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Feminism as antipsychology: learning and teaching in feminist psychology

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Feminist initiatives in psychology have met strong resistance from the traditional discipline. Feminists themselves have often neglected mainstream psychology, finding psychoanalysis's greater complexity and flexibility more helpful to them. As a result, feminism's influence in psychology is spread thin, its effects concentrated in specific areas like the psychology of achievement and moral reasoning, and in the specialist fields of the psychology of gender differences and of women. Nevertheless, feminist ideas are acquiring wider currency within psychological discourse, and feminist psychologists are increasingly recognizing the role their teaching can play in this expansion (Richardson, 1982; Russo, 1982; Walsh, 1988). This chapter discusses the importance for feminist psychologists of paying attention to teaching and learning practices. Then it explores a particular version of feminist psychology education, where psychology students and teachers extend feminist ideas into a kind of antipsychology. Such a development presents some problems. But it also has valuable implications for feminist psychology in general.

Why should feminist psychologists study psychology education?

Feminist perspectives on psychology are transmitted to their widest audience through popular books like *My Mother/Myself* (Friday, 1977), *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Orbach, 1978), *The Cinderella Complex* (Dowling, 1981) and *Women who Love too Much* (Norwood, 1985). To conventional psychologists, such texts' commitments to feminism, their populism and their largely psychodynamic orientation, make their methods unreliable and their conclusions of limited validity. More significantly for feminist psychology, these very successful texts are all, despite their superficial variability, 'how to' books, with therapeutic or self-improvement aims. They all belong to an ego-psychoanalytically influenced feminist psychology, which, because it is [77] concerned predominantly with personal change, skates over the social, economic, and political characteristics of gender relations, and neglects the irrational, fragmented and contradictory aspects of gendered subjectivities.

What about the mushrooming academic and applied psychological publications on gender differences, the psychology of women, and feminist psychology? Many feminist psychologists see these as the best indicators of feminist psychology's progress. But a relatively small group of psychology professionals reads the journals in which these papers are published. A much larger community comes into contact with psychology through a psychology course in a university, college, school, or adult education institute. Most courses do not require, and most students' circumstances do not permit, extensive reading of the primary literature where most feminist psychological work is to be found. Course textbooks' awareness of feminist issues, even in the areas of the psychology of women and of gender differences, is patchy, and seems likely to

remain so. It is, then, through education practices in general, rather than just through reading and writing psychology books and papers, that feminist psychology education can currently reach the most people.

Courses in the psychology of gender differences and of women are obvious vehicles for feminist ideas, and they are increasing in number (Russo, 1982). But they are still uncommon in Britain, and they will in any case always make up only a small proportion of psychology courses. For feminist initiatives to have most effect, they need to address all areas of psychology education.

Traditional work on psychology education concentrates on improving the content and structure of courses, teaching methods, and student selection and assessment, all in an effort to raise student standards. Broader appraisals are rare. This is partly because teaching is seen as research's poor relation. But it is also because psychology education's clear connections with social and institutional factors tend to lead comprehensive accounts of it into radical criticisms of psychology as a whole. Many psychologists want to avoid such criticisms.

Some western feminist academics, too, view teaching as separate from and inferior to their 'own' work. But most, like radical psychologists, see an intimate connection between their academic or practical activities, and teaching and learning. They formulate this link either by picturing feminism as a body of knowledge which can be disseminated through education, or by equating the collective, experiential aspects of education with consciousness-raising in the western women's movement. But some feminists have a more complicated understanding of education. They recognize that feminist [78] learning and teaching has to address not just obvious examples of women's oppression and self-derogation, but also subtler, unconscious expressions of dominant gender relations, and the social relations of, for instance, 'race,' sexuality and class, which are articulated with gender. These feminists see the perpetually renewed criticisms which students bring to 'established' feminist knowledge as encouraging the sensitive, wide-ranging approaches they need. Kaplan, for instance, says of feminist literary academics, that 'it is in and through their women students that they have to a great extent developed and expanded their critique of male-dominated culture' (1986, p.65).

