

[Book Review] A feminist companion to social psychology

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Madeleine Pownall and Wendy Rogers, *A feminist companion to social psychology*. Open University Press, 2021, 151 pp. ISBN: 978-0335250752

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A Feminist Companion to Social Psychology is a critical contribution to often-mainstream introductions to the field. The text provides an account of the history of social psychology, infuses this discussion with long-standing yet ever-current debates around privilege, power, and intersectionality, and shows what it can bring to the table for social psychology. We see this as an excellent introductory companion text for people new to social psychology, one that we much enjoyed reading. Yet, there are areas that we felt could benefit from further thought. In some ways, we found the text to be too focused on WEIRD (Western, European, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) examples. We also found at times that the text could focus too much on a binary gendered framing, sometimes resulting in a neglect of non-binary genders. Despite our criticisms, we appreciated the text for being approachable and easy to understand for people new to social psychology in general and feminist social psychology in particular.

The book is arranged into nine chapters, including two introductory chapters that act as guides for how to read the text. Chapter 1 starts with the authors introducing themselves as feminist social psychologists and providing some positionality on critical feminism, which we very much appreciate as a refreshing start to a social psychology companion text. The chapter introduces the concept of feminist social psychology and what that means to Pownall and Rogers, including how they understand and operationalize gender as inclusive of trans experiences, research as inherently political, and feminism as needing to be intersectional.

Chapter 2 begins to delve into the history of social psychology, emphasizing the missing *her-stories* that need to be reclaimed or rediscovered. Importantly, this chapter also brings methodology to the discussion. It asks what methodologies have been used for decades and what new perspectives social psychology could benefit from. Having had similar questions for years, we were delighted to see critical approaches to methodology being discussed in an introduction to social psychology text, making this text different from its mainstream companions.

Chapter 3 does a good job of highlighting current debates on gender, identity, and intersectionality. As intersectionality has become more popular as a framework in psychology in general and social psychology in particular, Pownall and Rogers provide a rich yet concise discussion on the relationship between gender and intersectionality. They encourage the reader to question how certain terms are used and taken for granted in psychology (e.g., how the term “founding fathers” is used in everyday discourse). In addition, this chapter introduces an informative historical account of the origin and development of feminist psychology, and this project is continued throughout the book by giving specific historical examples for the topic at hand. In doing so, it allows, for example, readers to learn about the situation for women in psychology in the 1960s, how feminist psychology has shifted the theories, methodologies, and discussions in social psychology, and how gender has become important in the way that research questions are approached in the discipline.

Bro culture—predominantly male behaviors such as macho behaviors—and patriarchy, as well as negative outcomes of patriarchy for women and men, are the focus of Chapter 4. It is enriching in this respect, though we thought elements of this chapter could have been introduced earlier, as it provides some foundational discussions on patriarchy. Still, the chapter’s discussions made us think about gender and patriarchy and their societal implications. Indeed, one of the critical sections in this chapter is the list that Pownall and Rogers provide on how women are excluded in science. The list is a great start, yet not a complete one. We believe that this chapter could have benefitted from including discussions on how women are excluded in other ways, for example, through psychology’s sexual harassment problems (e.g., see Young and Hegarty’s, 2019, article, which includes a discussion of Henri Tajfel and the way he mistreated his female students during the 1960s–70s), and the ways in which many women’s research is not taken seriously or is explicitly criticized in public spaces (e.g., recent harsh criticism of Dr. Roxanne Felig’s work by some proponents of the Open Science Movement on Twitter).

Chapter 5 does an admirable job of discussing othering, specifically feminist psychology as “other”. Pownall and Rogers’ discussion on the otherization of women as “objects of male knowledge” is excellent. However, the authors’ reminder to the reader that feminist approaches in social psychology themselves are deeply marginalized and otherized from mainstream discourses in the field felt somewhat repetitive.

Through Chapter 6, Pownall and Rogers challenge the validity of sex research with the concept of neurosexism, showing its outcomes, discussing how neurosexism has been used as a weapon against women (e.g., how to put them in their place) to support male superiority, and the ways that feminists have used the concepts of essentialism, determinism, and constructionism to respond to neurosexism. As part of their interrogation of sex research, Pownall and Rogers produce a fantastic critique of the Open Science Revolution, replicability and reproducibility crises, and “bropen science” (i.e., White masculine dominance of Open Science Movements; see Whitaker and Guest, 2020). For us, however, the chapter would have been strengthened by attention to how qualitative and mixed methods benefit discussions about sex differences (similarities between experiences of men and women, for example). As feminist psychology has contributed to and benefited from qualitative methods, this could have been highlighted more to provide a richer discussion on the topic.

