Approaches to Psychology PS1012 & PS1014. The approach of feminist psychology. John Beech

The feminist approach: lecture plan
1. Brief introduction
2. Brief history of feminism and the women’s movement
3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias (including research methods & design)
4. The feminist view of science
   (a) Use of language and personal experience
   (b) Gender in a wider context
   (c) The social construction of gender

The approach of feminist psychology: 1. Introduction

The case is made that there is a strong masculine bias in development of psychology. This is a reflection of dominance of males in power in Western society. Thus psychology is androcentric, which means that it concentrates on focussing on the experiences of men.

Feminist psychologists look at psychology as a discipline, especially its methods and applications from this perspective. But first some history of feminism outside of psychology…

The approach of feminism: 2. History of feminism

- Feminism is thought to have started in the 18th century in the West.
- Feminist thought developed during The Enlightenment* when women’s education was promoted.
- Emmeline Pankhurst was one of the founders of the suffragette movement. The aim was to show the institutional sexism in British society.
- Feminism became more international in the early 20th century, especially towards the end of WW1.
- By the 1920s in many countries women had secured the vote and achieved legal recognition.

[*The Enlightenment = 17th & 18th century era in which freedom, democracy and reason were considered to be society’s main values.]

The approach of feminism: 2. History of feminism

- In both WW1 & WW2 shortages of men at war led to many women taking on men’s work.
- But women were still restricted in Nazi Germany & Italy.
- Feminists before 1960s have been called first wave and those after 1960 as second wave. The first wave made significant gains in providing equality of citizens irrespective of gender, especially in education, welfare and in employment.

- The second wave is concerned with getting full social and economic equality. They concentrated therefore more on interpersonal politics. This included the right to contraception and also to sexual liberation.
- Some feminists have felt uneasy as sexual revolution implies that men can have sex more easily without the accompanying responsibilities. They raised awareness about domestic violence and rape. In 1968 a sheep was crowned as Miss America by feminists in protest of the Miss America contest.
- Third wave or post feminism queries the need for feminism as the equality of women can be assumed, and not fought for.
The approach of feminism: 2. History of feminism

- At present internationally, especially outside the West, women are paid less than men for the same work and are under pressure to conform to gender stereotype.
- Away from the West feminism has been identified as Western colonialism, and this has been part of a backlash against the more radical elements of feminism.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias – an overview

Sexism: research mainly based on men. Appears to be implication that women’s behaviour is abnormal, while men’s is the standard.

Gender difference research emphasises biological rather than the social differences between the sexes. Tends to fix stereotypes. Thus psychology is ‘sexist’ in viewing women as being inferior and discriminates against them. It is seen as ‘heterosexist’ for regarding gay men and lesbian women as abnormal. Psychology also discriminates against these groups.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Bernstein and Russo (1974) proposed that there is assumption that all famous psychologists are male. But many were women. Same bias applies to new names. Margaret Washburn - work on animal behaviour and Margaret Harlow - tactual contact and nurturance. Washburn was the first white American woman to get a PhD (1908). In 1921 she became the second woman president of the APA.

Mary Calkins discovered primacy and recency effects. She was banned in 1890 from doing postgraduate work.

Sandra Bem (1944-) explored masculinity and femininity and examined our gender roles. She produced a questionnaire called the “Bem Sex Role Inventory” (BSRI). Filling in this questionnaire gives a measure of an individual’s degree to which they fit their sex-role stereotype.

Lerner (1979) has examined role of women in the history of psychology. In 1973 Division of Psychology of Women formed in the APA. Journal: ‘The Psychology of Women Quarterly’. In the UK the BPS had the Psychology of Women section set up in 1987.
3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Wilkinson (1989) believes that there has been a lack of reaction to feminism within psychology, because not seen as legitimate area. Feminist psychology is seen as being purely political.

Strickland (1987): one third of all employed psychologists are women and more than half of those getting PhDs.

Psychology will be the first ‘feminised’ science. This should lead to the investigation of women’s friendship patterns, rape, sexual harassment, battered women, eating disorders etc.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Many examples from the past. E.g. Bettelheim (1965): ‘we must start with the realisation that, as much as women want to be good scientists or engineers, they want first and foremost to be warmly companions of men, and to be mothers’. Also there is the ‘male standard’ in which men assumed to be the norm. It makes women feel abnormal.


