

## Feminism in Psychology: Revolution or Evolution?

By JUDITH WORELL

**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses the major contributions of feminism to the discipline of psychology in the areas of theory, research, and practice. Among the most important of these innovations are the introduction of the psychology of girls and women as legitimate topics of study; naming and exploring important issues in the lives of women; reconstructing research methods and priorities to study women in the context of their lived experiences; integrating multiple diversities into all areas of the discipline; developing innovative approaches to therapeutic practice; transforming institutions toward being more inclusive and collaborative; and advocating for social action and public policies that benefit the health and well-being of both women and men. Although feminist scholarship and practice have permeated substantive areas of the discipline in both subtle and visible ways, many sectors of psychology remain wary of perspectives that are openly feminist. Feminist psychology remains active, however, and will continue to insist on the visibility of women in all its sectors and practices and on a discipline that values and promotes equality and social justice for all.

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**I**N this article, I discuss the extent to which the feminist movement has altered the focus and direction of psychology as a discipline and the major contributions of feminism to psychological theory, research, and practice. Feminist psychologists have opened doors to the opportunities for a revised discipline by asking new questions, naming new problems, challenging research priorities, giving voice to the invisible woman, revising applied practice (the practice of psychology in clinical and other settings), and applying research findings to public advocacy.

The introduction of feminist scholarship and research to the field of psychology has been relatively recent. Feminist psychologists generally endorse a common core of principles, but we are also confronted by controversies that divide and challenge us. Challenge comes also from mainstream psychology, which has been alternately accommodating, ambivalent, or clearly inhospitable. The story of the feminist movement itself has reflected struggle and dissension, but the movement has achieved and retained its positive outlook by resolving conflict through consensus and constructive action toward personal and social change. Feminist psychologists follow a similar path. The feminist revolution in psychology has not overturned the profession, but the evolving influence of feminism continues. I conclude that the impact of feminism on the future of psychology will be significant and robust.

#### EARLY BEGINNINGS

Psychology is dedicated to the study of human development, cognition, and behavior within a diversity of environments. It is a young discipline, established as an institution in 1892 with the inception of the American Psychological Association. From its infancy, psychology quickly established its territory as that of an objective, quantitative, empirical, and value-free science. The researcher, as an unbiased observer, conducted carefully controlled laboratory experiments and remained distanced from the subjects of study. Although many early studies were conducted with animals, the goals of research were generally to understand and predict human behavior. The outcomes were conceived as universal truths or laws that would apply to a wide range of individuals across situations and time.

Interest in applying psychological principles to the amelioration of human distress and misery developed after traumatic experiences during World War II drove veterans to seek relief from their pain and confusion. Since then, the field of psychology has experienced expansive growth across a range of basic and applied areas, including, among others, neurological, cognitive, developmental, personality, social, organizational, clinical, and counseling psychology. Paradoxically, the introduction of applied practices to the field of psychology has both enriched and divided the discipline.

## ENTER FEMINISM

The roots of feminist psychology were nourished in the soil of the wider feminist movement. As a broad interdisciplinary movement, feminism has aimed to achieve equality and justice for all women. To this end, three specific goals have provided a common denominator across the social sciences: (1) to understand the imbalances of power and privilege for women in all societies; (2) to challenge the disadvantaged status of women in both public and private arenas; and (3) to advocate on behalf of and empower girls and women of diverse social, national, and ethnic identities. Among contemporary social reform movements, feminism is especially notable for its appeal to groups both within the scientific, academic, and professional communities as well as in the general public.

*Psychology**acknowledges feminism*

We can date our psychological origins about 30 years ago to Naomi Weisstein's classic dictum, "Psychology constructs the female" (1968), in which she declared that psychology had neglected and omitted women from its corpus of knowledge. Since then, in a relatively brief period of time, feminist psychologists have made their presence known through multiple efforts to revise and reconstruct the discipline. An overriding goal for feminist psychology has been to uncover, reshape, rename, and transform the face of its parent discipline and its connection to the real lives of girls and women everywhere

(Worell and Johnson 1997). As a corollary to this goal, when the lives of women are liberated and transformed, men will also be freed from the bonds of their gendered lives.

