

Burman, E. (ed) (1990) *Feminists and Psychological Practice*. London: Sage.

## **PART ONE**

### **CHOOSING PSYCHOLOGY?**

[pp. 14-17]

This part of the book explores the variety of positions in which feminist psychologists find themselves.

Testifying to the common but rarely articulated occupational experience of women, Carolyn Kagan and Sue Lewis highlight the subtle but systematic devaluation and marginalization of their work and interests in psychology. This devaluation takes the everyday form of occasional comments betraying expectations that having children will necessarily reduce their involvement in work and their developments at work; of reduced promotion opportunities because their teaching and research interests are not defined as central to the concerns of the department; of having continually to counter the casual but blatant sexist comments made by male staff about women students; and of being defined as lacking in confidence because they choose not to take on the administrative commitments that pave the way for advancement. They also describe how their developing feminist consciousness in turn became reflected in the work they do.

Several issues emerge from this account: first, the authors point out that the presence of women staff has consequences not only for the mutual support and for the ethos of a department, but also determines the choices available to the (predominantly female) student population, particularly in relation to research and project supervision. Second, the undermining nature of these daily experiences is in turn reflected in the presence of women staff. The examples discussed here, some of which are both long-standing and recurrent, testify to the frustration of the seemingly ineffectual battle against the intransigence of institutions. This underlines the pervasiveness of the 'drifts' described in the following chapters. Significantly, the authors report that of the six women who were in their department ten years ago, all but one have either gone half-time or have moved out of psychology completely, whereas the male staff have stayed on. Finally, they indicate how, in a paradoxical way, the difficulties they have encountered have worked to their advantage. Released from the pressures of competition within the mainstream hierarchy, out of the limelight, they have been able to develop their own areas of teaching, research and consultancy with 'relative autonomy'.

These difficulties, compromises and struggles for women in academic psychology have forced many women to leave, either to work in more practical ways in professional psychological roles [15] (although as later contributions show, these too are not without their problems), or to do women-centred work outside psychology. The next chapter presents two different accounts of how feminists have found they had to move out of the domain claimed as psychological in order to do work in the areas and with the methods they see as central to feminist research. Sue Sharpe locates her dawning awareness of the limitations of traditional psychological approaches in the political context of her training. The strategy she was forced to adopt to conduct and present her research in ways that do not patronize or objectify her informants and reduce them to numbers was to give up the security and salary that accrue from institutional support and work freelance. While this

has in many respects proved challenging and successful, enabling her to develop collaborative research relationships and present her work in an accessible and accountable form, she acknowledges that the space for independent research is rapidly dwindling and that the personal costs in terms of insecure and inadequate funding are likely to prove too great.

In her account, Jane Jefferson describes the progressive choices she took which led her into and out of psychology as she pursued her interest in the role of science and its impact on women's lives. She was lured into abandoning her initial facility and fascination with physics by psychology's promise of finding ways to understand and investigate how individuals, groups, settings and society function, together with a critical analysis of its role within this. As with Sue Sharpe, at each stage her choices involved costs, and losses of career opportunities - it is significant that a course on women's studies could only be taken in her degree programme at the expense of forgoing future eligibility for a 'professional' psychology training. Having found better research training and more 'relevant' work outside psychology, she recently returned to the institution to apply some of her experience in community work and women's health issues through teaching social psychology. For reasons that are common to young feminist teachers, the experience was not a happy one. Undermined by the sexist culture of higher education where consultative teaching is seen as ceding control and therefore wrong, and embarrassed by the poverty and banality of prevailing trends and explanations in social psychology, she has gladly moved on to do more congenial work elsewhere.

Although the accounts offered here are presented as personal histories they do much to throw light on why women's presence in psychology is so transient. Women leave psychology not because they fail, nor because they are no longer interested in issues central to the domain of the psychological. They leave because they do not want to participate in a practice that ignores or even exploits women's [16] experiences, occupationally and theoretically, or at least seems to discourage any alternative. It is this challenge of changing the discipline to make it address the very issues that drew her in, rather than leaving it in disillusionment like so many women, that is taken up by Jane Ussher in the next chapter. Reflecting on her own experiences as an undergraduate, a research student and a trainee in clinical psychology, she argues that participation by feminists within the mainstream structures is essential to challenge the masculine and patriarchal practice of psychology - at the level of theory, organization and clinical practice. Feminist presence within psychology ensures that alternative approaches cannot be dismissed as belonging elsewhere, and offers new hope to successive generations of undergraduates. She affirms the importance of creating a feminist community within psychology without romanticizing or underestimating the issues raised for women working within existing structures, and creating new ones. For Jane Ussher, leaving psychology to the rats, pigeons and men is to deny its progressive and empowering potential - in her words, throwing the baby out with the bathwater - thus robbing feminism of a useful tool for change.

In a fitting close to this section on 'Choosing Psychology?', Meg Coulson and Kum-Kum Bhavnani take up the wider question of what happens when women do become part of the system, or attempt to use it for our own (feminist) purposes. While this emerges as a continuing theme throughout this book, a particularly useful feature of this account is that it locates the debates and developments in psychology in the wider context of the

changing relationship between feminism, feminists and academia, raising key issues for feminist psychologists committed to progressive political practice. Subverting the dilemma set up in the previous chapter, they ask: are we throwing out our feminist politics when we join the mainstream structures of academic institutions? Their investigation of this question in relation to women's studies is particularly relevant for feminist psychologists, many of whom, because of the difficulties they experience (as documented here) as well as commitment to women's education, find the prospect of setting up and teaching on women's studies courses very attractive.

Setting their enquiry within the international context of the current state and achievements of feminism, then, Meg Coulson and Kum-Kum Bhavnani take a critical look at the development of women's studies in terms of the political dilemmas it brings for the women staff involved. They point out how through its participation with patriarchal academia, women's studies can reproduce the same patterns of elitism and inequality, for example in relation to black people and education. They caution against interpreting the promotion of women to senior academic positions as necessarily progressive and identify key areas of [17] compromise for women who take up management positions in academic institutions. They contend that we need to distinguish between two projects that coincide within the general women's studies rubric: promoting women students and developing a women-centred area of knowledge. While the first is concerned to facilitate greater accessibility to education for women students, the other aims to change the educational system in which it is located. They highlight the tension between these projects, but conclude that both factors need to be recognized and understood for the construction of progressive practice. [End of page 17]