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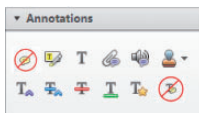
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# Special Focus: Revisiting “the woman question”

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## Keywords

Stephanie shields, functionalism, Darwinism, social myths, history of the psychology of women

## Introduction

This Special Focus celebrates Stephanie Shields’ classic 1975 paper “Functionalism, Darwinism and the psychology of women: A study in social myth.” In this paper, Shields undertook a historical analysis of psychological research from the mid-nineteenth century up until the early 20th century – a time during which psychology became established as a formal discipline. Shields argued that the search for sex differences in psychology occurred against a backdrop of the emergence of the functionalist movement in the mid-1900s in the United States. The popularisation of functionalism coincided with a sustained interest in the biological foundations of intelligence. Taken together, these two intellectual currents stimulated discussion in psychology around the existence of sex differences in general and in relation to intelligence in particular. Shields traced a path through theory and research on sex differences in the brain to form a cogent analysis of how scientific theorisations were grounded in and perpetuated social myths around women’s inferiority in comparison to men. Important to this historical analysis was how ideas of male superiority were commonly grounded in explanations from evolutionary theory. As Shields noted, the variability hypothesis became central to the study of sex differences in psychology. The variability hypothesis posited that deviations from the average or norm were a key to evolutionary selection processes. Shields noted that a number of arguments were

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advanced to suggest that men were the more variable sex. For example, men had been argued to demonstrate a greater range of ability, both at the higher and lower ends, on a number of variables including intelligence and creativity, and so perhaps not surprisingly this greater variability was taken as evidence to suggest that men were naturally more evolved than women. Alongside these arguments, Shields pointed to the ways in which popular conceptions of a maternal instinct were constructed to render women as less developed. For example, one such argument suggested that, biologically speaking, women's efforts were primarily devoted to the preparation of the body for pregnancy, which left little energy for the development of other (intellectual) capacities.

Shields' classic article joined a small but growing collection of papers that were published during the 1960s and 1970s against a backdrop of political activities of feminist and women's movements. It is certainly not uncommon in more recent work on the history of the psychology of women and feminist psychologies to see Shields' work discussed alongside, for example, Betty Friedan's (1963) *The feminine mystique*, which provides a powerful analysis of how social scientific claims supported prejudicial views of women, or Naomi Weisstein's (1968/1993) critique of problematic representations of women's inferior capabilities in relation to men in her seminal paper "Psychology constructs the female" (see, for example, Capdevila & Lazard, 2015). During this particular historical period, Shields' paper lent weight to the political challenges that were steadily gaining momentum in the science of psychology. It was influential in the subsequent burgeoning body of feminist work that critiqued the status of scientific knowledge and practice as well as raising a series of issues that were pertinent to understanding women in the discipline of psychology both as contributors to and objects of knowledge. This served as a starting point in our call for papers for this special issue where we posed the following questions: (1) In psychology, what are the highlights of the debates in the last 40 years around the study of women? In particular, what are the contemporary challenges to "scientific myths" and heteronormative assumptions in psychological theory? (2) How has the relationship between feminist theory and evolutionary theory evolved, particularly in relation to the study of sex differences (for example, social, behavioural, neurobiological) and the dichotomisation of nature and nurture? (3) How is "maternal instinct" understood today in psychology? How does psychology theorise the relationship between notions of "family" and challenges/choices that women face in contemporary societies? In the papers that are featured in this Special Focus, these issues have been examined in a number of ways.