Transformations in psychology have taken place on many fronts. In the early 1970s, feminist psychologists questioned the androcentric bias of psychological knowledge, which they believed reflected a male model of reality. They pointed out that researchers and the people they studied were predominantly male; the topics they studied, such as aggression and achievement, reflected male concerns; and the results of research based on male samples were assumed to apply also to women (Crawford and Marecek 1989). When women were studied, they were evaluated according to a male standard, so that women's personality and behavior were seen as deviant or deficient in comparison. For example, early research that focused on sex differences claimed that in comparison to men, women were less motivated to achieve, less assertive, and less proficient in science and mathematics. These presumed deficiencies were then seen as stereotypes of all women and were used to deny women entry or advancement in male-dominated employment settings.

Feminist psychologists began to challenge this androcentric perspective by illuminating how commonly held sex role or gender stereotypes were biased against women. In a landmark study on gender stereotyping by psychotherapists, Inge Broverman and her colleagues

(1970) reported wide differences in stereotypes of the healthy woman or man. Men were more likely to be seen (by both women and men) as more independent, aggressive, direct, unemotional, competent, and dominant. Men were also viewed as more similar than women to the "healthy person." In contrast, women were more likely to be seen as warm, expressive, and sensitive, as well as emotional and childlike. These researchers concluded that therapists subscribed to a double standard, by defining mental health in terms of an androcentric model. Phyllis Chesler (1972) then proposed that women are "driven crazy" by men and male therapists as a means of maintaining patriarchal power and control. Studies such as these were early precursors to feminist models of counseling and psychotherapy with girls and women (cf. Worell and Remer 1992).

In contrast to these stereotypes, Sandra Bem's research (1974) on gender stereotyping found that many women and men possessed an equal balance of both feminine and masculine characteristics, which she labeled "psychological androgyny." Bem further proposed that androgyny is the ideal model of mental health, in which both women and men could be flexible in their sex role characteristics, displaying a range of characteristics appropriate to the situations in which they found themselves. Thus women could be assertive or compliant, powerful or compassionate, depending on the circumstances. The concept of androgyny as a model for ideal adjustment was attractive for a while

as a viable alternative to prior conceptions that women and men exist as polar opposites.

Androgyny eventually came under attack, however, as just another way to maintain cultural stereotypes that differentiate women from men. That is, it defined certain personality traits as stereotypic for either women or men, thus perpetuating the myth that the two are indeed quite different from each other. Additionally, the androgyny model was conceived in a narrow frame that omits many aspects of behavior and personality that are not defined by these two groups of traits. Although androgyny no longer maintains its popular appeal in psychology (Worell 1978), Bem's research was an important marker for the challenges to sex-difference research, most of which tends to portray women as deficient in comparison to men.

These early studies provided the impetus for a burgeoning field of research and scholarship on women and the multiple meanings of gender. In succeeding years, feminist psychologists have contributed to innovative approaches in theory development and measurement (Brabeck and Brown 1997); research method and content (Grossman et al. 1997; Worell and Etaugh 1994); and the inclusion of those overlooked women who have contributed to the development of the discipline (Scarborough and Furamoto 1987). Some of the areas in which feminist psychologists have produced transformations include constructions of ethical behavior (Rave and Larson 1995), curriculum development and pedagogy (Kimmel and Worell 1997),

violence toward women (Koss et al. 1994), women's sexuality (Wyatt and Riederle 1994), and our understandings of women's mental health and well-being (Rosewater and Walker 1985; Worell and Remer 1992). We have also influenced conceptions of effective management and leadership (Eagley and Johnson 1990) and the structure and functioning of our professional organizations (Mednick and Urbanski 1991). The new psychology of men and masculinity was born from and fueled by the energy and insights of the feminist movement.

Although this list of feminist contributions appears substantial, our influence remains limited within each domain. Further, many areas resist change. Among these are forensic psychology (the relationship between psychology and the law), mainstream social psychology, communication and social processes, the psychology of personality, and processes in child development. The barriers remain where the term "feminism" defines the scope or process of research. However, when feminist psychologists use feminist process or content without using the label, we are often more successful in transmitting our message.

