FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY MEETS WOMEN’S BIOMEDICAL VIEWS IN WOMEN’S HEALTH


We review these texts as a team, thinking it best to have a psychologist and a physician work together, because the texts seem to represent the integration of both disciplines and professions. Women’s mental health is not encompassed by psychology or medicine alone.

If it is true, as Burt and Hendrick tell us, that “women use more health care services than any other group in the United States” (2001, p. 1), then these two texts go a long way in helping health care practitioners understand the wide range of medical and psychological factors that contribute to a woman’s overall reproductive mental health. In order to provide the reader with a better understanding of the numerous and ever-changing factors—biological, psychological, sociological, and cultural—both texts might have attempted to integrate the most current research findings from the fields of psychology and medical science. Unfortunately, neither fully succeeds.

The Psychological Aspects of Women’s Health Care: The Interface Between Psychiatry and Obstetrics and Gynecology comprises a series of wide-ranging and comprehensive articles that, as the editors tell us, focus on answering three critical questions: “1) What issues specific to women are encountered by psychiatrists or mental health workers? 2) What psychologic issues should be considered in providing women’s health care? 3) What are the special problems seen in a consultation or liaison service to an obstetrics/gynecologic program?” (p. 6). Each of the 28 chapters attempts to answer these questions while dealing with specific topics relevant to women’s health ranging from “Normal and Medically Complicated Pregnancies” (Chapter 2) to “Psychological Aspects of Lesbian Health Care” (Chapter 24) and “The Male Perspective” (Chapter 26). Written in both a descriptive and prescriptive manner, with a plethora of footnotes and references, each is a rich source of information for leisurely or scholarly consideration for the health care practitioner.

The Burt and Hendrick text is, as the title indicates, a concise guide “meant to complement the more detailed information found in lengthier psychiatry texts” (p. xiii). Its scope is wide but not as inclusive as the larger text. The chapters are informative and prescriptive in nature. Medical students and residents who like to carry their reference books in their lab coat pockets could quickly access relevant information in a clinical situation.

Although relationships are a major focus of feminist psychology, there is no discussion of them in these texts. Clearly, the quality and dynamics of the physician-patient relationship is of major importance when considering the psychological aspects of women’s health care and mental health. Yet both texts fail to consider the dynamic distribution of power in the quality of the physician-patient interactions or how central it and other relational aspects are in women’s care and health. Similarly, the relationship between the physician and other health care professionals is a critical component for the effective provision of care for women and is essential for effective team-based care. Yet, a critical analysis of this key element is absent from both texts, despite the authors’ claims that the books were written for an audience consisting of psychiatrists, residents and medical students, and other health care professionals involved in the provision and delivery of consultation-liaison services.

Although the purpose of the concise guide may have contributed to its narrow focus on diagnostic categories and recommended treatment, no such restriction applies to the longer and more ambitious, The Psychological Aspects of Women’s Health Care: The Interface Between Psychiatry and Obstetrics and Gynecology. The absence of any critical assessment of relational and, particularly, power issues is striking. This exclusion may reflect the lack of value placed on relational and power issues by practicing physicians.

Despite the mental health and psychological references in the titles of both texts, the subject matter is examined primarily from the illness and biomedical point of view, supported by solid empirical science and preferred practices. Perhaps because of the biomedical emphasis (“bias”) of the authors, there is considerable overgeneralization. At least that’s how mental health practitioners, familiar with differing individual experiences, may interpret it. Wellness, multiple dimensions of human functioning germane to health, and bio-psycho-social models are among the theoretical cornerstones of feminist psychology that are absent from these texts.

The nature and function of empiricism, as defined in the scientific method, is to measure material reality while specifying cause and effect relationships, and it is empiricism that underlies the biomedical model. In contemporary psychology, both feminist and multicultural standpoints contend that competent theory, research, and practice must consider the critical factors of race-ethnicity, class, sex-gender, age, ability status, sexual-affective preference, geographical location, and nationality (Brown, 1993; Sue et al., 1998). The guide ignores the complexities of these important factors. In Psychological Aspect of Women’s Health Care,
Mindy Fullilove writes a lovely final chapter that discusses minority status and oppression. Although it does not draw from the plentiful literature outside of her discipline, it is a sensitive and perceptive chapter, one that all the contributors should have read before and while drafting their chapters. Further, although one might argue that the value of the guide is in its brevity and clarity, as we have suggested in this review, it is simply no longer credible or acceptable to perpetuate mono-cultural and dominant views as if they fit all.

