

Higher Education Psychology Teacher of the Year Winner Case Study

Supporting students to reimagine social psychology through a critical feminist lens

Madeleine Pownall

'A feminist perspective is not only compatible with the history, objectives, and emphases of social psychology, but necessary for its continued vitality.' (Lott, 1991, p.505)

- *Social psychology is a core component of the British Psychological Society accreditation of psychology programmes. Typically, the teaching of social psychology relies upon well-established, dominant approaches.*
- *However, in recent years, critical, community, and feminist psychologists have provided alternative ways of thinking about the methods, research questions, and epistemological approaches of mainstream social psychology.*
- *Feminist social psychology is ultimately concerned with three core aims: (1) the inclusion of women and girls, (2) advocating for diverse, critical perspectives, and (3) promoting equality.*
- *I encourage students to think critically about their core social psychology teaching, to promote psychological literacy (i.e. application of content to solving societal problems; Pownall et al., 2021, 2022).*

Keywords: *Feminist psychology; Psychology of women; Social psychology; Psychological literacy.*

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

IN THIS case study, I detail three examples of how I support students to view social psychology through such a critical feminist lens, to encourage critical thinking, bolster engagement with the subject content, and advance the diversity and representation of the social psychology curricula. This includes three interventions: 1) an overview of two in-class teaching activities delivered across core first-year modules, 2) publishing an undergraduate feminist social psychology textbook, 3) developing a final-year undergraduate module, using the textbook as a framework.

1. Intervention 1. Encourage students to collaboratively and critically think about social psychology through a lens of feminist scholarship

Background: Encouraging critical debate and discussion is at the heart of feminist teaching and scholarship (e.g. Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). Feminist teaching regu-

larly involves hands-on activities, group-based discussions, or collaborative working to explore the nuances and complexities of the psychology of women (Robinson-Keilig et al., 2014). Here, I share two activities that aimed to fulfil these functions of feminist teaching, in a large-scale undergraduate Psychology BSc programme.

What I did: I developed, ran, and evaluated multiple in-class activities, each related to the psychology of women, prejudice, and intersectionality, throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. I cover two of these activities here. These activities were all delivered asynchronously online to a large first-year undergraduate psychology course.

Activity 1. In this activity, I begin the lecture on The Psychology of Prejudice by presenting students with a stock-photo line-up of eight people. The line-up includes men and women of all ethnicities. I tell students that these people are interview candidates

Table 1:

Chapter	Indicative content
Chapter 1: Introducing feminist social psychology	Reclaiming the history of social psychology, moving away from the White, male, Western dominance
Chapter 2: How (and why) is social psychology changing?	Identifying how open science and research reform can be viewed through a feminist lens
Chapter 3: Gender, identity, and intersectionality	Tackling gender norms, identity (beyond social identity theory) and encouraging students' reflexivity
Chapter 4: Social psychology's horrible history	Shining a light on the troubling foundations of social psychology, e.g. sexual harassment throughout psychology's history
Chapter 5: Prejudice, stereotyping, and objectification	Overview of feminist theories of stereotype formation and objectification
Chapter 6: Delusions of gender	A critical view of gender and identity
Chapter 7: Communication and language	Introduction of qualitative research methodologies and a look to critical approaches to discourse and language
Chapter 8: Roles and relationships	Gender norms, female friendships, mothering, and care
Chapter 9: Looking forward to your feminist future	A focus on advocacy and activism

for the job of Psychology Lecturer and they are asked to decide who they feel will make the best lecturer, using only the candidate's appearance as justification. I then prompt students to consider whether the process of selecting a candidate based purely on their in-group membership is inherently problematic and whether it constitutes *prejudice*. This prompts a lively discussion about lived experience and perceptions of prejudice and ingroup/outgroup bias, which I then contextualize this with theory about gender-based prejudice, implicit associations of ethnicity, and intergroup bias. Students are then invited to think about how to promote bias-free hiring practices, informed by social feminist psychology.

Activity 2. This second activity is designed to introduce students to a feminist appraisal of the history of psychology so that students can develop their feminist critical thinking skills and practice the act of reflecting upon their own experiences. In this lecture, I begin by introducing students to the early days of psychology and challenge students with a prompt on a Padlet wall discussion: 'What

do these psychologists have in common? Whose voice is missing?' I finish the lecture by offering a reclaimed version of psychology's history, explaining concepts such as the domination of male voices in mainstream psychology (Crawford & Marecek, 1989), androcentrism or male-centrism (e.g. Bailey et al., 2019), and the value of women and minoritized groups' contribution to the study of psychology (Thompson, 2017). Students are then invited to contribute their own 'profiles' of the 'missing voices' of social psychology history.

