feminist psychologists against a too easy acceptance of the 'Psychology of Women' as an additional area of psychology. She demonstrates that such an acceptance results in an essentializing of women as a fixed, unitary category, that is likely to reproduce the structures which feminists seek to change. In addition, an uncritical reception of a 'Psychology of Women' will reproduce the absence of a focus on racism which is characteristic of the psychological agenda. Both these authors demonstrate ways in which racisms within psychology shift over time, and how new theoretical perspectives shift the identities of the discipline.

MULTIPLE SHIFTING IDENTITIES

In their examination of the shifting nature of identities, and in keeping with the point that identities are both structural and agentic, many contributions demonstrate the intersection of individual histories and political imperatives in producing identities. Bhavnani and Haraway, and Henwood use autobiographical narratives to trace routes to, and reasons for, resisting the traditional tenets of psychology with regard to anti-racism and feminism. Henwood shows how the structures of the British Psychological Society have served to promulgate ways of thinking about 'race' and racism as well as feminism, which have acted to silence white women psychologists like herself who, only through struggle, can declare their allegiances and stand against racism. Bhavnani and Haraway relate their histories to their current intellectual identities exploring the commonalities and differences that have led each to be feminists within the US academy. They

discuss how identities shift, and, therefore, how the constituents of racist discourses do so. In this way, new ways of thinking and social changes emerge, so that there can no longer be one static form of racism but a multiplicity of racisms which are in a constant process of formation.

Burman and Essed also use personal biographies to situate the ways in which identities are multiple, relational, historically located and potentially contradictory. Essed uses a case study approach to show that the category of 'black woman' is not a monolithic one; that black women's life experiences are the result of the interweaving of gender and 'race' and that it is simultaneously possible to consider oneself as very different from other people who are deemed to constitute part of the same group, in this case black people, while still experiencing a sense of group responsibility. The article by Woollett, Marshall, Nicolson and Dosanjh provides an empirical exploration of the varied strategies of bringing up children employed by women living in London, who, in the British context, are constituted as 'Asian'. Woollett and her colleagues argue that the plurality of identities of the women they studied show how the ascription 'Asian woman' is not a singular nor a homogeneous category.

Corinne Squire's piece engages with a topic that touches the lives and interests of millions of people who view it in Britain and in the USA — the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. The huge popularity of this chat show, hosted by a black woman who regularly confronts her audience with intimate details of issues popularized from psychology, demonstrates a tension also touched on in Burman's article. How do the actions of particular members of minority groups — either through assimilation (Burman) or through respect and adulation (Squire) — lead to a shift in majority constructions and identities? Squire engages with the question of whether the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, with its carefully formulated psychological appeal, can be said to be feminist or anti-racist. Her argument is consistent with that of many articles in this issue in showing the complexities and contradictions the above question raises.

AGENCY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION AS FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGISTS

Questions of identity and difference, along with how these can be harnessed for positive political change, continue to exercise feminist psychologists. How can non-exploitative alliances between different groups of women be fostered? In the articles in this issue, the identity politics of the last two decades are examined and found wanting in terms of both explanatory power and of political action. Postmodernist notions of fragmented identities are also partially criticized in this context for their encouragement of a solipsistic focus on difference, rather than on political alliances and action (see e.g. the pieces by Burman and by Yuval-Davis). Although recognizing the importance of the concept of identity, Burman expresses a preference for the idea of 'positionality' — the process of constructing identifications which treat identities as produced rather than as fixed, personal