The wave of interest and commitment to a new psychology of women and gender was followed by the establishment of feminist organizations and scholarly journals. The Division of the Psychology of Women (now the Society for the Psychology of Women) was admitted to the American Psychological Association in 1973, and its flagship journal, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, was

launched in 1975. During the same period, other scholarly journals appeared that focused on feminist issues, and research on women and gender began to be accepted into the mainstream journals in psychology. However, the specialized journals on women, gender, and feminism continue to provide the major outlets for feminist writing and research. It is clear that psychology's acknowledgment of feminism remains cautious and that feminist scholarship tends to be kept at the margins.

*Feminist psychology  
embraces diversity*

Perhaps most important, feminist psychology has become more diverse and more inclusive. In moving beyond simplistic questions about sex differences, we have begun to acknowledge and explore the diversity of perspectives among women that intersect with gender (Greene and Sanchez-Hucles 1997; Landrine 1995). For many of us, some of these issues, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, or ablist, supersede and take precedence over those inequities created by gender. For lesbian and bisexual women, sexual orientation may predominate in their experiences. Lillian Comas-Diaz (1991) has called for "an integrative feminist psychology . . . that embraces cultural, ethnic, and social class pluralism" (607). We have only begun to open our eyes and our research efforts to the lives and experiences of diverse groups of women who have remained largely voiceless and invisible. In doing so, we expand our vision and enrich both our science and our practice.

*Feminist psychology  
remains at the margins*

On the other hand, feminist influences have also been restricted to specific areas of the discipline and have not visibly influenced most traditional theorizing and research practices. Although some innovations created by feminist psychology have been integrated into mainstream practice, there is limited recognition of their identity as feminist in origin. What are now believed by many psychologists to be correct or ethical practices had their origins in feminist activism. Examples of feminist-promoted practices include encouraging career exploration and planning for women, forbidding sexual intimacy between therapists and clients, and recognizing rape as an act of aggression rather than of sexuality.

One of the paradoxes for feminist psychologists, therefore, is how to bring about feminist transformations in a discipline that chooses to ignore but also to selectively assimilate its beliefs and practices. The major polemics center on whether feminist psychology is "real science" or "only politics." Although feminist psychologists agree that their science is frequently political (infused with values about justice and equality), they point out that all science is predicated on a set of values. A major issue between feminist and traditional science in psychology is the extent to which these values are visible and articulated or hidden and couched in the language of objectivity.

The resolution of issues such as remaining at the margin or moving to the center of the discipline is complicated by our diversity of interests and goals and by our plurality of identities and priorities. In psychology, as in all the social sciences, feminists subscribe to a wide range of beliefs. Despite media statements that attribute a unilateral position to "the feminists," we do not speak with one voice. As feminist psychologists, we also participate in a wide range of activities—as educators, researchers, health providers, administrators, entrepreneurs, authors, and community leaders—and we subscribe to many goals. Integration into mainstream psychology may be more important in some roles, for some issues, and for some psychologists than for others.

OPENING DOORS

Despite the ambivalence of their parent discipline, feminist psychologists have had major influences in many spheres. Among these are (1) opening innovative areas of research by asking new questions; (2) naming and renaming the problems; (3) challenging research methods and priorities; (4) revising approaches to therapeutic practice; (5) integrating multiple diversities; (6) applying research to public advocacy and legislative policies; and (7) transforming programs and institutions to render them more collaborative and woman friendly. I provide a few examples of these contributions in the following sections.

*Asking new questions*

The questions and hypotheses that drive the research process both frame the issues and determine our fund of knowledge. By asking questions about the lives of women that were never before considered, feminist psychologists have illuminated the hidden experiences and gender asymmetries that remained submerged and unexplored. For example, instead of asking about the effects of broken homes or the loss of masculinity of fatherless boys, feminist psychologists began to ask about the health and well-being of single mothers (Worell 1988). By reframing the research question to address the well-being of single parents, the focus moved to those environmental variables that affected their lives and their parenting opportunities, including poverty, isolation, and lack of social support.