The American Psychiatric Press should be commended for publishing these texts addressing women's reproductive mental illness issues. However, both books are expensive and, because of cost, may prohibit the text from reaching a large portion of its intended audience. The binding on Burt and Hendrick's book appears weak, which could be an issue if being frequently referenced. The chapters in the Stotland and Stewart text are uneven and several contain outdated references. They appear to be brought forward from the first edition without significant change in spite of the burgeoning research literature in women's mental health within medicine and psychology.

Finally, these texts address the ever-evolving domain of women's health. Their foci are similar, but their uses and possibly their audience are somewhat different. Congratulations to the authors for their research and presentation of useful information. We urge the editors as well as the contributors to continue to explore the diverse and interdisciplinary ranges of women's mental health.

REFERENCES


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TACKLING THE LAST GENDER FRONTIER


“This book is awesome. It is so completely accurate! These students are telling my story and using my survival strategies. I kept telling myself all through school, ‘I am stubborn, damn it. I do not belong, but I am staying, damn it.’” These spontaneous comments come from a female colleague in computer science whom I had urged to read Unlocking the Clubhouse before she embarked on plans to counter the sharply dropping female student enrollment in computer sciences at our university. Not unlike many of the women students interviewed for this book, my colleague was able to persist by rejecting and finding alternatives to the dominant culture of the field. But fewer and fewer women today appear able to do so (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2000).

Understanding why this is the case and using this learning to make structural and climate changes to reverse these trends are the raison d’etre for the study on which this book reports. Particularly noteworthy is that the vast body of knowledge developed by feminist social scientists studying women's educational experiences provided the foundation for the study and the context for understanding the experiences of the students whose lives were studied.

The book is built around a longitudinal analysis of interviews with undergraduate students at Carnegie Mellon University, which were conducted during a four-year period, starting with the 1995 incoming class of computer science majors. Approximately 250 interviews took place with 127 female and male undergraduate computer science and non-computer science majors. Most students were interviewed multiple times. Other sources of information included classroom observations, surveys, and informal interviews with faculty and graduate students. The authors used their knowledge of gender, feminism, and education to develop a compelling narrative about the cultural and societal forces that encourage the current male claim on the computing field and erode girls' and women's interest in it (AAUW, 2000). What adds to the book's usefulness are descriptions of how the interviews with students helped shape needed changes in the computer science program, which were then put into place and evaluated.

Within a five-year period, Carnegie Mellon was able to increase the percentage of women persisting in computer sciences from 7% (7 of 96) in 1995 to 42% (54 of 130) in 2000. This was at a time when comparable departments reported continuing declines in enrollments. The key recommendations based on the study all involve ways to change a culture that is insensitive to and ignorant about the ways in which it discourages and excludes bright and committed women. Most critical are a champion who understands and pushes on the problem until results are achieved, receptive faculty and administrators, and an understanding of what interventions best fit particular departments or programs. Successful interventions introduced during the course of their study included changing the sequencing of courses to build skills needed for success in "gatekeeper" courses, changing admission requirements unrelated to performance or persistence, contextualizing technology, and providing visible support structures for women students.

The book is a must-read for those concerned about the ferocious gendering of technology. It provides the insight, energy, and clear direction needed to bring about changes in the educational and institutional climates in an area viewed by many as the last gender frontier. The book is a guide to wise action.

REFERENCE


Lucia Albino Gilbert is Vice Provost and Professor of Educational Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin. She is a recipient of
the Carolyn Sherif and Heritage Awards from Division 35 and the “Vision to Action Award” from the Austin Women’s Psychotherapy Project. Her current research focuses on disrupting discourses about gender and technology in middle school and high school classroom environments. She is the co-author of Gender and Sex in Counseling and Psychotherapy (Allyn & Bacon, 1999) and several books on dual-career families.

BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD


The jacket photo for War and Gender depicts a woman in a formal, full-length white dress and hat (see www.warandgender.com) being ushered from the viewer toward a row of cadets, at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, escorted by a sword-carrying officer in dress uniform. This striking photo directs our attention to institutionalized and gender-discrepant rituals within formal military organizations. The author, a political scientist, a savvy reader, and a skilled narrator, offers sweeping analyses of the influence of gender on war and vice versa. These analyses cross over disciplinary boundaries, cultures, and historical periods. In engaging descriptions and graphics, the author describes theories and findings from biochemistry, anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, and history, using bi-directional causal explanations and multiple levels of analysis.

That said, this book is also disjointed and lacking in parsimony. Because much of the author’s material originates from areas outside his field of expertise, the book sometimes reads like a back-translation that is intelligent and engaging, but lacking depth. He uncritically presents evolutionary and sociobiological finding as definitive, for example, failing to distinguish conjectural generalizations from more rigorous data. Additional weaknesses include data that often rely on secondary sources, bidirectionality as a formulaic when invoked for 20 hypotheses, and incautious jumping from topic to topic justified by “levels of analysis.”

The book begins with comprehensive definitions of gender and war. While war is defined broadly as “lethal inter-group violence” (p. 3), the book’s focus is not on war, per se, but on women’s nearly-universal exclusion from combat, particularly in large-scale, Western wars (e.g., World War II). This focus on women’s exclusion is fascinating, but it is narrow and sidesteps such influential, less spectacular, and developmental aspects of war as: gender disparities in periods leading to war; stages of war with little overt inter-group violence (e.g., the Cold War); children’s roles in war for both boys (e.g., child soldiers) and girls; contemporary intra-state conflicts; and nonofficial and unrecognized wars such as wars for independence from colonial rule in South America, Asia, and Africa. Non-Western cultures, when they are considered, tend to be exoticized and described in their precolonial state. As a result, contexts in which gender participation in war may deviate from the Western model and consequently offer provocative, instructive examples are given short shrift (e.g., the role of women in such resistance movements as the Mau-Mau).

The author describes himself as feminist and is clearly sensitive to women’s role overload, undercompensation, and victimization in war and peace. Women’s voices, however, weak at the beginning become increasingly difficult to locate in the book. The author frames the book with his proposed typology of feminism that dichotomizes feminist approaches into “liberal,” “difference,” and “postmodern.” This typology neither brings order to his rambling analysis nor captures the complexity of feminist thinking. A key contribution of feminist scholarship has brought class, race, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality to bear on gender-related issues. The anecdotes and analyses in this book are insufficiently attentive to these crucial contingencies. Without them, it is impossible to understand, for example, the Civil War in the United States or wars raging throughout the world today. These contingencies are crucial because they yield a more lucid understanding of gender disparities in exposure to risk during war by combatants and civilians. They also bring an understanding of gender disparities in the experiences of those uprooted by war and during social reconstruction. We also missed discussions of the importance of gender in formulating emergency response as well as addressing gender-related violence such as war crimes. Social issues that we identify as pressing may not correspond with the author’s interests, and it is his right to raise issues as he sees them. However, the curiously lengthy sections on homosexuality among female bonobos (also called pygmy chimpanzees), anal sex, venereal diseases, cross dressing, bestiality, and prostitution among humans do not seem helpful or enlightening.

After 400 pages of spirited, diffuse, and sometimes redundant analyses, the author concludes that we can best explain gendered war roles by “small, innate biological gender differences” and the “cultural molding of tough brave men who feminize their enemies to encode domination” (p. 406). These ideas have been proposed with greater strength, substance, and originality in original sources he cites (e.g., Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998). Similarly, themes that the author identifies as emerging from his evidence—gender is about men as much as women; war is an extremely complex system; war casts a shadow on everyday life and gender roles—are sensitive ideas, but they do not contribute new or practical knowledge. Militarism, combat, and gender are important, but those seeking a deeper understanding of war and gender will be disappointed. We agree with the author’s plea that the topic, war and gender, warrants far more scholarly attention. Indeed, over the twentieth century, war has killed 33.5 million combatants, led to 205 million victimization deaths among civilians (Bassiouni, 1996), and uprooted many millions more. But as in its jacket photo, this book examines war and gender within a narrow context that does not consider wider social contexts and their potent social issues.