The complexity and breadth of feminist aims mean that feminist psychology should not be like any other field of psychology. It should criticize not just psychological objects, methods and theories, but also the institutional and wider social and political situation of psychology. This kind of eclectic analysis is particularly difficult in psychology; the discipline is so protective of its status that it resists criticism on any other than its own 'scientific' criteria. But the obvious involvement of psychology education, with extrapsychological as well as psychological factors, makes it a good place to try out such an approach.

This chapter, adopting an amended version of Fisher's (1982) list of the conflicts experienced by feminist academics, addresses not just the relationship between feminist psychology students and academics, and the discipline they are studying, but also the relationship between these students and academics; the relationship between both groups and the institutions in which they work; and the groups' relationships to the wider feminist movement, and to the social and political communities to which they belong.

The chapter is based on my discussions of feminist ideas about psychology with students from a wide range of educational, employment and social backgrounds, in a variety of contexts, from evening classes to postgraduate seminars; and from psychology degrees, to one-off short psychology courses on the one hand, and social science degrees and professional social work and nursing training courses on the other. The chapter concentrates on situations where gender has

been explicitly at issue, and on women students' arguments, since it is in these circumstances that debate about feminist psychology becomes most intense. The chapter draws on my reading of papers on this subject, but also on taped and written records of students' and my discussions; on student presentations and essays; on my lecture notes; on course reviews; and on my own remembrance of events. There are many layers of selection involved in my representation of this material. The frame of the selection is an interest in the place that subjectivity, and psychological work on subjectivity, have in feminist theories. But [79] the chapter is bound to contradict this alleged standpoint in various ways, some of which I can guess at, some of which I can't.

What is feminist antipsychology?

Many feminist psychology academics recognize that their courses produce anger in their students, and they argue extensively about how to direct this feminist consciousness most effectively. At the same time, they acknowledge that feminist psychology has a number of often conflicting strands, which students have to learn to deal with (Walsh, 1988). This chapter examines how the anger which both feminist students and teachers feel is manifested in the development of different sorts of feminist psychology within psychology education itself. Students and teachers react in a variety of ways to the role which discourses of gender play in traditional psychology. Sometimes they deny or ignore it. Sometimes they concentrate on analysing the dominance of discourses of masculinity, and working out how this might be changed. At other times, they reject the mainstream discipline completely, and start trying to construct an alternative, woman-centred psychology. And occasionally, they proceed from a recognition of the gendering of psychology, through a discovery of how other social differences, like those of class, sexuality and 'race', affect psychology, to what I shall call antipsychology, an approach which grants all psychological data and theories a severely limited validity, or even rejects them completely. These approaches often overlap with each other, or coexist on the same page or in the same sentence. But they can still be distinguished from each other. The antipsychological approach is the one which I shall argue offers most to feminist psychology.

Antipsychology and psychology

Psychology students' and teachers' attitudes to feminism emerge most clearly in the orientation they develop towards the discipline itself. Some explore feminist corrections of conventional psychology's neglect of women subjects and female-associated subject matter, and try to build on them. But this tends to leave them too close to the mainstream discipline to question fundamental aspects of it, like its insistence on developing scientific procedures and theories. Other students and teachers decide to put traditional psychology to one side, and devote themselves instead to imagining and searching out a gynocentric psychology, which uses women subjects, and women- identified subject matter, methods and theories. This approach is more dynamic, and it is often more in touch with feminist arguments outside[80] psychology. But its notion of a culturally or biologically fixed female subjectivity makes it ahistorical, liable to play down differences between women, and prone to use the category of 'personal (women's) experience' in an authoritarian way (Squire, 1989).