In a similar vein, research on spouse abuse has been reframed from the question of "Why doesn't she just leave?" to those such as "Why do some men beat their wives and partners?" or "What are the barriers that keep her from leaving?" The new questions redirect focus from a woman's internal pathology (is she just masochistic, gaining pleasure from being hurt?) to the pathology of the system that keeps women imprisoned by fear and lack of resources. The questions raised by feminist psychologists have opened up entire areas of new research and knowledge about the lives of women and families. For the issues of single motherhood and spouse abuse, feminist research has been the source of

public policies to intervene, remediate, and legislate.

*Naming and renaming the problems*

Until a problem or event is given a name or title, it remains unidentified and devoid of research. Although women have been exposed to sexual assault for centuries, feminists have shown that naming the problem exposes it to public examination. Two examples here are date rape (Koss et al. 1994) and sexual harassment (Fitzgerald 1993), neither of which existed until recently because no one had given them a name. At the present time, both of these topics have received extensive research attention, exposing the problems and documenting their prevalence. Feminist research on rape and sexual harassment again resulted in public demands for education, legislation, and prevention. Feminist psychologists have developed rape-prevention programs for presentation in schools and have lobbied for health services and legal resources to assist sexually assaulted girls and women.

*Challenging research priorities*

As in other social sciences, feminists in psychology introduced a whole new paradigm for conducting research. They challenged the notion that all research is objective and value free, declaring that personal and political values enter into all scholarly efforts. By changing the questions asked, by including girls and women as research participants, by including research subjects as participants in a collaborative

enterprise, and by turning to qualitative methods that assessed women's lived experiences, feminists mined new territories in women's lives.

Although quantitative approaches to data collection remain strong in psychological research, the inclusion of qualitative methods enabled researchers to explore the individual experiences of women within the context of their lives. In contrast, traditional laboratory research tends to view the person outside of her community and cultural context and thus may ignore important variables that affect her responding. The debate in psychology around quantitative versus qualitative research is no longer an active one, however, as both approaches are recognized as relevant to the questions we ask. Of particular importance in feminist research, as in all feminist principles, is the ethic of social policy and advocacy for the well-being of women and families. Thus research is directed toward identifying, examining, and remediating social injustices and status inequities.

#### *Revising therapeutic practice*

The introduction of a new subfield of feminist therapy and counseling was a direct response to the sexism and bias that characterized both Freudian psychoanalysis and other more traditional therapies (Worell 1980). At the base of these theories were practices that assumed that the lives and experiences of men (the dominant male culture) and of middle-class heterosexual white women provided the standards for normal and desirable human behavior.

Feminist therapy grew from the earlier consciousness-raising groups that characterized the revised women's movement. In consciousness raising, small groups of women gathered informally to explore their lives and to identify their commonalities through an analysis of women's oppression and their subservient place in society. Discussions in consciousness-raising groups led to the theme that "the personal is political." This theme implies that women's personal distress is embedded in inequalities in the political, economic, legal, and social structures of society that disempower all women (Worell 2000).

Feminist therapists typically view women's symptoms as their best attempts at coping with pathological situations, rather than as reflecting pathology within the woman. Feminist therapists explore women's distress from the following perspectives:

1. Attention is directed to the external sources of women's problems as well as women's internal conflicts. This position locates women's pathology in a social and political context.
2. Power imbalances are acknowledged and egalitarian relationships are encouraged both within and outside of therapy. This position acknowledges women's lower social status with respect to men, as well as the power imbalances for minority women.
3. Personal and social identities—with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, ablism, nationality, and so forth—are honored and explored.



4. By valuing women's perspectives, feminist therapists validate women's lived experiences, identify personal strengths, encourage self-care as well as caring for others, and encourage women to value themselves and one another (Enns 1997; Worell and Remer 1992).

The tenets of feminist therapy may be articulated differently across therapists who have particular training backgrounds and theoretical preferences. However, research on feminist, as compared to nonfeminist, therapists has clearly demonstrated that, as a group, they are more likely to adhere to the principles previously listed (Chandler et al. 1999). As a result, women (and some men) have received the kind of therapeutic experiences that are more likely to lead to personal and social empowerment. The goals of empowerment therapies are intended not only to alleviate symptoms of distress but also to strengthen individual well-being and the ability to cope in future stress situations with effective interpersonal and problem-solving skills.

