

GENDERED CHALLENGES TO PSYCHOLOGY'S AUTHORITY

Shefer, T, Boonzaier, F & Kiguwa, P (eds) (2006) **The gender of psychology**. Cape Town: UCT Press. ISBN 1-9197-1392-1 pbk. Pages xx + 335.

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The gender of psychology, the *first* psychology text on gender published in South Africa, is a stunning, theoretically and often analytically sophisticated text with wide ranging feminist considerations of gender, the psychology of gender, and, uniquely in this collection, the gender of psychology as conceptualized and practiced in South Africa. The text includes informed discussions of both historical and contemporary psychological theorizing on gendered intersections with other social categories and epistemological positions (race, class, ethnicity, sexualities, and so on), and on the feminist challenges that destabilize these conventional disciplinary notions within the South African context.

The gender of psychology is unique in advocating and explicating, albeit unevenly, the ways that definitive, feminist, post-structuralist perspectives challenge dominant relations of gender power and knowledge production in South African society and, more specifically, the ways that they unmask psychology's regulatory role in reproducing these power relations. By clearly explicating traditional psychology's research methodological practices and assumptions, centring local realities, and infusing the individual discussions with gender intersections, the text encourages readers to transcend categorical disciplinary thinking. It pushes the reader into more theoretically and politically complex conceptual domains. The collaborative nature of the edited text enables readers to benefit from individual essays while developing more robust understandings of feminist, post-structural theories of gender, gender in South Africa, and gender in psychology through the sum of its parts.

This text aims to generate and represent local knowledge on the psychology of gender and the gender of psychology. Toward that end, its major goals are: "first, to deconstruct the way in which psychology has traditionally spoken about women, men and gender; and second, to present alternative models of theorizing on gender that acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of what it is to be gendered and how this plays out specifically within South African local contexts" (Shefer, Boonzaier & Kiguwa, 2006:xi).

To achieve these goals, the text is divided into three sections. The first, *The (re) production of knowledge in psychology*, examines philosophical and methodological issues within psychology. Here a feminist, post-structuralist lens is used by all the authors to both criticise the discipline of psychology for reproducing sexist and racist practices (“This chapter reflects on the sexist nature of the majority of psychological research ...”, Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006:3), as well as to acknowledge the contributions of some areas of social and psychoanalytic theory. Boonzaier and Shefer in their refreshingly direct first chapter, *Gendered research*, establish themes reiterated by the other local, South African authors included in the text. For example, their chapter moors the ways that research often serves dominant groups, the impact of feminist theorising on traditional theoretical constructions, and post-modern alternatives to conventional research assumptions. As an instance Boonzaier and Shefer address a central debate in feminist theories and methodologies internationally that concerns issues of representation and authorship where Western, often white, women “give voice” to Third World or “other” women to build their own research careers. Boonzaier and Shefer direct attention to the local reality: “Here [in South Africa] the focus was not only on the lack of black female authors, but importantly the linked question of who has the right to represent, speak on behalf of and do research on whom” (2006:10).

Another textual consistency established by Boonzaier and Shefer is the accessible presentation of multiple theoretical perspectives. Kiguwa’s chapter, *Narratives of gender and identify constructs*, explicates women’s ways of knowing through a detailed discussion of Ricoeur; Palmary’s chapter, *The possibility of a reflexive gaze ...*, gives readers a very nuanced analysis of representing the “other” and constructions of difference through theorizing situated accounts; and Hook, in Chapters 4 and 5, encourages and develops reconstructions of Freud and Lacan through a feminist lens. The unevenness in the text is first represented in the chapter by Finchilescu, *Women as a minority group*, in which the author focuses on social identity theory, a flourishing theoretical terrain in the last 10 years, rendered unimportant through the author’s use of dated citations and Wikipedia (!) to establish her arguments.

The second section of **The gender of psychology**, namely *De/re-constructing psychological knowledge about gender*, particularises the earlier theoretical arguments by examining some of the gender content areas within which psychology has produced both theory and research that have legitimated unequal power relationships on the basis of gender. The first chapter in this section, Shefer and Potgieter’s *Sexualities* again establishes the themes further elucidated by other contributing authors, that is, psychology’s power as legitimating authority, particularized in this chapter, for normative sexual identity and practice and it’s consequent authoritative ability to pathologise non-heterosexual identities and practices. Re-iterating this theme, Macleod’s insightful and subtly textured chapter on adolescent sexuality and teen pregnancy demonstrates how psychology serves to establish and maintain dominant moral discourses on female sexuality by foregrounding adolescent research in ways that are gendered.