## **Representation and visibility of women in psychology**

Shields (1975) drew attention to "an almost universal ignorance of the psychology of women in the history of psychology as it existed prior to its incorporation into psychoanalytic theory" (p. 739). The relative absence of women in dominant versions of psychology's formal history led to calls for attention to gender inequities by scholars working under the rubric of feminism and the psychology of women. This body of work became focused on a now-familiar story of the ways in which

women and women's experiences were routinely underplayed, made invisible or pathologised. Subsequent to Shields' publication, Crawford and Marecek (1989) used the term "womanless" to describe this state of affairs in psychology. As the editors raised in the Call for Papers for this Special Focus, Shields not only commented on the under-representation of women scholars but also went some way to address it by flagging the contributions of the forbearers of the psychology of women and of feminist psychology. Noteworthy for Shields was the work of Mary Whiton Calkins (1896), Helen Thompson Woolley (1903) and Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1914). These scholars explored gender biases operating in conclusions drawn around the use of the variability hypothesis to explain sex differences in intellect. Calkins, Thompson Woolley and Hollingworth all pointed to the important impact of social factors for making sense of observed sex differences. However, Shields noted that these early criticisms and calls for a sustained focus on the impact of social issues on sex differences were, by and large, ignored. The search for (innate) differences between men and women continued unabated.

Shields noted that implications of the early "womanless" and androcentric work on biological sex differences were far-reaching. Psychological theorisations of women's inferiority in comparison to men supported popular ideas at the time around the need for separate education for women for the purpose of preparing them for domestic life and more "feminine" professions (Shields, 1975, 1982). Policy recommendations about women's education were made on the back of the variability hypothesis. For example, Edward Thorndike (1906), who later became the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, spoke of the need to restrict and tailor women's education to the average so that it would complement their intellectual convergence to the mean. According to Fehr (2007), whilst the variability hypothesis was drawn on as an explanation less frequently from the 1980s onwards, this did not curtail the androcentric biases that seeped into popular explanations for discrimination against women in male-dominated educational and professional fields. As an example, she cites the high profile and widespread coverage given to Harvard President Lawrence Summers in 2005 for his comments on women's under-representation in science and engineering. Summers controversially suggested that intrinsic sex differences, which favour men, appeared to manifest particularly at the high end of intellectual abilities.

In this Special Focus, two articles return to Shields' concerns around the invisibility of women psychologists. Vaid and Geraci (2016) discuss the under-representation of women in the field of cognitive psychology. They discuss the impact of androcentric biases and in particular a form that they term autonomous mind bias operating within this field. More specifically, they argue that the latter form of bias is based on the possibilities of studying mental processes independent of social (gendered) context. This assumption becomes extended to the broader research activities in the discipline, which render gendered social structures of inequity invisible.

Vaid and Geraci's (2016) discussion of the under-representation of women in the production of cognitive psychological knowledge resonates with issues raised by Unger and Dottolo (2016). Included in their commentary on four major

contributions of Shields' (1975) paper is their point about the importance of revisiting history to glean insight from earlier feminist challenges to gender inequalities. With this in mind, Unger and Dottolo review the ways in which the processes of publication and citation have historically worked to obscure the contributions made by the forbearers of feminist psychology. They provide a brief history of where Shields' 1975 paper sits in relation to other pivotal work published around the same time which challenged biologically determined and/or androcentric psychological explanations of sex differences across a range of abilities. They also note the ways in which this body of work produced in the 1970s attempted to change the conversation in a number of ways (Unger, 1979). Unger and Dottolo also highlight in their discussion how such challenges came up against a deep entrenchment of essentialised understandings of sex which were and still are difficult to shift and change.

The issues regarding the processes of publication and citation raised in the article by Unger and Dottolo find further resonance in the paper by Lee, Rutherford, and Petit (2016). More specifically, Lee, Rutherford and Petit address the reception of Shields' article by two different discourse communities. They remind us that 1970s witnessed the emergence of the critical history literature alongside the feminist psychology literature. In their paper, they position Shields as both a critical historian of psychology and a feminist psychologist, and her article as heralding the rise of the genre of critical feminist history of psychology. As feminist historians of psychology themselves, the authors ask the question of how the Shields article has been received within the critical history and feminist psychology communities. They empirically assessed this reception by conducting citation and co-citation analyses using different databases to maximise the results that were captured. Their excavation yields different patterns of the distribution of citations from the two discourse communities. Lee, Rutherford and Petit's paper contributes to enhancing institutional memory within psychology, which Unger and Dottolo (2016) note is relatively weak. As also pointed out by Unger and Dottolo in their paper, Rutherford is well known for having led the development of an online project entitled "Psychology's Feminist Voices" (<http://www.feministvoices.com>), which is a rich multi-media resource that challenges the invisibility of women in psychology and continues the mission that Shields and others started in the 1970s.

