

Feminist theory in *Feminism & Psychology* [Part I]: Dealing with differences and negotiating the biological

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Abstract

Theory is an important preoccupation of articles published in *Feminism & Psychology*. This Virtual Special Issue includes 10 of those published since the journal's inception that have a primary focus on theoretical issues related to two related topics – differences and the biological. The concern with differences includes the socially constructed categories sex and gender, as well as sexuality and social class. Those articles addressing the biological represent critical scholarship that is working to negotiate a place for the biology within feminist psychology and entails moving away from the view that the biological is natural and innate. This introductory article addresses how theory fits within feminist psychology and offers a brief history of debates concerning differences and the biological before offering summaries and observations related to each selected article. The featured articles can be located on the *Feminism & Psychology* website and are listed in Appendix I at the end of this article.

Keywords

theory, sex differences, gender differences, intersectionality, critical neuroscience, feminist psychology

The entire Virtual Special Issue can be accessed on the *Feminism & Psychology* website, where it is indexed under the heading Collections. The Appendix to this article lists the contents of the VSI.

In their lead editorial, Catriona Macleod, Jeanne Marecek, and Rose Capdevila (2014) highlighted the importance of theory in the articles published in *Feminism &*

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Psychology between 2000 and 2012. They identified 107 articles that fit this specific topic area, making it the top-ranked area of scholarly focus. I was invited to select a “handful” from among those published between 1991, the year *Feminism & Psychology* first appeared, and 2015, the 25th anniversary of the journal, with an eye to those with a primary focus on theory. In the end, I settled on a set that coalesced around four major theoretical issues relevant to domains of research interest within feminist psychology: differences, the biological, power and subjectivity. These will be presented in two Virtual Special Issues, *differences and the biological* in the first and *power and subjectivity* in the second. In the introduction to this first issue, I will begin with some critical reflections on *theory* before moving to the topics at hand. This is important, not only because within psychology (and sometimes within feminism) *theory* is often viewed with little enthusiasm – as boring, a topic to be feared, simply irrelevant to the empirical project, or impossible to comprehend – but in addition, because it will be helpful in understanding my choice of articles, difficult as it was. As well, the motivation behind such special issues is twofold – one is to recognize the contributions of the journal as it passed the 25-year mark and the other is pedagogical, i.e. to provide a package of theoretical work over time that might be useful in classrooms and seminars where feminist theory in psychology is of interest.

A brief reflexive note

Looking back at the articles selected, they represent a somewhat narrow range of feminist theoretical scholarship within psychology. Originating in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, they constitute significant moments in feminist thought within the English-speaking world. It is useful to consider how language still divides us even as we presumably are subject to globalization and to remind ourselves that interesting theoretical developments and debates are occurring in local contexts. Hence, our sense that we “know” the state of feminist theory is ever subject to question. This article then should be read as providing a context for reading theory largely reflecting the concerns of “first world” feminists.

The nature of feminist theory

The question of what constitutes *feminist theory* proves to be somewhat complicated as the meanings of both *theory* and *feminist* are up for debate. In 2000, the inaugural issue of *Feminist Theory* addressed what “counts” as feminist theory in the editorial as well as in an interchange among three feminist scholars. In her contribution, Sarah Ahmed (2000, p. 97) playfully imagined the somebody doing the counting:

I can almost see a ghostly image of a woman, upstairs in the dusty attics of our institutions, counting out theories, counting out feminisms. . . . I can almost hear her voice, gleeful and joyous, as she throws out some works, names them as impostors, saying that they don't count, that they can't be counted. Am I that woman? Have I been her? Are you her?

I could only reply “Yes, I am that woman” – well, at least in the pragmatic sense that I have to choose or there’s no point to the project. Besides pointing out that what counts as feminist theory is diverse and contested, Sarah Ahmed’s (2000) paper is also particularly helpful in shifting the grammar of theory from noun to verb, that is, she argues that theory is not a fixed object or end product but a process of critique and analysis.

She argues further that we make and recognize feminist theory within the constraints of our socio-historical contexts and proposes that feminist theory may include “. . . *the posing of a critical challenge to the criteria that operate within the academy about what constitutes theory per se*” (p. 99). She goes on to highlight the interconnection of theory and practice, such that feminist theorizing often occurs outside the academy, but regardless of location, is critical in questioning what is taken for granted: “In this sense, we can think of feminist theory as being produced precisely where social norms about gender are contested: whether that contestation takes place in educational settings, in political mobilization or in everyday life and social interaction” (p. 99). But, of course, the explanatory work of theory also addresses broader social processes that may link local contexts together. It “moves” and “re-mak[es] ‘what is’” (p. 100) by questioning local common sense and the categories of analysis adopted by scholars (and in everyday social interactions). Challenging a well-worn binary, activism for Sarah Ahmed is a form of practical theorizing – “affecting or transforming the world in a way which is better, even if what we think is better, can never be fully agreed upon or fully decided” (p. 102).