A third feminist approach, which some teachers and more student~ develop, is an antipsychological critique of the way in which psychology addresses, not just gender, but sexuality, 'race' and class differences. What does this feminist antipsychology look like? Lott,

teaching a feminist-oriented psychology of women course, gives a teacher's perspective. She uses non-psychological as well as psychological material, 'including poetry, literature, the popular and the mass media' (Walsh, 1988, p.888), and gets students to write journals and do social problem-solving exercises as well as orthodox psychological literature reviews and critiques. In this way, feminist psychology becomes literary and sociological, as well as psychological. Among students, examples from my own courses include one who, discussing the different moral voice which some feminist psychologists ascribe to women, endorsed Stack's (1986) description of this voice's social specificity, and constructed an account of the social determination of all 'morality'. Another student punctuated an essay on the psychology of gender and achievement with denunciations of the class-specific nature of these debates. A third student dismissed the American and Eurocentric focus on the self preserved in Gardiner's (1987) careful recuperation of ego psychology for feminism.

In such cases, psychological factors lose their primary place, or are elbowed out of the explanations completely. How, then, is anti-psychology valuable for feminist *psychology?* First, it questions the universality and timelessness that psychology asserts for itself, by detailing the social and historical determinants of psychological knowledge. This is especially important for feminists, because gender has a history in psychology of being reduced to a concern with the numbers of biologically female and male psychologists and subjects. Second, antipsychology presents a strong and flexible critical repertoire, which feminist psychology needs if it is to challenge the powerful and self-protective mainstream discipline. A single-issue critique is relatively easy for this discipline to assimilate. A feminist psychology that manifests itself in a range of social critiques, differently weighted according to the type of psychology it is addressing, stands a better chance of occasional success.

The third advantage of the antipsychological approach is that, as psychology is especially jealous of its boundaries and almost impermeable to ideas outside them, a feminist antipsychology which seems to have more to do with anthropology or sociology, or even history, politics or literature, is a useful development. It throws doubt [81] on psychology's claim to be the ultimate source of knowledge about the human subject, by refusing to respect its boundaries, and drawing on knowledge from other disciplines. Fourth, feminist psychology's attention to social and historical differences matches contemporary western feminism's interest in such differences, and makes it able to exchange ideas with feminist initiatives outside psychology. Feminist antipsychology is never entirely separate from psychology. Since it is formulated in reaction to mainstream psychology's account of its object, the individual subject, it always retains a focus on that object. Even if it analyses the individual subject out of existence by defining it as a social artefact, it does not thereby answer all the questions about subjectivity with which western twentieth-century discourses are permeated. Psychological concepts tend to creep back into even the most antipsychological of students' and teachers' arguments, through generalizations about female and male subjectivity, and references to 'human nature', for instance. These inconsistencies occur in every feminist psychological initiative. All of them try to account for gendered subjectivity, yet have also to accept its existence in order to address it. Greater reflexivity and theoretical caution let such difficulties be handled more gracefully than feminist anti-psychology can manage. But this disadvantage is outweighed by the special efficacy of its criticisms.

Antipsychology, students and teachers

A feminist concern with psychology education must address the relation which affects the transmission of psychological knowledge most directly: that between students and teachers. Particularly at the start of their work together, feminist psychology teachers and students often see their relationship as an uncomplicated handover from one to the other of scientifically legitimated knowledge. They picture this happening within a democratically modified version of the formal lecture method, which allows students to make approved interventions, from questions and comments, to seminar papers. This straightforward liberal view of education is frequently accompanied by a psychological view of the teacher as a role model, for women students especially. Psychology's own interest in personalized accounts strengthens the tendency.