3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Tavris: Underlying bias in gender difference research is to find out why women are not so good along various dimensions. More women than men tend to buy self-help books, due to under confidence?

Broverman (1979): asked psychiatrists to define ‘adult’, ‘male’ and ‘female’. ‘Adult’ & ‘male’: assertive, ambitious and task-oriented; ‘women’: caring, expressive, nurturing and affiliative. Thus ‘adult’ and ‘male’ similar in description, but ‘women’ considered to be different.

Tavris (1993): research often presents males as the norm. One study found that women have lower self-esteem than men. But could equally have concluded: men are more conceited.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Tavris (1993): Can be bias in participant selection. E.g. all women sample when looking at contraception.

Biological Psychology: bias to all-male participants. This is because the oestrus cycle can influence and possibly bias test results. But problems of subsequent generalization.

Race and gender not reported in many studies. However, can be more difficult to do in the case of ethnicity than gender.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

History of results on men being generalised to women. E.g. Erikson, but he formulated theory 40-50 years ago.

Kohlberg (1969) speculated on gender differences having tested 84 boys. He founded a theory of moral development based on these data.

3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Another bias is to generalise from a narrow context to a broader one (e.g. rod and frame test and embedded figure test). (The rod and frame are illuminated within a dark room.) 

Men are found to be more field independent. However, field independence of men does not generalise in other spheres.
3. Feminist psychology: Masculinist bias

Experimenter who test to see if there is a gender difference and do not find a difference find it difficult to publish. This could lead to a bias to publish only when there are positive findings. This can lead to the impression that there are only differences between the sexes, rather than similarities. There could be evidence of strong similarities, but this has been suppressed by the publication bias.

However, there are some good review studies. Voyer et al. (1995) examined 286 effect sizes and they found evidence of a sex difference in mental rotation and discounted suppression of negative results as an unlikely scenario in this case. Important to emphasise that this is a difference between averages. There is evidence that women are better than men verbally.

4. The feminist view of science: (a) Use of language and personal experience

- Feminist view on the research process: there should be more active involvement, don't be detached, be co-operative, participative, interdisciplinary and don't have hierarchies. One should begin an approach on basis of personal experience (Task Force of APA Division).
- Some Feminist psychologists have used Grounded Theory as a basis for qualitative analysis. This often involves analysing a database of text produced from conversations or structured interviews.
- Within this context some suggest having a section of the report dealing with reflexivity. This means elaborating your personal experiences and feelings that may have a bearing on the interpretation of your analysis.

- Language in the past has been masculine biased: 'subject', 'manipulate', 'control'.
- But there could be limitations on the Feminist proposal to be interdisciplinary. Similarly, what about asking researchers to be co-operative? Aren't they already? Another aspect is that too close an involvement with the participants has to be treated cautiously.

The use of the term 'subject' is ingrained but APA now actively encouraging the use of the word 'participant'. A working party under Vicki Bruce in the UK has also encouraged the use of the word. What about 'manipulate' and 'control'? In many areas of Psychology tight experimental designs are important for controlling variables. Is all that is required is a cosmetic change in words (as in 'subject to 'participant')? We could just avoid the use of these words, e.g. specific labelling of groups rather than the term 'control group'.

4. The feminist view of science: (b) gender in a wider context

Some areas of psychology viewed as more rigorous with higher proportion of men. Seen as 'value-free', in same way as physical sciences. But challenged by feminist psychologists. Science can be seen as ideological.

Prince and Hartnett (1993): between 1924-72 7,500 women in Virginia State were forcibly sterilised. Criterion was performance on the Stanford Binet. IQ is a 'hypothetical construct' used for prediction, but it is not directly observable. In this case it was being used to bolster a particular political ideology. Feminists propose that we should have a 'value-laden' approach that acknowledges the wider social reality.
4. The feminist view of science: (b) gender in a wider context

Weisstein (1993) thinks that inner traits have no use in Psychology. (This is the notion that we have traits such as introversion, neuroticism, etc.) We need the wider context of history, economics and politics. An example is the ‘battered wife syndrome’. Abuse eventually drives a woman to take desperate means, even murder.