At a minimum, we could say that feminist theorizing entails a critical stance (openness to varied perspectives and *reflexivity* are emphasized) that is decidedly political and directed towards social change (Mann, 2012). To unpack this a little, the obvious political project entails recognizing how power relations are implicated in the restrictions on girls and women that are associated with social norms, the knowledge that is accorded legitimacy, as well as more formal regulations, such as laws. Feminist theorizing, at least within psychology, seeks to explain the lives of girls and women (and more generally people who are marginalized by virtue of their identification with the categories, sex, gender, and sexuality) in ways that make visible varied perspectives. Highlighting such diversity then points to possibilities for social change and to imagine the future in novel ways. Although reflexivity has several meanings (Morawski, 1994), the one that I would like to emphasize is how “what we already know” shapes our understanding of the world. To be reflexive in this sense means critically reflecting on how theorists/researchers and their methods affect the process of theorizing and producing knowledge. This too opens up a space for alternative visions that can be debated and vetted for their transformative potential in reworking power relations and hence our everyday lives.

In order to achieve the goal of social change, it must be possible to *generalize* analysis within a particular socio-cultural context, but the inclusiveness need not attempt to establish *universally* applicable generalizations. Indeed, contemporary feminist theorizing predominantly orients to specific social locations. This contrasts somewhat with trends within “first world” psychology where admittedly, some of the first feminist scholars of the feminist movement arising in the mid-20th century,

who attempted to re-theorize psychology to include girls and women (e.g. Jean Baker Miller's 1976 *Toward a new psychology of women* and Carol Gilligan's 1982 *In a different voice*), offered an alternative perspective relative to the androcentric accounts of their male colleagues that was not particularly sensitive to differences beyond the sex/gender binary. Moreover, there is a considerable body of research and theorizing within psychology, some feminist and some not, that has taken a *sex differences* approach in attempting to incorporate women and men (see "Connecting theory to sex and gender as differences" section). Suffice it to say, this general inclination has concealed the diversity that contemporary feminist theory, such as *intersectionality* theory (e.g. Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) seeks to shine a spotlight on. Although sensitivity to power relations means that even early feminists of the mid-20th century were conscious of differences between women, today's feminist is even more acutely aware of the limits this places on theoretical claims.

The selected articles fit well with Ahmed's conceptualization of feminist theory as a critical practice. In this regard, they also reflect similar commitments to those of *Theoretical Psychology*, an independent but sometimes sympathetic counterpart (see Stam, 2006, 2012a, 2012b for an elaboration of this and how these commitments differ from the mainstream). Notably, feminist psychology and theoretical psychology are generally positioned on the margins of the dominant or mainstream indigenous psychologies that have developed within Canada and the United States (and I dare say, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia). The mainstream or "received" view is that theory is the end product of empirical research, grounded in an objective methodology. In other words, the common understanding of theory is that one first discovers the underlying reality of some psychological phenomenon and then one is in a position to offer a general theoretical statement about it. Thus, feminist scholars and theoretical psychologists stand apart from the mainstream in the meaning and practice of theory as a critical project that questions the status quo and orients to social justice and power (see Teo, 2015, for an overview of *Critical Psychology*, a movement within psychology that has affinity with feminist psychology).

At least in the United States, the majority of feminist scholars within psychology seem to side with the received view more so than with Ahmed (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Recently, in trying to gauge how feminist critiques of psychology may have altered "psychological science", Alice Eagly and Stephanie Riger (2014) argued that postpositivist epistemology clearly dominates psychology, at least within the United States, and that those who critique it (whom they refer to as "feminist postmodernists") are firmly on the margins of the discipline, their exclusion from high impact journals being one sign that "these issues have not inspired much debate among psychological scientists, especially in the United States, other than among feminists and critical theorists" (p. 698). Although they argue that the "disagreement is not about human psychology", I would disagree and suggest that there is a large gap between the psychological projects envisioned by "post-positivist" feminists and those who propose alternative epistemologies. Postpositivists, for instance, are likely to attend to "internal" processes in exploring

questions of sex/gender. Social role theory is one example: the gendered division of labour in a society is presumed to produce gender stereotypes, which are then internalized by the individual to yield a gendered identity (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This focuses attention on assumed fixed and measurable personal attributes, such as attitudes, cognitions, and personality traits and is likely to result in research adopting survey and experimental methods. Feminists who draw on alternative epistemologies begin from a position that is critical of this approach and propose, for example, that gender be understood as a performance and gender identity as a flexible subject position that is responsive to the specific social context. They are interested in how history, culture, and social relationships are implicated in human psychology. The research methods adopted may be as diverse as critical history, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, or phenomenology. What they share is their oppositional stance to postpositivism and their marginal status within the discipline. Psychological scientists' lack of interest in questioning the discipline's research practices is a reflection of the privileged position of postpositivism, and it comes at a cost – a conservative stance that resists conversation with those, like the authors of the articles selected for this special issue, who dare to explore alternatives.