*Applying research  
to public advocacy*

Traditional psychology has tended to function within the ivory tower. That is, research was conducted for its own value as basic information about human behavior and the human condition. In contrast, feminist psychologists have promoted the principle of social activism and advocacy for underrepresented groups. Within this perspective, research that is socially relevant to the lives of

women and families is highly valued, in part because it is more likely to translate into policies that benefit women and that remedy injustices. Socially relevant psychological research has been effective in advocating for women's abortion rights, freedom from marital rape, financial support following divorce, programs to intervene with eating disorders, the rights of gay and lesbian parents, initiatives for funding women's health concerns, and many more issues of similar importance to women's well-being. In this advocacy role, feminist psychology has been influential in moving mainstream psychology toward adopting an activist stance.

CONTINUING  
CONTROVERSIES

Both established and innovative factions within any discipline are subject to ideological conflicts and internal disagreements. Within feminist psychology, at least three areas of concern elicit continuing dialogue and dissent: feminist psychology versus the psychology of women; essentialism versus social construction views; and the question of the appropriate locus of women's subordination and oppression, be it gender or the many other locations of women's personal and group identities.

*Feminist psychology versus  
the psychology of women*

Many psychologists research and write about women and women's issues without identifying themselves as feminist. Although the

issues may be surface or substantive, the division is real and has some direct implications. Taken to its extreme, the psychology of women could include popular women's magazines that offer advice on how to keep one's man or the pop psychology books that opine on why men hate women. In a more reasonable vein, the psychology of women implies the study of women, not men, and its focus avoids a blueprint for the inclusion of values, visions of science, or guideposts for activism. The study of women implies a focus on gender as difference (women from men), and the variations that exist between diverse groups of women become blurred or invisible.

Further, stripped of its feminist value orientation and activist stance, the psychology of women is little different from traditional psychology, with the addition of women as topics of study. Divested of its inclusive and activist positions, the study of women as targets remains static and stabilizes the field with entrenched positions that isolate the individual from her social and political contexts.

Identification with feminist psychology, in contrast, may place the researcher or scholar at risk of isolation, lower status in the academic community, exclusion from mainstream journals, and marginalization within her own profession (Worell 1994). For some psychologists, the risk seems too great. But a recent study of 77 randomly selected feminist psychology professors across a range of colleges and universities found that feminism was protective for them in the face of academic gender discrimination.

"Rather than making it hard for women to swim in academic waters, feminism seemed to serve as a life raft for many professors" (Klonis et al. 1997, 333). Although 97 percent of these women said they had experienced gender discrimination, they found that feminism provided them with the tools to defend against the negative effects of such discrimination. Over half of the respondents said that their feminist commitment helped them to frame the issues and to join with others to combat the problems. Thus they may have been better equipped to recognize that negative social judgments were a function of sexism rather than of their own shortcomings. These considerations of how feminism will impede or assist in one's career confront each scholar who desires to pursue a profession in either the psychology of women or feminist psychology.

*Essentialism versus  
social constructionism*

Two distinct and contrasting views permeate the feminist community. On the one hand, those who subscribe to an essentialist view take the position that women's development is uniquely different from that of men, resulting in women's being intrinsically more caring and relational than men. Women are not only different from men; they are much better human beings than men because women care for others rather than being invested only in themselves (Gilligan 1982). These qualities enable women to achieve greater mutuality and intimacy in relationships.

A social construction view of gender, in contrast, takes the position that the true natures of women and men are unknowable. The characteristics that we attribute to females and males are not intrinsic to the individual and determined by biological sex but are socially and situationally created. Differences across females and males are socially constructed categories that function to maintain female-male dichotomies and unequal power relations (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1988). These social categories then become internalized as gendered self-concepts that organize both individual life activities and goals and the expectations of those with whom we interact.

