

# Does psychology have a gender?

Alexandra Rutherford, Kelli Vaughn-Johnson and Elissa Rodkey

In 1967, a year before his death, American psychologist Edwin Boring published an account of The Experimentalists, the invitation-only psychology club that his mentor, British-born and Oxford-educated Edward Bradford Titchener, founded at Cornell University in 1904. Boring began attending meetings in 1911 while a graduate student with Titchener. He later wrote the following of his inaugural experience with the club: 'It was my first meeting, and the occasion when Dodge and Holt attacked Titchener on introspection. My wife-to-be and Mabel Goudge secreted themselves in a next room with the door just ajar to hear what unexpurgated male psychology was like' (Boring, 1967, p.322). Boring's wife-to-be was Lucy Day, herself a graduate student with Titchener. So why weren't she and fellow student Mabel Goudge in the club?

Not only were women banned from The Experimentalists until after Titchener's death, but the meetings themselves were designed to be distinctly masculine affairs. As historian Laurel Furumoto has documented, the practices, atmosphere, and even *kind* of psychology permitted for discussion was gendered (Furumoto, 1988). Titchener was a staunch advocate of psychology as an instrument-heavy, laboratory-based science. Although apparently he did not see this kind of psychology as gender-specific (he supervised many women and appears to have been quite proud of their accomplishments, despite not wanting

them in his gentleman's club!), Boring would later come to insist that women were, with only a few notable exceptions, unsuited for and uninterested in the laboratory. In his subsequent writings on scientific eminence, Boring portrayed science as a distinctly masculine enterprise for which women were temperamentally and intellectually unsuited (see Rutherford, in press).

Gender historian Judith Zinsner has recently commented that, 'Historians of every region of the world know that "learning" and the "learned" have not been fixed entities. All that has been fixed in the past is the sex and gender of those who defined the concept and enjoyed its prerogatives' (Zinsner, 2014, p.5). So we pose the questions, Does psychology have a gender? What would a history that approached psychology as itself gendered look like? Why would it matter?

## Gendering psychology

Since the 1970s or so, historians and psychologists have developed a wonderfully rich literature on the history of women in psychology in many parts of the world (e.g. Gul et al., 2013; Gundlach et al., 2010; Scarborough & Furumoto, 1987). This literature was and is a needed corrective to histories that had, until then, been written largely by and about men, treating male and masculine as unmarked universals. Elizabeth Valentine, for example, in previous issues of this publication, has offered tantalising

portraits of four women in early British experimental psychology: Beatrice Edgell, Victoria Hazlitt, May Smith and Nellie Carey (Valentine, 2008, 2010). While a graduate student at University College London, Carey won the prestigious Carpenter Medal, awarded only every three years for a doctoral dissertation of exceptional distinction in experimental psychology. Carey undertook carefully designed experimental work on sensation, perception and the structure of mental abilities. Edgell, Hazlitt and Smith too were all enthusiastically devoted to laboratory science, as were many of the early women in American psychology like Christine Ladd-Franklin and Margaret Floy Washburn.

As Valentine notes: 'In terms of experimental psychology specifically, it is noteworthy that women often undertook heroic experiments and pioneered new methods... There is no evidence for... separate spheres of operation for men and women, with women occupying



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“caring” practitioner roles, and men ‘understanding’ scientist roles, that became prevalent later in the century...’ (Valentine, 2010, p.974). Despite Boring’s exhortations, the laboratory was a comfortable place for women in the earliest days of academic psychology. So what happened? Furumoto has shown that it was not until after WWI that American women began to be explicitly funnelled into ‘lower status’ applied work, often with children (Furumoto, 1987), effectively setting up the separate spheres to which Valentine refers.

The patterns of women’s participation in our field provide a revealing window on the gendering of certain areas of psychology – the process whereby women’s ‘preferences’ and ‘predispositions’ come to appear as natural or essential rather than as a result of social processes in which power and authority have played decisive roles. Those in positions of power, as Zinsser reminds us, have had the ability to dictate the value and

meaning of others’ knowledge and their place in the ‘learned culture’.