2. Intervention 2. Create a student-centred textbook which provides students with an alternative view of social psychology

Background: While the contributions of feminist psychologists are vast, this is often notably absent from mainstream teaching of social psychology. Also, some of the core social psychological theories do not capture the nuanced richness of all human experience. Therefore, a feminist 'companion' to the social psychology curricular can provide students with this reclaimed, critical appraisal of social psychology.

Table 2:

Module assessment	Student instructions
Research pitch	<i>Imagine you are pitching a study to a research council. Select a study published in a mainstream social psychology journal and propose a conceptual replication of this work, demonstrating the principles (including methodology, values, and epistemology) of feminist social psychology</i>
Policy brief	<i>You have been asked to a) synthesise the evidence, b) propose evidence-based solutions for a feminist social psychological societal problem of your choosing. Write a brief communicating this information to UK government.</i>

What I did: In order to bring feminist ways of thinking to social psychology students on a broader level, I developed, wrote, and published an undergraduate textbook ('A Feminist Companion to Social Psychology'; Open University Press) in 2021. This book, co-authored with Prof. Wendy Stainton-Rogers, takes students through the core BPS social psychology curricula and provides more nuance and criticality to the core content. In this textbook, I introduce students to notable women psychologists and their contribution to psychology's history, present, and future. I use resources, such as Psychology's Feminist Voices *Women Past*, (an important feminist pedagogic site for teaching the history of women's contribution to psychology; Ball et al., 2013), TED talks, film, discussion prompts, and other activities to encourage students to actively engage with the book's contents.

3. Intervention 3. Develop an 11-week module which introduces students to feminist social psychology

Background: Feedback from both the in-class activities and the textbook was very positive (see Benefits and student perspective below). So, I wanted to develop the content into an 11-week undergraduate module, using the textbook structure as a framework. This also allowed me to consider how best to implement the broader *values* of feminist scholarship into teaching, assessment, and student support in a module context.

What I did: I have developed a new final-year undergraduate module, of which I am module leader called 'Feminist Social Psychology' which uses my textbook as a framework to teach this content to third-

year students in more depth. This module will be run in this academic year (Semester 2, 2022/2023 academic year). I have focused on promoting active, critical engagement by embedding authentic assessment to promote psychological literacy (as per Pownall et al., 2021). For example, see the module assessment strategy:

Benefits

Textbook reviews

'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. A Feminist Companion is particularly successful as a student-focused text.' (Ulug & Acar, 2022).

'Madeleine Pownall and Wendy Stainton Rogers' book pings with the vibrancy and creativity of feminist critique. With this companion, they have made feminist inspiration, analysis, and activism easily accessible to everyone studying social psychology!' (Virginia Braun, 2021).

Issues

The main challenge I have faced in this space is to ensure that students have a suitable grounding in core social psychological content to prepare them for engaging in critical discussion through a feminist lens. I respond to this by positioning feminist social psychology as a complementary accompaniment to mainstream approaches to understanding human behaviour and experience,

rather than a complete ‘retelling’ of the core dominant approaches. This, I find, promotes a more nuanced appreciation of what critical approaches can offer students.

Student’s perspective

Student feedback on this practice has been positive and has formed the basis of student-nominated awards. For example, the University of Leeds Faculty of Medicine and Health Partnership Award (2021) that I won. Student feedback on my in-class activities (from module evaluations and student emails) and textbook have also been very positive:

‘I thought the lectures delivered by Madeline Pownall were particularly interesting and engaging.’

‘Lectures covered by madeleine were very interactive and she used interactive methods such as padlet so we got to explain how we feel about certain topics.’

‘I loved learning about feminism. It was everything!!’

Dissemination and publication

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‘Madeleine’s lectures were highly engaging’

‘I can’t believe a book like this exists. I feel so seen! This is everything I wanted when I was studying social psychology and it’s opened my eyes so much. Thank you so, so much for writing this’ [Student email]

Reflections

I enjoy introducing students to content that they are previously unfamiliar with and have found that students engage well with scholarship that comes from a feminist perspective, as it is inherently connected to critical thinking and practical application of subject content. I have found that this content and approach enables me to authentically engage with students more so than with other topics, because it invites reflexive engagement and consideration of how to connect social psychology content to ‘real world’ problems (i.e. psychological literacy; Pownall et al., 2022).

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