The contrast between these two views of gendered relations is observed most clearly in their applications to practice. Some feminist therapists, for example, adhere to an essentialist position, while most gender researchers adopt a social construction point of view. However, a new area of research, evolutionary psychology, has adopted an essentialist position as well. Evolutionary theorists declare that differences between women and men are based on principals of survival of the fittest, such that male dominance and female relationship concerns are biologically determined. Needless to add, feminist psychologists do not take kindly to this position.

*Gender versus diversity  
in women's oppression*

The third major controversy in current feminist psychology involves the appropriate location of women's

oppression. Feminist psychology was originally developed by white middle-class psychologists and is believed by some factions to reflect the privileged majority perspective that gender is the major site of unequal power relations. During the first two decades of feminist scholarship in psychology, women's subordination was attributed to patriarchy, or male-dominated social structures. The generic woman was compared to the generic man, with little distinction being attributed to social locations other than gender.

The feminist position of women of color was particularly influential in bringing into focus the diversity among women. In assuming the ethic of universal sisterhood, early feminists ignored the differing life experiences of women from diverse ethnic, racial, national, and multicultural backgrounds (Comas-Diaz and Greene 1994). The insistence of multicultural feminism on attention to the diversity of women's experiences spurred new areas of scholarship and research on the pluralism in women's social and personal identities. The issue of white privilege entered the dialogue and provided another dimension of discourse; the discussion of which group constitutes the real minority became prominent. For many women of color, the dichotomy of gender as female-male presented them with conflicting loyalties in which solidarity with their racial or ethnic group often takes priority over gender. Being asked to view men as the source of women's oppression denied their sense of loyalty to their community and support networks. On the other hand,

"women of color are exposed to oppression not only within the dominant group, but also experience sexism and oppression within their own ethnic and racial communities as well" (Comas-Diaz and Greene 1994, 5). Thus issues of equity and power imbalance do not necessarily disappear within minority communities.

These multiple considerations of the social location of women's oppression also lead to research on discrimination based on physical appearance; ablism or disability; and social class and the situation of poor women and their families. However, there remains an undercurrent of disagreement across the community of feminist psychologists concerning which of these presumed disadvantages are most oppressive to women.

#### THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY

Where is feminist psychology headed in the next decade and beyond? The issues discussed in this article will probably not disappear. Feminist psychologists will continue their internal dialogue and differences with respect to theory, research, and appropriate modes of practice. Mainstream psychology may not be eager to welcome the dissident voices that challenge its supremacy. I believe that controversy and conflict concerning many issues have the potential to open new avenues of scholarship and research. Although many of us experience this conflict as painful, it can also lead to constructive alternatives and innovative approaches. However, feminist scholarship has permeated

substantive areas of psychological research and knowledge. Feminist activism has promoted new structures within psychological associations, a substantive increase in the number of women in governance and leadership in the field, and scholarly publications that enrich and expand our psychological perspectives.

The creation of new structures within organized psychology that focus on women has affected the field in multiple ways. Institutionalized groups within psychology devoted to women's concerns have been successful in making women's issues visible and thus in attracting more women to join and become active in such groups. Within these groups, women have developed a network of support, a group of colleagues with whom to conduct research, and an advocacy group with which to lobby for resources and political strength. Within the American Psychological Association, which has a membership of over 160,000, the Society for the Psychology of Women is now the fifth-largest in membership of the 55 divisions of the organization. Women's groups within the American Psychological Association have lobbied for research resources, have promoted agendas and policies that focus on women's health and well-being, and have promoted the election of women to outstanding leadership positions. The incoming president of this organization, Norine Johnson, is a feminist psychologist whose leadership agenda will certainly reflect her feminist commitment. Likewise, feminist psychologists have achieved important leadership positions in university

psychology departments and as presidents and provosts of leading universities. Although these very visible individuals may not publicly promote their feminist beliefs, their policies and actions reflect their commitment.

As feminist scholars, we envision a discipline that is open to change, that values and promotes equality and social justice across groups and individuals, and that is active in its insistence on public advocacy for the well-being of both women and men from all groups. It is too early in this process to determine whether we have witnessed a revolution in the field or the evolution of a new field of psychology that integrates the principles of feminism into all of its core functioning. We do know that feminist psychologists have opened doors that will not easily be closed.

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