Oral history is a powerful methodological tool for uncovering these social processes. In our *Psychology’s Feminist Voices* oral history and digital archive project ([www.feministvoices.com](http://www.feministvoices.com)), one can find multiple examples. For example, Canadian-born psychologist Lila Braine earned her doctoral degree in physiological psychology in 1951 with noted neuropsychologist Donald Hebb at McGill University in Montreal. Post-PhD she began working in the neuropsychology laboratory of Hans-Lukas Teuber at New York University. A full-time researcher, she decided she would like to get some teaching experience. Accordingly, she approached the head of the psychology department at New York’s City College and asked if she could teach physiological psychology. The department head said no, but he could offer her a course in developmental psychology. When she refused on the grounds that she was not a developmental psychologist and had never taken a course in the subject, he averred that it was okay, ‘you’ll learn, you’re a woman. Just keep a chapter ahead’ (Braine, 2009, p.13).

Braine did not accept his proposal to keep a chapter ahead, but decided that learning a bit about developmental psychology, especially the cognitive and perceptual development of children, might not be a bad idea. The next year she went back and taught developmental. When she began giving papers at conferences in developmental psychology, she found the gender dynamics much more congenial than those she had encountered in the virtually all-male world of physiological psychology. In developmental psychology she found ‘a lot of women, for one thing’. In contrasting this with the masculine domain of physiological, she remarked, ‘I...found it so much more hospitable.

There were people to talk to in a different way. I didn’t feel I had to be careful about what I said. I felt more welcomed. It was a gradual move... I’m not unhappy, but there really was a lot of sexism in my

move into developmental’ (Braine, 2009, p.13). Braine’s story highlights that her move – and perhaps those of many other women – into what has

typically been regarded as a feminine area of psychology had little to do with her original interests and talents and much to do with the power and professional dynamics she encountered.

“gendered meanings infused every step of the design of the experiment”

### Gendering genius

Although individual life narratives provide one window on the gendering of science, there are multiple ways that gendering works in and through psychology. Consider the work of psychologist Peter Hegarty. In his historical research, Hegarty has analysed the career of Lewis Terman to expose the knotty relationship between scientific theories of intelligence, and gender and sexuality (Hegarty, 2007). Specifically, Hegarty examines Terman’s research to show how it was designed to reinforce the logic that genius was gendered masculine, and heterosexual. In Terman’s *Genetic Studies of Genius* both boys and girls were given IQ tests and tests of masculinity/femininity. Overall, for both boys and girls, higher masculinity was associated with higher IQs. When effeminate boys did show high IQs, Terman attempted to downplay their potential for homosexuality to reinforce the notion that high IQ was also equated with heterosexuality. Thus, Terman enforced both the link between intelligence and masculinity and intelligence and heterosexuality – at least in men.

As an example of gender analysis, Hegarty’s work attends to the process through which genius became gendered in the empirical work of a male scientist, how gender ideologies, as well as ideologies about sexual orientation, course through science, and how the gendering of a neutral category – intelligence – served to enforce the power/authority of a particular group.

### Gendering the laboratory

Deploying gender analysis in a different way, historian of psychology Ian



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## Looking back

Nicholson has used the iconic Milgram shock-box experiments to show that laboratory practices themselves can reveal much about the gendered concerns of certain times and places (Nicholson, 2011). While typically presented as a product of post-Holocaust anxiety over the nature of evil, Nicholson proposes that there was another explicitly gendered concern that coursed through not just the external logic of the Milgram experiments but also the very performance of them. He argues that the obedience-to-authority experiments reflected deeply felt American Cold War anxieties over gender, science and the strength of masculine national character. He embeds the experiments in social and cultural concern over an enfeebled American masculinity, and shows how gendered meanings infused every step of the design of the experiment – from the manliness of the confederate who was cast as the experimenter, to the effeminacy of the beleaguered, submissive learner who was chosen to look the part of an ‘inferior male.’ The learner was effectively emasculated in front of the subjects as he was strapped to his chair and hooked up to the machine: ‘What was on display in this polished, gender-enhanced context was not simply “obedience” but masculinity itself (p.255).