Sometimes, feminist students and teachers recognize the hierarchical, male-identified nature of this approach to education, but think its assertion of feminist psychological expertise makes it 'worth adopting -combined, perhaps, with a more woman-centred approach to psychology itself (see Hyde in Walsh, 1988). Other feminist psychologists try to conceptualize their educational endeavours differently, as [82] a female or female-identified oasis within the larger patriarchal pedagogy, where power relations between students and teachers are dissolved, and each learns from and empowers the other. These feminist psychologists aim for knowledge which they, rather than mainstream psychology, judge to be significant. They try to work collaboratively, starting from their own experiences. Humanist psychological views of the progressive nature of student-centred education, and feminist trust in collective, experiential consciousness-raising, converge here into an equation of biological or cultural femaleness, with feminist and all radical education. In this scenario, every woman can be a role model. But in education and in feminism, experience, however deeply felt, can be as deceptive as theory. The collective imparting and getting of knowledge, however mutual it seems, is still structured by institutional and social differences between members of the group. Many feminist teachers of the psychology of women, for example, encourage students to investigate data for themselves and use their own experiences (Walsh, 1988). But they rarely participate in this process to an equal degree. Even if I talk in class about traumatic events in my childhood, my position makes me less vulnerable than students are when they do the same. If I disclose more, this only perpetuates the idea that a teacher can say more, and more significant things, than students. Woman-centred students and teachers play down such differences, in favour of a psychological account of their relationship.

The third antipsychological approach which feminist psychology students and teachers take, characterizes psychology teaching as an expression of gender and other social power relations, which imposes, rather than imparts, knowledge. Psychology teaching is a form of training, implicitly drilling students until they can understand and produce socially acceptable accounts of subjectivity. This approach defines the teachers as agents of social control, and their students as subjects of it. Given such an analysis, feminist students and teachers can only hope to gain some personal pleasure from psychology education, or to use it pragmatically, as a step towards educational, employment, or other goals. At best, they can put together a meta-psychological analysis of the discourses of psychology learning and teaching, of why certain things are taught and certain methods used. Many students develop comprehensive critiques of the sexuality-, class-, 'race'- and gender-marked nature of the series of influential investigations which a psychology course typically presents. Some students also demand that this series should not just be criticized, but should be abandoned for a course teaching the 'psychology' that is outside the mainstream, often not written down or even

investigated. Where, they demand, is the psychology of black, white homosexual,[83] and white, heterosexual, working-class subjects', especially female subjects', friendships and loves, but in certain kinds of sociological work, and in fiction? Where is the psychology of the majority non--nuclear family childcare experience, for example of grandmothers and grandchildren, except in their own accounts?

Such 'psychology' education might seem more like sociology or literature education, or just telling stories. But its continued interest in the individual subject preserves its psychological orientation. This is true even in the most socially directed field of psychology, social psychology. Teachers who persistently trash the social myopia of paradigmatic social psychology experiments often go on working with strong popular, rather than academic, ideas of psychology education, arguing that they should be teaching about 'relationships' rather than 'experiments', for instance. Students who consistently demand from me and each other information about socially relevant, non-psychological approaches to social psychological topics may still, when a new issue arises, want first to know from me what mainstream psychology says about it. I still try to tell them, and they still go quiet to listen.

Power never exists in the abstract, only in power *relations.* Psychology teachers have more power than their students, but the students have some, too. Antipsychological feminist students' satirical depiction of me as the person who is 'supposed to know' about psychology, expresses this unequal yet two-way relationship. Their rejection of mainstream psychology education for other discourses of the subject, and their assertion of equally problematic commonsense notions of psychological knowledge, converge in their rhetorical demands that I teach them psychologies which they also assert do not yet exist. All this generates the kind of bold, yet contradictory, unstable commentary on the nature of psychology learning and teaching, which an evolving feminist psychology needs.

Antipsychology and the institution

Psychology education is situated within educational and psychological institutions, which are licensed by, respectively, government and other public bodies, and psychological associations. In the largest non-professional field of psychology education, the input of psychological associations is achieved largely through their members' participation in educational institutions, and so it is the power of these institutions with which feminist psychology has to deal most directly.