In all of the articles that I have selected, criticism of the received views on differences as well as our understanding of biology, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, is evident. One could say that critiques levelled at the problems of biological essentialism and biological reductionism serve as the underpinning of the general concern with differences. Typically, psychologists hear biology to mean genetics, hormones, and of course, the brain. Within feminist studies more broadly, however, there has long been a general concern with the body, embodiment, the interconnectedness of the biological and material with the social and cultural, as well as the connections between humans and other organisms. I will touch on this in a little more detail in introducing the articles. My point here is to note that only in the most general sense can we argue for a common project among feminists who have adopted widely divergent perspectives with respect to differences. The problems of the meanings of *sex* and *gender* (and any other categories you might think of) and how to understand ourselves as biological and social beings are profoundly theoretical topics and how these problems are addressed will surely have an impact on how human psychology is understood. Dialogue is possible, but a consensus would require more compromise than mainstream psychology is likely to accept.

For students in psychology, who are primarily exposed to the mainstream account of psychological sciences – its theoretical claims and methods – reading the range of articles in *Feminism & Psychology* may seem like entering a new universe. Certainly, students in my Psychology of Gender course seem divided in their reactions to what I have labelled the “new” gender scholarship (based on the text written by Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek (2012)), with some becoming incredibly enthusiastic and recognizing the value of these lines of scholarship, and others finding them difficult to comprehend or perhaps overly challenging of their world views. What then distinguishes these theoretical articles from those one might find in mainstream psychology journals that publish theoretical scholarship, *Psychological Review* for example? I highlight two things. First, they are explicitly

feminist and often interdisciplinary, and second, most are situated within alternative epistemological frameworks (with many considered to be postmodernist) that have developed in reaction to the mainstream or received view within psychology (and other human sciences). Thus, this collection represents a particular kind of brief and recent history of feminist theory relevant to the psychological project.

Theoretical hallmarks of a “new” psychology of gender

At this point, it is timely to offer some brief explanation of both *epistemology* and *postmodernism*, which provide the theoretical grounding for scholarly work that fits under the umbrella of “new” gender scholarship. Here is what Lorraine Code (2000, p. 170), a distinguished feminist philosopher of science, had to say about epistemology in the context of feminism:

Epistemology – theory of knowledge – investigates the nature and conditions of knowledge. Traditional epistemologists evaluate sources of evidence and methods of inquiry, seeking criteria for justifying beliefs and knowledge claims, and ways of refuting scepticism. Feminist epistemologists are equally concerned to analyse the nature and positioning of knowers and the (gendered) politics of knowledge.

She goes on to point out that “epistemology is central to feminist theory”, because “reliable, authoritative knowledge is integral to feminist practices of developing informed analyses of social-political oppression and marginalization, and engaging in emancipatory projects” (p. 170). Indeed, the first mid-20th-century feminist critiques in psychology (e.g. Weisstein, 1968/1993) focused on precisely these sorts of issues in identifying the lack of knowledge about women specifically and the absence of women as producers of knowledge. Feminist psychology is most decidedly about producing knowledge that is relevant to girls and women, and hence, how that knowledge is produced and whether or not we can trust that knowledge is central to its project. Not surprisingly, then, feminist epistemology is a significant topic in its own right, and here I have barely scratched the surface (for some “classic” sources, see Code, 1991; Collins, 1990; Harding, 1986; hooks, 1989; Keller, 1983; Rose, 1983).

Postmodernism(s) is also a complicated and large topic, but it is worthwhile to clarify a few points in order to locate the selected articles within this theoretical tradition. It reflects a paradigm shift in thought that has accompanied a range of economic, cultural, and political changes in the 20th century (e.g. globalization, the rise of the information society, deindustrialization of developed countries). It is also a reaction to modernism, an intellectual tradition arising in the 18th century with important features being an emphasis on science and technology, a focus on the individual, and the belief that human civilization is developing in a progressive direction thanks to the accumulation of scientific knowledge and technological developments. The epistemological perspective of *feminist empiricism*, which adopts the postpositivism of mainstream psychology (Eagly & Riger, 2014), draws on modernist ideas. As another epistemological perspective, postmodernism is associated with a range of theories, including poststructuralism, postcolonial

theory, and queer theory (Mann, 2012). For our purposes, the important point is how postmodernism differs from modernism. A key idea is that knowledge is socially constructed, which means that there is no straightforward relationship between “reality” and our knowledge of it. All knowledge in effect is an interpretation, which is constrained by culture (i.e. the knower can never be objective in the sense that postpositivism would have it, and consequently, there is never a single truth and all knowledge is situated). Hence, attention is diverted from the individual knower to the socio-cultural context of the knower and to concerns about the means by which knowledge becomes legitimated and accepted as true and how this comes to pass. Attention to language use, i.e. discourse, is an important feature as knowledge is constituted through discourse. Thus, postmodernism rejects the objectivity and individualism of postpositivist (i.e. modernist) epistemology. While it recognizes that our ideas about the world change and technologies enable new possibilities, these alterations are not building towards some singular truth – in this sense, it also rejects postpositivism’s ambition of progress.

