Using Psychology's Feminist Voices in the Classroom
Laura C. Ball, Jennifer L. Bazar, Jenna MacKay, Elissa N. Rodkey, Alexandra Rutherford and Jacy L. Young
Psychology of Women Quarterly 2013 37: 261
DOI: 10.1177/0361684313480484

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/37/2/261

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Society for the Psychology of Women

Additional services and information for Psychology of Women Quarterly can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://pwq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://pwq.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - May 17, 2013
What is This?
Using Psychology’s Feminist Voices in the Classroom

Laura C. Ball¹,², Jennifer L. Bazar¹,³, Jenna MacKay¹,⁴, Elissa N. Rodkey¹, Alexandra Rutherford¹, and Jacy L. Young¹

Just a few short decades ago, an area explicitly called feminist psychology did not exist (Stewart & Dottolo, 2006). Psychology of women courses and the materials needed to teach them did not appear until the early 1970s, and as Unger (2010) has shown, some of these earliest materials were not particularly feminist. Although today’s students may not realize it, even the increased presence of women in the discipline is a fairly recent phenomenon. In 1960, only 17.5% of all doctoral degrees in psychology in the United States were awarded to women. By the year 2004, the proportion of women receiving doctorates in the field had risen to 67.4% (Women’s Programs Office, American Psychological Association, 2006). Female students are now the majority in most psychology classrooms in North America. However, despite this shift, in the increasingly antifeminist, neoliberal environment that surrounds us, the future of courses and programs on women and gender, especially feminist ones, is at risk.

Given this context, it seems especially important to educate students about the short history, but long past, of women and feminism in psychology. Even though feminist psychology did not coalesce until the 1970s, women (many of whom identified as feminists) have long been active and important contributors to psychology. Their voices and stories went largely undocumented until the 1970s when feminist activism brought their contributions to light. Psychology’s Feminist Voices (www.feministvoices.com) is a unique multimedia digital archive that we have developed to highlight both the history and the current status of women and feminism in psychology. It is an advocacy tool for feminist psychology as well as an educational resource for instructors who want to include contextualized material about gender and feminism in their courses. Here, we give a brief history of the project and then present the teaching resources we have developed to help bring Psychology’s Feminist Voices into the classroom.

Psychology’s Feminist Voices: A Short History

In 2004, concerned about both the future and the past of feminism in psychology, I (A.R.) began an oral history project to collect and preserve the narratives of the women and men who strove to bring feminism to psychology in the 1970s. The project started modestly, but its greater potential soon became apparent: Instead of a preservation project with only a handful of early participants, why not expand it to explore the dynamic relationship between feminism and psychology as experienced by the very people who live it in their personal and professional lives? In addition to life narratives, I became interested in further questions: What was it like to be a feminist in psychology, then and now? How did our interview participants develop their feminist identities? How does their feminism enter their work? What do they see as the persistent challenges and future directions for the field? These questions became part of the interview protocol as the oral histories continued. The research team grew and the project expanded. We reached back further into the past for even more feminist voices. We decided we needed to find a way to get others engaged with this rich material.

In 2010, buoyed by the support of feminist organizations like the Society for the Psychology of Women and a federal grant from the Canadian government, the Psychology’s Feminist Voices research team launched a multimedia digital archive to do just that. Although we had originally focused on psychology’s explicitly feminist story lines, in developing the digital archive we became concerned that our attempts to decide who had or had not been a feminist in psychology’s past would both be “presentist” (by projecting our current understanding of feminism onto the actions and experiences of those in the past) and overlook the substantial progress that

¹ Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
² Research and Academics Division, Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care, Penetanguishene, Ontario, Canada
³ Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
⁴ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Laura C. Ball, Research and Academics Division, Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care, 500 Church St., Penetanguishene, Ontario, Canada, L9M 1G3.
Email: lball@waypointcentre.ca
had been made since the 1970s in rendering women visible in psychology’s history (e.g., Benjamin, Henry, & McMahon, 2005; Bernstein & Russo, 1974; Bohan, 1995; Johnston & Johnson, 2008; O’Connell & Russo, 1983, 1988, 1990, 1991; Scarborough & Furumoto, 1987). Thus, we decided to organize the site into two main sections: Women Past and Feminist Presence. In Women Past, we opted to include profiles of as many women as we could, feminist or not, who had received PhDs in psychology prior to 1950. In Feminist Presence, we would use our interviews as a starting point to create profiles of psychologists who self-identify (or self-identified) as feminist psychologists and had received their PhDs after 1950.

