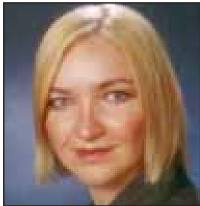
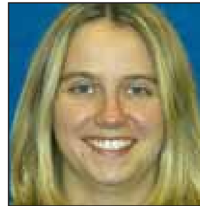
Institutional sexism in academia





Sarah Riley, Hannah Frith, Louise Archer *and* **Louise Veseley** *discuss women in psychology and The Psychologist.*

NOTING that there were fewer submissions to *The Psychologist* by women, the Psychologist Policy Committee asked us, via the Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities, to comment. In our examination of six years of issues of *The Psychologist* the sex ratio of female to male authors has varied from 1:8 to 1:3. The wider picture is not much better: for example, the sex ratio of BPS award winners is approximately 30 female to 70 male. In other practices within our discipline women are also underrepresented, for example in senior positions.

In contrast to explanations that locate blame or responsibility for low participation in psychology within individual women (such as those which focus on low self-esteem, fear of failure, or a lack of ambition) we present an alternative framework, of feminist social constructionism. How can we understand sex differences in participation in psychology via material and discursive conditions? We draw from our own experiences and those of three senior women who work in our area, collected during a group discussion. We also draw on broader debates about women's participation in academia, and the gendered nature of psychology as a discipline. We suggest that a key factor in women's unequal participation in the discipline, and in *The Psychologist*, arises out of a combination of the culture of academia and the culture of psychology.

The culture of academia

One explanation for why female academics may have been underrepresented in *The Psychologist* rests with the particular pressures that reside within the gendered culture of academia. As various theorists have noted, there is a normative masculinist culture within academia that can disadvantage women (Wolffensberger, 1993). Furthermore, writing for *The Psychologist* may be considered a luxury that women cannot afford in the context of their disadvantaged status within academia and the ways in which the RAE and other work pressures impact on their personal and professional lives.

Academic roles are traditionally categorised into teaching, research and administration. The climate of 'new managerialism' (Davies, 2003; Trow, 1994) that now pervades academia has increased pressures on time/resources, producing a culture of constant audit and accountability. Decisions about allocation of time and effort to particular activities (and the imperative to only focus on 'what counts') are heightened by demands such as the RAE. Within this context, submission of work to peer-refereed journals with an ISI listing takes priority. As one woman in our discussion group said: 'For me it's about what you prioritise given that you are so busy, and I've just dismissed *The Psychologist*…it doesn't count for the RAE.' There is good reason to believe that these pressures may be felt more acutely by women because they tend to experience additional pulls on their resources. Perhaps preparation of articles for alternative sources such as *The Psychologist* (whose importance and impact can be measured in different ways) becomes a luxury that is better afforded by those with greater resources to spare (e.g. time, status, a significant publication portfolio).

'unequal participation…arises out of a combination of the culture of academia and the culture of psychology'

Unfortunately, women academics continue to be underrepresented among the most senior and prestigious positions. For example, only 8 per cent of vice-chancellors of UK universities are women (Smithers, 2004). At professorial level, women are severely underrepresented in senior jobs; this is particularly acute in science and engineering subjects, but is also evident in the arts and humanities where the numbers do not reflect the huge proportion of women studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in these areas. Those in the lower echelons of the profession (i.e. women) tend to bear the burden of teaching responsibilities, leaving them less time to concentrate on research (American Psychological Association, 2000). This is exacerbated when women are concentrated in part-time, temporary or contract positions with low job security and primary responsibility for teaching delivery (see Hey, 2001). Furthermore, evidence suggests that students prefer instructors and role models of the same gender, and as most psychology undergraduates are female, women in academia can quickly become overloaded with demands for their time from students (American Psychological Association, 2000).

So women may bear the burden for teaching, which, while enjoyable and rewarding, often does not form the basis for promotion and advancement. In addition, they are underrepresented in research. An analysis of the 2001 RAE revealed that 22 per cent of all women academic staff were classed as research active in 1998/99 compared with 40 per cent of men (AUT, 2004). Psychology is among the 10 worst offenders here. Women also appear to apply for and win less research funding than men. For example, men make more ESRC grant applications than women (in 2001/2 there were 786 male and 479 female applicants), and have a slightly

higher success rate. Women are also underrepresented in the major research councils; for example only 35 per cent of the board members of the ESRC are female (Pearson & Riddell, 2004). Perhaps this lack of structural support results in women being less research active, and so feeling they have less to write about for *The Psychologist*.