Connecting theory to sex and gender as differences

This epistemological divide between modernism and postmodernism is central to understanding how differences between individuals assigned to different sex categories have been taken up, related debates within feminist psychology, and to the connected issue of how the biological matters. To appreciate this, however, we first need to revisit early mid-20th-century feminist psychology. It is fair to say that feminists at this time, including those within psychology, were preoccupied with addressing the prevailing assumption of ‘natural’ female inferiority (compared to males, of course). Implicit in this assumption is a further assumption of two biological kinds of human being (sexes), who nevertheless share some common traits, offering the basis of comparison. Most psychologists then (who were primarily men) were so convinced of this truth that they were prepared to assert it without any scientific evidence (Weisstein, 1968/1993).

This framing of a central problem for the psychological study of women, i.e. whether or not there are natural differences between females and males, stretches back to the late 19th century and early 20th century when psychology as a discipline was taking shape (Shields, 1975). Pioneering figures, such as Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Helen Thompson Woolley, sought to evaluate scientifically the assumption of female inferiority and put forward the counterclaim that girls and women were limited by their upbringing and opportunities. As mid-20th-century feminism made its way into the academy, feminist psychologists revived this problematic, and the field seemed to get stuck in understanding sex and gender purely in terms of differences and similarities. As Jill Morawski (1994, p. 21) has so cogently pointed out, this stuckness could be attributed to feminist empiricism’s alliance with the theoretical foundations of mainstream psychology:

Assumptions about difference, especially difference between men and women, are entrenched in the language, methods, and cognitive orientations of psychology.

Even when these notions of difference are critically questioned, they seem to lead to a quagmire of damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Here, she is referring to the debates within feminist psychology about the value of studying sex/gender differences (e.g. Baumeister, 1988; Eagly, 1990, 1994; Halpern, 1994; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990, 1994; Hollway, 1994; Hyde, 1994; Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Kitzinger, 1994). She goes on to note that attempts to explore experience beyond the individual by using theoretical frameworks and methodologies appropriate to the task, such as adopting a postmodern epistemology, may find little traction, especially in the US, because they "fail to meet orthodox standards of the science" (p. 22). As I have already noted, recent exploration of the types of research dominating in the fields of psychology of women and psychology of gender (a crude proxy for feminist psychology) bear this out (Eagly & Riger, 2014).

There is however another thread in this brief history of feminist theorizing on sex/gender differences within feminist psychology that intersects with the debate concerning the merits of making sex and gender comparisons. Alongside this disagreement, the very meanings of sex and gender have been contested. From the mid-20th century onwards, feminist psychologists have argued against a *reductionist* (and *essentialist*) perspective that attributed sex/gender differences to biology. Weisstein (1968/1993), for example, in her classic paper argued that social psychological research on the influence of social expectations on behaviour could account for differences that had been assumed to originate in biology. A decade later, Rhoda Unger (1979) wrote another classic paper, outlining a strong argument for distinguishing between sex – to refer to any female–male differences that could be tied to biology – and gender – to refer to any female–male differences that could be tied to social processes. Although the distinction had already appeared in the work of John Money (1955) and Robert Stoller (1968), who were working with clinical cases where biology and identity as female or male were not consistent, Rhoda Unger (1979) emphasized its relevance more generally and argued that while sex might serve as a stimulus that affected how individuals are perceived and treated, the consequences of the independence of sex and gender had yet to be fully appreciated within psychology.

This attempt to resolve the problem of attributing sex and gender to nature has drawn criticism from feminist scientists, however, for presuming that biology (and hence sex) is fixed and provides a foundation for the socialization of gender differences, which are at least somewhat malleable (e.g. Bleier, 1984; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2012; Jordan-Young, 2010). As well, it did not offer a clear solution as one can find the terms sex and gender used in a variety of inconsistent ways across the disciplines with these interests (Bluhm, Jacobson, & Maibom, 2012). Within psychology in particular, it introduced an essentialist perspective that posited social processes, socialization, or social learning, which led to relatively fixed internal cognitive structures or traits (e.g. Bem, 1983; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Deaux & Major, 1987). Subsequently, much of the literature associated with the fields of psychology of gender and psychology of women has treated gender as the social psychological expectations that are imposed on the biological sexes

(e.g. the notion of gender roles still has considerable currency within US psychology) and manifest in individual characteristics and behaviour. Thus, while gender differences are viewed as individual characteristics that are contingent on time and place and therefore subject to historical and cultural variation, sex differences (and the sex binary) are assumed to be universal. Although still widely adopted within mainstream US psychology and mainstream US feminist psychology, much of feminist scholarship has left sex/gender roles far behind (Mann, 2012).