**Psychology’s Feminist Voices: Teaching Resources**

The result is a multimedia digital archive that at time of writing holds over 200 original profiles, dozens of oral histories, and many other valuable resources. Here, we focus on how instructors can use different elements of the site to integrate gender and feminism into their teaching and to help students develop more critical and contextualized understandings of psychology.

**The Changing Face of Feminist Psychology: A Teaching Video**

During the course of their regular studies, psychology students typically do not learn about the historical, political, and cultural contexts that deeply affect, and at times make impossible, certain lines of scientific inquiry and even whole fields of study. To help students appreciate that psychology is deeply responsive to and influenced by these contexts, we have produced The Changing Face of Feminist Psychology, an original 40-minute documentary on the historical evolution of American feminist psychology suitable for use in both psychology of women/gender and history of psychology courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Using archival and interview material, it chronicles the synergy between the second wave of the women’s movement and the emergence of feminist psychology. It features experts in the field discussing ongoing challenges, future directions, and their personal and professional experiences.

The video is a springboard for discussion of how psychology, as an institution and a body of scientific work, arises from and feeds back into its social context. Examples of discussion questions that can help students grasp this point include the following: Where did the field of feminist psychology come from? What were the intellectual, social, and political contexts from which it emerged? What issues have animated feminists in psychology, then and now? What was the feminist critique of psychology in the 1970s, and how has this critique unfolded and changed over time? How has feminism changed psychology? How has feminist psychology itself changed? What intellectual, social, and political contexts affected these changes?

For example, in relation to “What was the feminist critique of psychology in the 1970s, and how has this critique unfolded and changed over time?” the video shows how in the 1970s Feminist Psychologist Naomi Weisstein critiqued psychology for having nothing valuable to say about women because it ignored the importance of social context and relied on trait-oriented and intrapsychic explanations. Students can discuss not only the historical and intellectual factors that gave rise to this critique (e.g., the “crisis” in social psychology) but also to what extent this critique is still valid. To supplement the video, they could read Weisstein’s profile at the site and look up her classic article “Psychology Constructs the Female” (Weisstein, 1971). Notably, later in the video students hear from Social Psychologist Michelle Fine. She comments on psychology’s continued neglect of topics like class, noting psychology’s persistent tendency to see class, race, gender, and so on as properties of people rather than social formations. She asks, “What topics do we take up, what are the problematics, to what extent in this country do we really study ideology or class? And if we do, do we understand that these are social formations rather than categories of people?”

How would students respond to Fine’s queries?

Early in the video, students learn about challenges to the status quo by feminists of color. When and how did feminists of color gain a voice in the discipline of psychology? What unique impacts have they had on the field? As Clinical Psychologist Lillian Comas-Diaz notes, “I always call myself a feminist of color. As feminists of color we are so used to contradictions and paradoxes and different ways of empowering yourself. Surviving and thriving in multiple realities and in environments that could be hostile to you, you have to learn how to deal with it.” The concept of intersectionality is brought up by Jean Lau Chin as she describes her personal experience as an Asian American woman in psychology: “I think that not unlike many ethnic minority women, race/ethnicity is an important first defining variable of one’s identity . . . . So the issue of gender is important . . . but it’s the intersection of both of them; never one or the other in and of itself.” How have the contributions of feminists of color reoriented and advanced research and practice in psychology?

These are just a couple of examples of how The Changing Face of Feminist Psychology can be deployed to help challenge the decontextualized, placeless, and disembodied accounts of psychological research and practice that students often encounter in their textbooks. Overall, both the video and the profiles at the site reveal that feminist psychology is enacted by women and men of remarkable diversity and that feminist psychology is itself diverse and responsive to changes in social context; indeed, there are many feminist psychologies. These understandings may also help to combat some of the negative connotations and misperceptions about feminists and feminism that circulate widely in our culture and among our students.
**Women Past and Feminist Presence**