## **Feminist challenges to biological determinism**

The sentiments of Shields' cogent analysis of biologically determined sex differences for (re)producing and maintaining gender inequalities were reflected in subsequent feminist critique. More specifically, a body of feminist work sought to challenge the conflation of women's experiences and capabilities with representations of inferior or problematic female biology (see, for example, Bleier, 1984; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2000; Ussher, 2006). The relevance of Shields' early analysis to the current cultural context is perhaps best demonstrated through developments in neuroscience during the recent history of the discipline of psychology. We have

witnessed the rise and promulgation of ideas from the neuroscientific study of sex differences and concomitantly “neurosexism” (Fine, 2010, 2013). As Jordan-Young and Rumiati (2013) point out, typical of neuroscientific approaches is the treatment of sex as a set of characteristics that “male versus female people (and sometimes other animals) have and the goal of many neuroscience studies is to add to an ever-growing catalogue of male/female differences – both what they are and how they arise” (p. 193). In ways reminiscent of the forebearers of feminist psychology described in Shields’ 1975 article, neurofeminist work continues to challenge the conflation of biological sex with gender as a social phenomenon in explanations of differences in neural activity between men and women (e.g. Fine) as well as methodological and conceptual choices in the way that sex differences are explored (Jordan-Young & Rumiati, 2013).

The ways in which biological accounts of sex differences continue to legitimise problematic claims of sex difference is an issue that is picked up by Hegarty (2016) in his commentary. Hegarty discusses the continued mythical function of psychological theorisation and research on brains, instinct and statistical variability. In mapping the terrain, Hegarty begins by examining the ways in which more recent gender brain theories produce gendered/sexualised differences despite the move away from explanations rooted in biological determinism to neural plasticity. He draws on examples from work on neurological explanations of homosexuality as well as hormonal intervention with intersex children to demonstrate biologically mediated forms of mother blaming myths. In Shields’ 1975 paper, myths about motherhood were grounded in the concept of maternal instinct, which was linked to the physical reproductive capacities of women in evolutionary arguments. Hegarty takes this as a point of departure to discuss the uneasy relationship between the objective science stance of evolutionary theory and the political position of feminism.

This is not to say that feminist engagements with biological theorisation have not moved on since Shields’ early work. The contributions in this special issue highlight the complexity of feminist engagements with issues around biological sex. For example, Joel (2016) discusses “sex” in her article as a “cause,” that is, a system that has genetic and hormonal components that affects other systems (e.g. the genitalia, the brain). In her article, Joel questions the taken-for-granted idea that sex causes dimorphic systems (such as sex differentiated patterns in brain functioning, for example). Joel argues that unlike the role of sex in the development of distinct genitalia, sex is just one of an array of factors (e.g. genetic variation, environment) that interact to shape the form of the brain. Drawing on a number of animal and human research studies, Joel, points to a lack of evidence for categorising men and women into distinct categories.

The interaction of biology and environment is further explored by Garcia and Heywood (2016) who discuss attempts to create a dialogue and identify points of intersection between feminisms and evolutionary theory. They note that the substantial difficulties for transdisciplinary movement across these areas of study are rooted in the early biological determinism of sex differences described by Shields as well as the more recent expressions of androcentric bias and neurosexism in the



field of psychology. However, Garcia and Heywood suggest that newer developments in evolutionary thinking may work as a basis for integrating feminist ideas. More specifically, the authors argue that the evolution of human behaviour does not occur in a social vacuum, but rather, that the products of evolution – adaptations – are plastic and subject to change. For Garcia and Heywood, the intersection of feminism and evolutionary theory may lie in the consideration of the how, when and why culture and biology come together to shape the psychology of gender and sexuality.