By the late 1980s, some feminist psychologists adopted a postmodernist epistemology to argue that sex and gender are socially constructed categories and therefore not reducible to individual characteristics (e.g. Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990). This perspective draws attention away from comparing individuals assigned to groups based on a priori categories to questions about the meanings assigned to sex and gender, historical shifts in those meanings, variation in meanings across geography and culture, and the consequences of those meanings. It also allows for revisions to those constructions, such as Anne Fausto-Sterling's (1993) proposal of five sexes (later amended to "sex and gender... as points in a multidimensional space"; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Furthermore, it enables a consideration of how the meanings of gender intersect with other socially constructed categories, such as race, ethnicity, social class, and so on (i.e. the basis for intersectionality theory; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; see also Shields, 2016, for an elaboration of her 1975 history of the psychology of women viewed from an intersectional perspective).

Postmodernist thought also contributed to the understanding of gender as fluid and performed, a verb rather than a noun (e.g. West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, in much feminist scholarship, gender is treated as a set of social practices. One's subjective sense of gender (i.e. identity) is produced through the enacting of these social practices. In decentring the subject by focusing on the social practices and discourses that constitute one's subjectivity, this perspective also rejects the individualism, i.e. the assumption that we are self-contained and autonomous individuals, that is so taken for granted in much of US and US-inspired psychology. Much could be said about postmodernist theories of gender (one relevant author is Judith Butler, 1990), but suffice it to say that once sex and gender were understood to be socially constructed categories with multiple, competing meanings, the very idea of comparing groups of women and men on some standard measure became untenable, at least among feminist psychologists who positioned themselves decidedly outside of the mainstream by taking up postmodernism or some other alternative to positivism.

The biological

From the outset, feminist psychology has been concerned with the biological. As I have already noted, concerns about the assumption of women's biologically based inferiority and the attribution of perceived psychological and social sex differences to a biological cause had been raised by the early 20th-century foremothers of feminist psychology (Shields, 1975). Mid-20th-century efforts to distinguish

between sex and gender within feminist psychology were a further effort to counter this prejudice by focusing psychology's attention on gender as, for example "the traits and behaviors considered characteristic of and appropriate to members of each sexual category" (Unger, 1979, p. 1093). This strategy of not automatically assuming that psychological and social differences related to sex/gender were rooted solely in biology appeared to make sense, but the difficulties associated with putting it into practice, e.g. the inconsistent uptake of the terminology, could be understood as a sign that feminist psychologists would have to come to terms with how biology matters. Furthermore, in current times with the neuropsychological "turn" in psychology, it would seem necessary for feminist psychologists to engage with the biological.

Within feminist studies more broadly, there is a relatively long history of feminist biologists in particular questioning the received view of biological differences between the sexes and the accompanying biological determinism and reductionism that supported these claims (e.g. Bleier, 1984; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2012; Hubbard, 1992). Moreover, in recent times, a number of alternative approaches that emphasize the interconnectedness of the biological, the social, and the cultural have been proposed (e.g. Bluhm et al., 2012; Garcia & Heywood, 2016; Hekman, 2010; Joel, 2016; Joel & Fausto-Sterling, 2016; Jordan-Young, 2010). Within these new frameworks, the biological is no longer understood as natural or innate – it is routinely changed by experience and hence cannot be separated from the social and culture. Again, this is a large and complex topic, and I am only able to point to a few key sources for the reader interested in pursuing this further. Suffice it to say that this is the body of scholarship that forms the background for the relevant articles that I have selected.

Re-theorizing differences and interrogating the biological

While the articles selected here orient to the debates I have briefly described, they also illustrate how postmodernist thought or a blend of modernist and postmodernist thought has been taken up in the journal and how feminist theory and critique related to sex and gender has developed over time (see Appendix 1). They are sensitive to time and place in their theoretical analysis and often focus on particular social locations, replacing sex/gender differences with a focus on lesbians or women who combine paid work and family. Those with a biological interest also take on the complex question of how biology is connected to our social and cultural worlds and how to theorize the biological and material in ways that are not harmful to women and other marginalized people.

Below I offer some commentary on the individual articles selected, by highlighting their theoretical contributions. As appropriate, I situate them within the broader literature to provide the context for the authors' arguments. Of course, my comments are necessarily selective, just as my choice of articles has been, in order to pave the way for readers' deep readings that will be informed by all manner of concerns that I cannot possibly anticipate.