As noted above, *Women Past* includes over 100 profiles of women who received their PhDs prior to 1950 and who may or may not have identified as feminist. These profiles include biographies, photos, links to existing archival materials, reference lists of these women’s works, and links to other resources (e.g., videos, oral history interviews, podcasts, etc.). *Women Past* also includes a timeline that provides information on women, feminism, and psychology from 1848 to 1950. In consulting the timeline, students will discover that although “feminist psychology” did not emerge until the 1970s, many early 20th-century psychologists did challenge the sexist beliefs about women that were widespread in both American society and psychology at that time. For example, Helen Thompson (Woolley) published the first dissertation on sex differences in 1903, entitled *The Mental Traits of Sex*. Students can connect both to her profile and to the full text of this work right at the timeline. Here they can discover the conclusion of her study: men and women are more the same than different, and any differences cannot be interpreted until the environments women and men encounter are the same. They will also discover that it took about 50 years after the field’s inception for women of color to be granted full participation in psychology. African American psychologists Inez Beverly Prosser and Ruth Howard were not able to earn their PhDs until the early 1930s. Political milestones in the history of feminism are included to help students see how disciplinary developments unfold within a political context. For example, it was not until 1929 that women were included as “persons” under Canadian law as a result of the feminist activism of a group of women known as the Famous Five.

*Feminist Presence* features over 100 profiles of women who received their PhDs after 1950, who self-identify (or self-identified) as feminist, and who do (or did) psychological research or practice. The profiles include biographies, photos, interview transcripts, video clips from the interviews, links to existing archival materials, selected references to the psychologists’ works, and links to related resources (e.g., videos, other biographies, personal websites, etc.). *Feminist Presence* also includes a timeline with information on women, feminism, and psychology from 1950 to the present to help facilitate an understanding of how feminist psychology has been part of larger social and political developments. For example, students will learn that, in 1970, members of the newly formed Association for Women in Psychology (AWP) challenged the American Psychological Association to address psychology’s mistreatment of women. In the same year, the publication of the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS; Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1973) helped launch the women’s health movement. If students further explore the links at these two entries of the timeline, they will find interviews and archival documents about the AWP challenge, as well as a history of the women’s health movement at the OBOS site.

The full interview transcripts and short video clips available at most of the *Feminist Presence* profiles are also a unique resource for instructors. They provide rich insights into the personal experiences, historical and intellectual contexts, and professional challenges that have motivated feminist psychologists. They help convey that the context of knowledge production is an essential component of understanding the knowledge itself. As Jill Morawski (1990, p. 175) has stated, “how and what we come to know depends on who we are.” Interview participants discuss how they came to their topics of interest and how their experiences as women, feminists, women of color, lesbians, or working-class women have led them to theorize and use psychology in new ways. For example, Oliva Espin eloquently explains how her research on the intersections of sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender was in part impelled by her desire to make sense of her own experiences as a Latina lesbian. She describes how her research and writing not only enhanced self-understanding but also resonated deeply with other Latinas (Espin, 2005).

Interview participants also talk about the rationales behind the methods they have chosen to use in their research or practice, as well as how they have interpreted and built upon their own and others’ work, often in response to challenges and critique. This material provides an opportunity for instructors to reveal that the knowledge produced in psychology is not disembodied, universal, and transhistorical, but rather, all knowledge is enmeshed with the histories, identities, and social locations of the researchers themselves. This was, and is, an important feminist critique of masculinist science that presented itself as a view from nowhere (Harding, 1991).

There is also a “Resources” section on the site, which includes bibliographies on the history of women in science and psychology, the history of feminist psychology, and classic works in feminist psychology. It also includes lists of additional websites that might be of interest and archives that have collections featuring women psychologists. These resources serve a dual purpose: First, they may be useful to instructors who are planning lectures on topics that are unfamiliar to them or who want to gain more contextual knowledge about the field itself; second, they may be of use to students who are researching term papers or assignments or who simply want to read more deeply on a topic. The bibliographies were developed to help both instructors and students examine how the history of women in science, the history of women in psychology, and feminist psychology are intertwined. Finally, the “Resources” section also includes teaching guides and assignments developed specifically for *Psychology’s Feminist Voices*.