Clearly then, women are disadvantaged in academia at a structural level. Echoing the findings of the Greenfield Report (SETFair, 2002) Paul Cotterell, assistant general secretary at the AUT, argues that universities are 'rife with institutional sexism' (Curtis, 2004). This is marked not only by the continued pay gap, but also by structural barriers, such as the assumption of a continuous career, that prevent women's academic advancement. Drawing on Macpherson's (1999) notion of institutional racism, institutional sexisms operate similarly in academia through 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and…stereotyping' and through 'the collective failure of… organisation[s] to provide an appropriate and professional service' to members because of their sex.

The culture of psychology and *The Psychologist*

A second explanation for why fewer women write for *The Psychologist* rests with the particular gendered culture of psychology as a discipline. Psychology (and *The Psychologist* as a forum for debate about it) can appear a hostile place for women, in that women's work may be evaluated differently because it is written by a woman or because it focuses on a topic that is seen as peripheral or inappropriate. As one of our discussion group said: 'I just think that I would have to jump through so many hoops to get something that I actually wanted to say published in *The Psychologist*.'

This perception perhaps stems from the long history of problematic ways in which psychology has (mis)represented women by depicting differences between the sexes as female deficiencies (Hyde, 1994), by pathologising women's behaviour (Caplan & Gans, 1991), and by focusing on individualised explanations for mental illness at the expense of understanding contextual factors (Nicolson, 1986).

Women psychologists have always challenged the masculinist bias in psychology, with notable early contributions being made by Naomi Weisstein in her 1968 article 'Psychology constructs the female, or the fantasy life of the male psychologist' and Carolyn Wood Sherif in 1975 with 'Bias in psychology'. Both were reprinted in Janis Bohan's (1992) book, *Seldom Seen, Rarely Heard: Women's Place in Psychology*. She highlights the problem of 'women's virtual invisibility in psychology, both as scholars and as subjects of concern' (p.1). This edited collection documents women's invisibility as scholars in psychology's histories (asking where are the 'grand old women' of psychology?), the neglect of women's research and theoretical work, and the discounting of feminist challenges to psychology's fundamental assumptions and practices. This invisibility was noted by the women academics in our discussion group, who lamented the neglect of large bodies of feminist theory – even amongst critical psychologists. As one woman put it: 'Foucault can get in more easily than almost anybody [feminist].'

Psychological research has established that work produced by women is often evaluated differently from work by men (see Swim *et al.*, 1989, for a meta-analysis). It is for this reason that *The Psychologist* (like may other peer-reviewed publications) operates a policy of anonymous review. While this is an appropriate strategy, research evidence indicates that a subtle form of sex discrimination may be in operation when reviewers infer the gender of the author from the content or style of the article (Francis *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, reviewers may be more likely to assume that articles on issues of particular relevance to women – such as sexual violence, reproductive experiences, sex discrimination, work–life balance and gender identity – are written by women.

Many women psychologists, especially those who work in areas such as the 'psychology of women' or who use predominantly qualitative research methods, have written about working in a discipline that treats their work as either 'not "acceptable" psychology' (Sharpe, 1991) or 'an object of mirth or disbelief' (Ussher, 1991). The women who took part in our discussion group described the British Psychological Society and *The Psychologist* as engaged in boundary work around our discipline: 'It defines psychology to some extent.' They felt that this often served to exclude or marginalise their own research: 'I've faced horrendous opposition all the way through my career, an ostracisation from psychology all the way through… the kind of opposition I faced all the time was people trying to say that I wasn't a psychologist.' Mary Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) described a similar process when her paper was initially excluded from the proceedings of a Theory and Psychology conference.