Students' and teachers' first reactions to their discovery of the gendered structure of psychology is often to try to work within the discipline, subverting it from inside. Within psychology departments,[84] for example, they attempt to include more material about women in courses; to make courses more accessible to women students; to enable these students to do better, especially at higher levels of psychology; and to get feminist-oriented work accepted as a serious part of psychology education. Other feminist psychologists take a justifiably pessimistic view of the chances of making major changes in mainstream psychology education, and set up their own educational institutions instead. In the short term, this might mean convening small 'women in psychology' discussion groups for students and teachers on a psychology degree. In the long term, separate structures can develop, such as women's therapy centres which run educational seminars and organize therapeutic training. Such initiatives retain more connections than they acknowledge with mainstream psychology education. The mainstream defines what they teach critically, or do not teach at all; and their own histories can

be traced back to an initial training in it - in the case of women's therapy centres, for example, through an analytic lineage that returns ultimately to Freud.

When feminist students and teachers adopt an antipsychological approach, they are more able to deal with the ambiguous power which institutions of psychology education hold. They reject, along with psychology, all the educational structures through which it is transmitted: its admissions procedures, syllabuses, teaching methods and assessments. These, like the discipline itself, they see as impregnated with dominant discourses of gender, 'race', class and sexuality. Such a perspective is inconsistent with any participation in psychology education. Feminist antipsychologists get round this by pursuing limited aspects of psychology's institutional power, in a sceptical, self-critical way. Some students, for example, acknowledge the value of British Psychological Society-accredited exams enough to try to pass a required course, but decide at the same time to fulfil only the minimum course requirements, and to spend time instead on a topic that interests them, such as child abuse, reading psychological and non-psychological material, writing essays and autobiography, and talking intensively with friends. Such work, they know, the educational institution is unable and unwilling to assess.
Feminist antipsychologists also engage in more direct challenges to psychology's educational institutions. In a university psychology department, where the majority female student body is usually taught by a predominantly male staff, the hiring of female staff might be, for these and other feminist psychologists, a high priority. In a polytechnic social science department, where women are better represented among staff, gender issues are well recognized, and there is a high proportion of black students, feminist antipsychology among psychology students might centre on the lack of black faculty, and the Eurocentrism of the [85] course structure, and be no less 'feminist' for this. In both cases, an antipsychological approach produces a continual awareness of the enormous gap between the educational institution's agreed equal opportunities policy, and that policy's full and voluntary implementation; of the low chances of making permanent or large changes to the institution; but also of the possibilities for resistance offered by the cracks in the institutional structure.

Antipsychology, feminist and other communities

Students and teachers who adopt an antipsychological perspective often spend time on projects that do not look like 'education' of any kind. This is where the distinctiveness of the approach comes into sharpest focus.

Feminist psychologists frequently act as psychologists first, importing feminist ideas into psychology and trying to work out how they apply there. This approach underestimates the complexity of feminist politics. Some students, and a few teachers, react to the conflicts it produces, by weakening their links with conventional psychology, and establishing stronger theoretical and practical affiliations with the Women's Movement. Hyde, for instance, wants the psychology of women to become important for her students through their discoveries, less of psychological bias, than of sexism in general; and she addresses their anger about these discoveries by discussing the achievements of the western Women's Movement since the 1960s (Walsh, 1988). Again, such a perspective tends to simplify gender politics, by omitting to ask which women the 'Movement' represents, and whether there is really only one movement.

Feminist psychologists who take an antipsychological line build a relationship not just with feminism, but with a number of forms of resistance. Their approach to

psychology education draws on their understandings and experiences, not just of gender relations, but also of class, age and 'race' differences, of sexualities, of marriage, parenthood and education, and of political formations. Three examples should clarify this.