Differences in sexualities

Cynthia Burack's (1995) article on the place of psychological theory in constructing lesbian theory was concerned at a fundamental level with the meaning of *lesbian*. In this sense, we can place it within the broader scholarship devoted to differences between women, although there are similar conceptual and methodological issues to those encountered when comparing women and men. She oriented to a particular debate within lesbian communities at the time regarding the value of psychological theory and practice. As a political scientist, Burack brought an interdisciplinary, feminist perspective to bear and an emphasis on social theory that to this day eludes many psychologists. Her critique of feminist scholarship for its failure to consider the important distinction between practice, which may be harmful to lesbians, and theory, which also may be harmful to lesbians, was directed at both those within psychology (e.g. Kitzinger, 1991; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Perkins, 1991) and those without (e.g. Daly, 1978; Hoagland, 1988; Raymond, 1986). She highlighted the theoretical impasse between feminists who critiqued psychological practice and theory for dividing lesbians from their true selves and feminists who argued that psychological practice and theory renders lesbian identities private and political by creating the myth of true selves. Nevertheless, she also argued that psychological theory is still needed to explain lesbian experiences and identities, both as individuals and in relation to others, and to ground ethical and political objectives within lesbian communities. Finally, she emphasized the importance of situating theory in its historical context in order to understand why particular theories hold sway within psychology (and sometimes in everyday life as well) while alternative theoretical perspectives remain neglected. This makes visible assumptions that are not limited to psychological practices and theories and leads to a consideration of alternatives that may well render lesbian experiences meaningful.

While Burack's article was situated within the lesbian feminist project (see the 2010 special feature in *Feminism & Psychology* on Lesbian feminisms, edited by Sonia Ellis and Elizabeth Peel), Annamarie Jagose's (2009) article, published more than a decade later, illuminated the relations between the feminist project (in psychology as well as more broadly) and the project that has come to be identified as queer studies. She aimed to show that the two have overlapping concerns and are not as distinctive as some had argued. Of particular relevance to the question of differences, she emphasized how the questioning of the category "woman" has been at the heart of the feminist project, thereby opening up a recognition of other contested categories, including sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class, as intersecting with gender. Jagose's primary concern was with where queer theory was headed given its relatively recent origins in the final decade of the 20th century. Building on the assumption that sex and gender are socially constructed and therefore not fixed, queer theory has drawn attention to the constraints of the *normal* and focused on resistance to sexual and gender norms and, not surprisingly, sexual and gender differences (Mann, 2012). For example, *heteronormativity*, i.e. the assumption that heterosexuality is the normal human condition, came into common usage within

the context of queer theory. Yet, this too has roots in feminist scholarship, most notably, Adrienne Rich's (1980) analysis of *compulsory heterosexuality*. Jagose took up a specific debate – theorizing the connections among sex, gender, and sexuality – that is clearly fundamental within both feminist studies and queer studies – and offered a thorough analysis of how this has played out during the short history of queer theory.

Differences in social class

Lisa Blackman's (1996) article on social class was part of a special issue, edited by Valerie Walkerdine, on subjectivity and social class. In the introduction to the issue, Walkerdine (1996) highlighted how the mid-1990's authors problematized the ways in which the political Left and feminists in the 1970s and 1980s had analysed class. The "new" take on class, she noted, was more personal, as most feminists interested in studying class were educated women from working-class backgrounds. The focus on *subjectivity* drew attention to the ways in which social class, a socio-culturally significant distinction, produced certain kinds of subjects who are both subjected to historically and culturally contingent norms and expectations and discipline themselves according to those norms and expectations. *Intersectionality* as a named concept, which clearly problematizes the privileged as well as the subordinated and emphasizes the differing consequences of multiple, simultaneous, and intertwined social positions (e.g. Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), was relatively new in European feminist scholarly circles, although similar ideas had been circulating for some time (e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983). Importantly, the "new" scholarship on social class asked different questions and implicated psychology as a discipline in the role of "producing class as a technique of social regulation" (Walkerdine, 1996, p. 357).

As an example of this "new" scholarship, Blackman's (1996) article is theoretically rich, and I can only touch on a few highlights here. Still, it requires particular attention, because there is such a dearth of analysis on this topic (even today). Blackman attended to the specificities of how historically class and gender have been produced as risk factors for psychopathology. Taking a poststructuralist approach that was influenced in particular by Foucault, she challenged the position that social class is simply a difference in social structure that produces different perspectives on the world. Importantly, she pointed out that even when social class is not explicitly taken into account, it is implicit within a range of concepts used within psychology (and psychiatry), e.g. parenting style and problem-solving skills (p. 363), all of which assume a certain version of personhood. Her historical analysis showed how mental health (and lack of health) came to be understood in specific ways through "a multiplicity of conditions which combine and recombine to produce present understandings" (p. 365). As in Cynthia Burack's article, Blackman illuminated the importance of understanding the history of our analytic concepts and how their meanings have evolved over time.

Moving forward to the most recent decade, mainstream psychology still pays insufficient attention to social class and has not moved beyond a theoretical

framework focused on how external conditions shape subjectivities. Promisingly, social class caught the attention of the American Psychological Association, and in 2007, a task force issued its report documenting the importance, and lack, of psychological research on socio-economic status and social class. Although Bernice Lott (2012) reported little concrete action had followed this initiative, in recent years at least two sets of researchers have offered literature reviews and theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the significance of social class for psychology (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). In both cases, a middle-class standard is perpetuated through proposals such as expanding institutional norms to include those associated with the working class as well as the middle class without considering how the norms of the “other” might fare side by side with those of the middle class. While the “truths” of class as produced within psychology may no longer conceptualize the working class as dangerous in such an explicit manner, they retain the assumptions of personhood of which Blackman was so critical. Hence, the othering of the non-middle class can return with relative ease.