Sandra Bem (1993): the use of this syndrome in USA has helped women’s defence against murder, but it *pathologizes* women. We need to address their domestic context.

[^pathologizes = characterises as being medically or psychologically abnormal.]

2. The feminist view of science: (b) gender in a wider context

The feminist argument is that legal defence of self-defence is male-centred.

The defendant is innocent of murder if (a) the perception of the defendant is that they might personally have incurred great personal harm or might have died and (b) the only way of response is with the necessary force to defend oneself.

But not appropriate for battered wives. There are problems for women where there could be great imbalances of strength.

However, problems of proof that the pressure that bad, or escape difficult. How would Bem change the legal definition in this context (rhetorical question)?

4. The feminist view of science: (b) gender in a wider context

Colley (1995) in her presidential address (in the Psychologist) showed % of female UCAS applicants. She also showed that at Leicester University Science is seen as masculine, complex, practical and devoid of feelings.

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<th>% of female UCAS applicants</th>
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Archer (1984): women during adolescence underestimate their intellectual abilities, esp. in traditionally male areas.

4. The feminist view of science: (c) The social construction of gender

Gender is a role that is constructed as a result of the influences of society. You can recall your own personal instances of how this has happened to yourself. There is now more concern to examine the context of behaviour.

E.g. Maccoby (1990) girls from age of 3 years are only passive when boys present. They become just as independent as boys when amongst themselves.
4. The feminist view of science: (c) The social construction of gender

We frequently get messages about gender. The world provides us with many images about what are appropriate masculine and feminine identities. For all of us this means involvement in constructing and reconstructing our own gender identity. We get cards celebrating the birth of a baby that are appropriate for a male or female. These are full of stereotypes — girls: pink, bracelets, bows etc – boys: puppies, balls, etc. Advertising further promotes such messages. Gender comes out according to the social context. When women found to be self-blaming and having low self-esteem, this is due to powerlessness in their culture (Tavris, 1993). This is a way of thinking that is not biological, but cultural.

Conclusions

Wilkinson (1989) 3 improvements that can be made by feminism:
- It can identify bias that appears in the literature.
- It can make thinking about these issues more critical.
- It can broaden the scope of research in areas that are under-researched. Finally, it gives an ‘extra dimension’. The woman’s perspective means that it should extend our understanding of all of human nature.

The approach of feminist psychology: summary

1. Brief introduction
The proposition of feminist psychologists is that psychology is androcentric ie. focussed on men’s experiences.

2. Brief history of the feminist movement
First wave: started with the Enlightenment and culminated in voting rights for women and also legal recognition.
Second wave: at the fore in the 1960s: getting full social and economic equality.
Third wave (post feminism): the equality of women can be assumed. However in some cultures viewed as Western colonialism.

3. Masculinist bias in psychology: Tendency to assume a researcher is a male.
Feminist view of science: “Male view” is that science should be value free, but is actually value-laden. Feminists suggest that science should be acknowledged as value laden. Looking back in history it is easy to see this from the present. It is much more difficult to see in the present.

Research methods and design:
- 1. Bias to study men more than women. Results on men have been generalised to women as well.
- 2. There’s a problem of publishing bias in gender difference research. Many studies don’t find a difference between the sexes and don’t get published.

4a. Use of language & personal experience: we should begin with personal experience; use the term ‘participant’ and try to avoid the term ‘control’.

4b. Gender in a wider context. Psychology is too narrow, we need to look at the wider context of influences of the past: our society, the economic situation, etc. One example is the battered-wife syndrome, which has led to psychiatric diagnosis of women. This was male-centred in approach.

4c. The social construction of gender. We discussed sex roles and how this seems to interact with the sexes. It’s useful to examine the social context that makes us play particular sex roles.

Finally, feminism has helped us to think more critically about various issues. More generally, how we’ve considered our methods and how we test people. In particular, it helps us to consider our own sex roles. The result is that it has helped research to move in new directions and at the same time to re-examine old approaches. There is probably much more to come from feminism.
The approach of feminist psychology: the end