Thus, as an example of gender analysis, Nicholson shows how the very performance of a psychological experiment becomes freighted with gendered meaning and reveals, not only timeless, universal laws about human nature – as the Milgram experiments were purported to do – but the psychology of a very particular cultural and political moment.

### Gendering the history of psychology

There are many other individual studies that apply gender analysis to aspects of the history of psychology. For example, Jill Morawski has shown how early mental tests and personality measures were imbued with assumptions about normative masculinity and femininity, leading psychological researchers not only to reify these categories but to reinforce prescriptions about social order (Morawski, 1985). Stephanie Shields has analysed British and American

psychology’s late 19th-century representations of ideal emotionality in men and women. She has argued that gendered interpretations served to keep women tied to the domestic sphere and highlighted men’s suitability for public and political life, thus serving an important power function (Shields, 2007). Even psychologists’ assumptions about animal behaviour have been gendered, as Donna Haraway has shown in the case of the primatological research of Robert Yerkes (Haraway, 1990). Examples such as these convince us that attending systematically to the gendering of psychology would result in a very different view of the discipline’s history, if not the history of its subject matter, from what we have seen up to now. To write such a history is a daunting task. Why should we undertake it?

Gender analysis offers some particularly rich historiographic potential for psychology as a science that is not only gendered on multiple levels but also directly produces scientific knowledge

about gender itself. It is a powerful contributor to – as much as it draws upon – the ‘beliefs about gender’ that affect everyday experience and how we understand each other and ourselves. This deeply reflexive nature of psychology has been extensively discussed by historians (see Smith, 2005). Gender is one of the primary axes of self-understanding and social and political organisation – including that of science. Thus, examining how the gendering of psychology has influenced its knowledge-generation about gender can help us begin to disentangle the science/gender system in new ways. Finally, by bringing close historical scrutiny to the ways that gender ideologies run in and through psychology, we can start to destabilise – and perhaps even change – them today.

**I Alexandra Rutherford, Kelli Vaughn-Johnson and Elissa Rodkey are at York University, Toronto  
alexr@yorku.ca**

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Changing Face of Feminist Psychology  
WHICH THE VOICE

We need to recognize that, yes, we're women together, but there are differences in our experiences based on how we are perceived.

Jean Lau Chin

**Profound Shift**

Psychology has undergone a profound shift over the last 50 years. In 1960, women received only a small minority of doctorates in the field. Today, in many parts of the world, women receive the majority. To understand this shift and the role women and feminists have played in it, we need to collect the first-hand accounts of feminist psychologists who were instrumental in bringing about these changes and those who continue to enrich psychology with feminism. We also need to be aware of our history. Who were the women who came before us? How did their work lay the foundation for feminist psychology? This site highlights important women in psychology's past and amplifies the diverse voices of contemporary feminist psychologists. **We invite you to explore their stories.**

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**Using life and career narratives to understand the ways that gendering affects all aspects of science – what Evelyn Fox-Keller calls the science/gender system – is one of the goals of the Psychology's Feminist Voices project, an oral history and digital archive initiative that we launched in 2010 to collect, preserve, and disseminate the narratives of self-identified feminist psychologists, and to highlight women who have made contributions to psychology since it was founded in the late 1800s. Profiles of Lucy May Day Boring, Beatrice Edgell, Christine Ladd-Franklin, Margaret**

**Floy Washburn, and over 120 other women in the history of psychology, can be accessed at the Women Past section of the site ([www.feministvoices.com/past](http://www.feministvoices.com/past)). Over 120 profiles of self-identified contemporary feminist psychologists, including Lila Braine, can be found in 'Feminist Presence' ([www.feministvoices.com/presence](http://www.feministvoices.com/presence)). Full transcripts of the interviews we have conducted with these psychologists are also available to illuminate how feminism, gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation have influenced their lives and careers and ultimately psychology itself.**

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