

Discuss gender bias (e.g. alpha/beta bias, androcentrism) in psychological research

Mainstream academic psychology models itself on classical, orthodox, natural science (such as physics and chemistry). It claims to be objective, unbiased, and value-free. As applied to the study of human beings, positivism implies that it's possible to study people as they 'really are', without the psychologist's characteristics in any way influencing the outcome of the investigation. But this view of psychology as unbiased and value-free is mistaken, and gender bias permeates much psychological theory and empirical research. Much of the criticism of mainstream psychology's gender bias has come from feminist psychologists.

If women's behaviour differs from men's, the former is often judged to be pathological, abnormal or deficient in some way. This is a form of sexism, and also demonstrates alpha bias (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988). Men's behaviour is taken (implicitly or explicitly) as the standard or norm against which women's behaviour is compared and judged. This represents another form of gender bias, namely androcentrism (male-centredness or the masculinist bias). Beta bias (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988) involves formulating a theory based on an all-male sample, and then claiming that it's universally valid, that is, applies equally to women and men. Alternatively, applying the findings of a study which involves males only to women and men illustrates beta bias. Psychological explanations of behaviour tend to emphasise biological and other internal causes, as opposed to social and other external causes. This emphasis on internal causes is called individualism. This gives (and reinforces) the impression that psychological sex differences are inevitable and unchangeable. In turn, this reinforces widely held stereotypes about women and men, contributing to the oppression of women (another form of sexism). Heterosexuality (both male and female) is taken (implicitly or explicitly) as the norm, with the result that homosexuality (both male and female) is seen as abnormal. This demonstrates heterosexism.

According to Denmark et al. (1988), gender bias is found at all stages of the research process (question formulation, research methods and design, data analysis and interpretation, and conclusion formulation). As far as question formulation is concerned, it's assumed that topics relevant to white males are more important and 'basic' (for example, the effects of TV violence on aggression in boys) compared with those that are relevant to white females, or ethnic minority females or males. The latter are seen as more marginal, specialised or applied (for example, the psychological correlates of pregnancy or the menopause). In relation to research methods and design, the sex and race of the participants, researchers, and any stooges who may be involved are often left unspecified. This means that potential interactions between these variables aren't accounted for. For example, men tend to display more helping behaviour than women in studies involving a young, female stooge victim. This could be a function of either the sex of the stooge or an interaction between the stooge and participant, rather than sex differences between participants (the conclusion that's usually drawn).

Significant sex differences may be reported in very misleading ways, because the wrong sorts of comparisons are made. For example, there may be a significant difference between women and men on a test of spatial ability, which may suggest that women cannot or shouldn't become architects or engineers. But if you're then told that a certain percentage of

women score higher than successful architects or engineers do, you'd probably draw very different conclusions. The fact that a higher percentage of men's than women's scores exceed those of successful architects or engineers is almost irrelevant. Conclusion formulation is related to beta bias.

Two examples of gender-biased theories are Erikson's psychosocial theory of development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. According to Gilligan (1982), Erikson's theory, based on the study of males only, portrays women as 'deviants'. In one version, Erikson (1950) describes a series of eight universal stages. So, for example, for both sexes, in all cultures, the conflict between identity and role confusions (adolescence) precedes that between intimacy and isolation (young adulthood). But in a later version (Erikson, 1968), he acknowledges that the sequence is different for a female. She postpones her identity as she prepares to attract the man whose name she'll adopt and by whose status she'll be defined. For women, intimacy seems to go hand-in-hand with identity – they come to know themselves through their relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982). Despite Erikson's observations of sex differences, the sequence of stages in his psychosocial theory remains unchanged. As Gilligan says, male experience continues to define Erikson's life-cycle concept. This illustrates beta bias.

Similarly, Kohlberg's (1969) six-stage theory of moral development was based on a 20-year longitudinal study of 84 boys. But he claims that these stages are universal: another example of beta bias. When males and females are compared, females rarely attain a level of moral reasoning above Stage 3 ('Good boy-nice girl' orientation), which is supposed to be achieved by most adolescents and adults. This leaves females looking decidedly morally deficient, and is an example of alpha bias.

Like other feminist psychologists, Gilligan argues that psychology speaks with a 'male voice, that is, describing the world from a male perspective and confusing this with absolute truth (beta bias). The task of feminist psychology is to listen to women and girls who speak "in a different voice"' (Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Gilligan's work with females led her to argue that women and men have qualitatively different conceptions of morality. By stressing the differences between women and men (an alpha-biased approach), Gilligan is trying to compensate for Kohlberg's heavily beta-biased theory.

According to Kitzinger (1998), questions about sex differences aren't just scientific questions, they're also highly political. Answers to some of these questions have been used to keep women out of universities, or to put them in mental hospitals. Others have been used to encourage women to attend assertiveness training courses, or to argue that women should have all the same rights and opportunities as men. In other words, the science of sex differences research is always used for political ends. However much psychologists may hope or believe they're doing objective research and discovering truth about the world, they're always influenced by the social and political context in which they're doing it (Kitzinger, 1998). Gilligan (1993) states that at the core of her work on moral development in females was the realisation that within psychology – and society generally – values were taken as facts. Psychologists (and other scientists) have a responsibility to make their values explicit about important social and political issues. If they fail to do so, they may unwittingly contribute to prejudice, discrimination and oppression.