**Psychology’s Feminist Voices: Teaching Guides**

To make it easier for instructors to navigate and use the site in their lectures, we have developed two teaching guides: one
for Psychology of Women/Gender and one for History of Psychology (although both could be adapted for other courses as well). Both guides are organized by topics that would typically be encountered in each course. For example, in the Psychology of Women/Gender guide, there are sections on 13 major topics (e.g., gender differences, sexuality, research methods, feminist practice, violence against women, culture and ethnicity, etc.). The History of Psychology guide includes 23 topics organized under the following headings: Schools and Systems (e.g., behaviorism, psychoanalysis, Gestalt); Chronological and Thematic Developments (e.g., psychophysics, testing, professionalization, World War II); Research Areas (e.g., comparative psychology, studies of race); and Barriers in Psychology (e.g., anti-nepotism, struggles of Jewish psychologists). These headings were chosen to represent the variety of ways the history course can be organized and taught. Both teaching guides then identify exemplar profiles to illustrate the topic that the instructor is presenting.

The Psychology of Women/Gender Teaching guide focuses primarily on Feminist Presence profiles. It annotates the video clips from interviews, which could be used in the classroom. For example, for a lecture on feminist research methods, the teaching guide directs instructors to video clips of researchers who have discussed their own methods, such as Alice Eagly, Michelle Fine, Carol Gilligan, CarlaWillig, and Aaronette White. For a discussion of women, work, and leadership, the teaching guide annotates clips from Jean Lau Chin, Florence Denmark, Irene Frieze, Janis Sanchez-Hucles, and Janice Yoder. Importantly, most of the annotations also include sample discussion questions based on issues brought up in the clip itself or by the researcher’s larger body of work. For example, in a lecture on feminist research methods, the instructor is guided to a video of Aaronette White, which is annotated as follows: “White describes the importance of interview and narrative methods in her work on Black feminisms, especially the need to hear and learn from her participants about their complex experiences of race, class, gender, and sexuality.” The corresponding discussion question is “What are narrative methods and how have they been used in psychology?” In a lecture on violence against women, the instructor is guided to a video of Lisa Goodman reflecting on the reasons for the persistence of intimate partner violence (IPV). Goodman identifies a White feminist middle-class, idealized perspective on violence as one of the reasons for the failure of well-meaning attempts to effectively eliminate IPV. The corresponding discussion question is “How might one’s social position (race, class, sexual orientation) affect how one experiences and reacts to violence? Why might it be important to take all of these factors into account when trying to understand violence against women and what to do about it?”

The History of Psychology Teaching guide also indicates relevant profiles grouped by lecture topic and identifies related media available online, including videos, podcasts, oral histories, documentaries, and so on. It draws primarily from the Women Past part of the site, although not exclusively. For example, if an instructor was lecturing on Gestalt psychology and wanted to go beyond presenting the typical trio of Koffka, Kohler, and Wertheimer, the teaching guide would direct them to Tamara Dembo’s profile, as well as those of four more women with links to Gestalt psychology.

Another common topic in the history of psychology course is the emergence of experimental psychology in the Leipzig laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt. Women are typically not a part of this historical narrative. But as the teaching guide notes, “Anna Berliner was the only woman to ever receive a doctoral degree under Wilhelm Wundt. She first gained exposure to the discipline at the Psychological Laboratory in Berlin. After moving to Leipzig she learned that women were not permitted in Wundt’s lab. Undeterred, Berliner pursued her studies.” It also notes that her profile includes a short quote from her archival papers in which she reminisces about the moment she first learned that she could study with Wundt.

In addition to the two teaching guides, we have developed assignments that can be used directly in or adapted for either the history of psychology or the psychology of women/gender courses. There are five sample assignments described: Scavenger Hunt, Who Am I? Imagined Conversations, Speed Dating, and Historical Figures Debate (for full descriptions, see www.feministvoices.com/psychology-s-feminist-voices-teaching-resources/). Here, we focus on one of these assignments, Imagined Conversations.