Differences in work and family responsibilities

Angela Febbraro’s (2003) article addressed the long-standing debates on sex/gender differences within feminist psychology using the research literature on the psychological consequences of combining paid work and family in western high-income countries (in particular that portion of the literature focused on women working in the academy) as a case study. She argued that empirical research cannot resolve the disagreement between the contrasting theoretical positions advancing, on the one hand, women’s similarity to men in benefiting from the combination of paid work and family, and on the other hand, women’s difference from men in experiencing stress and strain when combining paid work and family. She nicely demonstrated the negotiations over the interpretation of the research even after it has achieved scientific legitimacy through publication. Consistent with critical psychology, she noted that the competing knowledge claims need to be adjudicated using moral, political, and ethical criteria (i.e. empirical criteria are insufficient). A second argument highlighted how the competing claims are not mutually exclusive and that both are problematic in assuming that men are the standard and individual *coping* is key to women’s success. Taking a both/and perspective situates the problem in how work and family responsibilities are structured, thereby leading directly to solutions rooted in social change.

Broadening this type of analysis then to sex/gender differences in general, we can conclude that research involving categorical comparisons alone will not advance a feminist agenda. How the results of those comparisons are theorized is critical in affecting how problems are constituted and what solutions are sought. The empirical results do not speak for themselves and require interpretation, which leads us to consider the perspective from which the interpretation is made and hence to focus on the ethical and political implications of those interpretations. It is fair to say however that research involving sex/gender comparisons remains controversial,

with those adopting a postpositivist approach to psychology (Eagly & Riger, 2014) most likely to engage in comparative research. The discipline of psychology broadly has failed to move in the direction of critically questioning our categories, and feminist psychology's on-going critique has yet to yield a unified feminist position.

Dana Becker (2010) also took up the topic of women's combining paid work and family in the dual career couple, but approached it from a discursive perspective in order to understand how the construction of psychological concepts serves to produce sex/gender differences as 'natural' and shore up relatively traditional gender arrangements. This provides a different take on why there has been so little social change in this area of women's lives. In exploring the discourse of *stress*, Becker noted how it is part of larger discursive movements of the 20th and 21st centuries that medicalize and hence individualize problems that could be construed as arising out of social conditions. These discourses are at work in popular culture, in the psychology literature, and in the accounts that women produce to explain "choices" such as "opting out". Importantly, Becker pointed out, paid work and family are constructed as inevitably conflicting (harkening back to the notion of *separate spheres* that was prominent in the late 19th century), and while *balance* is presumably the solution, family responsibilities trump paid work for women. Ironically, biological data have been interpreted as favouring women's resilience in the face of stress over that of men's. Presumably, women are well suited biologically for the complex juggling necessitated by the mandate to put family first and the largely unyielding expectations of the workplace! The only caveat is possible *spillover* from one domain to the other, and here women's assumed emotionality is something to be held in check (but again, as an individual woman's problem). In short, all of this works against any insistence that men step up and ensure equity in their work and family relationships with women. The problem remains a 'woman's' problem to be addressed by individual women through middle-class solutions such as yoga classes to restore balance.

Differences in "feminine" qualities

Andrea Lobb's (2013) article on empathy focused on the theoretical tensions associated with a characteristic that has, at least since the late 19th century, been marked as a feminine quality. U.S. feminists of the late 20th century, often referred to as cultural feminists, called for the recognition of the value of "feminine qualities" like empathy and argued that such qualities are fundamental to human existence but generally rendered invisible and devalued by virtue of their association with femininity (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1990). Others however were critical of this claim and pointed out, for example, that these may best be understood as "powers of the weak" (Janeway, 1988), i.e. qualities and ways of acting that aid the survival of those who are subordinated but do not promote gender equality.

Lobb's more contemporary concern was with *empathism*, which entails a critical stance in relation to the claim of sex differences in empathy. She defined *empathism* as "a conceptual slide between a general ontological claim that 'empathy is an

essential part of our species or human being' to a specific ontological claim about women and femininity: namely that women 'do empathy' better" (p. 429). Drawing on psychological and anthropological evidence, she concluded that empathy is not limited to females and its expression depends on previous experiences as well as the immediate context. Thus, she argued that the distribution of empathy work is a political and an ethical issue (by now a familiar argument across the articles taking on the problem of sex differences), with women bearing the cost of putting others' needs, principally those of children and men, ahead of their own. Theorizing empathy as a human value and re-distributing empathy work between the sexes seems the solution, but effective strategies remain elusive.