Williams (in Walsh, 1988) reports a shift in students' arguments about feminism, from a 1970s basis in gender, to a current grounding in fundamentalism or non-fundamentalism. By noting this shift, she also implicitly describes a modulation in the concepts of what 'feminism' and 'feminist psychology' are. This recognition of changes, beyond those brought about by feminism or psychology, is an important and unusual one for a feminist psychology teacher to make. Williams also uses clinical case material, in which the gendering of subjectivity is rarely consistent or unitary. She invites members of a [86] variety of relevant organizations, not simply feminist ones, to take part in her psychology of women courses. And she encourages students to work not just outside the syllabus, but outside psychology: to 'build on their diverse backgrounds', and to attempt projects which include 'voluntary work or biographies based on oral histories' (Walsh, 1988, p.890). This openness to non-psychological, non-academic, feminist and non-feminist communities operates, within a relatively traditional university environment, as a kind of antipsychology.

How do antipsychological feminist students address the world outside the educational institution? Imagine two groups, each containing twelve female students. In the first, the women, white, and aged between 30 and 50, are attending a non-examined university extramural course on psychology, held in the daytime at an adult education institute in a wealthy London suburb. The second group consists of seven black and five white students, aged between 21 and *45.* This is a seminar group, studying psychology in the final year of a full-time social science degree at an inner London polytechnic.

Most students in the first group develop a conviction during the course that women's and men's intrinsically different subjectivities have a lot to do with gender relations. They picture women's subjectivity as nurturant, caring, pacifist and social. The group disagrees over whether it is biologically based, or so strongly culturally embedded that it is as good as biological. But some students - three, perhaps - start to question why they are studying psychology. They begin dismissing experimental evidence if it was obtained from college students; they carp at the undeclared class composition of many samples; one uses black American women's writing as her sole source for a paper on gender and 'identity'. In the other group, this state of affairs dominates, almost from the start. Students wave away feminist and other psychologists' preoccupations with scientificity, rail at the gender and other selectivities involved in more ethnographic psychological accounts, and demolish the male-identified and Euro-centric concept of the individual. But they retain interest in some sociological, political, and even philosophical approaches to psychological phenomena.

Why were the two groups different? Women in both groups came from predominantly working-class backgrounds. Most of the women in the first group looked after children and worked part-time, but none worked full-time. It would be too easy to attribute their relative partiality to psychological arguments to the time they spent in a domestic, 'psychological' environment. Many of them had extensive community interests, and the number who felt restricted by their lives was easily matched by the number in the second group who felt [87] frustrated by their need to balance commitments to coursework, part-time work, children, ill or infirm relatives, and partners.

A number of differences remained. The black women, and to some extent the white women, in the second group, had an analysis of how 'race' and gender differences are articulated

together, which they applied to feminist psychological arguments, and extended to take in class. The white women in the first group were much less likely to remind themselves of such differences. Discourses of 'race' and class were much less at issue in their largely white, high-income community. The local organizations and campaigns around, for instance, schools, hospitals, roads and libraries with which the women were involved, defined their problems as managerial, as much as political. By contrast, the women in the second group were engaged with a slew of clearly political local and national initiatives which put their housing, transport and daycare arrangements under threat, and aimed to cut and redirect their education. Perhaps it is not surprising that feminist psychology remained for the first group primarily a matter of personal, feminine experience, whereas the second group turned it into a critique of psychology as a whole, and an incipient politics of subjectivity.

I have implied in this chapter that feminist students and teachers of psychology are all feminist 'psychologists', but most of my examples of feminist antipsychology have come from students. This is because students seem to be better, though less powerful, antipsychologists than their teachers. Feminist psychology teachers have an insider relationship, either, like other psychologists, to psychology, or, sometimes, to 'the Women's Movement'. These allegiances weaken the demands they make of psychology and feminism, lessen the likelihood of their maintaining connections with communities outside them, and often put the forceful, persistent challenge of what I have called anti-psychology beyond them. A final advantage of the antipsychological approach is that, unlike other perspectives, it makes it clear that feminist psychology teachers can learn a lot from their students, but that they will not do so until they try to work with more complex ideas about what a psychologist and a feminist is.

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