REFERENCES


Susan Opotow is an Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Dispute Resolution at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research examines moral exclusion, that is, seeing others as outside the scope of justice and therefore as eligible for exploitation and harm. She is associate editor of Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, and edited a Journal of Social Issues on “Moral Exclusion and Injustice” (1990) and another on “Green Justice: Conceptions of Fairness and the Natural World” (1994, with S. Clayton).
A NEW SPIN ON AN OLD DEBATE: NATURE VERSUS NURTURE


In Gender, Nature, and Nurture, Richard A. Lippa succeeds in presenting a fresh and unique look at one of the most enduring, and some might contend exhausted, controversies in psychology—nature versus nurture. Lippa explores the opposing views supporting the preeminent contributions of biological and environmental influences within the framework of gender development, carefully examining the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.

Overall, the text is concise and well organized, consisting of seven chapters. In the first two of these chapters, Lippa addresses the threshold question of “What is gender?” first examining the relevant research as it relates to sex differences (i.e., how men and women differ) and next, the gender-related individual differences within each sex (e.g., individual differences in masculinity and femininity within males and females). Chapter 1 also contains a discussion of statistical methods aimed at providing the reader with a basis for evaluating research on sex differences more objectively. As promised by the author, this discussion is “easy to understand and light on technical details” (p. 4). One possible exception is Lippa’s introduction of the d statistic. In particular, conversions from d to the percentage of women scoring higher than the average man (and vice versa) may prove confusing to some readers. However, most readers should gain a practical understanding of basic statistical methods, as well as meta-analysis, sufficient not only to understand the research presented throughout the remainder of the book but also to examine it critically.

Chapter 2 features an interesting comparative history of the study of masculinity and femininity, beginning with Terman and Miles’ publication of Sex and Personality in 1936. Overall, Lippa provides a fine critical analysis of this literature. Less persuasive are those sections in which he concludes that prevailing social construction views are insufficient and then advocates for his own approach to measuring masculinity and femininity—gender diagnosticity (GD). While Lippa contends that the GD approach provides an advantage over previous approaches, some readers will not be convinced given GD’s heavy focus on occupational preferences. Moreover, some readers may perceive some of Lippa’s discussion to be sexist. However, rather than diminishing the usefulness of the book as a whole, this section might instead make a good focus for critical analysis exercises and otherwise serve as a good teaching tool.

Chapter 3, which offers a comprehensive review of prominent theories that have addressed both aspects of gender as conceptualized by the author (i.e., sex differences and individual differences within sexes), perhaps best illustrates Lippa’s use of clear and interesting examples to make even complex concepts accessible to the reader. Lippa’s discussion of evolutionary theories of mating was particularly entertaining. Lippa devotes Chapters 4 and 5 to making a strong argument, grounded in the empirical research, first for nature (e.g., biological evolution, genes, hormones, neural structure) and then for nurture (e.g., culture, social roles, social learning, stereotypes, social settings). The most creative of the chapters, Chapter 6, presents the transcript of a debate between a personified “Nature” and “Nurture.” This format offers an entertaining and novel framework for reviewing key points and presenting both viewpoints, as well as the criticisms of those viewpoints, persuasively.