Given this opposition, some of our discussion group wondered if 'there is the sense that women wouldn't even consider submitting to *The Psychologist* because they assume that *The Psychologist* wouldn't be interested in what they have to say'; or that their efforts would be met with hostility: 'any time there is something interesting [in *The Psychologist*] it had such a backlash… and I just think why

Colin Edwards, Photofusion

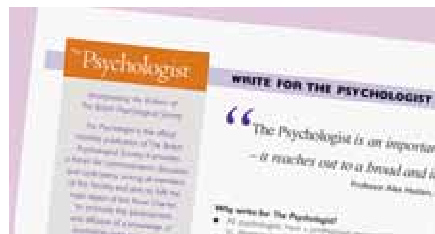
bother [to submit work there]'. This perceived hostility to women's (and particular feminist/critical) contributions to psychology was evidence within women's accounts of being subject to negative behaviours such as bullying or having their contribution to joint projects minimised: 'There's a sense in which for many mainstream male psychologists they think that women in fact are ruining their discipline… they've got to fight a rearguard action to defend psychology for science…[and] that justifies all that bad behaviour, doesn't it?'

Research on gender at work has suggested that the kind of sexist practices described by our discussion group are only sometimes motivated by overt misogyny. In many cases sexism derives from – and is justified through – appeals to 'common sense', contemporary popular discourses that mask the ideology that enables them (Billig *et al.*, 1988). In addition, those trained to uphold a positivist, quantitative and natural science model of psychology, may by definition be troubled by an alternative account. We might also ask how feminist rhetoric is experienced for men – given that feminists have fought not to be excluded from the discipline, we may perhaps have some empathy with the exclusionary nature that some men experience with the title the 'psychology of women'. However, there is an argument that public space needs to be created for women because women do not have equal access to what is technically 'gender neutral space'.

Gender inequalities can therefore be produced and perpetuated unwittingly, through seemingly innocuous ways. With regard to women in psychology, discourses around what is important: peer-reviewed journals, positivist epistemology, and quantitative methods work within a wider context of gender relations (women as devalued, as carers, as being different/problematic in wanting a non-linear career) to reduce women's participation in psychology.

Making changes

The Psychologist is circulated to about 42,000 psychologists across the UK. It is an important publication which both shapes and reflects the nature of the discipline, and profiles key individuals or areas of interest. We would encourage women to write for it. Writing for *The Psychologist* may not contribute to the RAE, but it does have the



'Why bother?'

advantage of enabling scholars to reach a much broader audience than is possible with peer-reviewed journals, which tend to be located within particular subfields of the discipline. This large readership means that we can help shape the boundaries of our discipline and share ideas, particularly with students and those not in our own 'language community'.

There are a number of changes within the culture of psychology that we celebrate. The Psychology of Women and the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Sections of the BPS provide long-deserved academic recognition for work that some have sought to position as marginal. The new Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section should also provide an important forum for debate about these methodologies and recognition for those who adopt them.

The Psychologist has also challenged traditional discourses about women and gender. For example, the July issue of 1989 included an interview with Barbara Sommer, discussing her research that challenged the 'menstrual cycle as a curse' discourse in relation to women's critical thinking ability; Paula Nicolson (February 1989) critically analysed discourses that position powerful women negatively; Precilla Choi (June 1997) had a letter published that critiqued androcentrism in psychology; and in her review of the BPS Annual Conference Fiona Jones (June 1997) reported Lynne Segal's feminist critique of psychology.

The Psychologist has also encouraged diversity in our discipline. For example, the Psychology of Women Section presented a special issue on the body (April 2002) and Henwood and Pigeon (March 1995) introduced approaches in qualitative methods. *The Psychologist* supports non-sexist language guidelines and is supported by the Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities, which aims to raise the profile of issues relating to disability, race, sex and ethnicity (SCPEO, 2002). Such articles and organisational structures make *The Psychologist* supportive of the diversity in our discipline. We believe that the current editorial approach that encourages inclusive, didactic and critical articles enhances the willingness of a range of people to contribute to *The Psychologist* – 42.5 per cent of authors/co-authors submitting articles in 2004 were women (52.9 per cent men, 4.6 per cent sex unknown); the acceptance rate for women was 47.4 per cent compared with 40.8 per for men. To continue this welcome process we make the following suggestions:

- Instate a right to reply to published letters about people's work. Our discussion group had read letters in *The Psychologist's* about their own work that they felt were aggressive. This had given rise to their experience of psychology as hostile to women, making them reluctant to contribute to future issues of *The Psychologist*. Having the opportunity to comment on published letters about one's work, so that the critique and reply appeared together, would reduce the sense of being under attack for the original author and allow the readership to enjoy an engaged debate.
- Promote opportunities to contribute to *The Psychologist* for people at all stages in their career. An example we welcome is the Students page, which represents one aspect of the current editorial team's encouragement of submissions from people in a range of points in their career, as well as those who have achieved prominence.
- Continue to monitor the demographics of those who submit and publish in *The Psychologist* and encourage submissions by people who are currently underrepresented.
- Monitor the content of articles in *The Psychologist* for androcentric assumptions (in which men are presented as 'the norm' and women as 'other'; Bem, 1993); and alpha/beta biases (in which gender is either constructed as 'difference', masking the considerable variation within the sexes, or simply made absent) since these are discourses that maintain women's disadvantage (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988).
- Expand SCPEO's focus on issues of representation in the BPS and consider the equal opportunities issues raised in this article that relate to the academics and practitioners of psychology and the

working practices under which they operate. For example, SCPEO could mirror some of the work done by their American Psychological Association colleagues to examine equal opportunity issues within the discipline of psychology. This work could, for example, be done in collaboration with the BPS Division of Occupational Psychology.

- Foster an explicit recognition and respect for diversity within the discipline. In our discussion group we had a sense that there was sometimes confusion between defending the discipline from 'bad' research and rejecting challenging, innovative work that crossed traditional boundaries. There is a wealth of research that is a legitimate concern for psychology, and we call for an editorial policy and a readership that celebrates the variety of maps we have for exploring our territory. Social theory should be as welcome as cognitive models, just as qualitative researchers should not reject outright the validity of experimental work. We call for reviewers to assess work in relation to the quality criteria set down by the approach taken, and to support high-quality research by women.
- Focus on inequality and a passion for promoting equality. We need to keep both gender and other inequalities salient. Our discussion group described being supported through networking, mentoring and invitations to work collaboratively. Actions against inequality could include challenging the gender pay gap in our profession, when we act as employers negotiating salaries, and as employees by encouraging our unions to call for a gender pay audit.

The importance of discussion

Gender (and other) inequalities are an important concern for everyone, not just women or feminists. As Lady Warwick stated (in Smithers, 2004), there are negative effects for public life if higher education continues to be perceived as providing women with only limited opportunities and challenges.

Despite evidence of institutional sexism embedded in the cultures of academia and psychology, it has become increasingly difficult to recognise and talk about gender inequalities in the current 'post-equal opportunities' social world – just as it was hard to label sexual harassment in the 1970s before there was recognised term for it. Gender inequalities tend to be treated as a problem originating *within* women, who are blamed for their inability to 'live up to' men's careers. Current popular solutions to women's career disadvantages are to focus on improving the individual women in question (e.g. through mentoring, individual support or encouragement), rather than focusing on changing wider dominant cultures and practices that disadvantage women in the first place.

The post-equal opportunities climate can also generate resistance from other women, who do not necessarily want to have their female identity made salient, and would rather be considered 'gender neutral' psychologists like their male colleagues. Women may find it difficult to lay claim to an identity as female, particularly when they are led to believe that if they behave sufficiently 'male' then they can have access to the discipline and its rewards.

With regard to women in psychology, discourses around what is important – peer-reviewed journals, positivist epistemology, and quantitative methods – work within a wider context of gender relations (women as devalued, as carers, as being different/problematic in wanting a non-linear career) to reduce women's participation in psychology. We all need to talk about this, and we hope this article will spark a discussion through the letters pages and online forum of *The Psychologist*.

■ *Dr Sarah Riley is in the Department of Psychology, University of Bath. E-mail: s.riley@bath.ac.uk.*
■ *Hannah Frith is at the University of Bristol.*
■ *Louise Archer is at London Metropolitan University.*
■ *Louise Veseley was a student at the University of Bath at the time of writing and is now a crime analyst at the National Crime and Operations Faculty.*

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