This assignment requires students to immerse themselves in the lives and works of a pair of psychologists and to examine the contexts that influenced their experiences and careers. Students are asked to write an imagined conversation between two psychologists, one chosen from Women Past and one from Feminist Presence. There must be an important rationale for the pairing; students must describe why these two psychologists would be particularly interesting to put “in conversation.” For instance, students might choose to pair psychologists because of their common research interests (e.g., sex differences or genetics), similar experiences as members of a minority group (e.g., both were Jewish psychologists), or differing political or epistemological commitments (one is a feminist, one is not; one is a feminist empiricist, one is a social constructionist). For example, Barbara Burks (1902–1943) and Alice Eagly (b. 1938) might be paired to compare and contrast their views on nature versus nurture. Burks was a behavioral geneticist who gave primacy to nature, whereas Eagly is a social psychologist well known for social role theory. Another interesting pairing would be Evelyn Gentry Hooker (1907–1996) and Bonnie Strickland (b. 1936). Hooker conducted important research in the 1950s to debunk the prevailing view that homosexuality was pathological. Strickland is a feminist psychologist who became the first openly gay president of the American Psychological Association. Instructors could also have students pair contemporary feminist psychologists to help them engage with the diversity of positions and contributions.
within feminist psychology. Eleanor Maccoby could be paired with Sandra Bem to compare their views on gender development and differences, or Mary Brabeck and Carol Gilligan could be paired to explore feminist theories of moral development.

Students are instructed to be creative and imaginative but also to ground their dialogue in research on these psychologists’ lives, careers, contributions, and the contexts in which they worked. Specifically, they are asked to provide a preface in which they briefly identify and describe the two speakers and present the rationale for pairing them. Then, in the case of the Women Past and Feminist Presence pairings, they must assume the speakers are located in their own historical period and place but can communicate across these dimensions. Questions to help spark the dialogue include the following: What would each speaker like to know about the other’s experience? What has changed in psychology and what has remained the same? How might each react to the other’s specific lines of research, practice, or way of thinking about psychology? How has gender affected their lives and careers?

Some of the most interesting conversations arise when the two psychologists differ in some important political, theoretical, or epistemological dimension and the student can show how these differences were affected by the psychologist’s historical context or social location. For example, in one of the sample assignments posted at the site, a student put Leta Hollingworth and Rhoda Unger in conversation to examine their different positions on exploring sex differences in psychology and showed how each position was grounded in its historical context.

Using Psychology’s Feminist Voices in Other Courses

Although the teaching resources available on the Psychology’s Feminist Voices site are designed to assist instructors and students in psychology of women/gender or history of psychology courses, this does not preclude their use in other courses. For example, the contributions of women and feminists are not often featured prominently in introductory psychology textbooks. Psychology’s Feminist Voices may be used to supplement standard textbook material to get women, gender, and feminist psychology in on the ground floor of students’ training. Instructors teaching research methods will find a wealth of material at the site and may even find ways to use the interview transcripts themselves as the basis for hands-on assignments in conducting qualitative analyses. Finally, the profiles on Psychology’s Feminist Voices are all searchable by major content areas (e.g., developmental psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology), making it easy for instructors in those courses to supplement their lecture material with feminist content that may not be highlighted in their textbooks.

Conclusion

Here we have presented several innovative uses of the Psychology’s Feminist Voices site designed to (a) acquaint students with the historical lineage that has shaped contemporary feminist psychology; (b) reveal how feminist psychology, like psychology and science more generally, is embedded in historical, social, cultural, and political contexts and influenced by the social locations of those who practice it; and (c) highlight the diversity of feminist psychologies and connect today’s students with the richness of feminist theory and practice. It provides students with access to the firsthand accounts of psychologists who are working to bring feminism and psychology together. These reflexive analyses, and students’ engagement with them, are crucial to understanding psychology’s ongoing and often uneasy engagement with many forms of feminist critique as well as to ensuring the future of feminist psychology.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the funding support from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant to the fifth author.

Authors’ Note

The author order has been determined alphabetically to indicate equal contributions from all authors.

References


(Eds.), Making a difference: Psychology and the construction of gender (pp. 150–183). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.


**Author Biographies**

**Laura C. Ball**, MA, is a PhD candidate at York University and is the Knowledge Translation and Implementation Coordinator at Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care.

**Jennifer L. Bazar**, MA, is a PhD candidate at York University and is an instructor at Simon Fraser University.

**Jenna MacKay**, MA, is a research analyst with Re:Searching for LGBTQ Health in the Social Equity Department at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

**Elissa N. Rodkey**, MA, is a PhD candidate at York University.

**Alexandra Rutherford**, PhD, CPsych, is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at York University.

**Jacy L. Young**, MA, is a PhD candidate at York University.