Unlike many authors who have addressed the nature versus nurture controversy, Lippa goes one step further to address the faults of simply saying, “the true answer is both.” He documents the problems with taking such a “middle of the road” approach in Chapter 7 and presents his “cascade model” of gender. The cascade model is a developmental model that encompasses an interdependent causal cycle between biological and social influences on gender. As such, it is one that should appeal to many readers. Lippa applies his model to a number of prominent public policy debates, including education, parenting, and military service. In the same even-handed treatment characteristic of his earlier chapters, Lippa presents the opposing views and research data informing such controversial topics as the value of same-sex schooling, parental leave, women’s participation in military combat, and approaches to preventing sexual harassment and assault. Although the author’s own politics often seem to be reflected in these discussions, they nonetheless provide a sound basis from which to consider these difficult questions.

In summary, Lippa is to be commended for producing not only a thorough and comprehensive review of current theory and research, but also for the addition of his own original work (e.g., a meta-analysis of six studies reflecting occupational preference data from more than 14,000 participants) where existing research was lacking. Particularly interesting was his work examining a potential link between masculinity and mortality. Readers of all levels should find this book informative, entertaining, and most worthwhile.

REFERENCE


DOMINANCE AND INSTRUMENTALITY LINKED TO STATUS, NOT GENDER

Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, we readily think of police officers as selfless heroes. Even our less dramatic images regard police as pillars of community strength (both positive and repressive), so it is no surprise that police are characterized, as a group, by high levels of instrumental traits. Our images are most consistent when we think of policemen, presumptively linking policing with masculinity, dominance, and instrumentality.

Gwen Gerber questions these seemingly obvious and indisputable linkages by focusing on social status in her theory-driven and practice-relevant look at New York City police partners. She surveyed 154 police dyads (66 all-male, 59 male-female, and 29 all-female), and she followed up 37 of these with intensive interviews. Drawing heavily on status characteristics theory (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977), she operationalized status as involving both groups (with male-male teams having the most status) and individuals within teams (exploring gender in mixed-sex pairs and seniority as a marker of relative status within all partnerships). Her findings raise serious questions not only about how we think about police officers, but more fundamentally, about how presumably gender-stereotyped traits of dominance and instrumentality are more closely related to status than to gender per se.

The format of Gerber’s book is intriguing. From the outset, she poses an overall question: Do men and women have different personality traits? The content of the book answers this question by summarily decomposing it into several more specific questions. Each of these component questions is posed as the basis for many of the book’s chapters, and within these chapters, Gerber arrives at discoveries that are used to provide a portion of the answer to her original question.

The book is organized so as to build the reader’s understanding in a logical manner. From the outset, Gerber clearly states her hypothesis, that it is status not gender that primarily determines the observed differences in women’s and men’s personalities. From that, the book moves to an explanation of status characteristics theory and how it can be applied to perceptions of personality traits and then advances to a description of the study. With the foundation laid, Gerber spends the next several chapters of the book posing and answering questions that build to a resolution of her original inquiry all the while illustrating her data with quotes taken from interviews with police officers. Throughout her book, Gerber challenges the fundamental premise of the gender-specific model of gender-stereotyping that argues that gender is the primary determinant of an individual’s perceived personality attributes. Through her research, she is able to support the argument that women and men only appear to have different personality traits because of status.

From the perspective of participants themselves, status, not gender, takes center stage. In a critical hierarchical multiple regression exploring the predictors of both self-perceived and partner-perceived dominating and expressive traits, entering sex first produced the gender-stereotyped pattern of men perceived as more dominating and women as more expressive. However, when individual status within partnership and group status across teams were entered in the second step, all the variability was accounted for by the status variables, with none related to gender.

Gerber began this research with a desire to better understand the difficulties faced by women police officers in being accepted as officers who are equally as competent as their male counterparts. Her findings need not be limited to women in uniform. Indeed, her research is applicable to women in all domains of work, especially those women who are working in male-typed jobs. What began as an investigation with women and men officers and their supervisors in New York City’s police department, eventually led to information that provides us with a clearer understanding of how status-related expectations guide interactions, affect personality attributions at work, and ultimately perpetuate stereotypes about women and men.

REFERENCE


Mary Hogue, a doctoral candidate in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of Akron, is exploring in her dissertation the role of status characteristics on the diminished entitlement effect.

Janice D. Yoder, Professor of Psychology at the University Akron, conducts research focused on women in nontraditional occupations, most recently firefighters.