Boonzaier’s chapter on woman abuse, or gender-based violence, directs the readers’ attention to the ways that psychology has focused attention on the individual abusing man, rendering abused women either invisible or masochistic, and completely ignoring the socio-cultural mechanisms of power and control that dominate women’s lives, especially those caught up in abusive relationships. She rightly highlights the ways in

which psychological discourses about gender-based violence are both raced and classed.

While Bozalek's chapter analyzing a text on the "*prevailing* paradigm of family" in "psy professions" (emphasis added) is a thoughtful role modelling using Foucault to inform a classroom textual analysis, the problematic is that the text chosen for the analysis is 26 years old. Much has been written, challenged, changed, developed, and pitched in psychological analysis of the family in the last 26 years internationally and in South Africa. Would a Foucaultian analysis have as much to contribute to an analysis of a contemporary text?

In Chapter 11, *Men and masculinities: Psychology and politics*, by Ratele, black consciousness meets critical political psychology through the lens of a critique of Steve Biko's writings and a consequent focus on black masculinities.

Kruger's chapter, *Motherhood*, traces the dominant ideologies of motherhood in differing historical and socio-cultural contexts, illustrating the ways that these ideologies impact subjective experiences of mothers. This chapter would have been enriched through inclusion of more recent, contemporary theorizing on motherhood.

Long and Zietkiewicz present the only empirically based chapter in the edited volume. Their work, *Going places: Black women negotiating race and gender in post-apartheid South Africa*, is a lovely exegesis of the reflections of young black university women's complicated and contradictory experiences of identity. The analysis is situated in the post-apartheid context with its emphasis on racial and gender equality. The contradictions emerge from the women's gendered subject positions within family/culture and university as the situated subjects are also interacting with broader social discourses of race and racism.

The final section of the book is, by the editors' admission, the least developed. I agree. This section deals with gendered practice and profession. Chadwick's opening chapter, *Pathological wombs and raging hormones: Psychology, reproduction and the female body*, fixes attention on the contentious interplay of issues in psychology concerning women and the body. She deftly offers a theoretical and historical overview of the topic, particularly the role of medical "experts" in intervention and the re/production of the female body in socio-medical discourse.

Chapter 15, Smit's *Western psychiatry and gender identity disorder (GID): A critical perspective* is a lucid critical indictment of the ways that psychiatric diagnoses of GID perpetuate the m/f gender binary as normative. Using the DSM and ICD, the two primary sources worldwide for the classification of "sexual and gender identity disorders" and the narratives of those diagnosed with GID, Smit takes the reader through the historical defining process and the contemporary legacies of the psychological definitions. Smit demonstrates how these powerfully defining texts have constrained and regulated normative binary gendered practices and identities.

The final chapter by Callahan, *Becoming a psychologist: Professionalism, feminism, activism*, explores the often disquieting relationship between feminist praxis and professional practice.

The imperfections noted in **The gender of psychology** do not diminish its overall effectiveness and innovation. If the results are mixed, that in no way detracts from this original effort to generate and represent local knowledges and realities regarding the psychology of gender and the gender of psychology in South Africa.

The gender of psychology challenges psychology's traditional authorities to re-think, re-consider, and re-direct research practice and assumptions by going beyond the add-gender-and-stir response to feminist critiques of established practice. It does so in easily accessible formats. Chapters are short and mediated by illustrative photos and offset boxes of explanatory or empirical information. The volume is unified by its consistent focus on feminist, post-structural analyses; the challenges to dominant discourse; the unfailing critique of essentialism in all its forms; and each author's acknowledgement of the limits of the research and the suggested directions for further research. It is a goldmine of research topics for gender scholars.

This edited volume is a "must have" for anyone interested in a critical engagement with gender, psychology, and/or psychology's history of gender authority. The text's accessibility makes it appealing for both advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students, and as an easy refresher read for more advanced scholars.