

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

PART THREE

STRUGGLES AND CHANGE

[pp. 137-139]

The final part of this book describes the struggles of women working in different areas of psychology to challenge and change their practice.

In their joint chapter, Sue Wilkinson and Jan Burns provide a detailed account of the context and implications of setting up the Psychology of Women Section of the British Psychological Society. Sue Wilkinson's contribution locates the events and terms of the debates in relation to corresponding international struggles of women psychologists to gain formal recognition in other professional organizations. The three main questions she identifies as structuring the British debate reveal much about the resistances and fears to which the organization of women within a male-dominated profession give rise. The resistance can perhaps be seen as an institutionalized version of the defences deployed by individual male educational psychologists described in the next chapters.

In the case of the BPS, rejection of the section on grounds of 'politics' underlines its own implicit politics, while we also see now-familiar story of women's issues and women's organization almost by definition challenging prevailing structures. The structural necessity of making the section open to men (to meet the demands of the BPS) serves, as both authors indicate, both to legitimate (and constrain) the 'psychology of women' as an academic area of study (because men claim to do it too), and also makes the section even more dependent on external feminist and feminist psychologist political activity to maintain its accountability. In a more personal vein Jan Burns tells how her involvement in organizing the first Women in Psychology conference in 1985 and the Psychology of Women Section of the BPS influenced her developing feminist politics and changing relationship to psychology. She ends the chapter by indicating the key areas of promise and compromise for women psychologists affirming and using our positions to advance the political situation not only of feminist psychology and psychologists but also to make some progressive intervention in the wider political arena. Two complementary accounts of the experience and position of women in local educational psychology services follow. Both comment on structural issues of the organization of each system and service as well as highlighting the generalized effects of the masculine values and of organizing that constrain their work. Both contributions [138] describe attempts within local educational psychology or schools psychological services to set up women's groups, and each account highlights the empowering and validating effects this had for the women concerned, together with the uniformly defensive reaction from their male colleagues.

The first account systematically analyses the various ways gender issues are structured within educational psychology, from acknowledging the positive features for women working in the profession to pointing out the disadvantaged position of the (mainly female) part-time staff. In particular, it highlights how gender-typical assumptions structure models of management, intervention and relationships with clients and serve to remove any emotional involvement. The emphasis on strong management, on distanced client relations and on consultancy-based work has led to behaviourist approaches being favoured over individual counselling or psychodynamic approaches. The consequences of failing to incorporate equal opportunities issues as a central

feature of educational psychology training and practice are also described. These range from an institutional reluctance to support in-service training in this area, to the resistance from teachers in schools to address these issues, to the reproduction of inequalities in the workplace in terms of the gendered hierarchy of the service. The authors also comment on the response to the organization of a local women psychologists' group. While the group brought its members support and confidence, the male staff's hostility seemed to derive from envy, since they also wanted the same degree of support. However, the attempt to set up an 'equivalent' men's group was unsuccessful. As the authors note, it is a sad reflection on both the structure of masculinity and psychology that even within the so-called caring professions it is so difficult for men to offer each other support.

Set initially within a context which highlights the differential allocation of resources within educational psychological services, a second contribution was to have traced a personal account of the experience of training and becoming an educational psychologist for women who come to identify themselves as feminist. The account focused on events within a local educational psychology service following a meeting to consider the Association of Educational Psychology's *Guidelines on Sexism*. This culminated in the setting-up of a women-only group to consider how to implement its recommendations. Meeting together the women became aware of how they both supported and were backgrounded by their male colleagues. I say 'was to have traced' because this second contribution has been removed at a very late stage in the production of this book. That anonymity was not, it became clear, sufficient to guarantee the security of these women is symptomatic of the predicament of women in [139] educational psychology. In spite of the backlash which led to the group gradually dissolving, the legacy of that confidence-building exercise remains and the women went on to highlight and challenge the everyday ways in which educational psychology colludes in the perpetuation of inequalities. These include rendering invisible the work done by women in developing good relationships and creating a harmonious atmosphere; the cultural chauvinism that permeates testing and assessment; and the key 'diagnostic' category of 'special needs' which is applied overwhelmingly to working-class boys, a disproportionate number of whom are black.

The final contribution identifies dilemmas and tensions in developing a progressive approach to clinical psychology. Christine Adcock and Karen Newbigging's account echoes some of the central concerns already identified. They tell how disquiet with the scientific models of investigation, knowledge and clinical relationships they experienced in training came to develop into a political critique informed by feminism. They highlight the effects and futility of taking, as psychology has traditionally done, the individual as the unit of intervention. As in Maye Taylor's earlier chapter, they identify the ways in which a feminist approach to clinical practice envisages and transforms relations with 'clients'. But taking these issues further they point out that the progressive models for practice upheld by feminism do not fit easily with the realities of working with women who are multiply disadvantaged by mental health problems or by learning disabilities. Indeed the very assumption that gender and gender identification is the key dimension for reconstructing a radical psychology practice can be construed as at best reinforcing in another form the intellectualism of the expert who knows best. Furthermore this emphasis on common gender identification, although it may serve to help the psychologist empathize with the woman she is working with, may also deny or reduce the other disadvantages and differences to which the intersection between gender and disability gives rise. Denying these differences serves to mask the power relations within which the woman 'client' is positioned, and thus runs the risk of effectively disempowering her further. Equally the best-intentioned

clinician who uses her professional power in the interests of her client may also stigmatize her further by doing so. The authors conclude by identifying some of the key issues facing clinical psychologists in constructing a feminist practice. [End of page 139]