Following their interrogation of sex research, Pownall and Rogers discuss communication (including non-verbal communication such as gaze), language, and the relationship between them in Chapter 7. They critically argue how language has been used strategically to uphold male superiority, such as how people have been forced to use men's language (e.g., governor vs. governess), he/man language (i.e., how "man" is used to embrace "woman") as well as the way in which feminist social psychologists have challenged how language has been used (e.g., conversation analysis). While this chapter is very informative, the examples given by Pownall and Rogers are exclusively centered on the English language. This makes sense, given that the book is written in English. However, as bilingual researchers who operate both in Turkish and English, we could easily see how some examples do not apply to languages without gendered pronouns, for example. That other languages are not gendered is important to acknowledge, especially as some of the points they raised are specific to English. For us, this speaks to the over-representation of WEIRD research as well as WEIRD contexts in the book.

Chapter 8 questions the heteronormative and cisgender bias that is often present in research on relationships and social psychology in general and asks the reader to rethink the value of approaches that are dismissive of queer relationships and roles. Pownall and Rogers' mention of the Trans Pregnancy Project is a great way to disrupt the mainstream narrative that pregnancy is an experience unique to and definitive of cisgender women. However, a discussion on the ways that trans and non-binary people's reproductive experiences challenge reproductive norms and practices, as well as how cisheteronormativity means that trans and non-binary reproduction is invisibilized and devalued in various ways, would have further complemented this chapter. Just as importantly, in Chapter 8, Pownall and Rogers also question how evolutionary psychology positions women in attraction and relationships as passive, but also assert that even within evolutionary psychology, there may be space for critical perspectives, notably feminist Darwinians.

We were delighted to see space given to female friendships (and indeed friendships in general), an oftentimes understudied or underdiscussed area of close relationship research. So, too, we appreciated the authors' discussion of the tenuous relationship that women can have with motherhood—motherhood has often been described as a "natural" state for women, yet it is also fraught with criticism and expectation as well. We did feel there was a missed opportunity to discuss regretted motherhood, a topic that still feels taboo but has recently received more attention through research (e.g., Donath, 2015) and entertainment media (e.g., films like *The Lost Daughter*).

The last chapter shows the importance of noticing the patriarchy problem and provides tools for how to fight against it. The authors argue, for example, that to be able to call out sexism, one first needs to recognize how women are *interrupted* by men, *explained* by men, *appropriated* and *sealioned*. All these concepts are elaborated to complement and expand on existing theories about language and behavior. However, we believe that an extended discussion on feminist activism would have been useful, as there is useful research on both individual (Foster, 2015) and collective action against sexism (Uluğ et al., 2020) as well as solidarity-based collective action (Drury & Kaiser, 2014) for gender equality in social psychology literature. These examples could have been used to highlight even more (pro-)feminist voices.

Pownall and Rogers' *A Feminist Companion* is particularly successful as a student-focused text. It invites students to pursue understanding and contextualization through many different resources (throughout the text, the authors recommend films, poems, TED talks, books, and articles for the reader to gain further knowledge). The activities invite the reader to continuously reflect on their own positions and perspectives. While many of their activities can be implemented in the classroom, others may require more preparation but can easily be assigned as homework for students. We also found the learning objectives at the start of each chapter, as well as the section summaries throughout, to be valuable, enabling readers to digest everything they have read.

Pownall and Rogers have produced a cohesive text—a topic introduced in one chapter will surely be re-addressed in another one, allowing the reader to make connections between social psychological concepts and epistemic perspectives over and over again. While we found that most chapters were easy to follow and very well structured, others were less so, perhaps because the authors sought to include many relevant topics in a way that would be accessible to a general audience.

There were times we found that the authors made bold statements without relevant references, leaving us to wonder if their statement was their own opinion or not. And while we very much liked the way the authors introduced certain concepts, incorporated intersectionality, and provided a variety of activities to reflect on feminist social psychology, some sections of the chapters are very Western-centric and reflect the quantitative tradition of social psychology. As non-WEIRD researchers living and working in WEIRD contexts, we looked for diverse examples as we read. Though some were indeed present (notably, research on gender expressions that contradict the patriarchal gender system, for example, the Fa'afāfine and Fakaleiti, Samoan and Tongan gender expressions, respectively), the examples cited by Pownall and Rogers are mostly restricted to WEIRD contexts.

Overall, we believe that *A Feminist Companion to Social Psychology* will be very useful not only for anyone who is relatively new to social psychology but also for anyone who wants to broaden their horizon of critical social psychology. And as discussions around gender, identity and intersectionality will continue to dominate social psychology in the next few decades, we believe this well-written companion will be very influential as well.


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