Possible intersections of feminism with evolutionary theory and nature explanations of gender more generally are taken up by Eagly (2016). Eagly starts by drawing attention to how critiques of the gender inequalities produced by scientific mainstream psychology have shaped a complex bifurcation of methodologies embraced within the psychology of women. This is characterised by those embracing either postmodern or postpositivist epistemological positions. In her paper, Eagly explores the implications of these two cultures of methodological work for extending the challenge to androcentric bias operating in modern psychology. More specifically, Eagly espouses the postpositivist feminist position, which she argues has increasingly acknowledged the impact of culture, ideology and language on shaping the outcomes of psychological research. Using this theoretical framework, Eagly makes the case for the value of contextual patterning of sex differences and similarities in general and of biological processes in particular.

### **Reconceptualising “difference”**

Whilst Shields' 1975 article critiqued explanations of biologically produced sex differences as supporting and maintaining a gendered status quo, it nevertheless hints at other axes of power in operation. As Shields (1975) pointed out “The leitmotiv of evolutionary theory as it came to be applied to the social sciences was the evolutionary supremacy of the *Caucasian* male” (p.739, our emphasis). The analysis of power across an array of fault lines (for example, disability, “race,” “class,” sexuality, to name but a few) has been central to critiques of “difference” from scholars working in the arenas of the psychology of women and feminism. For example, Fine and Addelston (1996) questioned the use of sameness and difference in psychological explanations because institutional power draws on and depends on both discourses. Very importantly, the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has been introduced as a means to move away from “difference” research that attempts to break down complex identity positions as if they were easily isolatable variables. Rather intersectionality begins to capture the irreducible complexity of gendered subjects and subjectivities. This theme is examined by Rickett (2016) in this Special Focus through her exploration of the intersection of working class identifications with maternal subjectivities. Shields' critique had set a challenge to incorporate consideration of power and inequity from the outset when considering the study of difference. Rickett describes how some strands of feminist psychology have responded to this challenge by exploring the ways in which socially legitimised meanings of the “maternal

instinct” are used to regulate women, particularly through discourses of good/bad mothering. Drawing on examples of poststructuralist feminist work, Rickett explores how intersections of class and gender (re)produce working class mothers as deficient in relation to idealised notions of neoliberal bourgeois feminine subjects. Rickett also considers how oppressive discourses can be/are resisted by the discursive construction and negotiation of working class female subjectivities.

The discussion of intersectionality is continued by Shields herself in her return to *Functionalism, Darwinism, and the psychology of women* (2016). In her own contribution to this Special Focus, Shields reflects on the process of developing her argument from just considering gender to using the lens of intersectionality – to examine and expose a range of social myths and biases operating in the study of sex differences. Shields uses intersections of “race” and gender to unpack the early history of “difference” in which the white men were positioned as sitting on the top in the hierarchy of human beings in relation to other racial groups as well as white women. Shields explores the following conundrum embedded within evolutionary biological and some psychological accounts: The challenge of explaining why “primitive” men, obviously human, lacked cultural progression and why white women, though deemed inferior in a number of capabilities, were still culturally advanced. Shields’ re-reading of *Functionalism, Darwinism, and the psychology of women* offers new insights on the ways in which certain intersections supported an array of discriminatory power relations in the history of psychology.

## Concluding thoughts

The contributions in this Special Focus point to the complex trajectory around the conceptualisation of sex differences since Shields’ 1975 analysis of the history of biological explanations. As some of the papers in this collection indicate, the operation of gendered social myth and androcentric bias within the recent history of psychology may suggest some change to the form and content of its expression. However, such myths and bias nevertheless continues to legitimise inequality in the treatment of men and women in psychology – both as subjects and objects of knowledge. However, at the same time, we also see the impact of feminist challenges shaping newer developments in biological theory and calls for new spaces of dialogue with areas traditionally seen as antagonistic to the political commitments of feminism.

As we look towards the future, this Special Focus joins current conversations around the direction of feminist challenge. We are anticipating a move, albeit a slow one, away from a dualistic and binary thinking about sex and gender, nature and nurture, and towards more nuanced theoretical discourses that address the complex interactions between the biological, cultural and political.

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