Differences in biology

Peter Hegarty (1997) focused on the claims of Simon LeVay whose published research was widely acclaimed as demonstrating a difference in the brains of gay men and heterosexual men. He noted the weaknesses of the research when viewed through a scientific lens, and how despite these, highly regarded scientific publications such as *Science* entertained it as scientific "fact". Drawing on Judith Butler (1993), he showed that how LeVay's research has been taken up rests on a number of normative claims. First and foremost, there is the assumption of two biological kinds – heterosexuals and homosexuals. Reviewing the history of the specific, western understanding of this taken up by LeVay, Hegarty showed how the gay man (and his brain) is *materialized* as "female" and lacking. Women's experiences, especially lesbian women, are rendered invisible. His primary aim however was to problematize "the claims that neuroscience reveals the underlying materiality of human psychology" (p. 368). Instead, he argued, discourses direct the focus of the research, the specific ways in which concepts like *sexual orientation* and *the structure of the hypothalamus* are materialized, and which research results garner sufficient attention to become accepted as knowledge. This of course calls into question the assumptions of postpositivist psychology, i.e. that by "looking" in the right place with unbiased tools, the secrets of the human brain will be revealed and that these secrets can adequately account for the psychology of sexuality.

Linda Birke's (2010) article also rendered problematic how the biological is taken up within psychology. Her interest however was in the use of non-human animals within psychological research and their relationships with human researchers. Here, a binary is created such that non-human animals are associated with the purely biological (they *only* have sex), whereas humans are biological beings contaminated by culture (we have sex and gender). She argued that early second wave feminists distanced themselves from non-human animal research because they were concerned to demonstrate the social construction, and hence arbitrariness, of gender. Consequently, they were unable to address the meanings of biology for humans. However, biology need not be understood as fixed and stable, which means that it is not inconsistent with a malleable gender that affords the possibility of social change. As she noted, studying the lives of non-human animals may actually contribute to how we theorize gender if research allows for non-human

animals to be other than “biological automata” (p. 340). Thus, just as feminist critiques of science have highlighted how standard research practices constrain knowledge about the psychology of girls and women, Linda Birke emphasized how standard research practices constrain knowledge about non-human animals, objectifying them and denying them agency. The boundaries constructed between humans and non-human animals in psychology contrast with the everyday world in which humans and non-human animals interact in ways that suggest relationality, communication, and interconnection. Reconsidering this may lead to a rethinking of how the biological, the psychological, the social, and the cultural interact and mingle.

Finally, the article by Clifford van Ommen and Vasi van Deventer (2011) can be situated within the emerging field of critical neuroscience and the broad feminist literature that has been questioning a range of relevant binaries, including sex/gender and biology/culture. They troubled these binaries by engaging in a deconstructive reading of one Goldberg’s texts. Although agreeing with the claim that the cortex is “sculpted” by the environment and there is a relationship between structure and function (i.e. cognition) of the cortex, they recognized that *sex* and *biology* are not fixed and ahistorical, but rather, mutable and dependent on past experience and the present context. Thus, gender variation is not overlaid on a stable biology – biology is itself subject to change based on experience. This draws attention to the variability in morphology and function that is beyond the binary. It opens up the possibility of multiple sexes and highlights again how the biological and the social/cultural are intertwined and cannot be treated as independent.

Conclusion

Throughout the pages of *Feminism & Psychology*, one can find significant theoretical analysis. The articles selected for this virtual issue are explicitly oriented to theory and weighed in on two of the central theoretical conversations within feminist scholarship, both in the past and at present. In my view, the import of theory is not overrated by giving it special attention, nor should students or feminist researchers treat theory as something beyond or outside of ordinary psychological research. Feminism cannot fail to be theoretical: “Feminism is ‘incipiently theoretical’ to the extent that it understands the plights of individual women as connected with each other, as instances of *systemic subordination* rather than as the results of individual, accidental, or coincidental misfortune” (Mann, 2012, p. 9). This quote also points to a tension that pervades the consideration of differences within feminist psychology. Namely, in focusing on differences one necessarily loses sight of the similarities, and in focusing on similarities one necessarily glosses over differences. Feminist psychology depends on there being women and girls, men and boys, even though it continuously questions those categories and explores the variations within.

We are at a point in history where the need to come to grips with the biological is necessary. The turn to neuroscience in some psychologies (such as the mainstream of US psychology) makes this a priority if feminist psychology, despite its

marginality, is to remain relevant to the discipline. The relevant feminist scholarship on this topic is promising. It both offers critique of the received view and accompanying practices as well as theorizing how biology, the social, and culture are interconnected.

In selecting the articles for the virtual issue, I necessarily needed to differentiate and omit those that were empirical but nevertheless included important theoretical analysis. As my aim in this introductory piece was to argue that theory is an inevitable practice within the research domain, I can only encourage the readers of this issue not to overlook feminist empirical research published in *Feminism & Psychology* when they are searching for useful theory on a topic. As for those articles included here, they offer both critique and a way forward for addressing difference and negotiating the biological.

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Appendix I

- Becker, D. (2010). Women's work and the societal discourse of stress. *Feminism & Psychology, 20*, 36–52.
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